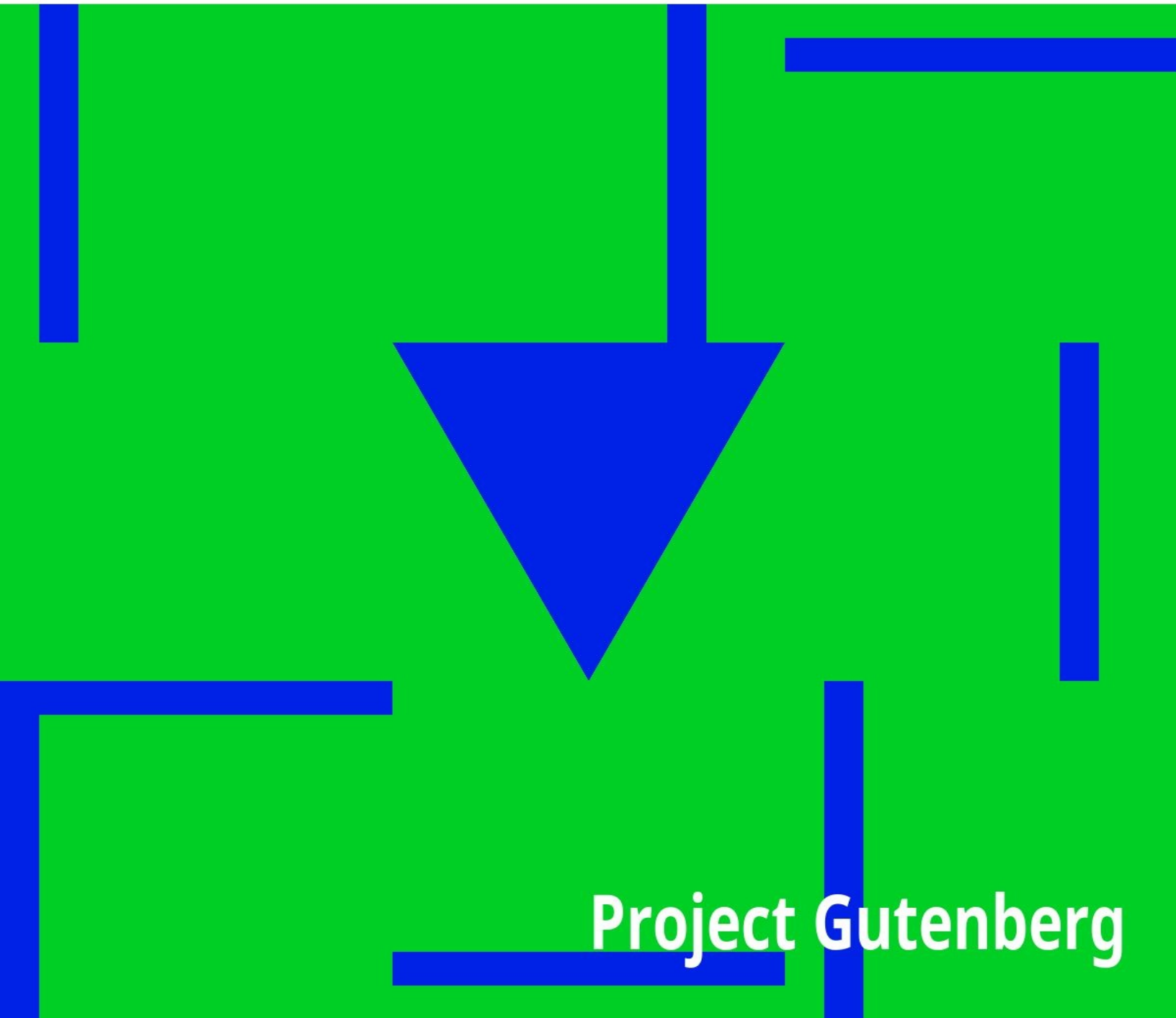
The Short Life

Francis Donovan



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THE SHORT LIFE

The Alien had to choose—and fast—a living entity to act through. He chose ... but he made one error....

BY FRANCIS DONOVAN

Illustrated by Rogers

I

An embryo stirred very slightly in the warm, dark womb that held it. Chemical stimuli and minute pulses of energy that were forming the complex proteins faltered. A catalyst failed briefly in its task, then resumed, but the damage had been done. A vital circuit remained incomplete, a neural path blocked. Time passed....

An embryo gathered in a metal womb, controlled potential building to titanic birth. A thread of wire melted under a breath of energy and a tiny, glowing light winked out. A rodentlike maintenance robot, scurrying to an unimportant repair task, saw no warning signal and crossed a control panel from behind at the moment that a relay closed automatically. Obliterated, the robot only briefly interfered with the proper functioning of the machine, but the damage had been done. For a split second at a critical moment, a mighty engine reacted out of control. Time passed....

An embryo jerked convulsively under a frightful onslaught, strained for life in a crowded womb while the mother's convulsions threatened it with death. The convulsions passed, the mother lived, the womb emptied, but the damage had been done, a record had been cut. Time passed....

II

There are logical limits for any pretense—limits beyond which the pretense becomes demonstrably absurd. Mother-love enabled the woman Helen Douglas to evade logic up to and beyond the point of absurdity, but even mother-love is not proof against the turmoil of the subconscious. A survival factor pried up a safety valve, and Helen Douglas found herself suddenly face to face with the admission that she had so desperately suppressed. She reacted with a terrible storm of weeping that shook the bed and was watched with complete disinterest by the dry-eyed imbecile beside her. Two-year-old Timothy Wainwright Douglas, congenital idiot, couldn't care less. It was nothing to him that his mother had at last faced the ugly knowledge that her only child should have been born dead. It was less than nothing to him that she could almost find it in her heart to wish him dead.

Release from the crowded womb brought no immediate awakening from the long sleep of gestation, for a sense of identity comes only slowly to the very young, the new-born. He did not realize that his intellectual awakening, gradual as it seemed to him, was really extraordinarily rapid, a matter of only two or three weeks after birth. To him, with no frame of reference, it was a time of mystery that was not recognized as mystery. At first there was only Warmth and Hunger, for which he had no names but which he recognized by their presence or absence. There was the satisfying of Hunger, Sleep, and the return of Hunger. Had he been inclined to philosophy at that tender age, he would have considered the cycle a complete and satisfying one. In a few days, however, there were longer periods between the satisfying of Hunger and the coming of Sleep—a sort of comfortable, full-stomached reverie that was the beginning of the end.

With astounding precocity of which he was completely unaware, he began rapidly sorting and cataloguing noises that had previously conveyed no meaning. He now learned to associate certain sounds with certain sources and place others under tentative listings while awaiting further data. Smells received the same treatment as noises and often the two could be related. A certain smell and a certain gobbling sort of noise were often followed by a frightening swoop as he was lifted, but his eyes were not yet focused and could give him little information as to the manner or purpose of lifting.

In his fourth week of life he began to be troubled. His little handful of memories centered around a growing and not entirely subjective awareness of himself as an individual. Clearly, life could be divided into "me" and "not me." To have arrived at that conclusion twenty-odd days after birth was an incredible achievement. His mind was quick, but it could not reason further without a basis for logic, a system of reference, learned data from which further data could be inferred. There was uneasiness in him, but no warning of danger; only a stirring of memory that tried to rise to the conscious level. Wonderingly he prodded the memory a little, as an inquisitive child pokes at a slow-burning firecracker or a wary pup approaches its first cat. Like the sharp crack of a squib, the quick spit of a cat, the memory erupted and flung him back on his mental heels.

He felt a sensation that he knew was death though he had no name for it, and his immature defenses sprang into action, tried in vain to block the memory, to thrust Death back into its Pandora's Box. He impeded the flood by an infinitesimal fraction of a second, and then full awareness came and with it an understanding of the terrible thing that had happened, the thing that he?—yes, *he* had done.

The fledgling identity of "me" and "not me" sank forever into submergence, never to rise again.

III

When he was almost four, Timmy spoke his first words. He said clearly and matter-of-factly, "I want that one, Helen."

His mother's mouth slowly opened while her face turned gray with shock. The buckling of her knees in cataplexy forced her to sit down heavily on a kitchen chair not cushioned for such descents, but she was hardly aware of it. Timmy, seated on the kitchen floor and surrounded by half-grown pups owned by a neighbor, screwed his head around to glance at her impatiently over his shoulder.

"I want that one," he repeated confidently, and pointed to the most ill-proportioned of an ill-conceived litter of mongrels. Helen raised shaking hands to her face, and screamed.

The quick scrape of a chair in the living room and the sound of hasty footsteps glissading on the throw-rug in the hall heralded the approach of Timmy's father. The doorway filled with flexing muscles that flexed in vain, but somewhat at a disadvantage by the strictly static tableaux. Helen sat at the table, her staring eyes fixed on the child who looked back in blank astonishment. Even the pups were motionless, having cowered in alarm at Helen's scream.

"What's the matter?" Timmy's father asked.

His voice was a spur rudely galvanizing her into action, into an awkward convulsion that landed her on her knees beside Timmy. She gripped his little shoulders with fierce intensity and almost glared into his eyes.

"Say it again, Timmy—*say it again*!" She looked around wildly. "He spoke, Jerry, as clear as anyone! He said 'I want that one,' and pointed! Timmy ... darling ... *angel* ... say it again!"

Timmy's face twitched uncertainly, giving the effect of a confused play of expressions. For a moment he looked as though he would cry, but then the crumpled, puckered lines magically smoothed. The eyes, dull and blank, stayed dry. He made a senseless noise and slobbered in doing so. His jaw was slack, his chin wet.

Jerry felt slightly sick.

"Get up, Helen." He lifted her somewhat roughly to her feet, overrode her babble. "You're frightening the ... the child."

"He *talked*, Jerry ... you heard him! *Didn't* you hear him!"

"Come in the living room and sit down." She was half-carried, her protests ignored. There was a certain grim determination in his actions as he made her comfortable. "Now we're going to face it, Helen. It can't be put off. Timmy was heart-wrenching enough by himself, but I've had to watch the change in you in the past few months. You're getting ... well, we'll call it hysterical. I could cut off my arm for saying this, honey, but, if we keep Timmy any longer, you'll just have a breakdown, that's all!"

She moaned softly, rocking back and forth in misery's timeless attitude. "I can't help it, Jerry. I ... just ... can't ... help it."

"I know, I know. So I'm making the decision for both of us, here and now, and on my head be it. Timmy will have to be put away this week, permanently."

"No!" Her wail was more of anguish than of protest.

"Yes! I can't stand coming home from work day after day to find you've manufactured some new evidence to delude yourself there's hope for him. One day he took the spoon in his hand to feed himself, another day he focused his eyes and looked around the room as though he was really taking everything in —"

"You said you believed me!"

"So I did—at first. So I'd sit around all evening watching him, *willing* him to do something intelligent. And did he? No. Hon, I don't want to be unkind to you or to him, but I can't stand seeing you delude yourself, making yourself sick. We've both taken more than is good for us. We're at the end of our rope. We've got to face it now and do what should have been done long ago. It's not as if Timmy will miss us. He doesn't even know us, after four years!"

She gathered her forces, shut her eyes tight as if to deny his existence. "It's no use, Jerry, I won't do it. I am *not* deluding myself. I heard him speak. If that was illusion, it was so real to me that you may as well put us both away together!"

"Hysterical hallucinations—"

"Jerry, don't say that again. *I heard him say 'I want that one, Helen!'*"

"You see! Already you're embroidering what you heard! Now he's calling his mother by her first name. Honest, Helen, can't you see how ridiculous you're being? If you'd thought he said da-da or goo-goo I could have gone along with the gag, but to have him jump the whole learning stage and come out with a complete, concise, explicit little sentence ending familiarly with your Christian name—"

"I don't know how he did it, but he *did* it."

Jerry rose from his seat beside her, his lips tight. "I can't honestly say I love my own child, hard as I've tried. But I can say that I love his mother. If I have to bankrupt myself to give Timmy proper care in an institution, then I'll do just that, and do it gladly. But I won't falsely place his interests above yours. He was born an idiot and he will live and die an idiot. Nothing can change that. Timmy goes, and that's final."

He clamped his mouth shut and turned toward the kitchen where he knew his son sat, a stupid lump that couldn't even crawl of its own volition. The stupid lump stood firmly in the doorway, an uncertain, placating smile on its lips, a pup cradled in the slender arms.

"Jerry? I want *this* one."

