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WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

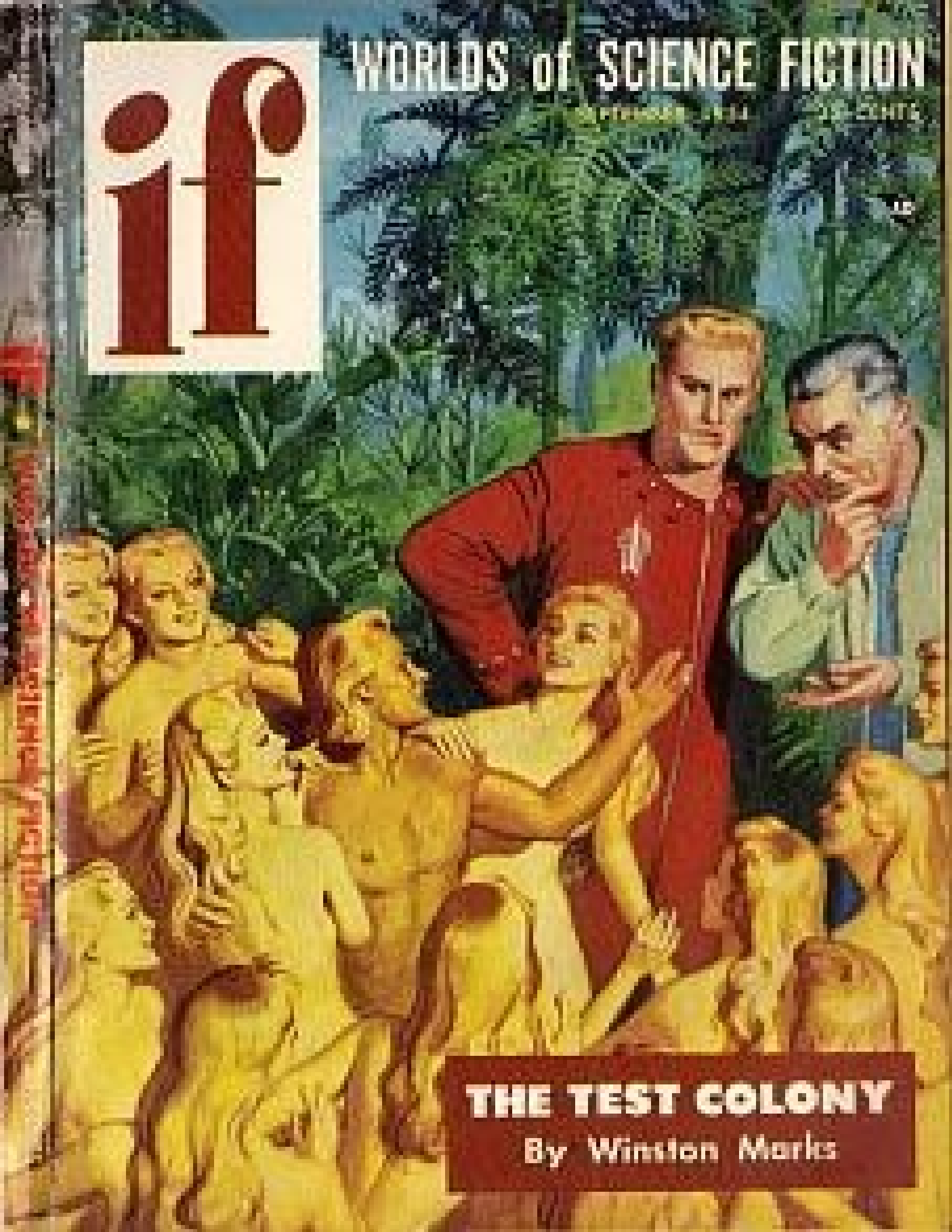
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WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

THE TEST COLONY

By Winston Marks



The Project Gutenberg eBook of Confidence Game, by James McKimmy

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CONFIDENCE GAME

Cutter demanded more and more and more efficiency—and got it! But, as in anything, enough is enough, and too much is ...

BY JAMES McKIMMEY, JR.

GEORGE H. CUTTER wheeled his big convertible into his reserved space in the Company parking lot with a flourish. A bright California sun drove its early brightness down on him as he strode toward the square, four-story brick building which said *Cutter Products, Inc.* over its front door. A two-ton truck was grinding backward, toward the loading doors, the thick-shouldered driver craning his neck. Cutter moved briskly forward, a thick-shouldered man himself, though not very tall. A glint of light appeared in his eyes, as he saw Kurt, the truck driver, fitting the truck's rear end into the tight opening.

