

PLACEMENT TEST

1

Reading the paper in his hand, Mart Maldon felt his mouth go dry. Across the desk, Dean Wormwell's eyes, blurry behind thick contact lenses, strayed to his fingerwatch.

"Quota'd out?" Maldon's voice emerged as a squeak. "Three days before graduation?"

"Umm, yes, Mr. Maldon. Pity, but there you are. . . ." Wormwell's jowls twitched upward briefly. "No reflection on you, of course. . . ."

Maldon found his voice. "They can't do this to me-I stand number two in my class-"

Wormwell held up a pudgy palm. "Personal considerations are not involved, Mr. Maldon. Student load is based on quarterly allocated funding; funds were cut. Analogy Theory was one of the courses receiving a quota reduction-"

"An Theory. . . . ? But I'm a Microtronics major; that's an elective-an optional one-hour course-"

The Dean rose, stood with his fingertips on the desk. "The details are there, in the notification letter-"

"What about the detail that I waited four years for enrollment, and I've worked like a malamute for five more-"

"Mr. Maldon!" Wormwell's eyes bulged. "We work within a system! You don't expect personal exceptions to be made, I trust?"

"But, Dean-there's a howling need for qualified Microtronic Engineers-"

"That will do, Mr. Maldon. Turn in your student tag to the Registrar and you'll receive an appointment for Placement Testing."

"All right." Maldon's chair banged as he stood up. "I can still pass Testing and get Placed; I know as much Micro as any graduate-"

"Ah-I believe you're forgetting the limitation on non-academically qualified testees in Technical Specialty Testing. I suggest you accept a Phase Two Placement for the present. . . ."

"Phase Two-But that's for unskilled labor!"

"You need work, Mr. Maldon. A city of a hundred million can't support idlers. And dormitory life is far from pleasant for an untagged man." The Dean waited, glancing pointedly at the door. Maldon silently gathered up his letter and left.

2

It was hot in the test cubicle. Maldon shifted on the thinly-padded bench, looking over the test form:

1) In the following list of words, which word is repeated most often: dog, cat, cow, cat, pig. . . .

2) Would you like to ask persons entering a building to show you their pass?

3) Would you like to check forms to see if the names have been entered in the correct space?

"Testing materials are on the desk," a wall-speaker said. "Use the stylus to mark the answers you think are correct. Mark only one answer to each question. You will have one hour in which to complete the test. You may start now. . . ."

* * *

Back in the Hall twenty minutes later, Maldon took a seat on a bench against the wall beside a heavy-faced man who sat with one hand clutching the other as though holding a captured mouse. Opposite him, a nervous youth in issue coveralls shook a cigarette from a crumpled plastic pack lettered granyauck welfare-one daily ration, puffed it alight, exhaled an acrid whiff of combustion retardant.

"That's a real smoke," he said in a high, rapid voice, rolling the thin, grayish cylinder between his fingers. "Half an inch of doctored tobacco and an inch and a half of filter." He grinned sourly and dropped the cigarette on the floor between his feet.

The heavy-faced man moved his head half an inch.

"That's safety first, Mac. Guys like you throw 'em around, they burn down and go out by theirself."

"Sure-if they'd make 'em half an inch shorter you could throw 'em away without lighting 'em at all."

Across the room a small man with jug ears moved along, glancing at the yellow or pink cards in the hands of the waiting men and women. He stopped, plucked a card from the hand of a narrow-faced boy with an open mouth showing crowded yellow teeth.

"You've already passed," the little man said irritably. "You don't come back here anymore. Take the card and go to the place that's written on it. Here. . . ." he pointed.

"Sixteen years I'm foreman of number nine gang-lathe at Philly Maintenance," the man sitting beside Mart said suddenly. He unfolded his hands, held out the right one. The tips of all four fingers were missing to the first knuckles. He put the hand away.

"When I get out of the Medicare, they classify me J-4 and send me here. And you know what?" He looked at Mart. "I can't pass the tests. . . ."

"Maldon, Mart," an amplified voice said. "Report to the Monitor's desk. . . ."

He walked across to the corner where the small man sat now, deftly sorting

cards. He looked up, pinched a pink card from the stack, jabbed it at Maldon. Words jumped out at him: NOT QUALIFIED.

Mart tossed the card back on the desk. "You must be mixed up," he said. "A ten-year-old kid could pass that test-

"Maybe so," the monitor said sharply. "But you didn't. Next testing on Wednesday, eight A.M.-"

"Hold on a minute," Mart said. "I've had five years of Microtronics-

The monitor was nodding. "Sure, sure. Come back Wednesday."

"You don't get the idea-

"You're the one that doesn't get the idea, fellow." He studied Maldon for a moment. "Look," he said, in a more reasonable tone. "What you want, you want to go in for Adjustment."

"Thanks for the tip," Maldon said. "I'm not quite ready to have my brains scrambled."

"Ha! A smart-alec!" The monitor pointed to his chest. "Do I look like my brains were scrambled?"

Maldon looked him over as though in doubt.

"You've been Adjusted, huh? What's it like?"

"Adjustment? There's nothing to it. You have a problem finding work, it helps you, that's all. I've seen fellows like you before. You'll never pass Phase Two testing until you do it."

"To Hell with Phase Two testing! I've registered for Tech Testing. I'll just wait."

The monitor nodded, prodding at his teeth with a pencil. "Yeah, you could wait. I remember one guy waited nine years; then he got his Adjustment and we placed him in a week."

"Nine years?" Maldon shook his head. "Who makes up these rules?"

"Who makes 'em up? Nobody! They're in the book."

Maldon leaned on the desk. "Then who writes the book? Where do I find them?"

"You mean the Chief?" the small man rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "On the next level up. But don't waste your time, friend. You can't get in there. They don't have time to argue with everybody who comes in here. It's the system-

"Yeah," Maldon said, turning away. "So I hear."

3

Maldon rode the elevator up one floor, stepped off in a blank-walled foyer,

adorned by a stone urn filled with sand, a potted yucca, framed unit citations and a polished slab door lettered placement board-authorized personnel only. He tried it, found it solidly locked.

It was very quiet. Somewhere, air pumps hummed. Maldon stood by the door and waited. After ten minutes, the elevator door hissed open, disgorged a slow-moving man in blue GS coveralls with a yellow identity tag. He held the tag to a two-inch rectangle of glass beside the door. There was a click. The door slid back. Maldon moved quickly, crowding through behind the workman.