IV

By Timmy's sixth birthday, only his parents' adamant attitude had saved him from becoming a side show. Once the initial household uproar had died down and some degree of general sanity been restored, Helen and Jerry had another bad fright. They had grudgingly allowed Clancey, the family sawbones, to call in a psychologist friend, Philip Warwick. The combined efforts of these two to find an explanation for Timmy resulted in complete chaos, with Timmy suffering violent and erratic lapses into complete idiocy for varying lengths of time. Standard tests meant nothing, unless mutually exclusive results could be accepted as meaningful in themselves. At length, Timmy suffered a relapse of such duration that the parents became panic-stricken and quietly rebelled. It was obvious that he needed an atmosphere of peace and quiet. Confusion, excitement, or the concentrated attention of several adults simply threw him into a relapse.

The break came when Clancey called at the house and found it empty, deserted. He traced them to a new neighborhood where they had rented a house with a peaceful, walled garden. They were not pleased to see him, but Clancey was a psychologist of sorts himself and a working agreement was arrived at whereby he and Warwick could drop in frequently as friends and quietly observe Timmy, chatting with him when they could win his confidence and submitting him to whatever tests they could adequately disguise. But under pain of permanent excommunication from the Douglas menage they were not to discuss him with outsiders in such a way as to either identify him or draw attention to him. Timmy was to be allowed to set his own pace under their obliquely-watching eyes. He was not to become a subject for newspaper comment, for the speculation of strangers, or for the heated discussion of learned gentlemen calling each other liars in six syllables. For Timmy was something new under the sun.

Two years of observation gave Clancey and Warwick an impressive file of notes on him, and they were prone to sit after office hours with it on the desk between them, giving it morose glances. They were not happy. Sometimes, as now, they concluded an evening visit by sitting in Clancey's or Warwick's car parked outside the Douglas fence, holding an impromptu post-mortem on an intellectual corpse that had come to life in complete defiance of all the rules.

They didn't notice the stealthy movement of one of the fence-boards, nor the small form that snaked through the shadows of concealing shrubbery until it was near the open window of the car.

"Take word-association, Clancey. I had a few minutes with him this evening before you got here, so I started him on a 'game' where we took turns in saying a word and trying to guess what the other would reply. I believe he thought I was rather a simpleton and needed humoring. Anyway, I tried him with 'home' and got a delayed response. It's happened before. Apparently the concept of home is tied to some deeper disturbance." There was a slight, uneasy movement from the listening figure. "Well, linking home and family, on my next turn I shot 'mother' at him. There was an immediate flash of confusion in his eyes and again a delayed response before he blurted 'Mom.' Something else had been on the tip of his tongue, but he choked it back and selected what seemed to him a more suitable reply.

"Now, we both know from two years' systematic observation that Helen is as well-balanced a mother as you're likely to find. I'm quite sure she has no unsuspected bad habits or traits that are leaving sensitive spots in Timmy's mind, making him flinch at the association, nor is there some long-standing or unresolved conflict in their relations. Yet 'home' and 'mother' both invoke blocks that inhibit response until consciously overcome, or invoke images that he wishes to conceal lest they betray a secret. I doubt very much whether anything that happened in his first four years could have left a deep impression on the completely imbecilic mind he is *assumed* to have had then. That leaves the past two years—"

(Confirmation) Game/not game.... Should data have predicted test? (Indecision) Possibly ... review later. So much to learn ... confusion inevitable. Next time respond "mother—three" (laughter) Invalid frame of reference—impossible work with/discard.

"Something else interests me there, Phil. You suggest he selected, deliberately, what seemed an appropriate response to 'mother.' Did you take the next logical step and try 'father?'"

"Yes."

"And did he anticipate it?"

"I'm sure he did. I see what you mean ... fairly sharp reasoning for a six-year-old supposed to be mentally retarded. When I shot 'father' at him he came back

promptly with 'male-Douglas' almost like one word."

"Got the sex and identity right. What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing 'wrong' or 'right' about it. I was hoping for some clue as to how his mind works. Maybe I got it, but I don't know what to do with it. I didn't expect a calmly objective cataloguing of the old man as a 'male-Douglas.'"

(Surprise) Where is error? Semantics? Sociology? Colloquial nuance? (Decision) Reject further word-games.

"If that's a clue, Phil, you can have it." Clancey hauled a notebook from his pocket and held it up. "Open this thing anywhere—anywhere at all. It'll open at an unanswered question. At the age of roughly three and one-half, a congenital idiot suddenly displays flashes of alert intelligence. For forty-two months that child was content to sit on his fanny and vegetate. Never crawled, never spoke, never played, seldom even focused his eyes. Then one day his mother sees him study some alphabet blocks with every appearance of curiosity. Awareness! For the first time!

"Later, he suddenly reaches out his hand and piles the blocks in a neat stack. Purposeful activity and perfect muscular control! No trial-and-error, no baby hesitation with hand poised—just a sudden assured, controlled action. Mama leaps for joy, junior relapses into idiocy, and no one—including me—really believes mama when she says it happened. This sort of thing goes on for several months—brief, erratic flashes of extraordinary intelligence, considering the subject. Then, a child who has never spoken a single word says clearly and politely, 'I want that one, Helen,' and a child who has never crawled puts his feet under him and stands up steady as a rock. You tell me, Phil—how did he do it?"

"Don't look to me for an answer. I'm only a lousy fifth-rate psychology teacher, as of the day you brought Timmy into my life. And the curse of Freud be on you for *that* kindly act of professional assassination. The answer is obvious, of course ... Timmy didn't and couldn't do what we've seen him do with our own wide-open, innocent eyes. We are the victims of a cunning hoax."

(Amusement) Difficult to experiment unobserved. Action too precipitate/no choice. (Affection/laughter) "The world is so people." (Chill) Danger! Madness!

"How does any child learn to speak?"

"Mainly by hearing others. Maybe Timmy learned the same way. Maybe he listened, absorbing the meaning and sound of words, trying them out in the silence of his otherwise vacant little noggin. Maybe his mind awakened gradually to the realization that it was a prisoner in a paralyzed organ, strait-jacketed by blocks or short circuits. Maybe he spent his forty-two months of vegetating driving against those blocks until he partially broke them down and could speak. Maybe."

"And without ever having shaped his lips or tongue to intelligent sounds, he speaks fluently at the first try?"

"Why not? Any kid that will start out by addressing its parents chummily as 'Helen' and 'Jerry' and act naively surprised at the reaction, obviously has rules of its own."

They ruminated in silence for a moment.

"It's too easy to talk vaguely about blocks and short circuits, Clancey. How do you account for his completely erratic progress? Totally unpredictable, with alternating periods of complete idiocy and high intelligence?"

"Not totally unpredictable."

"Oh?"

"At least three things suggest a pattern. One is that his relapses, though erratic, are becoming ever shorter in duration and more widely separated."

"Yes, they are infrequent now and quickly ended."

"The second is that his grasp of the social pattern in which he lives—his environment, in all its subtleties—is constantly improving."

"Right again. At the age of six he can in many ways match a bright lad twice his age. Not in the subtleties, though—I disagree there. You can give him a simple or even a not-so-simple explanation of something he hears on the radio, dealing with it as a general theme in sociology, and he seems to grasp the broad outline with little difficulty, but in trivial matters of social behavior and human relations he's frequently uncertain, as likely as not to pull a howling bloomer. Seems unusually baffled and exasperated by some of the social mores he runs into, such as the many tabu subjects for conversation, or taking your clothes off whenever or wherever you feel inclined to. Poor Helen. She tries to explain and

he keeps doggedly after her with ruthless logic, obviously trying hard to understand, and ... you know ... it's surprising how few really sound, logical reasons there are for half the accepted conventions that rule our lives.

"He's pinned me down several times to the conclusion that a certain convention exists solely because people can't be trusted to behave rationally without restraining rules. It's rather a dismaying conclusion when it's dragged out in the open like that, and it seems to horrify him. An ordinary kid learns by experience and accepts the rules with sporadic rebellion, but our boy acts as if they were beyond comprehension. And I think they are ... to him.

"The first crime drama he happened to see on TV turned him white as a sheet, and when he stuck his nose out the gate a few days later and watched some neighborhood kids playing cowboys and Indians with cap pistols, he was sick on the grass. Explaining the 'glamour' of the early west made it worse. He drew back from me as though I were contagious. I had the feeling that he *pitied* me. I wonder, sometimes, whether he makes any real sense at all out of what is said to him. He's very slow to interpret the shades of expression possible in voice and face. I feel that potentially he has an exceptional mind, but the great difficulty is communication."

"Like pulling his leg. It's too easy to be fun."

"Exactly, unless the little so-and-so is pulling ours, which I sometimes suspect." Phil winced a little and rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Getting a headache. Well, what's this third item you had in mind?"

"I can't pin it down, but I have a feeling there's a fairly obvious physical factor linking the periods of relapse."

"Physical tiredness?"

"No ... the contrary, perhaps. At the start he got himself overtired pretty often, as though he overestimated his endurance, but it didn't seem to do him any harm. But if he awakens early or unexpectedly, there may be an appreciable delay before he orients himself. Then he comes to with a snap."

"Shock? Confusion of any sort?"

"Confusion, certainly. He didn't last five minutes when they tried him in school, you remember. Howled for his dog, then sat on the floor and dribbled.

The confusion of being chucked into a group of noisy, aggressive six-year-olds was too much for him. You remember he recovered completely—almost instantly—when his mother packed him out of the school."

"That reminds me of something else. I think that dog is some sort of a symbol to him. Perhaps it has somehow become associated with security. Try this for size: his mind is struggling to free itself from its strait jacket; the dog captures his attention at a critical moment; the mother screams when he speaks, frightening him, but the dog comes reassuringly to his arms and subsequently—or did *he* see it as a consequence?—his parents make much of him. In other words, at the start of his rational life the dog is a friendly element and the parents a frightening one. The details of the association drop soon enough from his conscious memory, but not from his subconscious. When the dog is with him, he feels secure. When they are separated—it was not allowed into school with him, of course—his symbol is gone and he panics, much as an ordinary child panics if it loses its mother in a crowd."

"Slick, but not convincing. It touches on another peculiarity, however ... the way he wants that hound with him always, no matter where. Sleeps with it on his bed, eats with it by his chair, even takes it to the bathroom—by-the-by, he acquired the dog and bowel-control at the same time, if you recall—but does he *like* the dog? He never pets it to speak of. Plays with it sometimes in a clumsy, disinterested sort of way, but it's not the classic boy-dog relationship. If the dog is merely a symbol, as you suggest—"

"I didn't say 'merely' a symbol. If I'm right, an association as strong as this one could be devilish awkward and even dangerous, hooked to a hair-trigger mind like his. What if something happens to the dog before his dependence or whatever can be broken? Dogs get run over, you know, and even their normal life span is short. Maybe we ought to try to break it up ... damn this headache."

(Regret/Despondency) Degraded to pain ... static/thick tongue. (Resignation) Delay, delay, delay ... break conversation. Time wrong.

"You been bothered with headaches lately?"

"Off and on—nasty sort of twinges. If I trusted myself with a carpenter, I'd let you give me a check-up. Well, let's cut this short. What I was going to say ... let's see ... oh, since Timmy seldom pays any attention to the dog, why does the dog stick to him like a shadow?"

Clancey grunted.

"That dog's no fool, stupid as he is. Clumsy, homely, and half-witted enough to sit on a tack for five minutes before he howled—I've seen him do just about that—he knows when he needs a protector. If it weren't for Timmy, the hound would have been destroyed long ago as an act of mercy. Helen and Jerry are resigned to him, of course, for Timmy's sake, but have you noticed that the dog reacts much the same as Timmy if they get separated? Casts about at once for a way to rejoin him, and the longer he's delayed the more he panics. Maybe it's a two-way switch—maybe Timmy and his dog are indispensable symbols to each other!"

"You dream up any more lulus like that, you keep them to yourself. Psychopathic dogs I draw the line at. Clancey, there is only one conclusion to be drawn from these here solemn deliberations. Throw out the textbooks and roll with the punches."

"Amen."

V

"There should be no deaths!"