“Get that junk out of the way!” he yelled, and his voice roared over the noise of the truck's engine.

Kurt snapped his head around, his blue eyes thinning, then recognition spread humor crinkles around his eyes and mouth. “All right, sir,” he said. “Just a second while I jump out, and I'll lift it out of your way.”

“With bare hands?” Cutter said.

“With bare hands,” Kurt said.

Cutter's laugh boomed, and as he rounded the front of the truck, he struck the right front fender with his fist. Kurt roared back from the cab with his own laughter.

He liked joking harshly with Kurt and with the rest of the truck drivers. They were simple, and they didn't have his mental strength. But they had another kind of strength. They had muscle and energy, and most important, they had guts. Twenty years before Cutter had driven a truck himself. The drivers knew that, and there was a bond between them, the drivers and himself, that seldom existed between employer and employee.

The guard at the door came to a reflex attention, and Cutter bobbed his head curtly. Then, instead of taking the stairway that led up the front to the second floor and his office, he strode down the hallway to the left, angling through the shop on the first floor. He always walked through the shop. He liked the heavy driving sound of the machines in his ears, and the muscled look of the men, in their coarse work shirts and heavy-soled shoes. Here again was strength, in the machines and in the men.

Confidet on a chairAnd here again too, the bond between Cutter and his employees was a thing as real as the whir and grind and thump of the machines, as real as the spray of metal dust, spitting away from a spinning saw blade. He was able to drive himself through to them, through the hard wall of unions and prejudices against business suits and white collars and soft clean hands, because they knew that at one time he had also been a machinist and then tool and die operator and then a shop foreman. He got through to them, and they respected him. They were even inspired by him, Cutter knew, by his energy and alertness and steel confidence. It was one good reason why their production continually skimmed along near the top level of efficiency.

Cutter turned abruptly and started up the metal-lipped concrete steps to the second floor. He went up quickly, his square, almost chunky figure moving smoothly, and there was not the faintest shortening in his breath when he reached the level of his own office.

Coming up the back steps required him to cross the entire administration office which contained the combined personnel of Production Control, Procurement, and Purchasing. And here, the sharp edge of elation, whetted by the walk past the loading dock and the truck drivers and the machine shop and the machinists, was dulled slightly.

On either side of him as he paced rapidly across the room, were the rows of light-oak desks which contained the kind of men he did not like: fragile men, whether thin or fat, fragile just the same, in the eyes and mouth, and pale with their fragility. They affected steel postures behind those desks, but Cutter knew that the steel was synthetic, that there was nothing in that mimicked look of alertness and virility but posing. They were a breed he did not understand, because he had never been a part of them, and so this time, the invisible but very real quality of employer-employee relationship turned coldly brittle, like frozen cellophane.

The sounds now, the clicking of typewriters, the sliding of file drawers, the squeak of adjusted swivel chairs—all of it—irritated him, rather than giving him inspiration, and so he hurried his way, especially when he passed that one fellow with the sad, frightened eyes, who touched his slim hands at the papers on his desk, like a cautious fawn testing the soundness of the earth in front of him. What was his name? Linden? God, Cutter thought, the epitome of the breed, this man: sallow and slow and so hesitant that he appeared to be about to leap from his chair at the slightest alarm.

Cutter broke his aloofness long enough to glare at the man, and Linden turned his frightened eyes quickly to his desk and began shuffling his papers nervously. Some day, Cutter promised himself, he was going to stop in front of the man and shout, “Booo!” and scare the poor devil to hell and back.

He pushed the glass doors that led to his own offices, and moving into Lucile's ante-room restored his humor. Lucile, matronly yet quick and youthfully spirited, smiled at him and met his eyes directly. Here was some strength again, and he felt the full energy of his early-morning drive returning fully. Lucile, behind her desk in this plain but expensive reception room, reminded him of fast, hard efficiency, the quality of accomplishment that he had dedicated himself to.

“Goddamned sweet morning, eh, Lucy?” he called.

“Beautiful, George,” she said. She had called him by his first name for years. He didn't mind, from her. Not many could do it, but those who could, successfully,

he respected.

“What's up first?” he asked, and she followed him into his own office. It was a high-ceilinged room, with walls bare except for a picture of Alexander Hamilton on one wall, and an award plaque from the State Chamber of Commerce on the opposite side of the room. He spun his leather-cushioned swivel chair toward him and sat down and placed his thick hands against the surface of the desk. Lucile took the only other chair in the office, to the side of the desk, and flipped open her appointment pad.

“Quay wants to see you right away. Says it's important.”

