

Earth Unawarre

Mack Reynolds

PART ONE

"... The will is free

Strong is the soul, and wise, and beautiful

The seeds of godlike power are in us still

Gods are we, Bards, Saints, Heroes, if we will."

Matthew Arnold

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Jerry, in the control booth, was making stretching motions. Ed Wonder looked up at the studio clock. They were running long.

He said to the guest, "To go back a bit. You used a couple of terms there that most of us haven't been checked out on, I'm sure." He looked down at the pad upon which he scribbled notes as the program continued. "Palin... palin... something or other."

"Palingenesis," Reinhold Miller said with only the slightest trace of condescension.

"That's right. And metempsychosis. Did I get that one?"

"That is correct. Metempsychosis. The passage of the soul from one body to another. From the Latin, which in turn was from the Greek. In all modesty I would still suppose that I am the world's outstanding authority on palingenesis and metempsychosis."

Ed Wonder said, "You defined metempsychosis for us; just what is palingenesis?"

"It means rebirth, regeneration, the doctrine of transmigration of souls."

"Well, how does that differ from metempsychosis?"

"I am afraid that time limitations prevent my going into the matter in the detail that would be necessary completely to clarify the subject."

"That's too bad. Well, here's another item I wanted to ask about. You say you've been reincarnated three times. You were first born as Alexander, the Macedonian who conquered the Persian empire. You described how you died of fever after the big binge in Babylon, and then your, ah, soul was transmigrated into the newly born body of Hannibal, the Carthaginian who later nearly, but not quite, defeated Rome. After Hannibal committed suicide by taking poison, you woke up again in the body of Marshal Ney, Napoleon's right hand man."

"That is all correct."

"What I wondered about is where your, ah, soul was in-between. If my ancient history isn't all kooked up, Alexander was something like four hundred years or so B.C. Hannibal led his elephants over the Alps perhaps a hundred and fifty years later. Don't hold me to those dates, folks, I was the top champ at cutting classes when it came to ancient history. Now, let's see, Marshal Ney must have been born in the 18th Century if he fought with Napoleon. That's a pretty long hop from your first reincarnation to your second."

Reinhold Miller said stiffly, "There is no time in death."

"How was that again?"

"One *feels* no sense of lapse between lives. When I was executed in my incarnation as Michel Ney, there seemed a sudden flash of light and pain, and then I was conscious immediately of being newly born into the world as a crying child."

Ed Wonder thoughtfully touched the tip of his nose with his forefinger, then consciously took it away. He was going to have to kill that mannerism if he ever got the program onto television, it looked kooky.

He said, "Well, there was one other thing, Mr. Miller. Don't you think it's somewhat of a coincidence that in all three of your earlier, ah, incarnations, you were one of the greatest military geniuses the world has ever seen?"

"Perhaps mine is a soul of destiny."

"What did you tell us your present occupation is, Mr. Miller?"

"I am an accountant."

Ed Wonder looked down at his pad. "Oh yes. Here we are. Assistant accountant at the Brisby Department Store, in Brisby, Pennsylvania. I

thought practically all accounting was automated in these days of the Welfare State. Brisby must be a bit behind. But aren't you somewhat surprised that your latest incarnation wasn't Douglas MacArthur, or Eisenhower, or possibly Viscount Montgomery? You know, just to keep it consistent."

"It is not mine to question. The eternal spirit moves in mysterious ways."

"Well, look. What I meant was that two or three times before we've had reincarnations on the program. And what's always surprised me about people who, ah, claim to be born again, is that it's never the gardener who worked the swing shift in Tamerlane's melon patch, but always Tamerlane himself. It's never a chimney sweep in Moscow, in the year 1175, but Catherine the Great. How come you folks who *get* reincarnated were always big shots in the former life?"

Miller reacted to that, as he did with everything, with calm dignity and an appealing sincerity which, Ed decided, the twitch element listening in were probably swallowing like crazy.

"I might refer you to the case of Bridey Murphy."

"Touché", Ed said jovially. "You got me there. Folks, you'll remember way back in 1956 or so when the country was all interested in a lady out Colorado way who used to go into hypnotic trances and recall a former life in which she was a simple Irish colleen in the late 18th Century."

His phone clicked and he took it up.

Dolly said, "Professor Dee is on, Little Ed. He wants to ask the guest some questions."

Ed Wonder hung up and made a signal to Jerry in the engineer's booth.

He said, "Folks, I've just had a call from Professor Varley Dee. You old hands remember the professor—teaches anthropology over at the university. We've had him on as a panelist half a dozen times over. The professor is one of the great sceptics of all time. Folks, he just don't buy nothin'. Professor Dee wants to ask our honored guest of the evening, Mr. Reinhold Miller, a few questions, and if Mr. Miller doesn't mind, we'll just switch on the old beeper phone which is a method by which you listeners can hear both ends of the conversation. All right, Mr. Miller?"

"I am perfectly willing to answer any questions whatsoever."

"Fine. Well, Professor?"

Varley Dee's cranky voice crisped in. "You say you were once Alexander

the Great. If that is so, you must clearly remember the battle of Issus, the most famous of Alexander's victories."

"I remember it as though it happened yesterday."

"I'm sure you do," Dee said sarcastically: "Now then, during the battle where was Ptolemy?"

"Who?"

"Ptolemy, Ptolemy. Later the founder of the Macedonian dynasty in Egypt and the ancestor of Cleopatra."

"Oh." Reinhold Miller cleared his throat. "Your pronunciation is faulty. He..."

"I studied Ancient Greek for eight years," Professor Dee snapped.

"... fought on the left flank."

"He did not!" Dee said. "He was one of the companions and fought side by side with Alexander, Black Clitus and the rest of..."

"Nonsense," Miller said, snap in his voice. "You picked that up in some silly history book. I know where he fought. Who could know better? *I* was there."

Jerry was making circular motions to Ed Wonder from the control booth. Wind it up.

Ed began to cut in, but Dee continued over the beeper phone, "All right, I'll admit I wasn't there. However, some of those historians you scorn—including Ptolemy himself, who wrote an account—were there. But's here's another question. Still sticking to Ptolemy. What was his surname?"

Miller's face worked.

"Come, come," the professor urged. "He was one of Alexander's closest friends."

Ed reluctantly came to the rescue. He said, "Gentlemen, we're going to have to call time. Sorry, perhaps we can get together on another occasion. Thank you..."

"His surname was *Soter*" Professor Dee crowed. "As Alex..." but at that point Jerry killed the beeper phone contact.

"... Thank you, Professor Dee. And especially thank you, Mr. Reinhold Miller, who joined us tonight to explain his reincarnation three times over. This is station WAN, the Voice of the Hudson Valley, coming to you from Kingsburg, New York. You have been listening to Edward Wonder's

Far Out Hour." He cued the engineer by saying, "Let the music go round and round, Jerry."

The red light flickered off, indicating the studio was no longer hot. Ed Wonder leaned back in his chair and shifted his shoulders in an elaborate stretch. He tensed up, on mike, particularly on these long programs in which he had to carry most of the dialogue.

Reinhold Miller said, "You mentioned back there the possibility of my appearing again on the program. I'd be glad..."

"I'll bet you would." Ed Wonder yawned deliberately.

The other looked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Ed Wonder's small briefcase was on the padded table before him. They padded studio tables so that nonpro guests couldn't make unwanted noises to go out over the air by drumming fingernails or pencil points. He brought forth some papers and a checkbook. "Let's see," he said. "Your take was to be fifty bucks and expenses, right?"

"That was the agreement. Look here..."

Ed Wonder had brought forth his pen. "No, you look here, Miller. We get a lot of kooky people on this program. Folks who tell about seeing little green men coming out of flying saucers, folks who claim they're clairvoyants, mediums, fortunetellers, necromancers, witches. We even had a guy thought he was a werewolf once." He was writing rapidly, even as he spoke. "But you know something? Most of them are sincere. For all I know, some of them might even be right. We've got open minds on this program."

"I... I don't know what you mean, Mr. Wonder."

"I think you do. I thought when I offered to pay your expenses and fifty dollars for your time, you were a man—mistaken or not—who really believed he had lived in earlier incarnations." Ed Wonder grunted deprecation. "Anybody can read up a bit on historical characters like Alexander, Hannibal and Ney."

The other's lips were pale and thin. "You can't talk to me that way. I came here in good faith."

"And to pick up a quick fifty bucks. The proof of the pudding, Miller. You weren't able to answer Professor Dee's questions. As a historian he had read more on Alexander and his men than you had."

"See here, Mr. Wonder, I admit I've read a great deal about the men whose bodies I formerly occupied. I admit also that some details of my

earlier incarnations I have forgotten. That could happen to anyone. Surely there are details in your own life that you have forgotten. That doesn't..."

The radio man was yawning, even as he waved the check in the air to dry it. "Here's your travel expenses. And now I'll write you a separate check for your loot."

Reinhold Miller flushed angrily. "I'll take the expense money, because I need it. But if you think I'm a fake, Mr. Miller, you can keep the fifty."

"That's up to you. Please sign this receipt for total compensation."

Rheinhold Miller grabbed the pen, signed, took up the small check, turned sharply on his heel and left through the sound padded door to the hall. Ed Wonder looked after him calculatingly for a moment, then stuffed his things back into the briefcase.

Jerry was motioning to him from the control room, and he arose and sauntered in, lighting a cigarette.

Ed Wonder said, "Jerry, where in the devil do you get your clothes, from the Salvation Army? You make the program look crumby. And what do you smoke in that prehistoric pipe, soft coal?"

The engineer grunted around the stem of the pipe in question, then said, "This isn't TV. Even if it were, I wouldn't be on camera. Did you do him out of his money, Little Ed?"

"What?"

"Alexander the Great, in there."

"He was a fake."

"You know, he might be missing a few marbles but he believed in it. He *thought* he was telling the truth."

"That's not the way I received it. This program's on a limited budget, Jerry."

"Yeah. And if there's anything left over at the end of the month, it goes into your pocket. You get a flat sum for the package."

"What's it to you?"

"Not a thing. I love to watch you operate. They can automate nine people out of ten out of work, but the eternal chisler we will always have with us."

Ed Wonder flushed. "I suggest you keep your nose out of my business if you want to stay out of trouble."

Jerry took his pipe from his mouth and grunted humor.

"Trouble! From *you*, Little Ed? What kind of trouble could you cause anybody?" He examined the knuckles of his right hand, reflectively.—that a smash in that cute little mustache wouldn't cure."

The other took a quick half step back. He gathered himself and said nastily, "Is all this what you called me in here for?"