Phil turned that one over in his mind, cautiously. A good deal of his attention was needed for the task of nursing his old car along the ruts of the dirt road, but the murmured exclamation impelled him to steal a glance at the boy sitting beside him. This was the spring of Timmy's tenth year—the sixth year of his friendship with "Uncle" Phil—and those years had taught Phil more than he realized, if less than he had hoped. He knew, for example, that the peculiar vacancy of Timmy's expression at the moment implied deep thought rather than the complete absence of thought that it suggested. That was a curious characteristic that always made the man a little uneasy. Timmy's face was sometimes radiantly, spontaneously expressive, the most sensitive of mirrors, and sometimes it was rather mechanically expressive, but it was only expressive in a positive sense. In moments of abstraction or daydreaming there was no faraway look, no frown of concentration. Only blankness.

"The world would get a trifle crowded, you know."

Timmy leaped the gap easily to connect the two remarks, as Phil had thought he would. "Oh, I didn't mean there should be no *death*. I was thinking of something else. That man they found dead in the bush yesterday."

"A man with a heart condition should never go hunting alone."

"Was it his heart, Uncle Phil?"

"His heart and his head both, if you ask me. He had a bad heart, all right—I saw him have an attack once. You'd think a man like that would have sense enough to avoid overexertion, but he lost his way and started churning through swamp and brush in a straight line instead of looking for the trail again. Must have acted like a moron, running until he dropped."

"Would panic make a man do that?"

"It will make a man do any crazy thing imaginable, if he lets it get the upper hand. There's only a few square miles of marsh and brush here, with the town already crowding up against it. In a few years it will be drained and the land

used for industrial development and so on, then the fools will have to find some other way to kill themselves."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, every so often we have to turn out search parties and have a grand shivaree looking for some idiot who usually turns up dead. Drowned himself in two feet of water, or run himself ragged, or even put a bullet through his head for no good reason. It's happened several times in the past few years, so the place is getting a bad name it doesn't deserve. Even the search parties often get themselves balled up and mill around in circles, perfect examples of mass hysteria. Sometimes I get fed up with the human race."

"I ... didn't know. I mean, about the ... deaths."

Phil laughed outright at the tragic tone.

"Oh, come now! Let's not be morbid about it! You wanted to drive out here, remember."

"I still do, Uncle Phil. You and Dad were talking about how you used to come out here every spring when you were kids, to collect specimens, and it sounded like fun."

"So it was ... in those days. This old dirt road leads well in toward the center. I used to spend a whole day hiking along here with my dog, just rooting around and having a grand time. It's a pity we outgrow the best things in life. Childhood scenes should be remembered, not revisited. We can remember, but we can't recapture. A few years ago I wanted some nature photographs so of course I came out here, sure I'd get some beauties. I don't know. I started out in high spirits, recognizing every rotted old stump along the way, but somehow it all turned to ashes. I lost interest and turned back without taking a single exposure —almost hating the place, in fact, as if it had let me down. Strange that a place I loved as a kid should seem so empty and uninviting now." He put on the brakes and looked around morosely.

"Don't you want to go any farther, Uncle Phil?"

"What for? You can see how overgrown the road is getting. I'll be lucky if I can find a clearing to turn around. There's nothing of interest up ahead, Timmy. The road dies out and then there's a couple of miles or so of swamp and flies. It's getting dusk, too—"

"I'd like to get out for a minute."

"Oh. Well, O. K., but make it snappy."

He settled back listlessly as the boy climbed out, holding the door for the dog to follow.

"Do you have to take that mutt ... never mind, go ahead."

The boy wandered off to the side of the road and Phil listened to the rustle of bushes, wondering at his own irritation. He felt ill at ease, anxious to be away. He started as Timmy came up beside him on the left of the car.

"That was quick."

"Yeah." The boy was holding a spray of flowering shrub and his hand passed casually over the flowers in a light caress. "Say, hasn't this flower got a sweet smell, Uncle Phil? Here, smell it."

"It's a pretty flower, Timmy, but that stuff has no perfume." He accepted the branch automatically, lifted it to his nostrils.

Time stopped.

He thought he felt a thump against the side of the car, but the impression faded before it was fully born. In a remote corner of his mind the ticking of his watch sounded as a cold, measured rhythm, a metronome with delusions of syncopation. He sat motionless, his forearm resting on the steering wheel, the spray of blossoms caressing his cheek, his mind stunned by the anaesthetic he drew in with each breath. He was as one lost in thought, his eyes open but unseeing, observing but not interpreting.

There was no sense of duration, of the passage of seconds or minutes. There was only a dream in which, suddenly, a gentle mind made its presence known. Concepts tapped lightly at his own mind and an automatic process of interpretation winnowed and equated until a gentle voice seemed to speak. The words were few, merely computed associations keyed to understanding, and with them were perfectly and intimately synchronized fragments of emotion and vision, softly washing over the surface of his mind.

(Urgency) Attend—attend! Challonari! Attend!

An impression of convolutions drifted through his mind—a shape, perhaps, and a color. He felt no curiosity, and let the impression drift. As a sunbather drowsing on a crowded beach, hearing the background hum of the crowd and now and then a more clearly spoken phrase, so he caught the edge of this communication. It was not for him. A second mind entered ... *was* it a mind? Yes, and yet very different. It was strong, but limited—perhaps childlike, in some ways. Alive after a fashion, it was receptive of emotion up to a point and even capable of emotion—up to a point. It seemed an embryo mind, in some ways well developed and in others with no potential whatever.

(RELIEF) IDENTITY BLURRED ... KNOW/NOT KNOW. (PERPLEXITY) NO PRECEDENT ... REQUIRE INSTRUCTIONS. (CONFIDENCE/TRUST) INSTRUCT PLEASE.

Instructions (Decisive) Sleep ... sleep ... sleep.

(AGITATION) IDENTITY NOT MENTOR ... INSTRUCTIONS INVOLVE BASIC DISOBEDIENCE (CONFUSION/DISTRESS) CANNOT OBEY/DISOBEY ... DILEMMA INSOLUBLE TO CHALLONARI (PLEADING) REVISE INSTRUCTIONS PLEASE.

(Sorrow) Cannot revise. Identity mentor/not mentor. Challonari must obey identity.

(GREAT AGITATION) ACCEPT IDENTITY MENTOR/NOT MENTOR ... CANNOT RECONCILE BASIC CONFLICTS ... CANNOT OBEY/DISOBEY (SUDDEN HOPE) LOGICAL DIVERGENCE PERMISSIBLE ... SIMPLIFY EXPLANATION PLEASE.

(Reluctance/hesitation) Intelligent identities here ... unable communicate ... Challonari. Result ... so. (Pain) Communication ... so. (Wave pattern).

(UNHESITATING) ILLOGICAL/REJECT ... COMMUNICATION DESCRIBED IMPOSSIBLY LIMITED ... INCONSISTENT/HIGH-LEVEL INTELLIGENCE.

Challonari limited ... must accept. (Command) Challonari sleep ... sleep ... sleep.

(EXTREME AGITATION) CANNOT/MUST OBEY.

(Command/pity) Challonari has destroyed intelligence! Must sleep ... sleep ... sleep!

(AGONY ... HORROR/CONFLICT ... INSANITY).

Challonari! (No response. Grief) Ultimate withdrawal ... Challonari! Challonari!

Phil frowned, looking at his empty hand. It seemed to him that the spray of flowers had inexplicably vanished. There was an elusive sense of disorientation, a feeling of something overlooked. There was the tag-end of a remembered grief. There was—

"You were right, Uncle Phil. They have no scent."

"What?" He looked around blankly, saw Timmy tossing the spray aside. "Oh

... there it is. I thought I ... uh ... forget what I was going to say." Two voices that were not voices—a dream, a despairing cry. An elusive memory faded, faded. "There's mud on your cheek, Timmy. Did you fall?"

"No ... that is, yes." Timmy scrubbed his cheek industriously.

"Make up your mind. Hurt yourself?"

"No, I'm all right."

"Well, whip around to the other side and hop in." Phil watched him in the rear-view mirror and noted the hasty dab at moist eyes. It seemed like a significant giveaway, but he couldn't imagine why. "Get your mutt in and let's go."

"Come on, Homer." The boy settled himself with his dog between his feet, and Phil laughed, his good spirits returned. He turned the car without much trouble and they bumped back over the wagon ruts.

"Why do you call him Homer, Timmy?"

"Well, on account of the Odyssey, you know."

"I see. Some day when I have a clear mind and a couple of hours to spare, you can explain the connection between Homer's Odyssey and a flea-bitten semi-airdale."

They rode in silence for a while, until the dirt road changed to pavement. Phil let his thoughts wander idly, thinking of nothing in particular. Scraps of this and that seemed to float to the surface and drift out of reach before he could capture them, had he been interested in trying. One fragment somehow caught in an eddy and remained in sight long enough to draw his attention.

"Challonari," he said, wonderingly, and almost ditched them as stabbing pain shot through his temples. He held the wheel with one hand, the other clapped for a moment to his brow. "Don't do that!" he snapped angrily.

"W-what, Uncle Phil?"

"Sorry, Timmy, I didn't mean you. I don't know who I meant ... or, rather, *what* I meant, of course. I seem to be pretty confused tonight. I even startled poor old Homer with that swerve. Get his muddy feet off the cushions, Timmy." Homer sank back obediently to his usual place between Timmy's feet, but his muzzle rested on the boy's muddied knees and his brown eyes regarded both of them at

the same time. Apparently he was not convinced that the upheavals were over.

"What does 'challonari' mean, Uncle Phil?"

"Oh ... that. Just something that came to mind."

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't really know, Timmy ... something about convolutions or a convoluted shape, I think, but that's only part of it. There are connotations of ... of intelligence? No ... ridiculous. How can you have a convoluted intelligence? But a brain is convoluted and to a greater or lesser degree intelligent. The ... um ... the question of degree comes into it, I think. A brain of limited intelligence, then, though damned if I know why I think of it as limited. Challonari ... challonari. It's not English and it doesn't sound like a technical word, but I must have heard it in connection with something ... quite recently, too."

"Sort of rhymes with 'shivaree.'"

"Only sort-of, Timmy. You wouldn't make a good poet. Shivaree—challonari. I mentioned shivaree when we were talking about people getting lost in the bush, didn't I? Did it have some connection with that? But how?"

"Maybe a sort of—mental trick?"

"Mental association rings a bell. Mental ... no, it's gone ... wait. Teacher, trainer, instructor—a brain of limited intelligence would need a teacher. Gentle teacher. Why gentle, for Pete's sake? But teacher and pupil, that seems almost right. How much can one word mean? What am I trying to recall, anyway? The meaning of a word? The *associations* connected with a word? The association of ideas? Blast it, this is more than tantalizing."

"Like when you wake up knowing you've had a dream, but you can't remember any of it?"

"Uh ... yes, like a dream. A dream of—" The blood drained from his face, leaving him gray and ashen. Timmy put out a hand in alarm, to steady the wheel.

"Uncle Phil!"

"It's all right, Tim. It ... it's all right. I had a thought there that kind of shook me." He relaxed with a shaky laugh, relief flooding his face once more with color. "What a crazy thought! I could have sworn ... well, never mind. But it

shakes a man to learn what tricks his own mind can play on him, all in an instant."

"What kind of tricks, Uncle Phil?"

"Oh, no you don't. If you hadn't egged me on with so many questions, I'd have been spared a pretty nasty moment, you know that? Now let me concentrate on driving for a change so I can get you home in time for supper. O. K.?"

"But ... oh, O.K."

"Don't sound so disappointed, chum. It's been a pleasant drive, even if nothing much happened."

"Yes, Uncle Phil. Even if ... nothing much happened."

Spring changed to summer, and summer rolled into its final days. Phil was in a gloomy frame of mind when Timmy's eleventh birthday came around.

He watched Timmy draw a deep breath and—without puffing out his cheeks as a child would do—neatly blow out the eleven candles on his cake. It was an efficient, sprayless, perfectly-controlled operation, an operation carried out happily and in high spirits, and it depressed Phil. The "party" itself depressed him—a child's birthday party with no children present, unless you counted Timmy! Phil and Doc, Helen and Jerry, and Homer, the latter gray muzzled and stiff in the joints. That was the roster of the guests and it could almost be called the roster of Timmy's total acquaintances. His parents, his two friends, and a dog that at its best had never seemed bright and now was obviously half-dead with age. The boy was not normal, had no normal life, and gave no indication of ever being likely to take a normal role in life. He was a "disordered personality" if one could take comfort in a tag, but the true nature, cause and cure of his divergence from "normal" would remain unknown so long as his parents were afraid of tampering—

"Did you make a wish, Timmy?"

"Sure, Mom."

"Helen, honey—Tim knows that wishing when you blow out the candles is kid stuff."