Cutter nodded slightly and closed his eyes. Lucile went on, calling his appointments for the day with clicking precision. He stored the information, leaning back in his chair, adjusting his mind to each, so that there would be no energy wasted during the hard, swift day.

“That's it,” Lucile said. “Do you want to see Quay?”

“Send him in,” Cutter said, and he was already leaning into his desk, signing his name to the first of a dozen letters which he had dictated into the machine during the last ten minutes of the preceding day.

Lucile disappeared, and three minutes later Robert Quay took her place in the chair beside Cutter's desk. He was a taller man than Cutter, and thinner. Still, there was an athletic grace about him, a sureness of step and facial expression, that made it obvious that he was physically fit. He was single and only thirty-five, twelve years younger than Cutter, but he had been with Cutter Products, Inc. for thirteen years. In college he had been a Phi Beta Kappa and lettered three years on the varsity as a quarterback. He was the kind of rare combination that Cutter liked, and Cutter had offered him more than the Chicago Cardinals to get him at graduation.

Cutter felt Quay's presence, without looking up at him. “Goddamned sweet morning, eh, Bob?”

“It really is, George,” Quay said.

“What's up?” Cutter stopped signing, having finished the entire job, and he stared directly into Quay's eyes. Quay met the stare unflinchingly.

“I've got a report from Sid Perry at Adacam Research.”

“Your under-cover agent again, eh?”

Quay grinned. Adacam Research conducted industrial experimentation which included government work. The only way to find out what really went on there, Cutter had found out, was to find a key man who didn't mind talking for a certain amount of compensation, regardless of sworn oaths and signatures to government statements. You could always get somebody, Cutter knew, and Quay had been able to get a young chemist, Sidney Perry.

“Okay,” Cutter said. “What are they doing over there?”

“There's a fellow who's offered Adacam his project for testing. They're highly interested, but they're not going to handle it.”

“Why not?”

Quay shrugged. “Too touchy. It's a device that's based on electronics—”

“What the hell is touchy about electronics?”

“This deals with the human personality,” Quay said, as though that were explanation enough.

Cutter understood. He snorted. “Christ, anything that deals with the human personality scares them over there, doesn't it?”

Quay spread his hands.

“All right,” Cutter said. “What's this device supposed to do?”

“The theory behind it is to produce energy units which reach a plane of intensity great enough to affect the function of the human ego.”

“Will it?” Cutter never wasted time on surprise or curiosity or theory. His mind acted directly. Would it or wouldn't it? Performance versus non-performance.

Efficiency versus inefficiency. Would it improve production of Cutter Products, Inc., or would it not?

“Sid swears they're convinced it will. The factors, on paper, check out. But there's been no experimentation, because it involves the human personality. This thing, when used, is supposed to perform a definite personality change on the individual subjected.”

“How?”

“You know the theory of psychiatric therapy—the theory of shock treatment. The effect is some what similar, but a thousand times more effective.”

“What *is* the effect?”

“A gradual dissolving of inferiority influences, or inhibitions, from the personality. A clear mind resulting. A healthy ego.”

“And?”

“Confidence.”

Cutter stared at Quay's eyes, assimilating the information. “That's all very damned nice. Now where does it fit in with Cutter Products?”

Quay drew a notebook from his coat pocket swiftly. “You remember that efficiency check we had made two months ago—the rating of individual departments on comparable work produced?”

Cutter nodded.

Quay looked at his notebook. “All administrative personnel departments showed an average of—”

“Thirty-six point eight less efficiency than the skilled and unskilled labor departments,” Cutter finished.

Quay smiled slightly. He snapped the notebook shut. “Right. So that's our personnel efficiency bug.”

“Christ, I've known that for twenty years,” Cutter snapped.

“Okay,” Quay said quickly, alerting himself back to the serious effort. “Now then, you'll remember we submitted this efficiency report to Babcock and Steele for analysis, and their report offered no answer, because their experience showed that you *always* get that kind of ratio, because of personality differences. The administrative personnel show more inferiority influences per man, thus less confidence, thus less efficiency.”

“I remember all that,” Cutter said.

“Their report also pointed out that this inevitable loss of efficiency is leveled out, by proportionately smaller wage compensation. The administrative personnel gets approximately twenty-five percent less compensation than the skilled labor personnel, and the remaining eleven point eight percent loss of efficiency is made up by the more highly efficient unskilled labor receiving approximately the same compensation as the administrative personnel.”

“I remember all that nonsense, too,” Cutter reddened faintly with a sudden anger. He did not believe the statistics were nonsense, only that you should expect to write off a thirty-six point eight efficiency loss on the basis of adjusted compensation. A thirty-six point eight efficiency loss was a comparable loss in profits. You never compensated a loss in profits, except by erasing that loss. “And so this is supposed to fix it?”