"Fatso came in while you were on mike. He wants to see you."

"Mulligan? What's he doing here this time of night?"

Ed Wonder turned and left before waiting for an answer. There was a small hall immediately outside the soundproofed door which opened into the control room. There were two other similar doors, one of which opened into Studio Three which Ed Wonder had utilized for his late hour program and the other into the corridor beyond.

Ed walked down the corridor to the offices, coming up to Dolly's desk before going on to his own to leave his briefcase. He pretended to flinch.

"Holy smokes, what've you done to your hair?"

She touched it. "Oh, do you like it, Little Ed? It's the latest—latest from Italy. The Fantasy-mode."

He shook his head, eyes closed in sorrow. "Do you think women's hair will ever come back?" He dropped the bantering tone.

He went over to his own desk, put the briefcase in a drawer and locked it. He started toward Matthew Mulligan's office, adjusting his bow tie. He paused before the door a moment, then knocked two careful raps.

The station head was seated behind his desk, listening to the Rock'n'Swing music which followed Ed Wonder's show and looking as though it wasn't helping his digestion.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Mulligan?"

The older man looked him directly in the eye and blatted, "My country, may she always be right..." And then left it there.

Ed Wonder blinked. The other was evidently waiting for him to finish the quotation. His mind hurried it up. He said, "Ah... but my country, right or left."

"... but my country, right or *wrong*." Mulligan said accusingly, "I can see you're not a member of the society."

It came to Ed Wonder. The Stephen Decatur Society, an organization that considered the Birchers too far left. He had heard that Matthew

Mulligan was a member.

"Well, no sir," Ed said earnestly. "I was thinking of looking further into it, possibly joining up, but I've been awfully busy with the program. Have you thought any further of putting it on television, Mr. Mulligan?"

"No, I haven't," Mulligan growled. "Sit down. You make me nervous jittering around. I didn't call you in to talk about your program, Little Ed, but while we're on it I don't mind admitting it's not quite what I pictured when you sold me the idea. Sure, sure, you get some character who says he flew to the moon in a flying saucer, but how come you've never got anybody to show us a chunk of it he brought back, or something? And these fortunetellers. What we need on your program is somebody who predicts Number One, over in Moscow, will get knocked off next Tuesday, and, bingo, it happens. Something like that'd have a dozen sponsors bidding for your show."

Ed Wonder wished he dared close his eyes in pain. Instead, he said hurriedly, "What was it you did call me in for, Mr. Mulligan?"

"Oh? Yeah, well, what're you doing tomorrow night, Little Ed?"

"I've got a date. Tomorrow's one of my free days, Mr. Mulligan."

"Well, maybe you can take her along. See here, have you ever heard of some twitch named Ezekiel Joshua Tubber?"

"I don't think so. A name like that I'd remember. I don't think it's possible to break this date."

The studio chief ignored him. "He's some kind of religious nut, or something. But the thing is, the society's got a couple of letters and a phone call complaining about him, understand? Claim he's subversive."

"I thought you said he was a religious twitch."

"Yeah, but subversive too. A lot of these reds hide out in the guise of religion. Like that archbishop over in England, whatever his name was. And some of these Jewish rabbis that're always signing petitions against segregation. Anyway, at the last meeting of the chapter it was decided to investigate this Tubber. So I was given the assignment."

Ed Wonder could see it coming. "This date..." he began hopefully.

"I don't know anything about religious nuts, but you, with this program are all up on crackpots. So tomorrow night you can attend his meeting. Here's the address, an empty lot over on Houston street. You can give a report at the next meeting of the chapter."

"Look, Mr. Mulligan, I wouldn't know a subversive if I found one under

the bed." He played his trump. "This date is with Helen."

"Helen?"

"Helen Fontaine. Jensen Fontaine's daughter."

"Helen Fontaine! What would a classy, high stepping girl like Miss Fontaine see in..." He cut the question short with a burp, and pursed his heavy lips. "See here," he said finally, "did you ever talk to Mr. Fontaine about your program, now that it's been on a while?"

"He's crazy for it," Ed said quickly. "He was telling me so just the other night. We were sitting around having a couple of drinks together while I was waiting for Helen to finish dressing."

"Oh, you were, eh?" The studio chief made facial motions as though he were chewing. "Well, see here. Mr. Fontaine is a member of the chapter, so is Helen, for that matter, even if she doesn't come around much. Why don't the two of you just take this tent meeting in for half an hour or so? That ought to be plenty."

"A tent meeting!" she said, unbelievably. "I thought it was the end when you wanted to take in that tea leaf reader's convention but..."

"The Precognition Society," Ed said unhappily. "And it was mainly crystalloscopy, not tea leaves."

"... this takes the frosted malted. Whatever gave you the idea I'd be willing to go to a religious revival meeting in lieu of a date, Little Ed Wonder?"

He explained hastily. Told her he would have put Mulligan in his place, if it hadn't been a Stephen Decatur Society project. Told her he'd thought she'd be hot to do a chore for the society. Told her they could cut it as short as she wanted. Told her he could spot a subversive in the first few moments of talk. Told her he was a commie spotter from way back. Told her he had denounced two of his schoolmates as undercover reds as early as third grade.

That last got to her and she made a moue at him. "All right, sharp. But you'd better not let Daddy hear you being flippant like that. He takes the society seriously."

Later, in the Volkshover, she said, "When are you going to get off those impossible hours, Little Ed? I thought the idea was to build your program up and finally switch it to TV on Sunday morning."

Ed said, "Well, that's what I thought, but for some reason old Fatso Mulligan can't see it. He doesn't realize how many people go for this kooky stuff. Why, most of the people in the country believe in one sort of far out idea or the other. It's exactly that kind of twitch who spends half his life sitting in front of his idiot box." He cleared his throat. "Now, if you could get your father to drop a hint..."

"Oh, Daddy's not really concerned with the station," she said disinterestedly, "just because he owns it. He owns a lot of things. What he's really interested in is the society."

They came to the empty acres on the outskirts of town which provided the room for a medium large tent which had been pitched almost in the exact center. It wasn't until they had drifted closer that they saw the second tent behind.

"Oh, *Mother*," Helen protested. "Does somebody *live* in that like—like gypsies?"

There weren't many cars descended on the area that had evidently been chosen for parking. Ed sank the beetle parallel to the others and switched off the lights. "It looks as if they're already under way," he said.

Helen said, "When are you going to get a *car*, Little Ed? I feel like a cockroach crawling in and out of this thing."

Under his breath, as he slid out from under the wheel, Ed muttered, "When I'm rich, honey, when I'm rich."

He took her arm to lead her toward what was obviously the entrance of the larger of the two canvas shelters.

She said, "Remember, we're going to go in there and leave again so quick they'll think we're some sort of blur."

There was a small reception committee at the entrance, two middle-aged types and a girl. They didn't exactly block the way, but it was simpler to stop a moment.

One of the middleaged ones twisted her face in what was probably a smile and said, "Dear ones, are you pilgrims on the path to Elysium?"

Ed thought about that for a moment before saying, "I don't think so."

Helen said, "I know darn well I'm not."

Amusement came from a source unsuspected. The girl member of the reception committee laughed softly and said, "No, I'm afraid you aren't, at least as yet." She put a hand out. "I'm Nefertiti Tubber," she told them. "Tonight's Speaker of the Word is my father."

"Not just tonight," one of the others put in. "Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, is *the* Speaker of the Word. The guru of the path to Elysium."

"Anyone can spread the word, Martha," Nefertiti said softly.

"I'm losing track of this," Helen said. "Let's get in and see the big show."

Ed Wonder had taken the girl's proffered hand. It was both firm and soft in a disconcerting way.

The Tubber girl smiled after them as Ed Wonder followed Helen into the tent and to chairs spank down in the front row. He decided that Helen was feeling mischievous all right. He would have settled for the rear.

The meeting was already under way and for the time the speaker's words didn't get through to the newcomers. While helping Helen with her coat and getting settled on the somewhat rickety wooden folding chair, Ed Wonder kept mental fingers crossed. The score or so who made up the balance of the audience didn't give the appearance of burn-'em-at-the-stake religious fanatics but still the last place Ed was in favor of starting a ruckus was a revival meeting.

Helen said, in a tone only one degree below a stage whisper, "With that beaver, he looks more like Abraham Lincoln than a preacher."

Ed said, "Shhh. Let's get a quick line on what he says."

Somebody else in the audience said *shhhhh* too, and Helen swiveled in her chair to glare.

As a matter of fact, Ed decided, Helen's description wasn't as far off as all that. There was a Lincolnesque quality about the old boy up on the speaker's stand, a transcendent beauty in the sheer ugliness of face. An infinite sadness.

He was saying, "... no matter how the system of representation or delegation of the governmental function is arranged, there is necessarily an alienation of part of the liberty and means of the citizen..."

Helen said from the side of her mouth, "What's he wearing, a suit made out of burlap bags?" Ed pretended not to hear.

"... all parties, without exception, in so far as they seek for power, are varieties of absolutism."

Helen caught that phrase and sang out, "Even the Communist Party?"

Tubber—Ed Wonder assumed this must be Ezekiel Joshua Tubber—paused in mid-thought and looked down at her gently. "Especially the communists, dear one. Communism fails to recognize that, though man is a social being and seeks equality, he also loves

independence. Property, in fact, springs from man's desire to free himself from the slavery of communism, the primitive form of society. But property, in its turn, goes to the extreme and violates equality and supports the acquisition of power by the privileged minority."

Whether or not that satisfied Helen Fontaine, Ed didn't know, but he was beginning to wonder what all this had to do with religion.

He whispered to Helen, "Whatever he is, he isn't a red. Let's go."

"No, wait a minute. I want to hear more of what the old goat has to say. How did a skinny old duffer like him ever get to be father of that pretty, plump little girl out front? He looks like he's eighty if he's a day."

Somebody back in the audience went *shhhh* again and somebody else said, "Please, dear one, we cannot hear the Speaker of the Word."

Helen didn't bother to turn this time, but for the moment held her peace, to Ed's relief. He was beginning to be able to picture being thrown out of the assembly bodily, and if there were anything Ed Wonder hated, it was violence, particularly when it was directed at him. He brought his attention back to Tubber who seemed to be getting into the meat of his subject. "So it is that we proclaim the road to Elysium must be taken. Such has become our lust for possessions, our mad, desperate scramble for goods, for property, for material things, that we are making of this promised land granted by the All-Mother to our ancestors a veritable desert. The nation has already lost a third of the rich topsoil that it had when the Pilgrims landed. Consumption of oil has tripled since the end of the Second War, and although we possess but a seventh of the earth's proved resources, in our madness we are consuming more than half of the world's production. Once the world's leading exporter of copper, we are now the leading importer, and our once tremendous reserves of lead and zinc are now so depleted that they are rapidly becoming uneconomic to work.