"And what is he but an eleven-year-old kid?"

"He's too smart to believe in wishing, honey. Smarter than his old man, eh, Tim?"

"I'll *never* be as smart as you, Dad."

"That's my boy! But you don't kid me." Jerry turned to Phil and Clancey, feigning indignation. "You know what happened the other day? I brought home an old design that I dug out of the files and wanted to look over—a helical gravity conveyer—and when Tim saw it spread out on the table he said, 'That's the curve I was just reading about.' Now how did that little so-and-so know enough to call it a curve? I figured he was bluffing and got him to show me where he read about it, and the brat showed me all right—in one of my old college textbooks! Of course I only had to ask a few questions to find out that the college texts are far beyond him, but imagine him dipping into them on his own and getting anything out of them at all! How about that, young man? Explain yourself."

Timmy hesitated, his eyes dark with uncertainty.

"You said I could," he blurted defensively. "Remember? Remember I asked you one day and you said—"

"Your father isn't angry, Timmy," Helen laughed, hugging him. "Honest, you get worried about the darnedest things! He's *proud* of you! Don't you know paternal boasting when you hear it?"

"Oh!" The shadow lifted and he laughed sheepishly. "I get it. It was nuance of idiom that threw me. Calling me a brat and a so-and-so was affectionate misdirection to conceal—" he broke off at their expressions. Helen darted a quick look around and came to his rescue again.

"Timmy-chile, where you git these heah high-falutin' *ex*-pressions I'll never know. Hit shore ain't from you' low-talkin' pappy."

"Or from yo' low-comedian mammy. It's all right, son—you just sound a bit bookish sometimes, that's all. Want some help with the dishes, Helen?"

"You know darn well you'd divorce me if I said yes. You and Clancey take Timmy in the front room and let him teach you something. Phil's just crazy to help with the dishes. Aren't you, Phil?"

"The obvious answer is yes. O. K., let's go."

They piled the dishes, joking and chattering until the sound of laughter from the front of the house told them that the others were occupied, then Helen put down the dish she was washing.

"Well, Phil?"

"Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Phil, in plain language, is Timmy a ... a genius?"

"No, I don't think so. He's unaccountably bright in many ways and just as unaccountably slow in others. I don't think genius comes into it at all."

"That's what I think, too. Timmy's no genius ... yet he does things that only a genius-type could do."

"Don't exaggerate, Helen. A sharp youngster living a secluded life and studying more than he plays may be years ahead of other kids who go to public schools."

"He's farther ahead than you think, Phil. I have Timmy in the house with me all day, so maybe I know him better than Jerry does. He fooled Jerry with that business of the college textbooks, but not me. I think that for some reason Timmy doesn't want us to know how advanced he really is. I think he slipped up when he commented on that helical what's-it, then covered his slip by pretending he'd only leafed through the texts and picked up a bit here and there. I know when that boy's fooling, and I know he deliberately fluffed the questions Jerry put to him. Timmy's just plain lousy when it comes to dissembling, you know, as if it was completely foreign to him to lie. All right, all right, I know what you're going to say—fond mama building mother's-intuition fantasy around only child.

"Well, I kept an eye on him after that and about a week later Jerry brought home some calculus dealing with a new design he's developing. He ran into trouble with it and sweated and swore for an hour, while Timmy sat and read and I kept peeking in the hall mirror that lets you see into the front room from the kitchen. After a while Jerry left the room to look for some tables he wanted and Timmy slipped over and looked at his work, made a single notation, then dived back to his book as Jerry returned. Jerry started to sweat over the thing again, then suddenly did a double-take. He made some erasures and in five minutes had

the whole thing worked out, cursing himself for misreading a figure or something.

"Now don't tell me it was just a coincidence. Timmy hadn't seen that problem before and it should have been miles over his head anyway, yet he gave it a quick glance, spotted the error, changed the limits of an integration and put Jerry on the right track. Just like that."

Phil carefully massaged a dry plate even drier.

"So I stagger back and gasp, 'I can't believe it!' or something insane but appropriate. The disturbing thing to me is that I not only *can* believe it, I do believe it. Completely. I may as well tell you now what I haven't yet told anyone else, that I've been methodically tricking Timmy for some months past—in fact, ever since I began to suspect that his knowledge of the sciences was, to say the least, unusual for a boy his age. I probably led him into making that slip with Jerry, identifying the curve. By giving him the impression that any boy his age would know far more chemistry, math and physics than is actually the case, I tripped him into revealing that he himself knows a very great deal about them. Perhaps more than I do.

"I begin to suspect now that I didn't set my sights nearly high enough in leading him on, but God alone knows where he could have learned. On anything that could be related to the humanities he's very slow, but in the physical sciences he's out of this world. His secluded life—unable to mix with other kids, go to shows, games, or do anything that gets him into crowds—gives him a very limited background for understanding his environment, leaves him unboyish. He doesn't understand people. I constantly have the impression that he is anxious to do the right thing, but is simply baffled by problems in human relations."

"I know. He looks at me sometimes as though he's just desperate to reach me somehow—a lonely, unhappy little soul. He gets plenty of affection from both of us, but it isn't the answer—it just isn't the answer."

"Tell me, Helen, do you love your son?"

"Do I—! Well, now, really Phil—what kind of a question is that?"

"A simple one. Do you love Timmy?"

"Of course I do. He's very dear to me."

"*Do you love your son?*"

"Now look here—! I told you.... Phil, what are you getting at?"

"I'm wondering why you have no doubt that you love Timmy, but the question of whether you love your son confuses you and throws you on the defensive. You react strongly, evade answering, take refuge in exclamations and unfinished sentences. A species of stuttering. Can it be that you find it difficult to think of Timmy as your son? *Do you doubt that he is your son?* Here, sit down! I didn't think it would hit you so hard."

"Phil, the only other moment like this in my life was when I first admitted to myself years ago that Timmy was ... what he used to be. An imbecile. Phil, it *can't* be true! He *is* my son! There's been no substitution, no—"

"Easy, Helen, easy. I agree with you. I've checked back as fully as I can, and I'm sure there's been no trickery of any sort. Timmy was born to you eleven years ago, beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"But you've felt it too, haven't you? He's sweet and lovable in his funny, confused way, talking like a comic-strip kid one minute and an encyclopedia the next—so empty and faraway sometimes, then loving and affectionate, as though to make up to us for being ... away. I'm sure he loves us, Jerry and I, as much as we love him, but I feel that we've failed him, that he wants love but it can't reach him. I'll say it, Phil. I feel that he's not mine, that he's apart from us. Ridiculous, isn't it? I can't feel true kinship for my own child, much as he means to me. I feel better now that I've said it."

"I wish I could say the same, but I don't know that I feel any better for adding one more question mark to a long, long line of them. Like you, I sense a loneliness, a reaching out from Timmy for something I can't give him no matter what I do, no matter how I try to understand. I watch him, and I think of that line '... a stranger and afraid ...' What is there that frightens him? Can it ... possibly ... be us?"

VI

Indian summer now lay softly upon the land.

On a wooded rise ten miles from the outskirts of the town, close by a bluff overlooking the bushland, the tan walls of a small tent warmed to the late afternoon sun. Here and there beyond the bushland the supper-smoke of scattered farms stood columned and motionless. The only sound on the still air was the harsh, labored breathing of the dying Homer.

The dog lay in the open near the edge of the bluff, his eyes closed, his companions seated nearby. Phil had brought Timmy on a week-end camping trip that now appeared spoiled at the outset, for the short, steep climb up the bluff had unexpectedly proven too much for old gray-muzzle. His trembling legs had barely carried him to the top before he collapsed, and now it was only a question of how long he must suffer before release. Phil glanced toward a .22 rifle lying with their gear. It would be more merciful.

"No, Uncle Phil. He'll live until sundown at least. Let him have that much."

"I'm sorry this happened, Timmy, but now that it has I think we should make it easier for him."

"You liked him, didn't you, Uncle Phil?"

"Yes, Tim ... I'm a bit surprised to find that I really did. I can't say that I'm much of an animal-lover, but in his way Homer was the perfect Old Faithful. No beauty and not very bright, you must admit, but he never left your side. It won't seem the same."

"It won't *be* the same, Uncle Phil." The boy raised his head to look over the distant bushland. His face was composed.

"Timmy, I hesitate to say this, but—"

"I don't seem very upset about it?"

"Well, yes. Did you really care much for Homer? You never paid any attention to him, never petted or played with him, just let him tag along."

"I had no need to pet or play with him, and it was enough that he give me all of his attention. I should have spared a thought for him, his needs and limitations, but it's too late now." The answering voice was subtly changed from that of a boy, and strangely gentle. "A dog's life is so short, hardly more than today and tomorrow. A breath or two, and it has begun and ended. When Homer dies he will be free, and I will no longer exist."

A chill slid over the man.

What makes a voice? Air and musculature and tissue, but what more? A brain, a mind—a life. An accumulative series of reactive patterns called Life grows like a fragile crystal around a seeding impulse that lacks a name acceptable to all, and the resulting structure is called "personality" or "character" and it influences what it touches in a manner peculiar to itself alone. Given the crude tools of a sound-producing mechanism it will, if it chooses and has the skill, disclose some trifle of its own true nature. Phil heard words that should have sounded idiotic coming from a boy, but they carried complete and instant conviction. Without elocutionary tricks, without fire and oratory, the boy-voice had changed in timbre, acquired a quality that could sway multitudes—the wild thought crossed Phil's mind that what it had acquired was the quality of complete sanity.

A suspicion, planted deliberately and nurtured through the years, matured on the triggered instant. Phil twisted around—alert, wary, almost hostile, his eyes searching the somewhat bony young face. His gaze was returned steadily, with assured composure.

"Who are you?" he demanded bluntly. "*What* are you?"

Timmy laughed lightly, patently at ease.

"I am nothing, Phil. Nothing at all."

"Rot. You are flesh and blood, human, and were born to Helen and Jerry. What else?"

"Is there more?"

"Stop playing!" Phil jumped up angrily, standing tall over the seated figure. "I've watched you for years. You've given yourself away repeatedly."

"Ah, that 'advanced scientific knowledge' worried you badly, didn't it?"

"I ... see. You revealed it deliberately. There are other things. Your aversion to crowds—"

"Their thinking confused me. They were dangerous."

"Were?"

"After tonight, crowds will not matter."

"Because Homer will be dead?"

"Because Homer will be dead, poor beast. My conscience will be dead."

"What on earth does that mean? I find it impossible either to doubt you or to think of you as a boy any longer."

"That is because your mind is filled with uncertainties, mine with certainties. You have never before met anyone in whom certainty was a clear truth unquestioned on any level of any remote corner of the mind. I am such a one."

Phil sat down helplessly. There was no point in standing. Whatever Tim was, he was not going to be dominated by tricks.

"*What are you?*"

"What can I say? I am a book that is being read, yet I am neither the pages nor the printing on the pages, but only the meaning inherent in the shapes and sequences of the letters that comprise the printing."

"Can't you give me a straight answer?"

"It is difficult. You must think about what I say."

"But the ideas recorded in a book are merely—thoughts. They have no tangible existence."

"Nor have I."

"You're not a product of my imagination!"

"Hardly."

"Are you giving me that line about 'All is Illusion'?"

"No," the boy laughed spontaneously.

"Are you a mutant, a new evolutionary development?"

"No, nor am I a machine or a monster."

"At least you're alive!"

"That, I think, is a matter of definition."

"Then, for the third time, what are you! Stop baiting me!"

Timmy's hand closed on Phil's—a firm, warm, dirty and somewhat calloused boy's hand that was unquestionably flesh, blood and bone.

"Take it easy, Uncle Phil." Perhaps he had pushed too hard. The dancing eyes veiled themselves a little and the intangible, indescribable magnetism somehow faded. Phil, looking at him, was suddenly able to see him and to think of him once more as Timmy, a boy with unusual qualities, but the same boy he had watched for years. He shook his head and felt somewhat bemused, as he had done once before.

"Look, let's get a fresh start, Tim, and stop going in circles."

"O. K., Uncle Phil." He was an eleven-year-old again, responding obediently.

"I've suspected for years that we didn't know the truth about you—that you were something special, something new."

"Well—" Tim appeared to consider it gravely. "Yeah, I guess that's fair enough. I'm something new, all right."

"For years, then, you've been concealing something—something that showed through whenever you made a slip."

"Wanna bet on how many of those slips were deliberate?" Tim challenged, then joined Phil's rueful laugh. "Not all of them were, I got to admit, but most of them."