"Hey, what gives," the man said.

"It's all right, I'm a coordinator," Maldon said quickly.

"Oh." The man looked Maldon over. "Hey," he said. "Where's your I.D.?"

"It's a new experimental system. It's tattooed on my left foot."

"Hah!" the man said. "They always got to try out new stuff." He went on along the deep-carpeted corridor. Maldon followed slowly, reading signs over doors. He turned in under one that read criteria section. A girl with features compressed by fat looked up, her lower jaw working busily. She reached, pressed a button on the desk top.

"Hi," Maldon said, using a large smile. "I'd like to see the chief of the section."

The girl chewed, looking at him.

"I won't take up much of his time. . . ."

"You sure won't, Buster," the girl said. The hall door opened. A uniformed man looked in. The girl waved a thumb at Maldon.

"He comes busting in," she said. "No tag, yet."

The guard jerked his head toward the corridor. "Let's go. . . ."

"Look, I've got to see the chief-"

The cop took his arm, helped him to the door. "You birds give me a swifty. Why don't you go to Placement like the sign says?"

"Look, they tell me I've got to have some kind of electronic lobotomy to make me dumb enough to be a receptionist or a watchman-"

"Let's watch them cracks," the guard said. He shoved Maldon out into the waiting room. "Out! And don't pull any more fasties until you got a tag, see?"

4

Sitting at a shiny imitation-oak table in the Public Library, Mart turned the pages of a booklet titled Adjustment Fits the Man to the Job.

". . . . neuroses arising from job tension," he read at random. "Thus, the

Adjusted worker enjoys the deep-down satisfaction which comes from Doing a Job, free from conflict-inducing nonproductive impulses and the distractions of feckless speculative intellectual activity. . . ."

Mart rose and went to the librarian's console.

"I want something a little more objective," he said in a hoarse library whisper. "This is nothing but propoganda."

The librarian paused in her button-punching to peer at the booklet. "That's put out by the Placement people themselves," she said sharply. She was a jawless woman with a green tag against a ribby chest and thin, black-dyed hair. "It contains all the information anyone needs."

"Not quite; it doesn't tell who grades Placement tests and decides who gets their brain poached."

"Well!" the woman's button chin drew in. "I'm sure I never heard Adjustment referred to in those terms before!"

"Do you have any technical information on it-or anything on Placement policy in general?"

"Certainly not for indiscriminate use by-" she searched for a word, "-browsers!"

"Look, I've got a right to know what goes on in my own town, I hope," Mart said, forgetting to whisper. "What is it, a conspiracy. . . .?"

"You're paranoiac!" The librarian's lean fingers snatched the pamphlet from Maldon's hand. "You come stamping in here-without even a tag-a great healthy creature like you-" her voice cut like a sheet-metal file. Heads turned.

"All I want is information-"

"-living in luxury on MY tax money! You ought to be-"

5

It was an hour later. In a ninth-floor corridor of the granyauck times-herald building, Mart leaned against a wall, mentally rehearsing speeches. A stout man emerged from a door lettered editor in chief. Mart stepped forward to intercept him.

"Pardon me, sir. I have to see you. . . ."

Sharp blue eyes under wild-growing brows darted at Maldon

"Yes? What is it?"

"I have a story for you. It's about the Placement procedure."

"Whoa, buddy. Who are you?"

"My name's Maldon. I'm an Applied Tech graduate-almost-but I can't get placed in Microtronics. I don't have a tag-and the only way to get one is to

get a job-but first I have to let the government operate on my brains-"

"Hmmp!" The man looked Maldon up and down, started on.

"Listen!" Maldon caught at the portly man's arm. "They're making idiots out of intelligent people so they can do work you could train a chimp to do, and if you ask any questions-"

"All right, Mac. . . ." A voice behind Maldon growled. A large hand took him by the shoulder, propelled him toward the walkaway entrance, urged him through the door. He straightened his coat, looked back. A heavy-set man with a pink card in a plastic cover clipped to his collar dusted his hands, looking satisfied.

"Don't come around lots," he called cheerfully as the door slammed.

6

"Hi, Glamis," Mart said to the small, neat woman behind the small, neat desk. She smiled nervously, straightened the mathematically precise stack of papers before her.

"Mart, it's lovely to see you again, of course. . . ." her eyes went to the blank place where his tag should have been. "But you really should have gone to your assigned SocAd Advisor-"

"I couldn't get an appointment until January." He pulled a chair around to the desk and sat down. "I've left school. I went in for Phase Two Placement testing this morning. I flunked."

"Oh. . . . I'm so sorry, Mart." She arranged a small smile on her face. "But you can go back on Wednesday-"

"Uh-huh. And then on Friday, and then the following Monday-"

"Why, Mart, I'm sure you'll do better next time," the girl said brightly. She flipped through the pages of a calendar pad. "Wednesday's testing is for. . . . ah. . . . Vehicle Positioning Specialists, Instrumentation Inspectors, Sanitary Facility Supervisors-"

"Uh-huh. Toilet Attendants," Mart said. "Meter Readers-"

"There are others," Glamis went on hastily. "Traffic flow coordinators-"

"Pushing stop-light buttons on the turnpike. But it doesn't matter what the job titles are. I can't pass the tests."

"Why, Mart. . . . Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that to get the kind of jobs that are open you have to be a nice, steady moron. And if you don't happen to qualify as such, they're prepared to make you into one."

"Mart, you're exaggerating! The treatment merely slows the synaptic response time slightly-and its effects can be reversed at any time. People of exceptional qualities are needed to handle the type work-"

"How can I fake the test results, Glamis? I need a job-unless I want to get used to Welfare coveralls and two T rations a day."

"Mart! I'm shocked that you'd suggest such a thing! Not that it would work. You can't fool the Board that easily-"

"Then fix it so I go in for Tech testing; you know I can pass."

She shook her head. "Heavens, Mart, Tech Testing is all done at Central Personnel in City Tower-Level Fifty. Nobody goes up there, without at least a blue tag-" She frowned sympathetically. "You should simply have your adjustment, and-"

Maldon looked surprised. "You really expect me to go down there and have them cut my I.Q. down to 80 so I can get a job shoveling garbage?"