"But still the waste goes on. Still the demand for more and more consumption. Consume! Consume! they demand of us. Seek happiness in the desire for things. Consume! Consume! they tell us and endless millions are spent on the perverters of Madison Avenue so that our people will continue to demand, demand more things they need not. Why, dear ones, do you know that in this mad attempt to lure us into still greater consumption those who profit by this way of life spend five hundred dollars a year in packaging alone for every family in the nation. Five hundred dollars a year into what is largely waste! Why, dear ones, our brothers in such lands as India have a per capita income of but thirty-six

dollars a year."

He was, Ed Wonder decided, really beginning to get steamed up now. However, it still didn't have much to do with religion. Other than an occasional reference to the *All-Mother*, whoever that was, and Tubber's habit of calling his audience *dear ones* it sounded more like an attack on the affluent society than a quest for salvation.

Ed looked at Helen from the side of his eyes. He had an idea that the fineness was beginning to wear off her mischievous nature and she'd soon be bored with the tent meeting. He had an idea, too, that she was assimilating only every other sentence or so of Tubber's diatribe, in spite of her scowl of concentration.

"... frivolous consumption. Why, we spend more for greeting cards than medical research. More on smoke, gambling and drinking than on education. More on watches and jewelry than on either basic scientific research or books..."

Ed began to whisper, "Look, this guy isn't a subversive. Just a chronic malcontent. What do you say we take off?"

But Helen wasn't having any. Her voice came clear and loud. "What are you moaning about, Dads? America has the greatest standard of living in the world. Nobody ever had it so good."

Silence fell.

Not even the shushers to their rear broke the hush.

Somehow, the gentle-faced, sad-faced oldster who had been holding forth in a quiet persuasive voice in spite of the nature of his attack, seemed to grow several inches in height, put on twenty or more pounds in pure bulk. For a moment, inanely, Ed wondered if the wobbly speaker's stand would hold this added weight.

He whispered to Helen, "Did you say Abe Lincoln? He looks more like John Brown about to free the slaves at Harper's Ferry."

Helen began to say something, but her voice was drowned in the rumble of thunder from Ezekiel Joshua Tubber.

"Standards of living, thou sayest! Is it standard of living that we must have a new vehicle every two or three years, whilst the old is discarded? Is it standard of living that a woman must needs own half a dozen bathing suits or think she is underprivileged? Is it standard of living that appliances are so constructed—planned obsolescence they call it—that it is all but impossible to get them home from the store before collapse? Indeed, we of the United States have used up in the past forty years more

of the world's resources than all the population of earth has used in all of recorded history up until 1914, in this false pursuit of living standards. Dear one, it is madness. The road to Elysium must be taken!"

Ed Wonder was shaking her arm, but Helen was not to be stopped. "Don't call me *dear one*, Dads. Just because you have to live in a tent and wear gunny sacks doesn't mean the rest of us want to."

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber grew another six inches taller. "Thou hast failed to hear the word, O woman of vanity. Have I not said that the gifts of the All-Mother are being frivolously wasted in the name of thy vanities? Look thou at thyself. At thy dress, which thou wilt wear but half a dozen times before discarding for new fashion, new style. Look at thy shoes, so fragile as to need the cobbler's care after but a few wearings. Look at thy visage, touched with multiple paints at fabulous cost, and always at the expense of wasting the gifts of the All-Mother. Did I not saith earlier that our copper is all but gone? Still every year women throw away hundreds of millions of brass lipstick holders, and brass is made largely of copper. Take up the path to Elysium, O woman of vanity!"

"Listen, Helen..." Ed Wonder was tugging unhappily at her.

But Helen was into it now. On her feet, she laughed at the enraged prophet.

"Maybe that daughter of yours, out front, would be enjoying herself on a date instead of hanging around a tent meeting, if she used a little makeup herself, Dads. And you can sound off the rest of the night about this path to the all-mother, or whatever, but you're not going to talk me, or anybody else with good sense, out of looking my smartest. The number of style conscious people is growing, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Listen, let's *get* out of here," Ed pleaded. He was on his feet too, tugging her toward the aisle that led to the entrance. Once more, inanely, he wondered how the rickety wooden stand upon which Ezekiel Joshua Tubber stood could hold the swollen fury of the man. Even as he tugged, he wondered at the stricken faces of the small audience.

Only for a moment did Tubber hold his breath, then the voice came in a roar that would have silenced Götterdämmerung.

"Verily now, I curse the vainglory of woman. Verily I say that never again wilt thou find pleasure in vanity of the person. In truth, ne'r again wilt thou pleasure in paint or bright fashion of clothing!"

For the first time in the past five minutes, there was the slightest of sound from one of the group of faithful who had seemingly been stunned

to silence at Helen's temerity. Someone breathed, in awe, "... the power..."

2

"COME ON," Ed urged through his teeth. "First thing you know, these kooks will want to lynch you." He hustled her up the aisle, trying to make with an air of sincere apology while at the same time projecting an it's-all-in-fun attitude. He doubted if it was going over. Helen was giggling softly. He could have strangled her.

The girl was a caution. Her devil-may-care attitude was too much for him. He began to wonder how far out the limb of ambition a man should climb, in the way of making a good business marriage.

Just before the entrance, he shot a quick look back over his shoulder. The audience still sat as though stricken. Up on the rostrum, old Tubber seemed to be regaining his composure. Somehow he had shrunken to his original proportions. Once again his appearance was that of a gentle Lincoln, his face in the sadness of ultimate compassion.

Outside, Helen shook her arm free. "Let go," she giggled. "I really got him boiling, didn't I?"

"You got him boiling, all right. Come on, let's get out of here before he changes his mind and decides to sic the faithful after us." But even as he said it, he doubted there was physical danger in the old man and his handful of followers.

The girl who had introduced herself as Nefertiti Tubber came hurrying up from the direction of the smaller tent.

"What... I heard Father..."

Helen said, "Simmer down, dahling. Nothing happened."

Ed Wonder said, "You ought to look out for the old boy. He's apt to blow a gasket one of these days." He ran his eyes up and down the girl appreciatively.

She had pulled to a halt. "I... heard his voice raised in wrath."

Helen yawned. "Your language is almost as fruity as his is, dahling. He got a little sore, that's all."

"But, Miss Fontaine, Father should never lose his temper. He is the Speaker of the Word."

Helen scowled at her. "How did you know my name?"

Nefertiti began to say something, tightened her mouth momentarily, while her neck went pinkish.

"Oh, *Mother*" Helen laughed. "The girl can blush. I don't think I've seen anyone blush for years."

Ed said, "Come to think of it, how *did* you know Helen's name?"

The girl said, lowly, "I... I've seen your picture in the papers, Miss Fontaine."

They looked at her. Helen laughed again. "So, while Poppa sounds off against fashions and cosmetics, daughter reads the Sunday society page and yearns."

The pink evolved to rose. "Oh... oh no..."

"Oh yes, Goody Two Shoes. I'll bet a pretty." Helen turned to Ed Wonder. "Come on, Little Ed. Let's go." She started toward the car.

Ed looked at the girl before following. He said, "Sorry about getting the old boy roused up. He was doing pretty good in there. At least he's sincere. I meet a lot of phonies in my line."

He got the feeling that she wasn't particularly used to talking to men. At least when she was alone with one. Her glance went down to the ground and she said, "I suppose you do, Edward Wonder." She turned quickly and went into the tent.

Ed looked after her. What the devil, she had known his name too. Well, he squared his shoulders in a preen, that wasn't as strange as knowing Helen's. His program was evidently taking on to the point where he was recognized. Confound it, if he could only get the show on TV, he'd have it made. He hurried after Helen.

Back in the car, and over the road, they reversed roles. Now that whatever physical danger might have been involved was behind them, Ed Wonder could find humor in the situation, but Helen was sobering by the minute and on the morose side.

She said finally, "Maybe I shouldn't have done that."

"What, the madcap socialite, Helen Beauregard Fontaine, regretting?"

She tried to chuckle. "Actually, he's a beautiful old man. Did you dig that air of sincerity?"

Ed reversed himself on what he had said to Nefertiti. "That's the stock in trade of religious kooks. You should see some of the characters I've had

on the program. There was this one who claimed he had spotted a flying saucer landing. He went over to it and was taken aboard and off for a ride to Jupiter. On Jupiter—evidently, he could breath the air and the gravity was exactly the same as here on earth—they taught him the local religion and told him to return to Earth and spread the message. They said that several times before they had come to earth and trained a man to propagate the message, but each time it had become garbled. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha were among those who loused-up the true religion revealed to them by the Jupiterians."

Helen said, "Jet it up, will you? I feel awful How could you keep from laughing in this character's face?"

Ed put a bit more pressure on the thrust pedal. "That's what I mean. To listen to the guy, you'd think he was giving you a real square shake. Sincerity just dribbled from him. After that program, hundreds of letters came in wanting to know more about this revealed religion of his. He had mentioned that he was writing a book. The *New Bible* he called it. At least fifty orders came in, most of them with money enclosed. I tell you, when it come to religion, people believe anything. The more offbeat it is, the more faith they have. Whatever that is."

"Little Ed Wonder, I'll have to get Daddy to have Mulligan switch you back to morning soap operas. That far out program of yours is making a cynic of you."

"That's all I need. It took me years to get a program of my own."

Her tone changed. "Besides, you shouldn't talk that way about faith. There's certainly nothing wrong with real faith."

He took her in from the side of his eyes. "What's real faith?"

"Oh, don't be such a sharp. You know what I mean. Real religion. Where are we going? Let's stop for coffee. I guess that argument with old whiskers upset me."

"I thought we'd go to the Old Coffee House; they've got a real waiter there. I like a real waiter. Sort of cozy."

The fact was, he had credit with Dave Zeiss, at the Old Coffee House. You can't swing credit in an automated place. Squirring Helen Fontaine around ran into money. You had to dress up to her, you had to be able, on demand, to take her to such spots as the Swank Room. He was lucky she didn't object more strongly to his Volkshover. She thought it was some kind of affectation. Her own General Ford Cyclones were auto, of course. Even the sports model. He doubted if Helen could drive, had she been in a

situation where she had actually to manipulate the controls.

"I don't think I've ever been there," she said idly. "What's wrong with an automated coffee shop?"

"It's just that I sort of like waiters."