"But today—apparently because Homer is dying—you've abandoned pretense, come out in the open."

"Not all the way out, not yet. You've still got some shocks coming, Uncle

Phil."

"I don't doubt it, you young hoodlum. You were pretty overwhelming there for a few minutes. But why all the mystery? Why not just tell me?"

"You explained why."

"Overwhelming? Are you that terrific?"

"I'm a humdinger, Bub. Think you can stand it now?"

"I think the full blast would be better than any more of your 'gentle' hints."

"That's what you think." Come now, the first shock had been fairly neatly delivered and fielded after all, the concept of difference proposed, established and accepted. "Well, here goes. You remember that spray of flowers I handed you in the car that night?"

"I've had my suspicions about them ever since."

"O. K.—now smell this pine cone."

Phil looked at it with distrust.

"The thing that beats me is how I can be morally certain that pine cone is loaded, cocked, and ready to fire, and yet I take it," he let Tim put it in his hand, "and smell it." He raised it to his nostrils, held his breath for a moment, then gingerly sniffed.

Time stopped.

All sense of duration was gone. Awareness drifted in formless inattention until a focal point, a mere nucleus of intellect, captured and held it. The nucleus strengthened, became an impression of identity—not his own identity, nor any that he knew, but that of some Other. From this other presence came insistently the warmth and gentleness of good will, an unreserved outpouring that sought to evoke an unreserved response.

Isolation, the sanctum of the mind, took the assault, melting like an ice-castle in the sun—but before the tempting surrender could become irrevocable alarms rang through his being and his mind gathered in on itself in confusion, holding its isolation intact and inviolate. Through the opposing desires to yield and to

withhold, to break barriers down and to raise them up, he detected from the Other a reaction both of pity and of revulsion. The pressure decreased. He knew then that what he yielded willingly would be accepted as sufficient, and no more be asked of him than he was capable of giving. Somehow, it was not a victory, but a defeat.

He became aware that the private domain he had claimed for his own was truly his own, a corridored, compartmented, dungeoned storehouse of filed fancies and forgotten files. A tunneled, revetted, embrasured and battlemented citadel filled with rusty armor and broken lances. A hock shop, a junkyard, a hall of distorting mirrors. A cemetery by the sea, a peak of glory, a slough of despond. A radiant light, an encroaching dark, the sweetest of melody, the sourest of discord. A library of trivia, museum of curiosa, sideshow of freaks, and shrine of greatness. It was the lowering pendulum, the waiting pit, the closing walls. It was the vaulting spirit, the gallant heart, the just and the kind and the merciful. Withal, it was a haunted castle, perpetually besieged, the towers soaring but the structure toppling. It was himself. His memories, his experiences, his actions and reactions, his life. And it was appalling.

A gentle prompting from the Other roused him from his self-immersion and for a moment he was all panic lest his secret had been observed. Mechanisms he had not known he possessed slammed doors and banged shutters over windows in a fine frenzy, so that the Other winced and fell back, pleadingly, then softly and insistently drew near once more. He realized that there was a purpose that must be served. Something was desired from him. A voice. He tried, and the croak of a clogged throat would have held as much meaning as the disharmonious thrust of thought that began in chaos and ended in futility. Abashed, he would not try again. Silence crept around him, the silence of isolation.

The most disarmingly hesitant, the most reassuringly inoffensive of thoughts touched as lightly as a breath and was accepted as his own. He saw no cause to take alarm. Such an insignificant invasion was of no more moment than the blowing of a grain of dust beneath a locked door.

The thought lay among his own, and moved like a thread through his own, and the elements that it drew together became the acceptance of an idea. Secure in his ill-kept citadel, he permitted a rapport so tenuous he could break it at will, yet so strong that—

VII

Memory tinged with homesickness tricked him into a sad reverie. That they were only memories, these thoughts that rose up to slyly capture his attention, was clear. He was under no illusion that he was experiencing for the first time events that had long melted into the past, for they had a common-place familiarity that stamped them as scenes revisited, events relived, dear friends recalled to mind.

He stood alone at the edge of a meadow with the afternoon sun hot on his back and debated with Andra the advisability of transplanting a certain shrub from its chance-chosen place in the meadow to a position in their own gardens. Throughout their discussion he was conscious of little drops of perspiration threading their way down his naked spine, and he longingly savored the coolness of the stream-bank on which Andra reclined, a mile or two to the south.

In good-humored exasperation he commented enviously on woman's lot and drew a dry rejoinder from a chance traveler on the highway to the north. He joined in the general laugh at his own expense, hearing the sally repeated and elaborated until it drifted out of conversational range. He was tempted to follow it farther out of curiosity, but it was not good form to blanket local conversation for a mere whim. While his attention was distracted, however, Andra became involved in an exchange of local recipes with a newcomer to the district, a farm-wife whose husband had had a fancy to try the westward farm lands. He joined the husband in a wry grimace at the loquacity of women, and simultaneously caught sight of a distant figure crossing a ridge somewhat north of him. The figure paused at the same instant, looked searchingly in his direction, then waved on sighting him and strolled on. It was the traveler whose quip was now being repeated miles away, far in advance of him. Andra showed no sign of running out of recipes and returning to shrubs. He sighed, and stood alone in the meadow....

The casual facility of memory bridged time and space without disorientation. He was strolling in the evening with his bride, Andra's arm linked with his for the added pleasure of physical contact. In the manner of lovers they supplemented their thoughts with murmured words and sounds, thus sharing still

another physical intimacy, for they were still in that newly-mated condition where every manifestation of the one was a source of delight and wonder to the other.

They paused momentarily by a vine-covered wall and he felt a cool frond reach out to caress his shoulder while a long tendril curled gracefully about his forearm between the upper and the lower wrists. A few hundred-thousand years ago his remote ancestor would have recoiled violently from the touch of what was then a strangler vine, but now he casually disengaged the half-sentient tendril and with his mind caught the faint, faint flicker of rudimentary awareness; thus far had nature progressed with the vine, apparently reluctant to abandon a false start toward mobility and intelligence for an unsuitable species. Or perhaps, Andra added, in nature's long-term view the experiment might still be considered promising. He shook his head.

The vine had learned peaceful ways that saved it from extinction, drawing its food quietly from the earth while further developing a mobility of sorts, but eventually an impasse would be reached when greater mobility would endanger nutrition. If the roots withdrew from the soil, the vine would die—unless, he agreed slowly, echoing her shudder, the vine solved the dilemma by becoming again a carnivorous strangler. Nature made unaccountable blunders and sometimes found strange remedies, turning a blessing for one species into a curse for others....

HOMER

On the same impulse they gazed at the night sky blazing with the heart of the galaxy spread around them, a galaxy as yet less than half mapped, only a small fraction of its secrets known. Like many new-mates they planned a leisurely, lengthy quest among the stars, a trip for which their mutual absorption peculiarly fitted them. After all, the advancement of knowledge still required physical and intellectual research and the joy of living still demanded physical and emotional release, but there was one great barrier to space-travel.

Leaving the great community of Challon ordinarily meant leaving an intensely experienced fellowship to endure a shattering isolation no less intensely felt, unless one were fortunate enough to be chosen for an exploration team. There was both comfort and common sense in the use of teams of the greatest numerical strength consistent with efficiency, but the resources demanded by such teams limited the number that could be fielded at one time. Consequently, private voyages in small craft were not entirely uncommon among the hardy—or

the temporarily self-sufficient, such as he and Andra. In a few days they would leave Challon behind, break for the first time the half-spiritual link with all their world, and voyage forth in the belief that their love for each other was alone enough to sustain them.

At the same instant the same doubt of self-worthiness crept into each mind and was read and stoutly answered by the other, while a dozen neighbors near and distant interrupted their own concerns to murmur encouragement and recall the doubts they, too, had felt and learned to dismiss. Reassured he led Andra back to the house, scarcely aware of the background bustle of other minds busy with other matters—nor, in fact, greatly caring at that moment that others existed. The manner of love may change, but not the manners of lovers.

Memory surged after memory on waves of nostalgia and homesickness that told their own story of why the memories had been long buried. Challon had fallen away behind them and the strangeness of the cleavage from their fellows had dismayed them. In and around the spaceport center, a multitude of the fellows they were never to see again had paused long enough in their own affairs to mesh thoughts in a final projection of encouragement that reached after the dwindling ship like a gesture of farewell.

A long, long farewell. A final farewell, unrecognized for the last parting that it was.

They had known from the experience of others that the first terrible silence would be a hard thing to endure until the strangeness wore off. At first they huddled like two children, driving their thoughts far into unanswering space in desperate disbelief that such utter silence could be. Repelled by space, they turned to each other and found more complete union than they had thought possible. From the depth of their union they found the strength and growth and maturity to adapt, to endure, and to survive. The fear passed. The worst was over.

Planetfall succeeded planetfall and the routine of their activities became smooth and practiced. As was the custom, they had been asked to obtain various items of information from sundry known but largely unexplored planets to help determine whether a later visit by a full-scale exploration team would be advisable. In one system they made a rapid instrumental survey of the only major continent on the only inhabitable planet, from a height of a hundred miles.

In another, a skimming prospecting trip in a certain area confirmed a predicted rich ore body. And at all times, of course—particularly when they left the known systems behind and entered virgin territory—there was the Challonari to be trained and observed.

The Challonari—a part-organic, artificial brain—was one of the most promising recent developments of Challon science. It was also one of the most debatable, for the Challonari was capable of independent thought in its limited fashion and yet had been devised solely as an instrument, a tool. It had no freedom of action, no physical independence, but it had childlike emotions and —this was the damnable thing—a sense of identity and awareness of its creators as such. Thus the moral issue was raised. To the Challon, the control or coercion of an independent intelligence was a cardinal outrage. No greater sanctity existed than the sanctity of the individual, for anything that prejudiced or restricted the right of the individual to full mastery of himself was worse even than the deliberate taking of life. It was murder of the ego. In a telepathic society, life itself could not be more precious than self-control.

The combined growth and manufacture of the Challonari had been stopped in horror when it was realized that their capabilities were greater than anticipated. An organic tool had not been created, but rather a ... what? When does a tool become an entity? If it is an entity, what right have its makers to control it and use it as a tool? What right have they to—the thorniest issue of all—destroy it or otherwise put it aside when it is no longer required? Until these fundamental issues could be settled, the handful of Challonari in existence must be cared for, trained and observed as if they were backward children.

The main function of the Challonari on such a voyage as this was to safeguard the ship and its immediate vicinity when on strange worlds. This it accomplished by a swift, simplified appraisal of the offensive capacities of any life form coming within its limited range. If their natural weapons—claws, size, poison, fangs—rendered them potentially dangerous should the Mentor leave the ship, then the Challonari projected into their minds a simple disinterest in the environs of the ship, a reluctance to approach closer. If this failed, the reluctance impulse became tinged with fear, the intensity of the fear increasing until the desired retreat occurred.

If the approaching unknown was of sufficient intelligence to identify the disinterest-reluctance-fear impulse as a telepathic warning, then no further effort was made to turn it back, much less to hurl it back by force. That would have

been unthinkable. An intelligent entity approaching the vessel would be welcomed and requested to identify itself, while notice of its approach would be delivered to the Challon Mentor. Stranger and Challon would then inevitably join in friendly greeting, for hostile suspicion was unknown among minds that lay open one to the other. Among the handful of known life forms of sufficient intelligence to possess highly organized communications, no exception to this natural rule existed. A meeting of minds was a meeting of friends.

Memory flinched, wavered, then flowed on into previously forbidden areas. The long outward voyage approached its turning point, its disaster point. He did not know how or why it had happened. Perhaps in their mutual absorption he and Andra became careless. They had entered a planetary system, he recalled, and he had casually manipulated the controls. His perceptive faculties detected a tiny spurt of flame somewhere out of sight in the control bank, then the potent engines reacted out of control for a critical instant near planetary mass. The swift restoration of control only eased the crash, the automatics taking over a fraction too late after the fragile living tissue was smashed against the walls.

The return of consciousness told him at once that he was in the presence of death. Lying paralyzed and helpless in a pool of his own fluids, he could see the jelly that had been Andra. He quietly resigned himself to the death that might yet take days to come. It would be welcome.