"Really, Mart; you can't expect society to adjust to you. You have to adjust to it."

"Look, I can punch commuters' tickets just as well as if I were stupid. I could-"

Glamis shook her head. "No, you couldn't, Mart. The Board knows what it's doing." She lowered her voice. "I'll be perfectly frank with you. These jobs must be filled. But they can't afford to put perceptive, active minds on rote tasks. There'd only be trouble. They need people who'll be contented and happy punching tickets."

Mart sat pulling at his lower lip. "All right, Glamis. Maybe I will go in for Adjustment. . . ."

"Oh, wonderful, Mart." She smiled. "I'm sure you'll be happier-"

"But first, I want to know more about it. I want to be sure they aren't going to make a permanent idiot out of me."

She tsked, handed over a small folder from a pile on the corner of the desk.

"This will tell you-"

He shook his head. "I saw that. It's just a throwaway for the public. I want to know how the thing works; circuit diagrams, technical specs."

"Why, Mart, I don't have anything of that sort-and even if I did-"

"You can get 'em. I'll wait."

"Mart, I do want to help you. . . . but. . . . what. . . . ?"

"I'm not going in for Adjustment until I know something about it," he said flatly. "I want to put my mind at ease that they're not going to burn out my cortex."

Glamis nibbled her upper lip. "Perhaps I could get something from Central Files." She stood. "Wait here; I won't be long."

She was back in five minutes carrying a thick book with a cover of heavy

manila stock on which were the words, GSM 8765-89. Operation and Maintenance, EET Mark II. Underneath, in smaller print, was a notice:

This Field Manual for Use of Authorized Personnel Only.

"Thanks, Glamis." Mart rifled the pages, glimpsed fine print and intricate diagrams. "I'll bring it back tomorrow." He headed for the door.

"Oh, you can't take it out of the office! You're not even supposed to look at it!"

"You'll get it back." He winked and closed the door on her worried voice.

7

The cubicle reminded Mart of the one at the Placement center, three days earlier, except that it contained a high, narrow cot in place of a desk and chair. A damp-looking attendant in a white coat flipped a wall switch, twiddled a dial.

"Strip to your waist, place your clothing and shoes in the basket, remove all metal objects from your pockets, no watches or other jewelry must be worn," he recited in a rapid monotone. "When you are ready, lie down on your back-" he slapped the cot-"hands at your sides, breathe deeply, do not touch any of the equipment. I will return in approximately five minutes. Do not leave the stall." He whisked the curtain aside and was gone.

Mart slipped a flat plastic tool kit from his pocket, opened it out, picked the largest screwdriver, and went to work on the metal panel cover set against the wall. He lifted it off and looked in at a maze of junction blocks, vari-colored wires, bright screw-heads, fuses, tiny condensers.

He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket, compared it to the circuits before him. The large black lead, here. . . . He put a finger on it. And the matching red one, leading up from the 30 MFD condenser. . . .

With a twist, he freed the two connectors, reversed them, tightened them back in place. Working quickly, he snipped wires, fitted jumpers in place, added a massive resistor from his pocket. There; with luck, the check instruments would give the proper readings now-but the current designed to lightly scorch his synapses would flow harmlessly round and round within the apparatus. He clapped the cover back in place, screwed it down, and had just pulled off his shirt when the attendant thrust his head inside the curtains.

"Let's go, let's get those clothes off and get on the cot," he said, and disappeared.

Maldon emptied his pockets, pulled off his shoes, stretched out on the cot. A minute or two ticked past. There was an odor of alcohol in the air. The curtain jumped aside. The round-faced attendant took his left arm, swiped a cold tuft of cotton across it, held a hypo-spray an inch from the skin, and depressed the plunger. Mart felt a momentary sting.

"You've been given a harmless soporific," the attendant said tonelessly. "Just relax, don't attempt to change the position of the headset or chest

contacts after I have placed them in position, are you beginning to feel drowsy. . . . ?"

Mart nodded. A tingling had begun in his fingertips; his head seemed to be inflating slowly. There was a touch of something cold across his wrists, then his ankles, pressure against his chest. . . .

"Do not be alarmed, the restraint is for your own protection, relax and breathe deeply, it will hasten the effects of the soporific. . . ." The voice echoed, fading and swelling. For a moment, the panicky thought came to Mart that perhaps he had made a mistake, that the modified apparatus would send a lethal charge through his brain. . . . Then that thought was gone with all the others, lost in a swirling as of a soft green mist.

8

He was sitting on the side of the cot, and the attendant was offering him a small plastic cup. He took it, tasted the sweet liquid, handed it back.

"You should drink this," the attendant said. "It's very good for you."

Mart ignored him. He was still alive; and the attendant appeared to have noticed nothing unusual. So far, so good. He glanced at his hand. One, two, three, four, five. . . . He could still count. My name is Mart Maldon, age twenty-eight, place of residence, Welfare Dorm 69, Wing Two, nineteenth floor, room 1906. . . .

His memory seemed to be OK. Twenty-seven times eighteen is. . . . four hundred and eighty-six. . . .

He could still do simple arithmetic.

"Come on, fellow, drink the nice cup, then put your clothes on."

He shook his head, reached for his shirt, then remembered to move slowly, uncertainly, like a moron ought to. He fumbled clumsily with his shirt. . . .

The attendant muttered, put the cup down, snatched the shirt, helped Mart into it, buttoned it for him.

"Put your stuff in your pockets, come on, that's a good fellow. . . ."

He allowed himself to be led along the corridor, smiling vaguely at people hurrying past. In the processing room, a starched woman back of a small desk stamped papers, took his hand and impressed his thumbprint on them, slid them across the desk.

"Sign your name here. . . ." she pointed. Maldon stood gaping at the paper.

"Write your name here!" She tapped the paper impatiently. Maldon reached up and wiped his nose with a forefinger, letting his mouth hang open.

The woman looked past him. "A Nine-oh-one," she snapped. "Take him back-"

Maldon grabbed the pen and wrote his name in large, scrawling letters. The

woman snapped the form apart, thrust one sheet at him.

"Uh, I was thinking," he explained, folding the paper clumsily.

"Next!" the woman snapped, waving him on. He nodded submissively and shuffled slowly to the door.