Quay's head bobbed. “It's worth a try, it seems to me. I've talked to Sid about it extensively, and he tells me that Bolen, who's developed this thing, would be willing to install enough units to cover the entire administrative force, from the department-head level down.”

“How?”

Quay motioned a hand. “It's no larger than a slightly thick saucer. It could be put inside the chairs.” Quay smiled faintly. “They sit on it, you see, and—”

Cutter was not amused. “How much?”

“Nothing,” Quay said quickly. “Absolutely nothing. Bolen wants actual tests

badly, and the Institute wouldn't do it. Snap your fingers, and give him a hundred and fifty people to work on, and it's yours to use for nothing. He'll do the installing, and he *wants* to keep it secret. It's essential, he says, to get an accurate reaction from the subjects affected. For him it's perfect, because we're running a continuous efficiency check, and if this thing does the job like it's supposed to do it, we'll have gained the entire benefits for nothing. How can we lose?"

Cutter stared at Quay for a moment, his mind working swiftly. "Call Horner in on this, but nobody else. Absolutely nobody else. Tell Horner to write up a contract for this fellow to sign. Get a clause in there to the effect that this fellow, Bolen, assumes all responsibility for any effects not designated in the defining part of the contract. Fix it up so that he's entirely liable, then get it signed, and let's see what happens."

Quay smiled fully and stood up. "Right, sir." He had done a good job, he knew. This was the sort of thing that would keep him solidly entrenched in Cutter's favor. "Right, George," he said, remembering that he didn't need to call Cutter sir anymore, but he knew he wouldn't hear any more from Cutter, because Cutter was already looking over a blueprint, eyes thin and careful, mind completely adjusted to a new problem.

EDWARD BOLEN called the saucer-sized disk, the Confidet. He was a thin, short, smiling man with fine brown hair which looked as though it had just been ruffled by a high wind, and he moved, Cutter noticed, with quick, but certain motions. The installing was done two nights after Cutter's lawyer, Horner, had written up the contract and gotten it signed by Bolen. Only Quay, Bolen, and Cutter were present.

Bolen fitted the disks into the base of the plastic chair cushions, and he explained, as he inserted one, then another:

"The energy is inside each one, you see. The life of it is indefinite, and the amount of energy used is proportionate to the demand created."

"What the hell do you mean by energy?" Cutter demanded, watching the small

man work.

Bolen laughed contentedly, and Quay flushed with embarrassment over anyone laughing at a question out of Cutter's lips. But Cutter did not react, only looked at Bolen, as though he could see somehow, beneath that smallness and quietness, a certain strength. Quay had seen that look on Cutter's face before, and it meant simply that Cutter would wait, analyzing expertly in the meantime, until he found his advantage. Quay wondered, if this gadget worked, how long Bolen would own the rights to it.

Cutter drove the Cadillac into Hallery Boulevard, as though the automobile were an English Austin, and just beyond the boundaries of the city, cut off into the hills, sliding into the night and the relative darkness of the exclusive, sparsely populated Green Oaks section.

Ten minutes later, his house, a massive stone structure which looked as though it had been shifted intact from the center of some medieval moat, loomed up, gray and stony, and Capra, his handyman, took over the car and drove it into the garage, while Cutter strode up the wide steps to the door.

Niels took his hat, and Mary was waiting for him in the library.

She was a rather large woman, although not fat, and when she wore high heels—which she was not prone to do, because although Cutter would not have cared, she kept trying to project into other people's minds and trying, as she said, “Not to do anything to them, that I wouldn't want them to do to me.”—she rose a good inch above Cutter. She was pleasant humored, and cooperative, and the one great irritant about her that annoyed Cutter, was the fact that she was not capable of meeting life wholeheartedly and with strength.

She steadily worried about other people's feelings and thoughts, so that Cutter wondered if she were capable of the slightest personal conviction. Yet that weakness was an advantage at the same time, to him, because she worked constantly toward making him happy. The house was run to his minutest liking, and the servants liked her, so that while she did not use a strong enough hand,

they somehow got things done for her, and Cutter had no real complaint. Someday, he knew, he would be able to develop her into the full potential he knew she was capable of achieving, and then there wouldn't be even that one annoyance about her.

He sat down in the large, worn, leather chair, and she handed him a Scotch and water, and kissed his cheek, and then sat down opposite him in a smaller striped-satin chair.

“Did you have a nice day, dear?” she asked.