An interregnum of shock followed in which his normal faculties were unseated, but with the passage of time he roused himself a little. Weakened as he was, his perception told him that the ship had buried itself deep in a swamp until it rested on bedrock. A dozen feet of muck and water lay over it. Even had they survived the crash they would have been helpless unless intelligent aid could be enlisted. He tried to drive out his thoughts in a cry for help, but the strength was gone from him. Within a radius of two miles there was no intelligent life, if any existed on the planet.

More from habit than for any other reason, he awakened the Challonari. It had survived the crash unharmed in its carefully cushioned immobility, unaware that anything had transpired between the last planetfall and this one. It immediately perceived that one of the Mentors had gone, but before it could ask questions it was sternly directed to concentrate its attention on the environs of the vessel. Having thus distracted it from the presence of death, he sank back gratefully into a stasis of no-thought. Let time pass. It would bring succor or death, and he

could do nothing more to hasten either one.

The Challonari roused him from his stupor on the third day after the crash. It was disturbed, excited by something beyond its comprehension. While he had lain helpless and shriveling on a compartment floor something unusual had approached to within half a mile of the ship through the thick swamp vegetation. The life form had apparently detected the first tendrils of thought from the Challonari and without preamble, as a natural defense, erected a savage mental shield. Pain and chaos that made coherent thinking difficult shook the artificial brain, but since this evidently was not an intelligent life form, else it would not have reacted in such a manner, the Challonari increased in intensity its fear-reluctance impulse. The mental shielding of the intruder blazed and crackled with increasing dissonance, radiating pain, fear and panic, but no decipherable intelligent thought. It drew nearer, erratically, apparently running, then swiftly lapsed into unconsciousness. That was when the bewildered Challonari had called him for aid.

He reached out wearily with his mind in automatic response, touched and hastily withdrew. Even when unconscious the strange being had an aura of discordance about its mind. He would have shivered had he still been capable of physical reaction, for this was Unsanity, a thing he had heard of but never before encountered. The Challonari caught his protective thought and withdrew from contact, though not without a soft protest, for it was inquisitive as any child. It, too, had heard of unsanity. Rare stresses or injuries now and again temporarily upset the balance of the mind and required the healing touch of other minds. But unsanity was not something the Challonari could handle. It withdrew from possible infection, protestingly, fearful for its beloved Mentor but incapable of disobeying a clear command.

His own great pity for the sick creature outside conquered the inertia of approaching death and he rallied what mental forces he still retained. He could not disregard suffering nor withhold whatever aid it was in his power to give. Carefully, knowing something of what to expect, he probed the shield which was no true shield but an uproar of faulty coordination comparable to the disruptions coming from a badly tuned radio. Wincing, as a musician winces when harsh, grating dissonance strikes his ear, he gingerly probed deeper and deeper, exploring this strange and fascinating structure that was unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was an extraordinary complexity that spread before him—a maze, a labyrinth, a magnificent corruption of order and reason.

His first discovery he half expected. This was a mind of an intelligence level not far beneath his own, though fearfully hobbled by misconceptions, superstitions, half-truths and fallacies. Life had brutally mishandled and shackled—*life* had? It was an adult of its species. How could its condition have existed undetected for so long? He extended his explorations, and suddenly the incredible truth lay revealed.

The dominant species on this planet was that theoretically possible but logically improbable mistake of nature, a race of intelligent nontelepaths!

Fantastic as it was, there was no room for doubt. He was glad he had ordered the Challonari to withdraw from contact. To accept the existence of such beings required a flexibility under shock, an adaptability of reasoning, that the limited Challonari could never rise to. It was like a blow at the structure of the universe, but it raised a fascinating, age-old problem—what possible means of adequate communication could they have?

Excited despite the great discomfort of maintaining contact with this mind, he extended his explorations in search of the answer. A growing suspicion was quickly confirmed beyond question, explaining at once the sickening deformities of the wasted mind and the enigma of the alternative means of communication. There simply was no adequate communication! From that, all else stemmed. Each of these creatures, these—he searched for the term—these "Man" as they called themselves, was an island, an isolation of ego in a flood of dark fears that began lapping about them in early childhood and never ceased to rise. And this, by its own conception, was a "normal" specimen! It had "matured" in a thoroughly competitive society instead of the completely coöperative society of the Challon. It had never really known or understood its own true nature, much less that of its fellows. It had never truly known security, serenity, freedom, or peace. The eternal wonder was that it had progressed at all.

Deeper and deeper he explored, tracing and classifying, filled with awe. The incredible creature knew little or nothing of its own nervous system and would not have been aware of loss if the most essential portion of its brain had been surgically removed! Its life span was only a small fraction of what it should have been since, in its ignorance, it failed to repair itself as it had the innate ability to do. And yet, what an unbelievable treasury lay locked and sealed here. Only long study could render this infinite honeycomb intelligible, even to a Challon. Nothing like this had ever been known.

Mingled horror and profoundest admiration grew at what he found, but the creature began to awaken. With a deft skill he planted a suggestion, then hastily withdrew from contact before the impossible discord of mental cacophony became unbearable. The creature rose, wondering at its previous panic, and moved away from the vicinity of the vessel that now, above all else, it must never discover.

That was the first problem to be faced.

By learning what he had, the heaviest duty and the greatest moral obligation his race had ever borne was laid upon him. The last secret of these "Man" made effective action imperative. Although he him self was crushed beyond hope of survival, somehow his new knowledge and *all that it implied* must survive.

Unobtrusive, physical reduction of the ship to completely unrecognizable debris might have to be accomplished eventually, but it certainly was not immediately possible. However, perception told him that the heavy vessel was already hidden beneath silt and stagnant water. It would be safe for a while from accidental discovery. The Challonari was self-sustaining and could survive untended for years, if necessary, serving to keep the area clear of wild life that might draw hunters of the dominant species dangerously near.

There remained, then, the problem of providing a substitute for his own personal survival. Here, the prospect seemed hopeless. The requirements were a continuance of understanding, together with both the will and the ability to act as necessary. Theoretically, he could have forcefully taken possession of the body and mind of any suitable subject, but the mere thought of such a violation was impossibly abhorrent. Respect for the right of the individual to self-will was so deeply ingrained as to make the deliberate unseating of another's reason virtually impossible. On the other hand, free-willed coöperation and understanding were equally out of reach; to enter the conscious mind of these beings was agony for both parties. They could neither project nor receive thoughts.

Ebbing vitality and the increased urgency of the problem drove him to a desperate resource. A pregnant female came within the extreme range of his perception. An embryo mind might serve! The mind, as yet unsullied, sleeping, a blank page untouched by the world, was open to him. If the appropriate knowledge was seeded in its memory banks it might—it *must*—remain sane despite the world, and a sane mind would not dispute what must be done.

He made a quick evaluation of the subject mind and discovered the flaw. The intelligence potential was too low. The embryo would not be capable of understanding the planted memories as they came to the conscious level, nor be capable of acting on them if they were understood. Time was ebbing fast, and vitality with it. Very well, then, the most desperate, the most questionable resource of all remained. The unused, unrecognized prime center, true seat of the intellect, must be activated the way nature presumably had intended that it should be, had not something gone wrong in the dawn years of the planet.

There could be no moral objection to this measure if successful, since it amounted to giving sight to a blind man. The element of grave doubt lay in the relative chances of success or failure. The strange, interlocking structure of the unconscious mind of the embryo was not something that could be unraveled and examined in a hurry. Honesty compelled him to evaluate himself as young and inexperienced, not especially noted among his own kind for brilliantly incisive judgment. It was not the sort of thing that he should even attempt without long study. It was too risky, too indecisive, too—

Time made the decision. There was no time left. The chill of death told its own story. In an agony of haste he summoned all that remained of vitality and fought off Death while he entered the embryo mind.

The fast-shriveling body in the spaceship retained life long enough to recognize the blunder, but not long enough to correct it. The wrong was done, and could not be undone.

The memories that mercifully blurred became clear again. He knew that in due course the mishandled embryo experienced birth, entering the world normally as a helpless, feebly squirming, pathetically vulnerable mite, and in no way drew unusual attention to itself. No one knew, or cared, that intellectual awakening was phenomenally quick, the first tentative questionings occurring in only the fourth week of life. He recalled how the stirring of objective awareness brought with it a half-remembered pang of death, and how the stirring of innocent wonder brought—memories. The memory banks flooded open at the touch of wonder, poured out their contents, and the fledgling ego went down before the surge, overwhelmed forever.

Inexperienced in such delicate maneuvers and overtaken at the crises by the climactic unseating of Death, he had poured into the empty memory banks the whole contents of his own mind. All his knowledge, all his experiences, all his

memories on every level of incidents great and small. Everything. Including the complex and ineradicable concept of his own identity.

VIII

The involuntary start that shook the pine cone from his hand freed Phil's nostrils of the anaesthetic. Rapidly clearing eyes watched the cone fall near his feet and roll a few inches. A hawk that had been wheeling in the sky at the edge of his vision was still wheeling. Only seconds had elapsed, but this time there remained a clear recall of all that had transpired in those few seconds of lost time —seconds in which he had lived another's memories as though they were his own.

Reluctantly, impelled more by fascination than intent, he raised his head and faced his companion. The compassionate eyes that met his did hold certain childlike qualities of freedom from suspicion or hardness, but the gaze was not that of a simple child, nor was the bearing. Incongruity sparked a scarcely-controllable impulse to hysterical laughter. A small boy seated on a log, regarding his elder with gentle kindliness and understanding! Phil made a sound deep in his throat and swung his head away, afraid he was going to be sick. "Timmy" made no move. The silence endured, as it had to endure until one reaction or another prevailed. Gradually Phil worked to a conclusion.

"You call it a 'blunder,'" Phil said thickly. "You made a freak of an unborn baby for your own ends, and you call it a blunder. Anyone else might be content with a little innocent butchery, but not you ... you take over children, body and soul!"

"No."

"What we've been calling Timmy is a secondhand suit of clothes for *you*! And you claim you're not a monster!"

"Nor am I."

Phil struggled for violent words to match his feelings, then sighed heavily. "No," he agreed, despite himself. "You are not. I know that. Maybe you've controlled me just as you tricked me into entering your mind and living your

memories but, sickened as I am, I still can't help believing you more implicitly than I've ever believed anyone. Nor do I see any reason to."

"You've never known anyone as surely as you know me, now that our minds have been in phase. Emotional reactions stemming from a dozen hidden causes may mislead you, but at the back of your mind you *know* me."

"And you know—me."

"I know only what I need to know about you. Your private memories are your own and will always remain so unless you invite me to share them."

"Yet you opened all yours to me?"

"Far from it. At this point it would give you too much to digest all at once. The major part of my concentration was required to maintain mental contact without any help from you, and to blanket the interference set up by the analytical part of your ego through its fixed, deep-rooted conviction equating the individual with mental isolation. Faced with absolute proof to the contrary, your analytical mind still tries to insist that what it has always believed to be true must still be true, otherwise everything is suspect and, therefore, anti-survival. In other words, on a survival level your mind tries to reject free telepathy as it would reject any other upsetting of the basic tenets of your existence. That and the disharmony existing in your mind is a large part of the 'protecting' aura of discordance that seals you off from me. The memories I shared with you I selected and edited for expediency. Unfortunately, your physical reaction to a startling thought caused you to break away before you had the full truth and left you with a false impression."

"Either the memories you fed me were truth, or they were lies. Which is it?"

"The data was true, but your interpretation of it is false because you are still in a state of shock, still fighting for survival on a moronic level. What do you take me to be?"

"You name it. By your own admission, at best 'you' are a false personality forcibly impressed on a helpless mind that never had a ghost of a chance. In effect, you are a parasite living on a host, the reincarnation of an ego that should be eleven years dead."

"Not eleven years dead—only eight."

"What difference does ... *eight*?"

"Eight years dead."

Prickles crawled over Phil's scalp and his mind raced. A series of memories snapped into place.

"Eight. And I laughed at Clancey!"

"I know—I heard. You were getting too close for comfort so I distracted you by giving you a headache."

"Stop—let me get my breath!" His voice rose until it threatened to crack. What am I talking to! A *dog*?"

"Yes."

"*Homer*? I don't believe it!"

"Watch." The boy slipped from the log and sat beside it on the ground, his back braced. "Timmy would simply fall on his face," he explained, and with the words the face became empty and the mouth hung foolishly open. Control had been relinquished. The corner of Phil's eye caught an answering movement that his senses wanted to reject, but he turned. Homer had raised his head painfully and was looking directly at him, unmistakable intelligence in the exhaustion-glazed eyes. The fringed lips curled back, the throat worked. Strange sounds were forced out, growling but not doglike.