"Oh, *Mother*, I feel awful. How far is this place of yours? Why in the world do you continue to hang around in radio, Little Ed? Why don't you go into business, like everybody else I know? Doesn't money make any difference to you at all?"

He rolled his eyes upward, in knowledge that the darkness hid his expression. "I don't know. I like radio. Of course, I'd rather have the program on TV. You sure you couldn't drop a word to your father?"

"Where is this place?" Her tone was getting on the petulant side. Confound it, she was a spoiled brat.

"Coming up now." Ed dropped the lift lever and drifted into the Old Coffee House's parking area. It was far enough out of the city's center for parking to be above ground. Even as he went through the motions of killing the Volkshover's life, opening the door for her, and escorting her toward the brilliantly lighted coffee shop, Ed Wonder was muttering inwardly. *Why didn't he go into business ... didn't money make any difference at all?* Ha! Why didn't he raise walruses in goldfish bowls?

"Let's sit at the counter," Helen said. "Order for me while I freshen up." She was off to the ladies' room.

Ed took a stool at the counter.

Dave Zeiss came up and they swapped standardized amenities. Ed made his request for credit, which was accepted, ordered the coffee.

He said, "Listen, how about turning off that screen and the juke box? Between the two, I can't hear my marbles rattle."

Dave chuckled appreciatively. "I never before did hear that one, Mr. Wonder. You radio guys always got them on tap. How come you don't like no music, being in the business and all?"

"That's the exact reason I don't like no music," Ed growled. "Just because three quarters of the country doesn't have anything to do but sit and stare at their idiot boxes, giving me a job supplying something for them to stare at, or listen to, doesn't mean I have to like it too."

Dave was shaking his head. "Gees, I'm sorry, Mr. Wonder, but I can't turn them off. I got other customers. You know how folks are. They go squirrel if it gets too quiet. If there wasn't no music going on, they'd go to

the next joint."

"I wanted to do some serious talking with the lady I'm with."

"I tell you, Mr. Wonder, I'd like to do it, but it wouldn't do no good, even if I did. Even if they did stick around, they'd just start tuning in their portables. There's hardly anybody anymore doesn't carry around at least a portable radio, usually a TV."

A new voice said, "Little Ed Wonder! Horatio Alger's representative on radio!"

Ed looked around. "Hi, Buzzo. How's the demon reporter? How the devil do you ever hold a job dressed like a bum?"

The other said, "I seldom do, Little Ed. Seldom do, you old clothes horse."

Ed said, screwing up his nose, "What do they make your cigars out of, rolled up army blankets?"

De Kemp took the object in question from his mouth and looked at it fondly. "This isn't a cigar, it's a stogie. When I was a kid I saw Tyrone Power playing a Mississippi gambler and smoking stogies. Never forgot it. A great Mississippi steamboat gambler was lost in me, Little Ed. I've got the soul for it. It's a shame the sidepaddle river boat ever went out."

Ed caught a glimpse of Helen returning to him and swiveled on his stool to help her to a place. Then his eyes bugged. He opened his mouth, couldn't think of anything to say and closed it again.

Buzz De Kemp, his back to Helen so that he hadn't seen her coming up, said, "Little Ed, what's this gaff I hear about you playing up to some rich society dame? Somebody said you were trying to marry the boss' daughter. You getting tired of working, chum? She hasn't got a friend, has she?"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in mute agony.

Helen looked her aristocratic look down her straight nose at the reporter. "What is this?" she said to Ed, not, *Who* is this?

Ed groaned. "Miss Fontaine, may I present Buzz De Kemp, of the *Times-Tribune*. That is, if he's still got the job. Buzz—Helen."

Buzz shook his head. "Phooey. You can't be Helen Fontaine. Big glamour girl type. All jigged up hair styles, makeup that takes a couple of hours to plaster on. I've seen pictures of Helen..."

Helen turned to Ed, almost defensively. She said, "I washed my face and combed out my hair, just to get more comfortable. It must have been

filthy in that tent. I absolutely *itched*." She took the coffee and stirred sugar into it.

Ed Wonder couldn't keep from staring at her. He said, "Listen, Helen, you didn't take that old duffer's sounding off seriously, did you?"

"Don't be silly," she said, watching the waiter fill her cup again. "It was simply dirty in that tent—I suppose."

"What's everybody talking about? What tent?" Buzz asked.

Ed said impatiently, "Helen and I went to a supposed revival meeting. Some offbeat crank named Ezekiel Joshua Tubber."

"Oh, Tubber," Buzz said. "I wanted to do up a couple of articles about him but the city editor said nobody was interested in new religious cults."

Helen looked at him, as though for the first time. "You've been to his meetings?"

"That's right. I've got a phobia for offbeat political economy theories. Regular phobia."

To keep the conversation going along the present path, in wishful prayer that it would never get back to Buzz's crack about trying to marry the boss' daughter, Ed said, "Political economy? He's supposed to be a religious twitch, not an economist."

Buzz took a long drink of coffee before answering. He put the cup down and pointed at Ed with his stogie. "Where religion lets off and socio-economics begins can be a moot question, Little Ed. You'll find most of the world's religions have a foundation in the economic system of their time. Take Judaism. When Moses laid down those laws of his, chum, they covered every aspect of the nomad life of the Jews. Property relationships, treatment of slaves, treatment of servants and employees, money questions. The works. Same thing with Mohammedism."

Ed said, "That was a long time ago."

Buzz grinned at him and stuck the stogie back in his mouth. He said around it, "Want a more recent example? Take Father Divine. Ever heard of his movement? It started back in the big depression, and, believe me, if the Second War hadn't come along Father Divine's so-called religion might have swept the country. Because why? Because it was basically a socio-economic movement. It fed people at a time when a lot were going hungry. It was sort of a primitive communism. Everybody tossed everything he had into the common kitty. If you didn't have anything to toss, that was okay too, you were still welcome. And then everybody worked, fixing up the delapidated old mansions they bought into what

they called heavens. Those who could, got jobs on the outside as maids, chauffeurs, cooks or whatever, and the cash they brought in went into the kitty too. When a heaven saved up enough money and when enough new converts came along, they bought another old mansion and fixed up another heaven. Oh, it was going great guns until the war came along and things boomed and everybody hurried off to make a hundred dollars a week welding in the shipyards."

Helen said, "What you say might apply to Father Divine and the Mohammedans, but not all religions are, well, economic."

Buzz De Kemp looked at her. "That's not exactly the way I put it. But, anyway, name one."

"Don't be silly. Christianity."

Buzz threw back his head and laughed. He ground his stogie out. He said, "Who was it that said if Christianity hadn't come along when it did, it would have been to the advantage of the Romans to invent it? And maybe they did."

"Why, you're insane. The Romans persecuted the Christians. Anybody knows that who's read anything at all about history."

"At first they persecuted them, but they made it the State religion after catching on to the fact that it was the perfect religion for a slave society. It promised pie in the sky when you died. Suffer on earth, and you get your just desert after death. What could be a better creed to keep an exploited population quiet?"

Ed Wonder said morosely, "This is getting to be a swell evening. We're sitting here arguing politics and religion. What do you say we amble on, Helen? There's still time to take in a show. I've got a couple of tickets to—"

Helen was saying heatedly, "You sound like an atheist!"

The reporter did a burlesque bow. "An agnostic with atheistic tendencies." He grunted ruefully. "Actually, I can't make any claims to intellectual superiority. My mother came from a long-time family of agnostics, and my father, though born a Seventh Day Adventist became one of those street corner atheists. You know, great for cornering some poor sincere Baptist and demanding if Adam and Eve were the only people in the world, who did Cain marry? So I was raised in an atmosphere that lacked belief in any organized religion. I became an agnostic for the same reason you became a Methodist or Presbyterian..."

"I'm an Episcopalian!" Helen snapped, not placated by his wry self-deprecation.

"Like your parents? And suppose a trick of fate had you born into a Moslem family? Or a Shintoist one. What do you think you'd be? Nope. Miss Fontaine—you really are Helen Fontaine, eh?—I am afraid we both lack originality."

"Well, anyway that doesn't apply to me," Ed said. "My people were both Baptists and I switched to Episcopalian."

Buzz De Kemp grunted. "You know, Little Ed, I suspect that under that fawning, pyramid-climbing exterior which you present to the world, beats a heart of pure brass. Let's face up to cruel reality. You're an opportunist. It's all the thing to be an Episcopalian."

Ed Wonder awoke from no deep dream of peace and groaned the words that had to be said to register with the voco-alarm and turn it off. The action brought back to mind that he was going to have to check his credit balance. The Volkshover wasn't paid for yet, not to speak of this far out TV-stereo-radio-phono-tape recorder-alarmclock built into his apartment wall.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and scratched his wisp of a mustache. He moaned gently as he came to his feet and started for the bathroom. He stared into the mirror. Thirty-three years. When did you start getting middleaged? Maybe at forty. You couldn't exactly call yourself young anymore at forty. He looked into his face for wrinkles, realizing he'd been doing that more often recently. He didn't have any wrinkles to speak of. And that merest touch of gray at his temples was on the plus side. Gave him some dignity. That was one of the advantages of a roundish face, slightly on the plump side. The wrinkles didn't show like they did on a thin, long face.

He skinned back his lips so he could see his teeth. That was one of his unsolved problems, whether or not to have his lower front teeth straightened a bit for TV appearance. But then, there was such a thing as too perfect teeth. The twitches tuned in figured they were false.

And how about his mustache? Should he shave it off completely or let it grow heavier? He was presently wearing a thin line of a mustache currently popular among the bright young executive types. The trouble was, a thin mustache made him look like a stereotype Parisian gigolo. He probably wasn't suited for a mustache at all, he decided gloomily. A mustache went with a face that had quite a space between the upper lip and the nose.

If he ever got the program on TV and off this kooky late hour radio arrangement, he'd have to settle about both teeth and mustache. You can't go switching your appearance once you get to be a TV personality. The viewers get used to the way you look and they want you to continue looking that way. They don't have brains enough to put up with switches. It irritates them.

He opened the jar of *NoShav* depilatory and began spreading it over his right cheek, rubbing it in well. Quite a few of the boys in TV had resorted to having their beards permanently removed. You couldn't take chances of your public image. What was the name of that presidential candidate, way back, who supposedly lost the election because on camera he looked like he hadn't shaved? The idea made Ed Wonder uncomfortable. Removing the hair from his face each morning was an act of masculinity. Had a way of making you feel, well, like a man. However, you couldn't take chances with your public image. You couldn't afford to look like a hooligan if you got your program onto TV.