She was always pleasant and she always smiled at him, and she was indeed a handsome woman. They had been married but five years, and she was almost fifteen years younger than he, but they had a solid understanding. She respected his work, and she was careful with the money he allowed her, and she never forgot the Scotch and water. “The day was all right,” he said.

“My goodness,” she said, “you worked late. Do you want dinner right away?”

“I had some sandwiches at the office,” he said, drinking slowly.

“That isn't enough,” she said reproachfully, and he enjoyed her concern over him. “You'd better have some nice roast beef that Andre did just perfectly. And there's some wonderful dressing that I made myself, for just a small salad.”

He smiled finally. “All right,” he said. “All right.”

She got up and kissed him again, and he relaxed in the large chair, sipping contentedly at his drink, listening to her footsteps hurrying away, the sound another indication that she was doing something for him. He felt tired and easy. He let his mind relax with his body. The gadget, the Confidet; that was going to work, he knew. It would erase the last important bug in his operational efficiency, and then he might even expand, the way he had wanted to all along. He closed his eyes for a moment, tasting of his contentment, and then he heard the sound of his dinner being placed on the dining room table, and he stood up briskly and walked out of the library. He really was hungry, he realized. Not only hungry but, he thought, he might make love to Mary that evening.

THE FIRST indication that the Confidet might be working, came three weeks later, when Quay handed Cutter the report showing an efficiency increase of 3.7 percent. "I think that should tell the story," Quay said elatedly.

"Doesn't mean anything," Cutter said. "Could be a thousand other factors besides that damned gimmick."

"But we've never been able to show more than one point five variance on the administrative checks."

"The trouble with you, Quay," Cutter said brusquely, "is you keep looking for miracles. You think the way to get things in this world is to hope real hard. Nothing comes easy, and I've got half a notion to get those damned silly things jerked out." He bent over his work, obviously finished with Quay, and Quay, deflated, paced out of the office.

Cutter smiled inside the empty office. He liked to see Quay's enthusiasm broken now and then. It took that, to mold a really good man, because that way he assumed real strength after a while. If he got knocked down and got up enough, he didn't fall apart when he hit a really tough obstacle. Cutter was not unhappy about the efficiency figures at all, and he knew as well as Quay that they were decisive.

Give it another two weeks, he thought, and if the increase was comparable, then they might have a real improvement on their hands. Those limp, jumpy creatures on the desks out there might actually start earning their keep. He was thinking about that, what it would mean to the total profit, when Lucile opened his door and he caught a glimpse of the office outside, including the clerk with the sad, frightened eyes. Even you, Linden, Cutter thought, we might even improve you.

The increase *was* comparable after another two weeks. In fact, the efficiency figure jumped to 8.9. Quay was too excited to be knocked down this time, and Cutter was unable to suppress his own pleasure.

“This is really it this time, George,” Quay said. “It really is. And here.” He handed Cutter a set of figures. “Here’s what accounting estimates the profit to be on this eight-nine figure.”

Cutter nodded, his eyes thinning the slightest bit. “We won’t see that for a while.”

“No,” Quay said, “but we’ll see it! We’ll sure as hell see it! And if it goes much higher, we’ll absolutely balance out!”

“What does Bolen figure the top to be?”

“Ten percent.”

“Why not thirty-six point eight?” Cutter said, his eyes bright and narrow.

Quay whistled. “Even at ten, at the wage we’re paying—”

“Never settle for quarters or thirds,” Cutter said. “Get the whole thing. Send for Bolen. I want to talk to him. And in the meantime, Bob, this is such a goddamned sweet morning, what do you say we go to lunch early?”

Quay blinked only once, which proved his adaptability. Cutter had just asked him to lunch, as though it were their habit to lunch together regularly, when in reality, Quay had never once gone to lunch with Cutter before. Quay was quite nonchalant, however, and he said, “Why, fine, George. I think that’s a good idea.”

BOLEN appeared in Cutter’s office the next morning, smiling, his eyes darting quickly about Cutter’s desk and walls, so that Cutter felt, for a moment, that showing Bolen anything as personal as his office, was a little like letting the man look into his brain.

“Quay tells me you’ve set ten percent as the top efficiency increase we can count on, Bolen.” Cutter said it directly, to the point.

Bolen smiled, examining Cutter’s hands and suit and eyes. “That’s right, Mr.

Cutter.”

“Why?”

Bolen placed his small hands on his lap, looked at the tapered fingers, then up again at Cutter. He kept smiling. “It's a matter of saturation.”

“How in hell could ten percent more efficiency turn into saturation?”

“Not ten percent more efficiency,” Bolen said quietly. “Ten percent *effect* on the individual who *creates* the efficiency. Ten percent effect of that which *causes* him to be ten percent more efficient.”