9

The Placement monitor looked at the form Maldon had given him. He looked up, smiling. "Well, so you finally wised up. Good boy. And today you got a nice score. We're going to be able to place you. You like bridges, hah?"

Maldon hesitated, then nodded.

"Sure you like bridges. Out in the open air. You're going to be an important man. When the cars come up, you lean out and see that they put the money in the box. You get to wear a uniform. . . ." The small man rambled on, filling out forms. Maldon stood by, looking at nothing.

"Here you go. Now, you go where it says right here, see? Just get on the cross-town shuttle, right outside on this level, the one with the big number nine. You know what a nine is, OK?"

Maldon blinked, nodded. The clerk frowned. "Sometimes I think them guys overdo a good thing. But you'll get to feeling better in a few days; you'll sharpen up, like me. Now, you go on over there, and they'll give you your I.D. and your uniform and put you to work. OK?"

"Uh, thanks. . . ." Maldon crossed the wide room, pushed through the turnstile, emerged into the late-afternoon sunlight on the fourth-level walkaway. The glare panel by the shuttle entrance read next-9. He thrust his papers into his pocket and ran for it.

10

Maldon left his Dormitory promptly at eight the next morning, dressed in his threadbare Student-issue suit, carrying the heavy duffel bag of Port Authority uniforms which had been issued to him the day before. His new yellow tag was pinned prominently to his lapel.

He took a cargo car to street level, caught an uptown car, dropped off in the run-down neighborhood of second-hand stores centered around Fifth Avenue and Forty-fifth Street. He picked a shabby establishment barricaded behind racks of dowdy garments, stepped into a long, dim-lit room smelling of naphtha and moldy wool. Behind a counter, a short man with a circlet of fuzz above his ears and a vest hanging open over a tight-belted paunch looked him over. Mart hoisted the bag up, opened it, dumped the clothing out onto the counter. The paunchy man followed the action with his eyes.

"What'll you give me for this stuff?" Mart said.

The man behind the counter prodded the dark blue tunic, put a finger under the light blue trousers, rubbed the cloth. He leaned across the counter, glanced toward the door, squinted at Mart's badge. His eyes flicked to Mart's face, back to the clothing. He spread his hands.

"Five credits."

"For all of it? It's worth a hundred anyway."

The man glanced sharply at Maldon's face, back at his tag, frowning.

"Don't let the tag throw you," Maldon said. "It's stolen-just like the rest of the stuff."

"Hey." The paunchy man thrust his lips out. "What kinda talk is that? I run a respectable joint. What are you, some kinda cop?"

"I haven't got any time to waste," Maldon said. "There's nobody listening. Let's get down to business. You can strip off the braid and buttons and-"

"Ten credits, my top offer," the man said in a low voice. "I gotta stay alive, ain't I? Any bum can get outfitted free at the Welfare; who's buying my stuff?"

"I don't know. Make it twenty."

"Fifteen; it's robbery."

"Throw in a set of Maintenance coveralls, and it's a deal."

"I ain't got the real article, but close. . . ."

Ten minutes later, Mart left the store wearing a grease-stained coverall with the cuffs turned up, the yellow tag clipped to the breast pocket.

11

The girl at the bleached-driftwood desk placed austerely at the exact center of the quarter-acre of fog-gray rug stared at Maldon distastefully.

"I know of no trouble with the equipment-" she started in a lofty tone.

"Look, sister, I'm in the plumbing line; you run your dictyper." Maldon swung a greasy toolbox around by the leather strap as though he were about to lower it to the rug. "They tell me the Exec gym, Level 9, City Tower, that's where I go. Now, you want to tell me where the steam room is, or do I go back and file a beef with the Union. . . .?"

"Next time come up the service shaft, Clyde!" she jabbed at a button; a panel whooshed aside across the room. "Men to the right, women to the left, co-ed straight ahead. Take your choice."

He went along the tiled corridor, passed steam-frosted doors. The passage turned right, angled left again. Mart pushed through a door, looked around at chromium and red plastic benches, horses, parallel bars, racks of graduated weights. A fat man in white shorts lay on the floor, half-heartedly pedaling his feet in the air. Mart crossed the room, tried another door.

Warm, sun-colored light streamed through an obscure-glass ceiling. Tropical plants in tubs nodded wide leaves over a mat of grass-green carpet edging a turquoise-tiled pool with chrome railings. Two brown-skinned men in brief

trunks and sun-glasses sprawled on inflated rafts. There was a door to the right lettered EXECUTIVE DRESSING ROOM-MEMBERS ONLY. Mart went to it, stepped inside.

Tall, ivory-colored lockers lined two walls, with a wide padded bench between them. Beyond, bright shower heads winked in a darkened shower room. Maldon put the toolbox on the bench, opened it, took out a twelve-inch prybar.

By levering at the top of the tall locker, he was able to bulge it out sufficiently to see the long metal strip on the back of the door which secured it. He went back to the toolbox, picked out a slim pair of pincers; with them he gripped the locking strip, levered up; the door opened with a sudden clang. The locker was empty.

He tried the next; it contained a handsome pale tan suit which would have fitted him nicely at the age of twelve. He went to the next locker. . . .

* * *

Four lockers later, a door popped open on a dark maroon suit of expensive-looking polyon, a pair of plain scarlet shoes, a crisp pink shirt. Mart checked quickly. There was a wallet stuffed with ten-credit notes, a club membership card, and a blue I.D. with a gold alligator clip. Mart left the money on the shelf, rolled the clothing and stuffed it into the toolbox, made for the door. It swung open and the smaller of the two sun bathers pushed past him with a sharp glance. Mart walked quickly around the end of the pool, stepped into the corridor. At the far end of it, the girl from the desk stood talking emphatically to a surprised-looking man. Their eyes turned toward Mart. He pushed through the first door on the left into a room with a row of white-sheeted tables, standing lamps with wide reflectors, an array of belted and rolled equipment. A vast bulk of a man with hairy forearms and a bald head, wearing a tight white leotard and white sneakers folded a newspaper and looked up from his bench, wobbling a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. There was a pink tag on his chest.

"Uh. . . showers?" Mart inquired. The fat man nodded toward a door behind him. Mart stepped to it, found himself in a long room studded with shower-heads and control knobs. There was no other door out. He turned back, bumped into the fat man in the doorway.