The question of his credit balance came up again. Trying to keep up to Helen's pace was getting to him. He wished he had the gumption to ask her to marry him. He had an unhappy suspicion that the idea would fracture her. But he had to do it sooner or later. The son-in-law of Jensen Fontaine. Holy smokes.

Maybe he should have asked her the night before. She was gay there for a while. And at one time, depressed. He'd never seen her before with her hair combed straight and her face completely free of makeup. Come to think of it, she had a certain wistful appeal, looking that way. He had to laugh inwardly. That old coot, what was his name? Tubber. Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. He had something with that able-to-swell personality of his. He'd evidently set Helen back with that cursing vanity, or whatever it was he had cursed.

Ed reached for a towel to wipe away the *NoShav*.

Ed Wonder parked his little hover car in the Fontaine Building's cellar parking area and made his way to the elevators. There was only one fellow passenger in the elevator, a dowdily dressed, plain-faced young woman. She evidently didn't care much about her appearance. Ed wondered vaguely who she worked for and who, in the swank Fontaine Building, would put up with such a drab.

It was none of his business. He didn't bother to wait for her to call her

floor first. He said, "Twentieth," and the auto-operator said, "Twentieth, yes sir." The girl called her own floor, in a throaty slur of a voice that vibrated warmth.

Ed Wonder looked at her with slightly more interest. With a voice like that, she belonged on the air. He took in her features. Why any beautician could go to town on that face. You could...

He pulled himself up, startled.

He said, "Oh. Pardon me. I didn't recognize you, Miss Malone. I didn't even know you were in Kingsburg."

She took him in, disinterestedly. "Hello, uhh, Little Ed, isn't it?"

"That's right," he told her eagerly. "I caught your network program Monday night. Real sharpy."

"Thanks, Little Ed. I came up for a special program. What are you doing these days? I don't believe I've seen you since you helped with the commercials on the—let's see..."

"The Sophisticated Heure show," Ed reminded her, wagging his tail at the recognition. "I've got my own program now."

Her eyebrows went up and she tried to project interest. "Really? How nice. Well, I'm afraid this is my floor."

When she was gone, he scowled in perplexity. Then his face cleared. She was incognito. That was the way to handle avoiding the fans. Why, not even he recognized her. When he had a name like Mary Malone's, maybe he'd have to figure out ways to keep his public off too.

He strolled down the corridor to his desk, his mind on the program to come. He'd had a letter from a swami, or yoga, or whatever he was, that might be a lead. He hadn't had any Hindus on the show for some time. Indians went over pretty well. They *sounded* authentic. He noted vaguely that someone else was sitting at Dolly's desk. Maybe the girl was ill. That'd be a pain. Dolly was his part-time assistant, his program not calling for a full secretary. She did most of the drudgery, and had been with him since he'd first got Mulligan's okay for his offbeat show.

Ed Wonder pulled up before her desk and began to inquire who this newcomer was, then shut his mouth with an audible pop.

He opened it again to say, "What in the name of Mountain Moving Mohammed are you doing in this getup?"

Dolly said defensively, "What's wrong with it?"

"You look like a country hick."

She flushed. "I don't think I have to take that from you, Little Ed Wonder. I'm clean. I'm neat. How I dress doesn't effect the work I do."

"Well, you're my front. Suppose somebody came in? Maybe a potential sponsor. Possibly a potential guest. What does he think? You don't see the other girls..." He swept his eyes around the extensive office, as though in indication, and came to an abrupt halt.

Dolly eyed him in superiority.

He blurted, "What in the devil's got into all you dames? I just saw Mary Malone in the elevator. She looked like she was in costume to play Little Nell, down on the farm."

Dolly said primly, "Mr. Mulligan asked you to see him as soon as you came in."

Still letting his eyes go round the office, from one to the next of some dozen of secretaries and stenographers, in utter disbelief, Ed made his way to his immediate boss' sanctum.

3

He'd carried out his assignment to cover Tubber's meeting hadn't he? Fatso Mulligan should have been on the grateful side. He should have been, well, genial.

Instead, he sat there like a lard Buddha and gave Ed Wonder the oatmeal look.

Ed cleared his throat and said, "You wanted to see me, Mr. Mulligan?"

The older man half-closed one eye, which didn't go very far toward dimming the intensity of the glare. "See here, Wonder, what was the lame-brained idea of taking Miss Fontaine to that kooky meeting last night?"

Ed Wonder looked at him. He opened his mouth, closed it again. He could think of something to say, but there was discretion to consider.

Mulligan rapped, "Miss Fontaine is a highstrung young lady. Very susceptible to suggestion. Uh, delicate."

Helen Fontaine was about as delicate as a hydrofluoric rubdown. So he had nothing to say in reply to that.

The TV-radio executive growled, "Well, don't stand there shuffling around like a kid that has to go to the rest room. What'da you got to say?"

Ed had to say, "What's *happened*, Mr. Mulligan?"

"What's happened? How would I know what's happened? Mr. Fontaine's had me over the coals for the past ten minutes. The girl's hysterical. She says this Tubber guy you took her to see hypnotized her, or something."

Ed shook his head. He took a breath. "She's not hypnotized."

"How do you know she's not hypnotized? She's hysterical, keeps screaming about this Tubber."

Ed said placatingly, "I've had several hypnotists on the program. In order to straight man for them, I had to cram up on the subject. I was there last night. Believe me, Tubber didn't hypnotize anybody."

Mulligan made movements of his mouth as though checking his dentures with his tongue. It came to Ed Wonder that it was just as well that his chief never appeared before camera.

He said finally, "You better get over there and see what you can do. Mr. Jensen isn't happy about this Tubber character. We're having a meeting of the chapter tonight. You'd better be there to give a report on what happened."

"Yes, sir. I'll go right on over to the Fontaine's. She'll probably snap out of it."

Jensen Fontaine himself met Ed Wonder at the door of the Fontaine mansion. He had evidently been watching the progress of Ed's Volkshover up the sweep of driveway that culminated in the grandiose entry which vaguely reminded the radioman of the White House.

Actually, he had met Helen's father a couple of times before but only glancingly. Ed doubted that he was remembered. Evidently the tycoon had long since given up trying to channel his daughter's life. Certainly he made no effort to censor her escorts.

He bent a grim eye on Ed Wonder now as the radioman ascended the stairs to the double doors, one of which was open. It was a day for grim eyes, Ed decided unhappily. For a long time he had been trying to get next to Jensen Fontaine through his contact with Helen. This wasn't exactly it.

The older man rapped, "You're this Edward Wonder?"

"Yes, sir. I have the Far Out Hour from midnight to one."

"You have *what?*"

Ed said unhappily, "On your radio and TV station, sir, WAN-TV. I have the Friday night program on radio from midnight to one o'clock."

"Radio?" Fontaine rasped indignantly. "Do you mean to tell me that Mulligan still continues *radio* programs in this day? What's wrong with television?"

Ed had a strong desire to close his eyes in suffering. However, he said, "Yes, sir. Nothing's wrong with TV. In fact, I wish we could switch my program over. But there's some people who can't look at television."

"Can't look at television? Why not! TV has become the American way of life! What kind of people can't enjoy television? Perhaps this should be looked into, young man!"

"Yes, sir. Well, blind people for one and..."

Jensen Fontaine's eye went bleaker still.

"... and, well, people who are working and can't sit down to watch a screen. People who are driving cars manually. There's lots of people who still listen to radio when they can't watch TV. I get a lot of truck drivers who listen to my program. And waitresses in all night restaurants. And..."

The elderly tycoon blurted, "I don't know how in the confounded blasted blazes we got onto this. You're the young fool who took my daughter to this ridiculous religious quack's meeting last night?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, I was. I mean did, that is. The question came up whether or not this Ezekiel Joshua Tubber..."

"*Who?*"

"Yes, sir. Ezekiel Joshua Tubber."

"Don't be an idiot. Nobody has a name like that in this day. It's a pseudonym, young man. And a man who needs a pseudonym is covering something. Probably something subversive."

"Yes, sir. That's the question that came up at the last meeting of the local chapter of the Stephen Decatur Society; whether or not this Tubber was subversive. So Helen, that is, Miss Jensen, and I went to attend."

Some of the bleakness was gone. Jensen said, "Ummm, the society, eh. *My country may she always be right...*"

"*But my country, right or... ah... wrong!*" Ed clipped right back at him.

"Excellent, my boy. I wasn't at the last meeting, Ed. I'll call you Ed. Busy off at the convention in California. This Tubber is a subversive, eh? What's

he pulled on my daughter, Ed? We'll get to the bottom of this." He took Ed Wonder by the arm and led him inside.

"Well, no sir," Ed told him, answering his first question. "At least it didn't seem so to me. I'm supposed to make a report to the chapter tonight. Mr. Mulligan arranged it."

"Hump. Sounds like a subversive to me. What did he do to Helen?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I came over to see her. I'd think she's just upset. She had a bit of fun last night. Heckled Tubber a little and he got sore and cursed her."

"You mean this charlatan, this, this subversive with the unknown name, actually swore at my daughter!" The glare was back.

"Well, no sir. What I meant was he laid a curse on her. You know, a hex. A spell."

Jensen dropped Ed Wonder's arm and stared at him for a long appraising moment.

Ed said, finally, "Yes, sir." There wasn't anything else to say.

Jensen Fontaine said, "Come with me, young man." He led the way to a staircase and ascended it, wordlessly. He led the way down a hall, wordlessly. Around a corner, past a half dozen doors, wordlessly. He opened a door and preceded Ed Wonder through it.

Helen Jensen was in bed, her hair every which way on the pillow, her face pale, and her eyes on the wild side. There were two medical looking coves and a nurse starched Prussian stiff in attendance.

Jensen Fontaine blurted, "Out!"

One of the doctors said smoothly, "I would suggest, Mr. Fontaine that your daughter be given a long rest and complete change of scene. Her hysteria is..."

"Out. All of you," Fontaine snapped, tossing his head at the trio of medicos.

Three sets of eyebrows went up, but all had evidently had contact with the Fontaine personality before. They gathered up odds and ends and beat a retreat.

Helen said, "Hello, Little Ed."

Ed Wonder opened his mouth but before even greetings came forth, Jensen Fontaine's blast chopped him to silence.

"Helen!"

"Yes, Daddy..."

"You get out of that bed. Suppose the newspapers got this. A curse! A hex! My daughter with two of the best diagnosticians and psychiatrists in Ultra-New York in attendance because she's been hexed. Get out of that bed. What would this do to my name? What would it do to the society if the word went out that prominent members believed in witches?"