Cutter snorted. “Whatever the hell that damned gimmick does, it creates confidence, drive, strength, doesn't it? Isn't that what you said?”

“Yes,” Bolen said politely. “Approximately.”

“Can you explain to me then, how ten percent more confidence in a man is saturation?”

Bolen studied what he was going to say carefully, smiling all the while. “Some men,” he said very slowly, “are different than others, Mr. Cutter. Some men will react to personality changes as abrupt as this in different ways than others. You aren't too concerned, are you, with what those changes might already have done to any of the individuals affected?”

“Hell, no,” Cutter said loudly. “Why should I be? All I'm interested in is efficiency. Tell me about efficiency, and I'll know what you're talking about.”

“All right,” Bolen said. “We have no way of knowing right now which men have been affected more than others. All we have is an average. The average right now is eight and nine-tenths percent. But perhaps you have some workers who do not react, because they really do not suffer the lacks or compulsions or inhibitions that the Confidet is concerned with. Perhaps they are working at top efficiency right now, and no amount of further subjection to the Confidet will change them.”

“All right then,” Cutter said quickly, “we'll ferret that kind of deadwood out, and

replace them!”

“How will you know which are deadwood?” Bolen asked pleasantly.

“Individual checks, of course!”

Bolen shook his head, looking back at his tapering fingers. “It won't necessarily work. You see, the work that these men are concerned with is not particularly demanding work, is it? And that means you want to strike a balance between capability and demand. It's the unbalance of these things that creates trouble, and in your case, the demand outweighed the capability. Now, if you get a total ten-percent increase, then you're balanced. If you go over that, you'll break the balance all over again, except that you'll have, in certain cases, capability outweighing the demand of the work.”

“Good,” Cutter said. “Any man whose capability outweighs the work he's doing will simply keep increasing his efficiency.”

Bolen shook his head. “No. He'll react quite the other way. He'll lose interest, because the work will no longer be a challenge, and then the efficiency will drop.”

Cutter's jaw hardened. “All right then. I'll move that man up, and fill his place with someone else.”

Bolen looked at Cutter's eyes, examined them curiously. “Some men have a great deal of latent talent, Mr. Cutter. This talent released—”

Cutter frowned, studying Bolen carefully. Then he laughed suddenly. “You think I might not be able to handle it?”

“Well, let's say that you've got a stable of gentle, quiet mares, and you turn them suddenly into thoroughbreds. You have to make allowances for that, Mr. Cutter. The same stalls, the same railings, the same stable boys might not be able to do the job anymore.”

“Yes,” Cutter said, smiling without humor, “but the *owner* has nothing to do with stalls and railings and stable boys, only in the sense that they are subsidiary. The

owner is the owner, and if he has to make a few subsidiary changes, all right. But nothing really affects the owner, no matter whether you've got gentle mares or thoroughbreds.”

Bolen nodded, as though he had expected that exact answer. “You are a very certain man, aren't you, Mr. Cutter?”

“Would I be here, in this office, heading this company, if I weren't, Bolen?”

Bolen smiled.

Cutter straightened in his chair. “All right, do we go on? Do we shoot for the limit?”

Bolen chose his words carefully. “I am interested in testing my Confidet, Mr. Cutter. This is the most important thing in the world to me. I don't recommend what you want to do. But, as long as you'll give me accurate reports on the effects of the Confidet, I'll go along with you. Providing you grant me one concession.”

Cutter frowned.

“I want our written contract dissolved.”

Cutter reddened faintly. Nobody ever demanded anything of him and got it easily, but his mind turned over rapidly, judging the increase in efficiency, the increase in profits. He would not necessarily have to stop with administrative personnel. There were other departments, too, that could stand a little sharpening. Finally he nodded, reluctantly. “All right, Bolen.”

Bolen smiled and left quickly, and Cutter stared at his desk for a moment, tense. Then, he relaxed and the hard sternness of his face softened a bit. He put his finger on his desk calendar, and looked at a date Lucile had circled for him. He grinned, and picked up the telephone, and dialed.

“This is George H. Cutter,” he said to the man who answered. “My wife's birthday is next Saturday. Do you remember that antique desk I bought her last year? Good. Well, the truth is, she uses it all the time, so this year I'd like a good

chair to match it. She's just using an occasional chair right now, and ...”

LIKE EVERYTHING he gave her, Mary liked his gift extremely well, and night after night, after the birthday, he came home to find her at the desk, using the chair, captaining her house and her servant staff. And the improvement was noticeable in her, almost from the first day. Within a month, he could detect a remarkable change, and for the first time, since they had been married, Mary gave a dinner for thirty people without crying just before it started.