"So somebody finally decided to do something about the leak," he said around the toothpick. "Three months since I phoned it in. You guys take your time, hah?"

"I've got to go back for my tools," Mart said, starting past him. The fat man blocked him without moving. "So what's in the box?"

"Ah, they're the wrong tools. . . ." He tried to sidle past. The big man took the toothpick from his mouth, frowned at it.

"You got a pipe wrench, ain't you? You got crescents, a screwdriver. What else you need to fix a lousy leak?"

"Well, I need my sprog-depressor," Mart said, "and my detrafficator rings,

and possibly a marpilizer or two. . . ."

"How come you ain't got-what you said-in there." The fat man eyed the toolbox. "Ain't that standard equipment?"

"Yes, indeed-but I only have a right-hand one, and-"

"Let's have a look-" A fat hand reached for the tool-kit. Mart backed.

"-but I might be able to make it work," he finished. He glanced around the room. "Which one was it?"

"That third needle-battery on the right. You can see the drip. I'm tryna read, it drives me nuts."

Mart put the toolbox down. "If you don't mind, it makes me nervous to work in front of an audience. . . ."

The fat man grunted and withdrew. Mart opened the box, took out a wrench, began loosening a wide hex-sided locking ring. Water began to dribble, then spurt. Mart went to the door, flung it open.

"Hey, you didn't tell me the water wasn't turned off. . . ."

"Huh?"

"You'll have to turn off the master valve; hurry up, before the place is flooded!"

The fat man jumped up, headed for the door.

"Stand by it, wait five minutes, then turn it back on!" Mart called after him. The door banged. Mart hauled the toolbox out into the massage room, quickly stripped off the grimy coverall. His eye fell on a rack of neatly-packaged underwear, socks, toothbrushes, combs. He helped himself to a set, removed the last of the Welfare issue clothing-

A shout sounded outside the door, running feet. The door burst open. It was the big man from the executive locker room.

"Where's Charlie? Some rascal's stolen my clothing. . . .!"

Mart grabbed up a towel, dropped it over his head and rubbed vigorously, humming loudly, his back to the newcomer.

"The workman-there's his toolbox!"

Mart whirled, pulled the towel free, snatched the box from the hand of the invader, with a hearty shove sent him reeling into the shower room. He slammed the door, turned the key and dropped it down a drain. The shouts from inside were barely audible. He wrapped the towel around himself and dashed into the hall. There were people, some in white, others in towels or street clothes, all talking at once.

"Down there!" Mart shouted, pointing vaguely. "Don't let him get away!" He plunged through the press, along the hall. Doors opened and shut.

"Hey, what's he doing with a toolbox?" someone shouted. Mart whirled, dived through a door, found himself in a dense, hot fog. A woman with pink skin beaded with perspiration and a towel wrapped turban-fashion around her head stared at him.

"What are you doing in here? Co-ed is the next room along."

Mart gulped and dived past her, slammed through a plain door, found himself in a small room stacked with cartons. There was another door in the opposite wall. He went through it, emerged in a dusty hall. Three doors down, he found an empty storeroom.

Five minutes later he emerged, dressed in a handsome maroon suit. He strode briskly along to a door marked EXIT, came out into a carpeted foyer with a rank of open elevator doors. He stepped into one. The yellow-tagged attendant whooshed the door shut.

"Tag, sir?" Maldon showed the blue I.D. The operator nodded.

"Down, sir?"

"No," Mart said. "Up."

12

He stepped out into the cool silence of Level Fifty.

"Which way to the Class One Testing Rooms?" he asked briskly.

The operator pointed. The door-lined corridor seemed to stretch endlessly.

"Going to try for the Big One, eh, sir?" the operator said. "Boy, you couldn't hire me to take on them kind of jobs. Me, I wouldn't want the responsibility." The closing door cut off the view of his wagging head.

Maldon set off, trying to look purposeful. Somewhere on this level were the Central Personnel Files, according to Glamis. It shouldn't be too hard to find them. After that. . . . well, he could play it by ear.

A menu-board directory at a cross-corridor a hundred yards from his starting-point indicated personnel analysis to the right. Mart followed the passage, passed open doors through which he caught glimpses of soft colors, air-conditioner grills, potted plants, and immaculate young women with precise hair styles sitting before immense keyboards or behind bare desks. Chaste lettering on doors read programming; requirements; data extrapolation-phase iii. . . .

Ahead, Maldon heard a clattering, rising in volume as he approached a wide double door. He peered through glass, saw a long room crowded with massive metal cases ranked in rows, floor to ceiling. Men in tan dust smocks moved in the aisles, referring to papers in their hands, jotting notes, punching keys set in the consoles spaced at intervals on the giant cabinets. At a desk near the door, a man with a wide, sad mouth and a worried expression looked up, caught sight of Mart. It was no time to hesitate. He pushed through the door.

"Morning," he said genially over the busy sound of the data machines. "I'm looking for Central Personnel. I wonder if I'm in the right place?"

The sad man opened his mouth, then closed it. He had a green tag attached to the collar of his open-necked shirt.

"You from Special Actions?" he said doubtfully.

"Aptical foddering," Maldon said pleasantly. "I'd never been over here in Personnel Analysis, so I said, what the heck, I'll just run over myself." He was holding a relaxed smile in place, modeled after the one Dean Wormwell had customarily worn when condescending to students.

"Well, sir, this is Data Processing; what you probably want is Files. . . ."

Mart considered quickly. "Just what is the scope of the work you do here?"

The clerk got to his feet. "We maintain the Master Personnel Cards up-to-date," he started, then paused. "Uh, could I just see that I.D., sir?"

Maldon let the smile cool a degree or two, flashed the blue card; the clerk craned as Mart tucked the tag away.

"Now," Mart went on briskly, "suppose you just start at the beginning and give me a rundown." He glanced at a wall-clock. "Make it a fast briefing. I'm a little pressed for time."

The clerk hitched at his belt, looked around. "Well, sir, let's start over here. . . ."

* * *

Ten minutes later, they stood before a high, glass-fronted housing inside which row on row of tape reels nestled on shiny rods; bright-colored plastic fittings of complex shape jammed the space over, under and behind each row.

" . . . it's all completely cybernetic-governed, of course," the clerk was saying. "We process an average of four hundred and nineteen thousand personnel actions per day, with an average relay-delay of not over four microseconds."