He spun violently, glared at Ed Wonder, for some unknown reason, and charged out of the room as though on the way to storm Little Round Top.

Ed looked after him. "How can a man who can't weigh more than a hundred pounds make that much noise?" he said. He looked down at Helen. "What in the devil's wrong?"

"I itch. Not right now. Like an allergy, or something."

He looked at her for a long moment, as though he had put a dime in a slot machine and nothing had come out.

Finally he said, "When do you itch?"

"If I put on makeup. Even the slightest touch of lipstick. Or if I do up my hair any way except combed straight down to my shoulders or done in braids. Or if I put on anything except the simplest clothes I've got. No silk. Not even in my underthings. I simply start itching. It started really last night, but I didn't realize it. Little Ed, I'm scared. It works. That old goat's curse is working on me."

Ed Wonder stared down at her. "Don't be a twitch."

She stared back at him, defiantly.

He had never seen Helen Fontaine before, save last night, in other than the height of heights, fashionwise. Every pore in place. It came to him now that she possibly looked better this way. Possibly when she got to be the age of Mary Malone, the screen and TV star, she'd need civilization's contributions to aid nature's gifts. But in her mid-twenties...

Helen said, "You were there."

"Sure I was there. So old Tubber waved his arms around a little, got red in the face and slapped a hex on you. And you believed him."

"I believed him because it worked." she flared back.

"Don't be a kook, Helen! Curses don't work unless the person who has one laid on him believes it will work. Anybody knows that."

"Fine! But in this case it worked without my believing in it. Do you think I believe in curses?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe I do now. But I didn't then. And let me tell you something else, Little Ed Wonder. That chubby daughter of his, and those followers in the audience. They believe in the *power*, as they call it, too. They've seen him do it before. Remember how scared his daughter was when she heard him speaking in wrath?"

"They're a bunch of twitches."

"All right, all right. Go on. Get out. I'm getting up and getting dressed. But I'm going to dress in the simplest things I've got, understand?"

"I'll see you later," Ed told her, not doing very well at keeping disgust from his voice.

"The later the better," she snapped back.

He had to get hopping on this program for the Friday after next. On his way past Dolly's desk to his own he said to her, "Get me Jim Westbrook. And put a little snap into it, eh?"

"Who?" Dolly said. He still couldn't get used to her well scrubbed face and her cotton print, not to speak of the Little Dutch girl hairdo.

"Jim Westbrook. We've had him on the program several times. He's in the book as James C. Westbrook."

He sat down at his desk and fumbled his key into the top drawer. Something was nagging him about Dolly's down-on-the-farm getup, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Something that should be very obvious, but didn't come through. He shook his head to switch subjects and brought forth the letter from the swami. He scanned it again. Confound it, this was the sort of character he could really project over TV. His program demanded TV. Half the kooks he had on as guests needed to be seen to be appreciated.

The phone buzzed and he picked it up.

It said, "Little Ed? Jim Westbrook here."

"Yeah, hi Jim. Listen, I've got this Hindu twitch who calls himself Swami Respa Rammal. Claims he can walk on burning coals. Is there any chance he can?"

Over the phone Jim Westbrook said slowly, "With a name like that, friend, he sounds like a phony. A respa is a sort of Tibetan neophyte lama who induces fantastic cold as part of his training for full lamahood. And Rammal is a Moslem name, rather than Hindu. And he wouldn't call himself a swami, either. That's the wrong word. A swami is simply a

Hindu religious teacher. Comes from the Sanskrit word *svamin*, meaning master."

"All right, all right," Ed Wonder said. "Phony name or not, is it possible that he can walk on burning coals?"

"It's been done, friend."

Ed was incredulous. "At 800 degrees Fahrenheit?"

"That's a little better than the melting point of steel," Jim told him, "but it's been done."

"*When*, and by whom?"

"Well, right offhand I can't reel off names and dates but there're two types of this fire-walking. The first takes place over coals and embers and the second over hot stones. The Hindus do it and so do various cults in the South Seas. For that matter, every year in Northern Greece and Southern Bulgaria they have a day on which they traditionally walk on hot coals. The British Society for Psychical Research and the London Council for Psychical Investigation both looked into it, witnessed it, and even had some of their members try it. Some succeeded..."

"And..." Ed prompted.

"Some burned the hell out of their feet."

Ed thought about it. He said finally, "Look Jim, do you know anybody with some nice scientific sounding handle who disagrees with you? Suppose we made this a four way panel. Me, the swami, you, who agrees it can be done, and this scientist who claims it can't. Possibly we can stretch it over two programs. The first one we'll interview the swami and argue it around. Then during the next week we'll have him perform, and we'll report on the experiment the following program."

Jim Westbrook said, "Come to think of it, I had an argument with Manny Levy a year or two back on the very subject."

"Who?"

"Doctor Manfred Levy, down in Ultra-New York. He's a big wig in popularization of science, several books to his credit. On top of that, he's got a German accent you could chin yourself on. Makes him sound very scientific."

Ed said, "Do you think you could get him to act as a panelist on my show?"

"Sure we could get him—at your top rates."

"Not for free, eh? Not just for the fun of it? My budget's running low for this quarter."

Jim Westbrook laughed. "You don't know Manny, friend."

Ed sighed. "Okay, Jim. Get in touch with him, will you? Let me know soonest what he says."

He switched off the phone, switched on the dicto and did a letter to Swami Respa Rammal. Whether or not they could get this Doctor Levy on the panel, he decided to use the fire-walker. A fire-walker, yet. Sometimes he wondered how he'd ever gotten into this line. Once he'd wanted to be an actor. It took him some ten years to find out he wasn't. Deep within, Ed Wonder divided the world into two groups, those who gawked and listened, the twitches, and those who performed. He couldn't stand not being one of the performers.

He got up and wandered over to the coke dispenser, not actually thirsty. On the way he stopped at the news teleprinter and let his eyes scan the last few dispatches. El Hassan was uniting North Africa, largely in spite of itself. The Soviet Complex was having interior rumblings again. The Hungarians were slowly replacing the Russians in the higher echelons of the party.

The teleprinter chattered and he took in the latest item.

A new fashion seems to be sweeping the nation... No makeup, no frills... Simplicity is the keynote... Robert Hope the third, TV comedian, has already tagged it the Homespun Look ...

Ed Wonder grunted. So that's why Dolly and the rest of the office staff had come to work looking like the hired girl all set to do the milking. The way these fads could spread. It was bad enough in the old days. Hems up, hems down; hair up, hair down, pony tails, wigs, short, long, and what not; bosoms are *in* this season, bosoms are out. It had been bad enough but now with universal television, the welfare state and the affluent society, a fad could sweep the country overnight. The proof was in the fact that this one evidently had. That explained Mary Malone's appearance in the elevator, too. Trust Mary Malone to be in there at the beginning.

However, he again had that premonition. He couldn't quite put his finger on something he ought to remember. He shrugged and continued on toward the coke dispenser.

As he stood there, drinking from his plastic cup, he contemplated the machine. Just how far would the efficiency engineers finally go? The beverage was free. The time and motion people had figured out that it was cheaper to contribute free cold drinks than to have the office help waste the time they did in trotting around getting change, or borrowing a dime each time they wanted refreshing.

Mulligan waddled from his office and cast his eyes around the room, spotted Ed and started toward him.

The luck of the Irish. Why couldn't he have been seated at his desk in a rash of hard work when Fatso issued onto the scene?

However, the studio head evidently wasn't in his usual critical mood. He rumbled, almost pleasantly, "All set, Little Ed?"

Ed looked at him blankly.

"The chapter meeting," Mulligan blatted. "Your report on this subversive religious kook."

Ed said brightly. "Oh sure, Mr. Mulligan. All set to go." Actually, he hadn't given a thought to this. He should have spent some time on it. Old man Fontaine would be there and probably half the local business bigwigs. It was a chance to make an impression. To make contacts.

The meeting of the local chapter of the Stephen Decatur Society took place in one of the conference rooms of Coy Parfums, Incorporated. Ed Wonder hadn't known that Wannamaker Doolittle, president of Coy, was a member of the society. Here was a contact, right off the bat. Coy perfumes were one of the big sponsors in Kingsburg.

His luck again. There wasn't going to be a spell, before the meeting got under way, during which he could meet the big shots present. The meeting was already underway. In fact, he and Mulligan attracted the scowls of several present, including Jensen Fontaine, who was prominently seated at the far end of the table around which some thirty chapter members were gathered.

They slunk into two unoccupied seats, not adjoining each other.

It was Wannamaker Doolittle himself who held the floor. He was waving a newspaper and viewing something with alarm, as best Ed could make out.

"Listen to this," the Coy head demanded. "Listen to this undermining of American institutions." He read, accusation in his high voice:

"Planned obsolescence through style fluctuation can present one of the most unbelievable elements of our unbelievable economy. As good an example as any are the twice a year changes in Detroit's autohoovers. Last year, General Ford autohoovers managed to get about in the night with but four lights, two forward, two behind. This year they carry fourteen outside lights, fore, aft and to the sides. Evidently, the autohover stylists couldn't get together on just what all these banks of lights were for. On some, a few of the taillights were dummies, not hooked up to the wiring system. A similar example is to be found in the latest kitchen stoves. In the attempt to put over to the housewife consumer that her present stove is antiquated, latest models are so gimmicked up with control panels that they look like the conning tower of an atomic submarine. They carry as many as thirty-five buttons and dials. On dismantling one of these the Consumer's Alliance found that many of the dials had no connections beneath the cover. They were dummies."

Wannamaker Doolittle looked up in accusation. He banged the newspaper he held in his left hand with the back of his right. "Commie subversion," he bleated. "Insidious underground attempt to undermine our institutions."

"Hear, hear," someone applauded, thumping on the table. There were general murmurs of indignation.

"Who is this Buzz De Kemp?" Doolittle demanded. "Do our newspapers hire any subversive who comes along claiming to be an honest journalist? Is there no screening? No check on his security rating?" He slapped the paper again. "What editor passes such open attacks upon two of the most important elements in our economy, autohoovers and kitchen appliances? Last week the president exhorted the people to buy, buy, buy, in order to continue our prosperity. How can we expect full consumption of our products if women slave away over antiquated stoves, and if families drive rattling, unstylish autohoovers, fully a year old?"

Ed Wonder's ears had pricked up at the mention of Buzz De Kemp's name. Buzzo must be slipping his gears to write things like that. Did he want to get a reputation as a kook?

Jensen Fountaine, evidently the chairman, banged the table with his gavel "A motion is in order to recommend to the publisher of the *Times-Tribune* that this malcontent reporter, uh, whatever his name is..."