There were other changes.

Quay brought in efficiency report after efficiency report, and by the end of three months, they had hit eighteen and seven-tenths percent increase. The administrative office was no longer the dull, listless place it had been; now it thrived and hummed like the shop below. Cutter could see the difference with his own eyes, and he could particularly see the differences in certain individuals.

Brown and Kennedy showed remarkable improvement, but it was really Harry Linden who astonished Cutter. An individual check showed a sixty-percent increase by Linden, and there was a definite change in the man's looks. He walked differently, with a quick, virile step, and the look of his face and eyes had become strong and alive. He began appearing early in the morning, ahead of the starting hour, and working late, and the only time he missed any work hours, was one afternoon, during which, Lucile informed Cutter, he had appeared in court for his divorce trial.

Within a month, Cutter had fired Stole and Lackter and Grant, as department heads, and replaced them with Brown, Kennedy, and Linden. He had formulated plans for installation of the Confidets in the drafting department and the supply department, and already the profits of increased efficiency were beginning to show in the records. Cutter was full of new enthusiasm and ambition, and there was only one thorn in the entire development.

Quay had resigned.

Cutter had been startled and extremely angry, but Quay had been unperturbed and stubborn. "I've enjoyed working with you immensely, George, but my mind is made up. No hard feelings?"

Cutter had not even shaken his hand.

It had bothered him for days, and he checked every industrial company in the area, to see where Quay had found a better position. He was highly surprised, when he learned, finally, that Quay had purchased a small boat and was earning his living by carrying fishermen out onto the Bay. Quay had also married, four days after his resignation, and Cutter pushed the entire thing out of his mind, checking it off to partial insanity.

By February of the next year, he had promoted Harry Linden to Quay's old job, gotten rid of the deadwood that showed up so plainly on the individual checks, and the total efficiency average had reached thirty-three percent. His and Mary's anniversary was on the fourth of March, and when that day arrived, he was certain that he had reached that point where he could expand to another plant.

He was about to order her a mink stole in celebration, but it was also that day that he was informed that she was suing him for divorce. He rushed home, furious, but she was gone. She had taken her clothes and jewelry and the second Cadillac. In fact, all that she had left of her personal possessions were the antique desk and chair. When the trial was over, months later, she had won enough support to take her to France, where, he learned, she purchased a chateau at Cannes.

He tried to lose himself in his work, but for the first time in his life, he had begun to get faintly worried. It was only a sliver of worry, but it kept him from going on with the expansion. Stocks in the company had turned over at an amazingly rapid rate, and while it was still nothing more than intuition on his part, he began to tighten up, readying himself to meet anything.

The explosion came in July.

Drindor Products had picked up forty-nine percent of the stock on the market, by using secondary buyers. There had been a leak somewhere, Cutter realized, that

had told his competitor, Drindor, the kind of profit he was making. He knew who it had been instantly, but before he could fire Harry Linden, all of his walls crashed down. Four months before, to put more *esprit de corps* into Linden, he had allowed Linden eight shares of his own stock, intending to pick it up later from the market. Linden had coerced with Drindor. Cutter lost control.

A board of directors was elected by Drindor, and Drindor assumed the presidency by proxy. Harry Linden took over Cutter's office, as Vice President In Charge.

Cutter had wildly ordered Edward Bolen to remove the Confidets one week before, but even then he had known that it was too late, and the smiling, knowing look on Bolen's face had infuriated him to a screaming rage. Bolen remained undisturbed, and quietly carried the disks away. Cutter, when he left his office that final day, moved slowly, very slowly.

HE BROODED for many long days after that, searching his mind for a way to counterattack. He still had enough stock to keep him comfortable if he lived another hundred years. But he no longer had the power, and he thirsted for that. He turned it around and around in his brain, trying to figure out how he could do it, and the one thing he finally knew, the one certain thing, was that if he used enough drive, enough strength, then he would regain control of the company he had built with his own hands and mind.

He paced the library and the long living room and the dining room, and his eyes were lost, until he saw, through the doorway of the sewing room, that desk and that chair, and he remembered he hadn't done anything about that.

He paused only briefly, because he had not lost an ounce of his ability to make a sudden decision, and then he removed that disk and carried it to the library and fitted it under the cushion of the large, worn, leather chair.

By fall, he had done nothing to regain control, and he was less certain of how he should act than he had been months before. He kept driving by the plant and

looking at it, but he did so carefully, so that no one would see him, and he was surprised to find that, above all, he didn't want to face Harry Linden. The memory of the man's firm look, the sharp, bold eyes, frightened him, and the knowledge of his fright crushed him inside. He wished desperately that Mary were back with him, and he even wrote her letters, pleading letters, but they came back, unopened.