"What's the source of your input?" Mart inquired in the tone of one dutifully asking the routine questions.

"All the Directorates feed their data in to us-"

"Placement Testing?" Mart asked idly.

"Oh, sure, that's our biggest single data input."

"Including Class Five and Seven categories, for example?"

The clerk nodded. "Eight through Two. Your Tech categories are handled separately, over in Banks Y and Z. There. . . ." He pointed to a pair of red-painted cabinets.

"I see. That's where the new graduates from the Technical Institutions are listed, eh?"

"Right, sir. They're scheduled out from there to Testing alphabetically, and then ranked by score for Grading, Classification, and Placement."

Mart nodded and moved along the aisle. There were two-inch high letters stenciled on the frames of the data cases. He stopped before a large letter B.

"Let's look at a typical record," Mart suggested. The clerk stepped to the console, pressed a button. A foot-square screen glowed. Print popped into focus on it: BAJUL, FELIX B. 654-8734-099-B1.

Below the heading was an intricate pattern of dots.

"May I?" Mart reached for the button, pushed it. There was a click and the name changed: BAKARSKI, HYMAN A.

He looked at the meaningless code under the name.

"I take it each dot has a significance?"

"In the first row, you have the physical profile; that's the first nine spaces. Then psych, that's the next twenty-one. Then. . . ." He lectured on. Mart nodded.

" . . . educational profile, right here. . . ."

"Now," Mart cut in. "Suppose there were an error-say in the median scores attained by an individual. How would you correct that?"

* * *

The clerk frowned pulling down the corners of his mouth into well-worn grooves.

"I don't mean on your part, of course," Mart said hastily. "But I imagine that the data processing equipment occasionally drops a decimal, eh?" He smiled understandingly.

"Well, we do get maybe one or two a year-but there's no harm done. On the next run-through, the card's automatically kicked out."

"So you don't. . . . ah. . . . make corrections?"

"Well, only when a Change Entry comes through."

The clerk twirled knobs; the card moved aside, up; a single dot swelled on the screen, resolved into a pattern of dots.

"Say it was on this item; I'd just wipe that code, and overprint the change. Only takes a second, and-"

"Suppose, for example, you wanted this record corrected to show graduation from a Tech Institute?"

"Well, that would be this symbol here; eighth row, fourth entry. The code for technical specialty would be in the 900 series. You punch it in here." He indicated rows of colored buttons. "Then the file's automatically transferred to the V bank."

"Well, this has been a fascinating tour," Mart said. "I'll make it a point to enter a commendation in the files."

The sad-faced man smiled wanly. "Well, I try to do my job. . . ."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll just stroll around and watch for a few minutes before I rush along to my conference."

"Well, nobody's supposed to be back here in the stacks except-"

"That's quite all right. I'd prefer to look it over alone." He turned his back on the clerk and strolled off. A glance back at the end of the stack showed the clerk settling into his chair, shaking his head.

* * *

Mart moved quickly past the ends of the stacks, turned in at the third row, followed the letters through O, N, stopped before M. He punched a button, read the name that flashed on the screen: MAJONOVITCH.

He tapped at the key; names flashed briefly: MAKISS. . . . MALACHI. . . . MALDON, SALLY. . . . MALDON, MART-

He looked up. A technician was standing at the end of the stack, looking at him. He nodded.

"Quite an apparatus you have here . . ."

The technician said nothing. He wore a pink tag and his mouth was open half an inch. Mart looked away, up at the ceiling, down at the floor, back at the technician. He was still standing, looking. Abruptly his mouth closed with a decisive snap; he started to turn toward the clerk's desk-

Mart reached for the control knobs, quickly dialed for the eighth row, entry four; the single dot shifted into position, enlarged. The technician, distracted by the sudden move, turned, came hurrying along the aisle.

"Hey, nobody's supposed to mess with the-"

"Now, my man," Mart said in a firm tone. "Answer each question in as few words as possible. You will be graded on promptness and accuracy of response. What is the number of digits in the Technical Specialty series-the 900 group?"

Taken aback, the technician raised his eyebrows, said, "Three-but-"

"And what is the specific code for Microtronics Engineer-cum laude?"

There was a sudden racket from the door. Voices were raised in hurried inquiry. The clerk's voice replied. The technician stood undecided, scratching his head. Mart jabbed at the colored buttons: 901. . . . 922. . . . 936. . . .

He coded a dozen three-digit Specialties into his record at random.

From the corner of his eye he saw a light blink on one of the red-painted panels; his record was being automatically transferred to the Technically Qualified files. He poked the button which whirled his card from the screen and turned, stepped off toward the far end of the room. The technician came after him.

"Hey there, what card was that you were messing with. . . . ?"

"No harm done," Mart reassured him. "Just correcting an error. You'll have to excuse me now; I've just remembered a pressing engagement. . . ."

"I better check; what card was it?"

"Oh-just one picked at random."

"But. . . . we got a hundred million cards in here. . . ."

"Correct!" Maldon said. "So far you're batting a thousand. Now, we have time for just one more question: is there another door out of here?"

"Mister, you better wait a minute till I see the super-"

Mart spotted two unmarked doors, side by side. "Don't bother; what would you tell him? That there was, just possibly, a teentsy weentsy flaw in one of your hundred million cards? I'm sure that would upset him." He pulled the nearest door open. The technician's mouth worked frantically.

"Hey, that's-" he started.

"Don't call us-we'll call you!" Mart stepped past the door; it swung to behind him. Just before it closed, he saw that he was standing in a four foot by six foot closet. He whirled, grabbed for the door; there was no knob on the inside. It shut with a decisive click!

He was alone in pitch darkness.

* * *

Maldon felt hastily over the surfaces of the walls, found them bare and featureless. He jumped, failed to touch the ceiling. Outside he heard the technician's voice, shouting. At any moment he would open the door and that would be that. . . .

Mart went to his knees, explored the floor. It was smooth. Then his elbow cracked against metal-

He reached, found a grill just above floor level, two feet wide and a foot high. A steady flow of cool air came from it. There were screw-heads at each corner. Outside, the shouts continued. There were answering shouts.