"Buzz De Kemp," Ed said, without thinking.

Eyes went to Ed Wonder, whose tie suddenly became overly tight.

"You know this obvious Communist?" Jensen Fontaine rapped.

"Well, yes sir. I've run into him several times. He's not a Commie. According to him he just sort of makes a hobby of offbeat politico-economic theories. You know..." His sentence dribbled away as he saw his words weren't exactly making a big hit.

Someone said darkly, "You can't play with tar without getting your hands dirty."

Fontaine banged the table again. "Do I hear a motion?"

Mulligan got out quickly, "Make a motion that a committee composed of members who advertise in the *Times-Tribune* draw up a letter to the publisher complaining of the reddish tinged articles of this De Kemp guy."

Somebody said, "Second."

There was a long-winded report then by some sort of library committee. Evidently they were having trouble with the children's section in the town's library. Something about refusing to ban *Robin Hood* from the shelves.

Ed Wonder looked suddenly alert. Jensen Fontaine had just used his name.

Helen's father was saying, "During my absence I understand we had several letters concerning the subversive elements in the so-called sermons of a certain..." he looked down at the paper before him and snorted disbelief "... Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. Member Helen Fontaine, my daughter, and a staff member of WAN-TV attended a Tubber revival and as a result Helen was confined for a time to her bed. Mr. Edward Wonder will now report fully."

Ed stood up. Already he wasn't liking this and had an unhappy suspicion that he wasn't going to win kudos.

Ed said, "The fact is, I'm no authority on underground subversion. I know it's important work. Keeping the country from being overthrown by the Commies and all. But, well, I've got my nose to the grindstone at WAN-TV. Possibly some of you folks have tuned in to the Far Out Hour on Friday nights..."

Mulligan said ominously, "The report on Tubber, Little Ed, the report on Tubber. No commercials."

Ed cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. Well, frankly, from what I heard, Tubber is anti-Communist, rather than a Commie. At least that's what he says. He complained about people being too materialistic, concentrating on the things they own or consume, instead of spiritual things... I suppose."

Somebody said, "My minister gives the same sermon every Sunday. On Monday we forget it."

Somebody else said, "Oh, he does, does he? This is something I've been wanting to bring up. What's wrong with our consumer society? What would happen to our economy if we listened to these supposed religious leaders?"

Fontaine banged his gavel. "Go on," he said to Ed Wonder.

He didn't sound too happy about the way the report was coming, so far. Which, in turn, didn't make Ed any too happy either.

"Well, all I can say is that he didn't sound like a Commie. In fact, Helen, Miss Fontaine, asked him a direct question about it and he made it clear that he wasn't."

The woman who had reported on the library said, mystified, "But what's all this got to do with Helen being under a doctor's care? What did he *do* to her?"

Ed looked in anguish at Jensen Fontaine who at first began to say something but then closed his mouth to a line so thin Ed Wonder decided you'd have your work cut out getting a knife blade between the lips. Oh great.

Ed said, "Well, Miss Fontaine was, ah, kind of heckling him. And he got sore and, well, cursed her."

There was a silence. They'd made the same assumption Fontaine had earlier.

Ed cleared it up. "That is, he laid a hex on her."

Wannamaker Doolittle said, "Hex?"

"Kind of a spell," Ed said.

"What's this got to do with her being in bed?"

Ed said, unhappily, "She says she itches."

Jensen Fontaine banged his gavel. "Let's cut short all this jabber. Exactly what did this crackpot say?"

In his barren actor's years, Ed Wonder had spent considerable time in perfecting his memory. In remembering dialogue. Now he sent his mind back. He said, "It went something like this: *Verily I curse the vainglory of women. Verily... when Tubber gets excited he slips into this fruity thee and thou language... Verily, never more wilt thou find pleasure in vanity. Truthfully, never again wilt thou find pleasure in styles or in cosmetics.*"

Ed wound it up, hopefully. "That's not exactly it, but almost. So you see, he wasn't exactly just putting a hex on Helen. The way he worded it, actually what it amounts to is a curse on all women..."

He broke off in mid-sentence, because an icicle had just touched the base of his spine and was slowly working its way upward.

4

By the next morning, there was little doubt left in Ed Wonder's mind. He scanned the teleprinter's bulletins. It wasn't a nationwide fad, it was a worldwide fad. Common Europe, the Soviet Complex, and the aborigines of the Galapagos Islands, for that matter, were all effected.

Fads there had been before. Every type of fad. People went for fads these days. The hula hoops and the Davy Crockett craze of an earlier decade were as nothing to today's fads. As watching TV replaced working as the daily occupation of the average citizen, the slight tendency to rebel against complete ossification seated in one's living room was taken up by the new tri-di cinema, which at least made you walk as far as the neighborhood theatre, and by fads, fads, fads.

Fads in food, fads in dress, fads in slang, fads in everything. It was one method by which the obsolescence by style manipulators kept their goods rolling. If convertibles were in, then sedans were out, and only a twitch, a kook, would be seen dead in one. If tweeds were in, gabardines were out, and you might as well throw yesterday's suit into the disposal chute. If Chinese food came in, Italian, Turkish, Russian, Scottish, or whatever had been the fad last month, went out. And a restaurant which had optimistically stocked its shelves and freezers with products for yesterday's fad, might as well dump them in the garbage.

Yes, fads there had been before, but never like this.

Ultimately, almost any fad originating in the West would spread to even the Soviet Complex. Did Battle Fatigue cocktails become the thing in Greater Washington, three months later they were being used to toast the health of Number One in the Kremlin. Did Bermuda shorts in Madras cloth become the rage for formal dress in Ultra-New York, they were adorning the thin limbs of the Chinaman in the streets of Peking within a matter of weeks.

But at least it took *weeks*.

So far as Ed Wonder could figure out, this current Homespun Look fad

had hit the world simultaneously. The data he could uncover bore that out to his satisfaction. Possibly no one else realized it, but Ed Wonder did.

It had hit Saturday night at eight thirty-five local time. From all he could piece together, from confused news reports, it had hit an hour earlier, one time zone west, and had come into effect four hours later, by the clock, in England, six hours in Common Europe. And so on. In short, it didn't go by man-made rules of time. It had hit simultaneously.

Some of the commentators had tried to suggest otherwise, undoubtedly in good faith. No one, as yet, had actually stumbled upon the truth as Ed Wonder suspected it.

He had listened to one jovial newsman who made efforts to trace the Homespun Look back several months, claiming that it had long been aborning and had suddenly blossomed forth. The same analyst pontificated on the fad. It wouldn't last. Couldn't last. It was against woman's basic human nature. It was one style that simply wouldn't have long range appeal to the fair sex. He had chuckled and revealed that the Homespun Look had already been a boon to Madison Avenue. The Textile Association had quickly raised an initial hundred million to be devoted to nipping it in the bud with a gigantic TV, radio and Skyjector campaign. Cosmetic manufactures were also supposedly in closed session to meet the emergency.

What the commentators didn't know, what nobody knew except Ed Wonder and Tubber himself, and the handful of Tubber's faithful, was that there had been no time limit set on the curse. It was slated for eternity. Always assuming that Tubber's curses, however it was that he managed them, continued their initial effectiveness.

He considered telling Mulligan about his suspicions, and decided not to. If he started sounding off about hexes laid on by itinerant religious quacks, he'd wind up convincing people he'd been on this Far Out Hour program too long.

He wandered over to Dolly's desk. As the day before, she was in full style. By the looks of her, it must have been a dress she'd had as a teenage kid. Something in which to go out into the country, on a picnic. No lipstick, no eyebrow pencil, no powder. No earrings. No nothing.

Ed said to her, "How do you like this new Homespun Look fashion, Dolly?"

Most of the masculine elements of the staff had been working the girls over in regard to their new getup. Dolly had evidently expected Ed Wonder to head the list of tormentors, but there wasn't that in his voice.

She said, "Well, gosh, Little Ed, it's just like any other style. It comes in, pretty soon it'll go out. I don't especially either like it or dislike it."

He said, his voice low, "Listen, have you tried putting on makeup at all these last couple of days?"

She frowned, puzzlement there. "Well... yes, a couple of times."

"And?"

She hesitated, her pert nose wrinkled. "Well, darn it, I felt *itchy*. You know, something like when you've had a bad sunburn and the skin starts peeling off."

Ed Wonder shook his head. He said, "Listen, Dolly, get me Buzz De Kemp, over on the *Times-Tribune*, will you? That is, if he's still at the *Times-Tribune*. I've got to talk to somebody."

She bent on him the strange look he deserved and went about the chore. Ed Wonder went back to his own desk and took the call.

He said, "Hello, Buzzo. I didn't know if you'd still be working there or not."

The other's voice said cheerily, "Not only here but basking in the warmth of a raise, Little Ed, old chum. It seems that some twitchy right wing outfit put in a beef to the editor about some of my articles. Wanted me fired. So Old Ulcers says the kind of pieces that'll start enough controversy to have beefs coming in just might possibly pry a few dimwits off their TV sets long enough to read the paper. So I got a raise."

Ed closed his eyes in sorrow at the workings of the world. "All right," he said. "I've got to see you. How about the Old Coffee House in fifteen minutes? The coffee's on me."

"You talked me into it," De Kemp said, his voice beaming. "It's a date. And I think you're beautiful, even with that queer mustache."

Ed hung up and headed for the elevator.

He had hurried his way over, but by the time he arrived the newspaperman was already there. The Coffee Shop was practically empty. Ed suggested to Buzz that they retire to a booth.

They took places across from each other in a booth as far from the TV set and juke box as it was possible to get, and Ed looked gloomily at the reporter. He said finally, "I saw that article you did on gimmicked up style changes."

Buzz De Kemp brought an eight inch long stogie from his jacket pocket and lit it. "Great stuff, eh? Actually..."

"No," Ed said, completely ignored.

"... the practice goes back to the early sixties, when hovers were in their infancy. You know where I got that dope? From the old boy we were talking about the other night. He's got more statistics on how our present affluent welfare state economic system is lousing up the nation..."

"Tubber!" Ed said.

"Sure, sure. Some of his data is dated a bit. Got a lot of it together back a decade ago. But it's even more valid now than then. The last time I heard him talk he was on the country wasting its resources with disposables. Steaks and other meats that came in disposable frying pans. Muffins and biscuits in disposable baking tins. A throw away aluminium mousetrap; you don't have to fool around with the mouse, you never even see it. You just throw away the whole unit. And plastic razors with the blade built in; use it once and throw it away." Buzz laughed and drew on his stogie.