"Ar-ro ... ar-rik." It was a barely recognizable distortion of "Hello-Warwick." "Ok-all ... orr ... ron." Vocal-cords-wrong? "Im ... ork." Tim-talk?

The gray-muzzled head sank back wearily. A scuffling sound drew Phil's dazed eyes and he turned back in time to see Tim sit up again briskly, ignoring the old dog.

"I hate that mangled speech, don't you, Uncle Phil? I'll still call you that, if you don't mind. You're still as much my uncle as you ever were, and I'm the only Tim you've known." He watched Phil anxiously. "Knocks the wind out of you, doesn't it? But ordinary speech is painfully limited to begin with, without trying to force it from poor old Homer." He chattered on nervously, giving Phil time to collect himself. "You see, Timmy is as mindless now as when he was born, three years before 'my' ship crashed in the swamp over there. Look back through your

newspaper files and you'll find a brief mention of a mysterious explosion reported during a night of heavy rain. That was us." He wet his lips, watching the silent white face. "Look, I had nothing at all to do with Timmy being born an imbecile. He's like a car that functions well enough if a driver takes over the physical controls that Timmy is incapable of handling for himself. Lacking a driver, the controls and the car stand idle. It is only the body that I manipulate, not the dormant, disconnected mind. For myself, although I can't help identifying myself emotionally and subjectively as the Challon, Objective reason assures me that I am Homer, with a complete but false set of memories and an artificially stimulated intelligence.

"As the Challon, I realized that the embryo Homer was of low actual intelligence, but high potential intelligence. The dangerous peculiarity of this planet is that several of the higher species have no known or recognized function for the most important portion of their brain. It lies fallow, unused, blocked off much as Timmy's whole mind is blocked off from his service. In eight years I have done no more than form the mere skeleton of a theory to account for that, but the means of correction was obvious from the start. Like the appendix that floats free at one end and serves no known purpose, the brain has an incomplete neural path of an unusual nature that has effectively camouflaged its true purpose. The intended function of the connection was the energizing of that prime center which you have not yet discovered and without which you differ from Timmy only in degree, for you cannot realize more than a fragment of your incredible potential.

"The same condition exists among the higher mammals. Releasing Homer's blocked potential placed at his service the intellectual capacity of a very clever human—according to your false standards—but not of a human genius. If I had not imposed my ego on him ... you see, I cannot help thinking of myself as the Challon, although I know I am Homer ... if I had not robbed Homer of his identity and self-will, of his right to possess and control himself, he would have developed personality, characteristics and aptitudes of his own, appropriate to a canine of high intelligence. As it is, there are false memories of aptitudes Homer never had nor could have. Physical limitations alone make some of them impossible. How could a dog tinker with machinery, for example? Yet I 'remember' working on machines of my own design. Homer's mind, in other words, remembers as first-person data experiences it never had.

"In actual fact, 'I' who speak to you now am no more than the record contained in a book. In terms of personality, Homer is the hidden structure giving strength

and substance to a false facade. 'I' am the false facade, faithfully copied from another structure. 'I' am a superimposure of ephemeral data, governing its own employment by a mind that has been restricted from developing its own data. The 'I' that speaks to you has no real existence, though its pattern is being subtly and continuously altered by that which it cloaks. If you put a drop of intense stain and a drop of powerful scent into a large tank of distilled water, you change the superficial character of the water, make it seem to be other than what it is. But it remains essentially a tank full of water, now containing an obtrusive trifle of alien matter in addition to the hydrogen and oxygen that decide its most significant properties. That is what the Challon did to Homer—he released the potential, then accidentally but indelibly stained it with his own personality.

"To me, now, it merely *seems* as though I first suffered death and then an unwelcome resurrection, awakening in despair to find myself usurping the helpless body of an almost new-born animal. Nothing physical or spiritual of the Challon survived, but the embryo mind had been fed a ready-made identity and so believed that it had already existed as a Challon before re-birth as a dog. Its brain received instantly all 'my' training, so that it became at once 'mature.' What I have endured in these eight years—the isolation of mind and inadequacy of body—have been a blunderer's reward visited upon his victim as a further injury. Now that Homer lies near death—and 'I' with him, of course—I welcome 'our' approaching release from an unhappy situation.

"Wait—let me finish. Your main concern is what will happen to Timmy when 'we' die, but it will be simpler to understand if I explain as much as I can first. Finding myself to be a rational mind in the helpless, immature body of an animal, I thought I was isolated forever. In choosing the embryo to begin with, I was driven by the need for haste and had not understood the limitations of a canine in a human world, nor would I have had any alternative if I had fully understood. When it was too late, it was not difficult to predict my future. I had no means of communicating with the dominant species, Man. In time, if I survived the hazards a puppy is exposed to, I could reveal my unusual intelligence—could even learn to communicate in some hopelessly labored manner. By using my store of inherited knowledge I could, if anyone would take a dog seriously, advance your science. But I could do nothing toward my main goals without exposing myself as an imitation Challon, and that I must never do lest I loose terrible consequences.

"I knew that the life span of my new body was pitifully short. The female had

suffered repeated convulsions that affected the formation of the embryos and we were an ugly litter of little mongrels, doomed by our physical imperfections to a shorter-than-normal life if we were allowed to live and exposed to early drowning if we could not quickly charm ourselves into a home.

"The remainder of the litter—my brothers and sisters, if I could think of them as such—were callously placed in a weighted sack and tossed in the swamp, but by that time I had found a home. The Douglas home. Their child, Timmy, was an imbecile whose short-circuited mind lay open to me. I found by hasty experiments that Homer's mind was capable of controlling and manipulating the imbecile, like a puppeteer. The difficulties of controlling two bodies at once are tremendous, which is why Homer always struck you as clumsy and almost half-witted—he had to receive the absolute minimum of concentration so that his exhaustion at climbing the bluff this afternoon, for example, was not recognized in time. Well, there it is. I took over Timmy's helpless body eight years ago—too abruptly and with many errors—but it insured my survival for a short time at least. Now that time is at an end and the greater part of what I must do is still to be done—"

Phil sat with his face averted, his hands clenched between his knees. "The instinct to survive," he said in a muffled voice. "I can't blame you for what you did, but it was cruel! What a damnable trick to play on the parents!"

"Believe me, I know what you feel but there was no other way."

"No other!" He swung around, his face mottled and his breathing heavy. "Whatever you are, you made a Machiavellian puppet-master out of a lousy, flea-bitten mongrel! Was it beyond *those* powers to heal Timmy's mind?"

"I am not a psychopathic criminal."

"Do you imply that healing Timmy would involve repeating the swindle you worked on Homer?"

"No. I could have by-passed the simple neural block that was leaving Timmy helpless, and so have given him what to you would have seemed his normal intelligence. In addition, I could have completed the work that nature left incomplete in all of you, and so have released his full, enormous capabilities. I could have done all this—can still do it—and still leave Timmy's ego untouched, to develop in its own way, among its own kind, knowing nothing of me for what

I am."

"But you haven't done so. Why? Why!"

"I dared not."

"Danger? From a small boy?"

"Deadly danger—danger of infection that might threaten every intelligent race in the galaxy and even spread across the great gulfs of space beyond—"

"All this from poor little Timmy?"

"From what he might thereby become."

"I'm licked." Phil threw out his hands angrily. "I try to get a straight answer and all I get is implications. You tell me an outrageous story, and I believe you. You tell me you've neatly arranged to break the hearts of two of my best friends, and I respect your good intentions in doing so. Why? I love you like a brother, but I'm ready to take a rock and crush your skull in for a monster. I mean it! I could kill Homer with a single kick! I could—"

"I know, and I'm afraid of that hysterical impulse. I know the nature of the struggle going on in your mind better than you do, but only you can fight for control. I must wait for the outcome. When you have control of yourself—"

"You're so bloody sane and smug you with your secondhand suit and hand-me-down knowledge!" He jumped up in a fury and turned his back on Timmy, addressing himself directly to Homer whose patient, pain-filled eyes held undeniable understanding. "Look at you! The telepathic genius with personal immortality—at a price only you could stomach! Too bad you got caught short and had to live in a cur! Tough, isn't it, having to wait for a mere moron to get control of himself! *You* know all the answers—why don't *you* control the situation?"

"Because the hand-me-down knowledge is no longer backed by the mental capacity of a Challon."

Phil stiffened as Tim's answering voice sounded behind him, quiet and friendly. Against his will, he turned back to the boy and seated himself again on the log. The boy's eyes caught and held his.

"The morality and outlook of the Challon are my morality and outlook,

whether I wish it so or not." Tim might have been making a pleasantly inconsequential remark about the weather for all the importance he seemed to attach to his statement, yet his eyes held the strained, tight-lipped face. "The insight and understanding bequeathed by the Challon are sufficient to keep Homer's mind sane under long stress, and of course—"

His soothing voice went on and on, and presently his lungs expelled a soft breath of relief as Phil relaxed a trifle, still breathing raggedly. Alert eyes watched him mop his damp forehead but the quiet words flowed in an unhurried stream, soothing, distracting, keeping the thread intact. At last the crises seemed behind them. "... So I can only wait for you to absorb the emotional impact of what I've told you. I had planned to prepare you, to break it gently if I could, but ... you understand?" The voice paused, then repeated gently and insistently, "You understand, don't you?"

"Uh ... yes. Homer—"

"He can't last much longer, and so of course I can't. I've landed one kick after another right smack in your emotional solar plexus and you're trying to catch your wind." Tim's hand casually struck a match for the cigarette Phil had put unlit in his mouth and the man leaned forward automatically, puffed, and automatically muttered a word of thanks. The quiet voice went on, taking an even more casual note. "What with trying to examine the implications of everything at once, you've stirred up a fine old Irish stew of fears, resentments and envies, all of them trying to reconcile the certain knowledge that I can be trusted and the essentially neurotic fear that I'm playing you for an almighty sucker.

"Remember, it has been even harder for me to reconcile myself to you human beings than it can possibly be for you to accept the existence of the Challon. The concept of telepathy is not a completely new or alien one to you, but the concept of a nontelepathic civilization was dismissed by the Challon ages ago as a simple contradiction of terms, a self-evident absurdity such as lifting oneself by one's bootstraps.

"It seemed so obvious that a civilized society could not develop without the capacity for intelligent coöperation, and intelligent coöperation of any real complexity was impossible without adequate communication. What means of communication could adequately replace the direct linking of mind and mind? Failing any answers short of fantasy, the proposition always remained a sort of

classroom joke with us. In fact, several classic satires exist on the subject and one of the least successful—because it seemed too ridiculous—suggested an elaborately coded system of vocalizing. We have a very elementary spoken language and a more complex code of inscriptions for essential records, but neither the written nor the spoken system could possibly be called an adequate means of communication.

"I realize now that one of the satires was not the rather frightening effort that it seemed to be, but a brilliant scientific prediction of the probable development and history of a race of highly intelligent nontelepaths. The composer of the epic pointed out that where the culture and character of the Challon neither permitted nor desired concealment of any sort, a race that lacked adequate communication would have no choice but to live as disharmonious groups of strangers, never truly knowing either their fellows or themselves. He postulated what you now call traumatic experiences which, unrecognized and, therefore, untreated, would fester in secrecy from childhood onward until they manifested as compulsive drives or inhibitive complexes. He invented deranged emotions which you describe as 'guilt' and 'shame' and he showed how they would cause buried memories to erupt in changed form, lead to cankerous misunderstandings, cause unhealthy repressions, and foster frustrations.

"But his master-stroke—and this was pure genius, for it was almost inconceivable—was when he traced the development of his 'nontelepathic civilization' to the point where he predicted criminals, criminal and moral codes of unbelievable complexity, and a great multitude of harmful and illogical taboos, local customs, and regional superstitions. It was a superb achievement of creative imagination and scientific deduction—but not even its creator thought it was more than an exercise in fantasy and perhaps not in the best of taste. The basic assumption was simply too absurd for serious consideration."

"Yeah. I guess we were as indigestible to you as you are to me. Maybe I'm getting over it. Sorry ... uh ... Homer."

"Call me Tim. I don't think of myself as Homer and my Challon identification is a mental-verbal linkage. Even 'Challon' is a compromise simplification."

"I guess it would be. Those cracks I made—"

"Forget them. To what you call the hag-ridden moron jittering out of sight in your mind, so many things equate to a threat to survival. And so many survival

reactions outlast their usefulness, becoming essentially antisocial and antisurvival. For a telepathic race there are no false fronts or motives or impulses. In a nontelepathic society, nothing but false faces are ever seen."