Mart felt over his pockets, brought out a coin, removed the screws. The grill fell forward into his hands. He laid it aside, started in head-first, encountered a sharp turn just beyond the wall. He wriggled over on his side, pushed hard, negotiated the turn by pulling with his hands pressed

against the sides of the metal duct. There was light ahead, cross-hatched by a grid. He reached it, peered into a noisy room where great panels loomed, their faces a solid maze of dials and indicator lights. He tried the grill. It seemed solid. The duct made a right-angle turn here. Maldon worked his way around the bend, found that the duct widened six inches. When his feet were in position, he swung a kick at the grill. The limited space made it awkward; he kicked again and again; the grill gave, one more kick and it clattered into the room beyond. Mart struggled out through the opening.

The room was brightly lit, deserted. There were large printed notices here and there on the wall warning of danger. Mart turned, re-entered the duct, made his way back to the closet. The voices were still audible outside the door. He reached through the opening, found the grill, propped it in position as the door flew open. He froze, waiting. There was a moment of silence.

"But," the technician's voice said, "I tell you the guy walked into the utility closet here like he was boarding a rocket for Paris! I didn't let the door out of my sight, that's why I was standing back at the back and yelling, like you was chewing me out for. . . ."

"You must have made an error; it must have been the other door there. . . ."

The door closed. Mart let out a breath. Now perhaps he'd have a few minutes' respite in which to figure a route off Level Fifty.

13

He prowled the lanes between the vast cybernetic machines, turned a corner, almost collided with a young woman with red-blond hair, dark eyes, and a pouting red mouth which opened in a surprised O.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said, motioning over her shoulder with a pencil. "All examinees must remain in the examination room until the entire battery of tests have been completed."

"I. . . . ah. . . ."

"I know," the girl said, less severely. "Four hours at a stretch. It's awful. But you'd better go back in now before somebody sees you."

He nodded, smiled, and moved toward the door she had indicated. He looked back. She was studying the instrument dials, not watching him. He went past the door and tried the next. It opened and he stepped into a small, tidy office. A large-eyed woman with tightly dressed brown hair looked up from a desk adorned by a single rosebud in a slim vase and a sign reading PLACEMENT OFFICER. Her eyes went to a wall-clock.

"You're too late for today's testing, I'm afraid," she said. "You'll have to return on Wednesday; that's afternoon testing. Mondays we test in the morning." She smiled sympathetically. "Quite a few make that mistake."

"Oh," Mart said. "Ah. . . . couldn't I start late?"

The woman was shaking her head. "Oh, it wouldn't be possible. The first

results are already coming in. . . ." She nodded toward a miniature version of the giant machines in the next room. A humming and clicking sounded briefly from it. She tapped a key on her desk. There was a sharp buzz from the small machine. He gazed at the apparatus. Again it clicked and hummed. Again she tapped, eliciting another buzz.

Mart stood, considering. His only problem now was to leave the building without attracting attention. His record had been altered to show his completion of a Technical Specialty; twelve of them, in fact. It might have been better if he had settled for one. Someone might notice-

"I see you're admiring the Profiler," the woman said. "It's a very compact model, isn't it? Are you a Cyberneticist, by any chance?"

Maldon started. "No. . . ."

"What name is that? I'll check your file over to see that everything's in order for Wednesday's testing."

Mart took a deep breath. This was no time to panic. . . ."Maldon," he said. "Mart Maldon."

* * *

The woman swung an elaborate telephone-dial-like instrument out from a recess, dialed a long code, then sat back. Ten seconds passed. With a click, a small panel on the desktop glowed. The woman leaned forward, reading. She looked up.

"Why, Mr. Maldon! You have a remarkable record! I don't believe I've ever encountered a testee with such a wide-and varied-background!"

"Oh," Mart said, with a weak smile. "It was nothing. . . ."

"Eidetics, Cellular Psychology, Autonomics. . . ."

"I hate narrow specialization," Mart said.

". . . . Cybernetics Engineering-why, Mr. Maldon, you were teasing me!"

"Well. . . ." Maldon edged toward the door.

"My, we'll certainly be looking forward to seeing your test results, Mr. Maldon! And Oh! Do let me show you the new Profiler you were admiring." She hopped up, came round the desk. "It's such a time saver-and of course, saves a vast number of operations within the master banks. Now when the individual testee depresses his COMPLETED key, his test pattern in binary form is transferred directly to this unit for recognition. It's capable of making over a thousand yes-no comparisons per second profiling the results in decimal terms and recoding them into the master record, without the necessity for activating a single major sequence within the master-and, of course, every activation costs the taxpayer seventy-nine credits!"

"Very impressive," Mart said. If he could interrupt the flow of information long enough to ask a few innocent-sounding directions. . . .

A discreet buzzer sounded. The woman depressed a key on the desk communicator.

"Miss Frinkles, could you step in a moment? There's a report of a madman loose in the building. . . ."

"Good Heavens!" She looked at Mart as she slipped through the door. "Please, do excuse me a moment. . . ."

* * *

Mart waited half a minute, started to follow; a thought struck him. He looked at the Profiler. All test results were processed through this little device; what if. . . .

A quick inspection indicated that the apparatus was a close relative of the desktop units used at Applied Tech in the ill-fated Analogy Theory class. The input, in the form of a binary series established by the testee's answers to his quiz, was compared with the master pattern for the specialty indicated by the first three digits of the signal. The results were translated into a profile, ready for transmittal to the Master Files.

This was almost too simple. . . .

Mart pressed a lever at the back of the housing, lifted it off. Miss Frinkles had been right about this being a new model; most of the circuitry was miniaturized and built up into replaceable subassemblies. What he needed was a set of tools. . . .

He tried Miss Frinkles' desk, turned up a nail file and two bobby pins. It wouldn't be necessary to fake an input; all that was needed was to key the coder section to show the final result. He crouched, peered in the side of the unit. There, to the left was the tiny bank of contacts which would open or close to indicate the score in a nine-digit profile. There were nine rows of nine contacts, squeezed into an area of one half-inch square. It was going to be a ticklish operation. . . .

Mart straightened a hairpin, reached in, delicately touched the row of minute relays; the top row of contacts snapped closed, and a red light went on at the side of the machine. Mart tossed the wire aside, and quickly referred to his record, still in focus on Miss Frinkles' desktop viewer, then tickled tumblers to show his five letter, four digit personal identity code. Then he pressed a cancel key, to blank the deskscreen, and dropped the cover back in place on the Profiler. He was sitting in a low chair, leafing through a late issue of Popular Statistics when Miss Frinkles returned.