Finally he went to see Robert Quay, because Quay was the only man in his memory whom he somehow didn't fear talking to. He found Quay in a small cottage near the beach. There was a six-day old infant in a crib in the bedroom, and Quay's wife was a sparkling-eyed girl with a smile that made Cutter feel relatively at ease for the first time in weeks.

She politely left them alone, and Cutter sat there, embarrassed faintly, but glad to be in Quay's home and presence. They talked of how it had been, when Quay was with the company, and finally Cutter pushed himself into asking about it:

“I've often wondered, Bob, why you left?”

Quay blushed slightly, then grinned. “I might as well admit it. I got one of those things from Bolen, and had it installed in my own chair.”

Cutter thought about it, surprised. He cleared his throat. “And then you quit?”

“Sure,” Quay said. “All my life, I'd wanted to do just what I'm doing. But things just came easy to me, and the opportunities were always there, and I just never had the guts to pass anything by. Finally I did.”

Quay smiled at him, and Cutter shifted in his chair. “The Confidet did that.”

Cutter nodded.

It came to him suddenly, something he'd never suspected until that moment. There was something very definitely wrong with what had happened to him. The Confidet had affected everyone but him; there must have been something wrong with the one he had been using. It had worked with Mary, but hadn't Bolen said something about the energy being used in proportion to the demand? Mary had certainly created a demand. Bolen said the life of it was indefinite, but couldn't

the energy have been used up?

“Ah,” he said carefully, smiling, to Quay. “You wouldn't have it around, would you? That Confidet of yours?”

“Oh, hell, no,” Quay said. “I gave it to Bolen a long time ago. He came around for it, in fact. Said he had to keep track of all of them.”

Cutter left hurriedly, with Quay and his wife following him to his car. He drove straight to Bolen's house.

Fury built inside of him. All this time, Bolen had kept track of his Confidet, the one that Mary had used, and all this time, he had known Cutter still had it. Cutter was furious over the realization that Bolen had been using him for experimentation, and also because the Confidet that he had tried to use had turned worthless.

All his hatred, all his anger churned inside of him like the heat from shaken coals, but when he walked up the path to Bolen's small house, he did so quietly, with extreme care.

When he saw Bolen's face in the doorway, he wanted to strike the man, but he kept his hands quietly at his sides; and though he hated himself for it, he even smiled a little at the man.

“Come in,” Bolen smiled, and he spoke softly, and at the same time he examined Cutter with quick, penetrating eyes. “Come in, Mr. Cutter.”

Cutter wanted to stand there and demand another Confidet, a good one, and not walk inside, politely, like he did. And he wished that his voice would come out, quickly, with the power and hate in it that he had once been capable of. But for some reason, he couldn't say a word.

Bolen was extremely polite. “You've been using that Confidet, haven't you?” He spoke gently, almost as though he were speaking to a frightened child.

“Yes,” Cutter managed to say.

“And what you expected to happen, didn't. That's what you want to tell me, isn't

it?”

Cutter's insides quivered with rage, but he was able only to nod.

“Would you like to know why?” Bolen said.

Cutter rubbed his damp palms over his knees. He nodded.

Bolen smiled, his eyes sparkling. “Very simple really. It wasn't the fault of the Confidet so much, Mr. Cutter, as you. You see, you are a rare exception. What you are, or possibly I should say, what you were, was a complete super ego. There are very few of those, Mr. Cutter, in this world, but you happened to be one of them. A really absolute, complete super ego, and the Confidet's effect was simply the reverse of what it would have been with anyone else.” Bolen shook his head, sympathetically, but he didn't stop smiling, and his eyes didn't stop their infuriating exploration of Cutter's face and eyes and hands. “It's really a shame, because I was almost certain you were a super ego, Mr. Cutter. And when you didn't return that last Confidet, I somehow felt that you might use it, after all that nasty business at the company and all.

“But while I was fairly certain of the effects, Mr. Cutter, I wasn't absolutely *sure*, you see, and so like the rest of the experiments, I had to forget my conscience. I'm really very sorry.”

The anger was a wild thing inside Cutter now, and it made his hands tremble and sweat, and his mouth quiver, and he hated the man in front of him, the man who was responsible for what had happened to him, the smiling man with the soft voice and exploring eyes. But he didn't say anything, not a word. He didn't show his anger or his frustration or his resentment. He didn't indicate to Bolen a particle of his inner wildness.

He didn't have the nerve.

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