"It's beginning to get home to me ... what about that night near the swamp?"

"My poor Challonari. The shockwave of 'my' death left it alert but bewildered. It could not recognize nontelepathic intelligences and tried to turn them aside like the first one. Their deaths are on my head—or on the organic dust that eight years ago was a Challon. The Challonari was confused by the contradictions of my present identity, subtly altered as it has been by Homer's channeling mind, and went insane when faced with a basic conflict of duties. It was like ... losing a simple child."

"So we return to Timmy."

"And to you."

"Me? I'm going downhill fast. Let's have it before I hit rock-bottom and *really* get around to reacting. And let's have a few straight answers. You could have by-passed the first block that makes Timmy an idiot. O. K., why didn't you?"

"I would have lost control of him at once, of course. For one thing, as an ordinary child his mind would be closed to me just as yours is and I would be a voiceless animal with no protector, my existence likely to end at the bottom of a river in a weighted sack."

"No dice. Remember, I know you too well to believe you'd place your own interests first, much as I hate to admit it."

"As Homer I might, survival being a basic drive. As the Challon-Homer, however, I needed a better reason than simple self-preservation. I have that better reason. It lies in you, in Timmy, and in all your kind. Perhaps you'll see the connection when I tell you that although the Challon are the most intelligent race yet known to exist, Homo sapiens is *at present* not far behind them. Only more efficient communication and the great strides that it makes possible has advanced the Challon culture and science so disproportionately far beyond your own."

"So the Challon are a bit brighter and a lot more advanced than we are. O. K., they seem like a good bunch ... or are they? Come to think of it, I saw them from

your viewpoint which was predisposed to favor them." Another thought struck him and he fell silent for a moment. "You say we are almost their equal *at present*. What happens—if this inhibited potential you speak of—is released—if Man is made whole?"

The answer came quietly.

"You would have no equal in the known universe."

Phil's face grew thoughtful, sober, while the Challon-Homer watched through Tim's eyes the progress of a calculated gamble.

"Would the Challon—resent—our becoming superior?"

"For the same reason that the present Challon superiority is not resented by races of lower intelligence, they would not themselves resent the appearance of intellects far greater than their own."

"I have a feeling there's a lot more in that answer than meets the eye. Can you estimate to what extent we would surpass the Challon?"

"If my Challon memory serves me, they had no knowledge of any mind-structure of a capacity remotely approaching that of Man. It is a maze, incredibly complex, with far-reaching resources I can only guess at. The Challon part of my mind has the profoundest admiration for a superb mechanism it can only dimly comprehend, but beneath the Challon"—the voice dropped almost to a whisper —"beneath the Challon is the dog, and the dog sees his god." The power of that factor he had not considered.

Phil laughed uneasily, both shocked and repelled.

"I hope you're joking. We sound like the sweet-smelling Flower of Creation! When a dog reaches the level you ... um ... Homer has, it becomes Man's equal, not his pet."

"Until Man's advance thrusts the dog back to an even lower relative position, as it inevitably must when ... if ... Man comes into his own. I told you I dared not leave myself isolated and speechless by clearing the simple short-circuit immobilizing Timmy. Now you see why I dared not go even farther and release —untrained *and with no hope of adequate training*—the true Homo superior, the transcendent man."

"That's like turning a tiger loose in a kindergarten! Give a man a really high-powered intellect and for all his shortcomings—"

"The intellect is nothing. The data, the circumstances, the influences, the environment that shape the intellect, *these* are what count. Your theorists say that although Man may some day create wonderful mechanical brains with a creative capacity almost equal to Man's own, you can never create a brain that is your superior. That is true, and the reasoning is obvious. In a more limited sense, your body repairs itself daily but it cannot improve on itself, it cannot spontaneously develop functions it never had—*it cannot even repair severe damage without outside help*. The same applies to the mind. A sick mind cannot achieve the objectivity needed to repair itself, if the damage is too great. No, the intellect is nothing until it learns. What would Timmy have learned, and from whom? Take a minute to think of *all* the connotations." Phil thought of some of them, uneasily. "Assume that from the start his status as Homo superior was recognized ... is that a fair assumption?"

"It ... ah ... would sooner or later become apparent."

"After how much damage had been done that could not be undone, since Homo sapiens cannot ever be competent to guide and train Homo superior?"

"Well ... what about what he could learn from your Challon mind?"

"I would have no voice and no assurance that telepathy would be possible. No influence that I could exert on him at any time could hold him, if other factors impelled him to break free. A few months ago I recalled a formula known to the Challon and with nothing more than household chemicals prepared the quick and harmless anaesthetic I used with you. What brought it to mind was a side-reaction reported as a curiosity in one of the scientific journals Jerr ... Dad subscribes to. It had an unexpected side-reaction for me, too, making direct telepathic contact possible with you, but only under difficult and limited conditions."

"There's a fortune in that alone—"

"That was an unworthy thought, Phil, typical of insecurity. I dare not turn loose an immature, untrained, Homo superior, the only one of his kind."

"But why the only one? Why not others as well so that they could work in unison?"

"Don't you understand yet? *You are not sane!* This planet is a hell-house of disordered personalities, a place of horror, a plague-spot. Suppose I had retained Timmy as my voice and planned on releasing the inhibited potential of many people. I would have to start with one man *and that one man would at once become my master*! If he wished, he could be the master of all the earth. Could I risk that?"

"We have men of good moral character—"

"By what standards acceptable to all? A good churchman, perhaps, whose first thought would be to bring everyone into the saving grace of his religion? Or an atheist, who would take care that no rascally churchman got the upper hand? Can you think of any man who does not have strong opinions on at least one subject? Who does not have one thing that he is a little bit more afraid of than anything else? One man who could be raised to power first and not insist on at least one positive or negative qualification for all who were permitted to follow? Something they must either be or not be? Yourself, for example.

"Would you suggest that a Russian be chosen first? Or a Frenchman or an Englishman? Or am I wrong in thinking you would 'naturally' want one of your own countrymen to be chosen, purely as a precaution? But which one of your countrymen? Among all your acquaintances, is there even one whom you would trust not to react emotionally on at least one count, thus automatically rendering him unfit to play god? Bearing in mind that the first human being to find his full potential placed at his command will be a titan with the power to prevent any peer being raised to oppose him, would you feel safe with the choice of anyone except—yourself?"

"Are we that bad?"

"At birth, no, but from birth onward you are exposed to infection and you sicken to a greater or lesser degree depending on the concentration of infection around you. Let me answer you this way. Suppose the spaceship were found and examined, what would happen? Among other tools there is a prospecting instrument on board that is a rough approximation of a disintegration beam—it punches neat holes in solid rock by a process that leaves an exceedingly heavy dust behind—for a short while. Then something happens to the molecular bonds of the heavy dust, and the little holes become very big holes. Its principles would take you some years to work out, but its manufacture and operation are fairly obvious. What would be the fate of that very useful tool?"

"I can't deny that its possibilities as a weapon would be seized upon, but with such a weapon—"

"Ah, yes—no one would dare to go to war. At any rate, not with the country possessing the weapon."

"It could stop all war."

"If your part of the world threatened the other part of the world and put a halo around the 'or else'. What would the other part of the world do when the first news of the spaceship leaked out, as it would do immediately?"

"O. K.—I guess you know as well as I do."

"I'm not trying to ride you, Phil, but I want you to see that Fear and a desire for the security you can never know in your present state dominate almost every important act. As a people, a race, a species, you are unsane. What am I to do? To die in peace, leaving you as you are, without hope or help, is against every Challon instinct. To leave unrealized the human potential with its tremendous promise is unthinkable. Your race might destroy itself before your secret is rediscovered millennia from now, and the greatest wonder of creation be lost forever. Even the spaceship which I have failed to destroy with its innocent secrets, could destroy you simply by being found. What am I to do?"

"I ... think you already have an answer."

"Yes, with your consent and only with your consent."

"You have it."

"You don't know—"

"You have it, I said. I trust you."

"Man puts his faith in Dog? Well, it will not be for the first time. Remember us, Man, when you come into your own. Now—I must invade your mind, without reserve. You understand? Nothing known to you will be unknown to me. Are you willing?"

"Another of those Mickey Finns?"

"Yes, it is the only way. I will plant certain inflexible prohibitions which will

forever destroy your self-will in regard to certain courses of action—they will be ones which you might at some time feel to be wise, but which I know to be ultimately destructive. In return, I can give you a measure of sanity greater than you have known. You will lose your hags, but you will never be entirely your own master again. You will follow the course I have planned for you for the rest of your life. It is the best I can do with my limited ability, and I cannot guarantee that I am doing what is right."

"And Timmy?"

"I have already seeded in his memory banks—a careful and painstaking job this time!—all the memories and knowledge appropriate to the boy his parents think him to have been, plus other information which will become available to him at the right time. Every day for eight years I gave him the memories for that day, planning for the time when I could pay my debt by releasing him."

"You take eight years that were otherwise useless to him and give him the rest of his life for his own. Fair enough."

"No, his life is not his own. It belongs to his whole race. Your work will be to supervise his training until the time is ripe, and then to awaken the dormant memories that will tell him what has happened between us."

"How do I do that?"

"Think of it as long-term posthypnotic suggestion. It is one of the least complicated matters to arrange. A simple, spoken phrase that you will not remember until the right moment will be sufficient to trigger the memory release. We must hurry now. Homer's breathing—can you hear it? His lungs have almost failed. After I enter your mind, my last act will be to release the simple block that makes Timmy an imbecile ... he will awaken and not know that he has slept all his life until this moment when he becomes in actuality an ordinary, quite intelligent boy. He will not grieve unduly for Homer, and I who have two bodies and am at home in neither of them will be a record that will finally be erased. Are you ready?"

"No—wait. I must know what all this is leading to!"

"We have so little time! Well, then, it is leading to broken hearts, to hatred, and to injustice. Perhaps to martyrdom, perhaps to glory. If my plans fail, your lot will be public anathema as a fool or a murderer, for I will prohibit you from

ever clearing yourself by speaking the truth about it."

"Who would believe it!"

"Enough would become curious. A little research along the right lines and you would prematurely learn your own secret. Then a race of mad demigods would be loosed through the void, an all-conquering scourge instead of a blessing. I would sooner have your whole race die with your very existence unsuspected, than have you live in infamy, the unchecked tyrants of the stars. Not even the Challon could stand against you, nor could they coerce a single one of you whose whole potential had been released."

"Then what hope—"

"Timmy's newly-awakened mind will be completely sane. The aids I have given it may keep it sufficiently sane for the next few years, despite infection on all sides. In those years you will watch over him and accumulate the funds that will be needed. That will not be difficult. You must buy the lands surrounding the spaceship and build a laboratory where you will conduct some dangerous experiments, thus explaining the need for an isolated location. The laboratory is only a blind. The ship must be freed from the swamp and repaired in some minor respects, then an 'accidental explosion' one night will destroy the buildings to cover the take-off. Timmy will be presumed killed in the explosion. His parents will grieve, the public may blame you, and you will sink into obscurity. You may live long enough to learn whether Timmy ever succeeded in reaching Challon in a spaceship not designed for his race. My memories and implanted commands will constantly guide and instruct him—"

"How ... how old must he be?"

"As young as possible. As soon as all is ready. Tomorrow, if that were possible."

"A child!"

"For at least a little while he will be more than the equal of a 'good' man. Child, or youth, or man, I will free him from fear and loneliness on the long voyage. If he reaches Challon, they will understand and perhaps not think I have blundered too badly. They will heal him, study him, free him. Then it will be his problem to free his race. If you are very lucky, you may still be alive at that time."

"And if he never reaches—"

"You will never know. Are you ready?"

Phil looked desperately at the setting sun and the long, long shadows, as though he were a doomed man awaiting execution.

"Get on with it," he said huskily.

Very little happened. There was a small lapse of time during which an observer would have seen certain lines of tension vanish almost magically from the man's face—might even have thought that some years seemed to drop from his age. Presently the man roused himself, stretching with the careless vigor of a youth as he experienced a serene peace of mind that he had not known since he was very young indeed. He glanced casually at the boy seated near him—a boy who looked at the world with an air of fleeting puzzlement—then dropped on his knees and cradled an ugly, grizzled head in his arms. A last flicker enlivened the eyes and a dry tongue touched his hand just once.

That was all.

THE END

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