"It seems a maintenance man ran berserk down on Nine Level," she said breathlessly. "He killed three people, then set fire to-

"Well, I must be running along," Mart said, rising. "A very nice little machine you have there. Tell me, are there any manual controls?"

"Oh, yes, didn't you notice them? Each test result must be validated by me before it's released to the Master Files. Suppose someone cheated, or finished late; it wouldn't do to let a disqualified score past."

"Oh, no indeed. And to transfer the data to the Master File, you just press this?" Mart said, leaning across and depressing the key he had seen Miss Frinkles use earlier. There was a sharp buzz from the Profiler. The red light went out.

"Oh, you mustn't-" Miss Frinkles exclaimed. "Not that it would matter in this case, of course," she added apologetically, "but-"

The door opened and the red-head stepped into the room. "Oh," she said, looking at Mart. "There you are. I looked for you in the Testing room-"

Miss Frinkles looked up with a surprised expression. "But I was under the impression-" She smiled. "Oh, Mr. Maldon, you are a tease! You'd already completed your testing, and you let me think you came in late. . . .!"

Mart smiled modestly.

"Oh, Barbara, we must look at his score. He has a fantastic academic record. At least ten Specialized degrees, and magna cum laude in every one. . . ."

The screen glowed. Miss Frinkles adjusted a knob, scanned past the first frame to a second. She stared.

"Mr. Maldon! I knew you'd do well, but a perfect score!"

The hall door banged wide. "Miss Frinkles-" a tall man stared at Mart, looked him up and down. He backed a step. "Who're you? Where did you get that suit-"

"MISTER Cludd!" Miss Frinkles said in an icy tone. "Kindly refrain from bursting into my office unannounced-and kindly show a trifle more civility to my guest, who happens to be a very remarkable young man who has just completed one of the finest test profiles it has been my pleasure to see during my service with Placement!"

"Eh? Are you sure? I mean-that suit. . . . and the shoes. . . ."

"I like a conservative outfit," Mart said desperately.

"You mean he's been here all morning. . . . ?" Mr. Cludd looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"Of course!"

"He was in my exam group, Mr. Cludd," the red-haired girl put in. "I'll vouch for that. Why?"

"Well. . . . it just happens the maniac they're looking for is dressed in a similar suit, and. . . . well, I guess I lost my head. I was just coming in to tell you he'd been seen on this floor. He made a getaway through a service entrance leading to the helipad on the roof, and. . . ." he ran down.

"Thank you, Mr. Cludd," Miss Frinkles said icily. Cludd mumbled and withdrew. Miss Frinkles turned to Mart.

"I'm so thrilled, Mr. Maldon. . . ."

"Golly, yes," Barbara said.

"It isn't every day I have the opportunity to Place an applicant of your qualifications. Naturally, you'll have the widest possible choice. I'll give you the current prospectus, and next week--"

"Couldn't you place me right now, Miss Frinkles?"

"You mean-today?"

"Immediately." Mart looked at the redhead. "I like it here. What openings have you got in your department?"

Miss Frinkles gasped, flushed, smiled, then turned and played with the buttons on her console, watching the small screen. "Wonderful," she breathed. "The opening is still unfilled. I was afraid one of the other units might have filled it in the past hour." She poked at more keys. A white card in a narrow platinum holder with a jeweled alligator clip popped from a slot. She rose and handed it to Mart reverently.

"Your new I.D., sir. And I know you're going to make a wonderful chief!"

14

Mart sat behind the three-yard-long desk of polished rosewood, surveying the tennis-court-sized expanse of ankle-deep carpet which stretched across to a wide door of deep-polished mahogany, then swiveled to gaze out through wide windows of insulated, polarized, tinted glass at the towers of Granyauck, looming up in a deep blue sky. He turned back, opened the silver box that rested between a jade penholder and an ebony paperweight on the otherwise unadorned desk, lifted out a Chanel dope-stick, sniffed it appreciatively. He adjusted his feet comfortably on the desktop, pressed a tiny silver button set in the arm of the chair. A moment later the door opened with the faintest of sounds.

"Barbara-" Mart began.

"There you are," a deep voice said.

Mart's feet came off the desk with a crash. The large man approaching him across the rug had a familiar look about him. . . .

"That was a dirty trick, locking me in the shower. We hadn't figured on that one. Slowed us up something awful." He swung a chair around and sat down.

"But," Mart said. "But. . . . but. . . ."

"Three days, nine hours, and fourteen minutes," the newcomer said, eyeing a finger watch. "I must say you made the most of it. Never figured on you bollixing the examination records, too; most of 'em stop with the faked Academic Record, and figure to take their chances on the exam."

"Most of 'em?" Mart repeated weakly.

"Sure. You didn't think you were the only one selected to go before the Special Placement Board, did you?"

"Selected? Special. . . ." Mart's voice trailed off.

"Well, surely you're beginning to understand now, Maldon," the man from whom Mart had stolen the suit said. "We picked you as a potential Top Executive over three years ago. We've followed your record closely ever since. You were on every one of the Board Members' nomination lists-"

"But-but I was quota'd out-"

"Oh, we could have let you graduate, go through testing, pick up a green tag and a spot on a promotion list, plug away for twenty years, make Exec rank-but we can't waste the time. We need talent, Mart. And we need it now!"

Mart took a deep breath and slammed the desk. "Why in the name of ten thousand devils didn't you just TELL me!"

The visitor shook his head. "Nope; we need good men, Mart-need 'em bad. We need to find the superior individuals; we can't afford to waste time bolstering up the folklore that the will of the people constitutes wisdom. This is a city of a hundred million people-and it's growing at a rate that will double that in a decade. We have problems, Mart. Vast, urgent problems. We need men that can solve 'em. We can test you in academic knowledge, cook up psychological profiles-but we have to KNOW. We have to find out how you react in a real-life situation; what you do to help yourself when you're dumped on the walkaway, broke and hopeless. If you go in and have your brain burned, scratch one. If you meekly register to wait out a Class Two test opening-well, good luck to you. If you walk in and take what you want. . . ." he looked around the office, " . . . then welcome to the Club."