"Listen, all this aside. I heard him sounding off the same way the night Helen and I attended his meeting. But what I want to know is, did you ever hear him lay on a spell?"

The reporter scowled at him. "Do what?"

"Make with a curse. A hex. Put a spell on somebody."

"Hey, the old boy's not crazy. He's just an old duck who's viewing with alarm. Warning about the deluge to come. He wouldn't really believe in curses, and even if he did, he certainly wouldn't curse anybody."

Ed finished his coffee. "Curse *anybody*? The fact is he's evidently cursed *everybody*. At least half of everybody. All women."

Buzz De Kemp took his stogie from his mouth and pointed it at Ed Wonder. "Little Ed, you're potted. Stoned. Swacked. Besides that, you don't make sense. No sense."

Ed Wonder had made up his mind to tell him. He had to tell somebody and he couldn't think of anybody better. "All right," he said. "Listen for a minute."

It took more than a minute. During the process, Buzz De Kemp had ordered more coffee, but otherwise didn't interrupt.

When Ed Wonder finally went silent, the newspaperman's stogie had gone out. He lit it again. He thought about it, while Ed worked away at his coffee.

Buzz said finally, "It makes one beautiful story. We'll exploit it together."

"What?"

Buzz leaned over the table, pointing happily with the stogie. "It's the Father Divine story all over again. Remember me telling you about Father Divine the other night?"

"What the devil has this got..."

"No, listen. Back in the early thirties, Father Divine was just one more evangelist picking up a scrubby living in Harlem. He only had maybe a hundred or so followers. So one day there was a knifing or something in his heaven and he was arrested and the judge gave him a mild sentence. However, a couple of reporters heard several of Father Divine's followers say that the judge was flying into the face of disaster. That Father Divine would strike him dead. A day or so later the judge died of a heart attack. The reporters, seeing a story, went to interview the evangelist in his cell. He played it straight, saying simply, 'I hated to do it.' Chum, believe me, when Father Divine came out of that jail, all Harlem was there on the street waiting for him."

Ed demanded impatiently, "What in the devil..." Then he stopped short.

"Sure," Buzz said urgently. "Don't you get it? Old Tubber curses the vanity of women. Puts a hex on cosmetics and fancy styles in clothes. That sort of thing. And what happens the next day? The Homespun Look fad hits. Coincidence, of course, but what a coincidence."

It was obvious now. "Yeah," Ed said slowly, then, "but what did you mean about us exploiting it?"

The stogie was pointing for emphasis again. "Don't be a kook. This is your chance of a lifetime. Up until now, on this offbeat program of yours you've had a bunch of freaks. Twitches who claim to have ridden in flying saucers, spiritualists who don't have any luck raising spirits for you, faith healers who couldn't take off a waft. But this time you've got it made. Go over and latch onto old man Tubber for your next show. He laid a hex on vanity and it worked. get it? It *worked*. And what's more, he's got witnesses. You witnessed it, Helen Fontaine witnessed it. Tubber's daughter was there and a bunch of his followers. He's got genuine bona fide witnesses that he cursed the vanity of women and the next day the Homespun Look took over. Can't you see a story when it falls into your lap."

"Holy smokes," Ed said in awe.

"I'll give you full coverage in the *Times-Tribune*. First build up to the program and then do a really good spread with lots of art, afterward. Maybe in the Sunday supplement."

"Art?"

"Photographs, photographs—of Tubber and his tent, and his daughter. Tubber in the pose he assumes when he's laying a hex on something. The works."

He was carrying Ed Wonder away. With this sort of a show he might even get enough publicity to interest some sponsor. Why, he might even get his TV spot for it.

He said, "But I've got an ESP girl on for this Friday."

"Bounce her. Postpone her. This is hot. You've got to use Tubber while this Homespun Look fad is new. It'll be old hat in a couple of weeks. This is one style that the bigwigs aren't going to let last. They can't afford to. Department stores, beauty shops, cosmetic manufacturers are already howling. They want the President to give one of his famous Air-Conditioner Side chats, telling the women of the country they're destroying prosperity."

"Right!" Ed told him. "We'll do it. I'll have to get hopping. I'll need to dig up some panelists to appear with him. Ask him questions, that sort of thing."

"Me!" Buzz crowed. "I'll be a panelist for you. I've listened to him half a dozen times. Then get Helen Fontaine to appear, since it was she who brought on the hex. Maybe we can get her to plead with him to reverse the spell."

"Yeah," Ed took it up. "And his daughter, Nefertiti. She's as cute as a pair of cuff links. Nice voice too. We'll work her in. She implied that old Tubber had made with a hex or two before, when he was speaking in wrath as she called it."

Ed Wonder had the faintest twinge of misgiving on the way over to where Ezekiel Joshua Tubber had his tents pitched. What would Mulligan, and the Stephen Decatur Society have to say about opening the airwaves to the man that only the week before they were investigating for subversion? He decided he wouldn't bother to tell the studio head. If he could get Helen Fontaine to appear on the show, Mulligan wouldn't have much to say. And Buzzo was right, this was a program that was going to

pull attention. The breaks, at long last, were coming Ed Wonder's way.

They drew up to the parking area of the large empty lot the Tubber followers had appropriated for his stay in the vicinity, and Ed Wonder dropped the lift lever of the Volkshover and settled to the ground.

Buzz said, "Hey what's going on? What's going on?"

"It looks like they're wrapping it up," Ed said. "They're pulling down the main tent."

The scrambled out of the little hovercar and made their way in the direction of the activities.

Nefertiti Tubber spotted them first. She had emerged from the smaller of the two tents, carrying a coffeepot and four cups in her hands.

For some inane reason, there came to Ed Wonder's mind a couple of lines he hadn't thought of since high school.

*Maud Miller, on a summer's day,
Raked the meadow, sweet with hay.*

He said from the side of his mouth, "For the past couple of days I've been seeing this Homespun Look. For the first time I can say, on her it looks good."

"On her it looks natural," Buzz said back. "The rural simplicity bit."

She stopped and waited for them, questioning in her eyes.

Ed said, "Ah, Miss Tubber. You and your father aren't leaving?"

She cocked her head infinitesimally. "I'm afraid we are. We've been here two weeks, you know." She paused before adding, "Edward Wonder." She looked at Buzz. "Good afternoon, Buzz De Kemp. I noticed that you used material from my father's sermons in some of your articles."

"Well, yes I did."

"Without bothering to mention their source, or even that father was in town."

Buzz winced. "Well, frankly, Miss Tubber, I wanted to do some pieces on the old... that is, your father. But the city editor killed them. Sorry. No interest in small religious cults."

"That's why we came over to see you," Ed put in hurriedly.

She turned her incredibly blue eyes to him. "Because there is no interest in small religious cults, Edward Wonder?"

"Well, in a way. Listen, just call me Ed. What we thought is that if your father appeared on my program he'd reach hundreds of thousands of people, right in their homes."

Her face brightened momentarily, but then the frown was there again. "But your program deals with cranks, with fakes, Edward... that is, Ed. My father..."

He said hurriedly, "Not at all, Nefertiti. You don't get it. My program is designed to give people, who ordinarily wouldn't be able to reach the public, an opportunity to present their beliefs, no matter how extreme. Admittedly some are fakes, some are even crooks, but that doesn't mean that perfectly sincere folk aren't also represented. This is your father's chance to get his message over on the big time."

She said hesitantly, "Father's never been on the radio... Ed. I don't believe he even approves of radio. He thinks people found more enjoyment when they played their own music. When each member of the family had his own instrument, or could sing."

"When was that?" Buzz De Kemp said flatly.

Her eyes came to him. "It still applies in Elysium."

The newspaperman started to say something further, but Ed Wonder hurried in. "It's not important whether or not he approves of radio, or if he's ever been on. I'm used to inexperienced folk. Almost all my guests are. This is his big chance. Besides, you'll be on too. And Buzzo, here. And, I think, Miss Fontaine."

She worried the idea a little, but then shrugged comfortably plumpish shoulders. "We can ask him." She led the way and now Ed and Buzz could see the elderly evangelist who was, with several others, pulling down the larger tent. Wooden chairs had already been folded and stacked outside, and the lecture platform folded up for transport.

When he spotted the two, he said something to the others who continued the work, and came over.

The old railsplitter, Ed Wonder thought all over again. Abe Lincoln in Illinois. The man had a personality. Maybe he was a father image, or something. It was a shame the program wasn't already on TV. It'd really go over if the audience could see this bird.

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber looked from one of the newcomers to the other. "Yes, dear ones?" he said.

Ed Wonder cleared his throat. "My name is..."

"I know your name, dear one. My daughter told me of your identity the other night."

It came to Ed very suddenly that he wasn't going to get Tubber on the show by appealing to venality. Instinctively he knew the man was no spellbinder on the make. Driving over here, with Buzz De Kemp, Ed had figured on promising the evangelist an opportunity to bring himself before the people in such a way that he would eventually make such great revivalists of the past such as Billy Sunday and Billy Graham look like pikers. Now he decided it might well be better if he made no mention of the curse at all, at this point.

Ed said, "Mr. Tubber, I..."

Tubber said gently, "Mister is derived from the title, Master, dear one. I wish to be no one's master, no more than I wish anyone to be mine. Call me Ezekiel, Edward."

"Or Zeke, for short," Buzz De Kemp said.

Tubber looked at the newspaperman. "Yes," he said gently. "Or Zeke, for short, if you will, dear one. It is an honorable name, that of one of the more progressive thinking of the Hebrew prophets who wrote the twenty-sixth book of the Old Testament."

"Easy, Buzzo," Ed muttered from the side of his mouth. Then to Tubber, "What I meant, sir..."

"The term sir, a variation of sire, comes down to us from the feudalistic era, dear one. It reflects the relationship between noble and serf. My efforts are directed against such relationships, against all authority of one man over another. For I feel that whoever puts his hand on me to govern me is a usurper and a tyrant! I declare him my enemy!"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes for a moment and held silence. He opened them again and said, "Listen, Ezekiel, how would you like to appear on my radio program Friday night?"

"I would like it very much. It is high time our mass media be utilized for dispensing other than trivialities." The bearded oldster looked wearily at the worn tent being dismantled by his assistants. "It is not through desire that my words are given to so few." His eyes came back to Ed Wonder and Buzz De Kemp. "I thank you for the opportunity to bring the word to the million mass, dear ones."

It had been that simple lining up Ezekiel Joshua Tubber.

Now Helen Fontaine was another thing.

Helen Fontaine glared at the two of them. "Put myself near enough to that old goat to even hear his voice again? Oh, *Mother*. Do I look as though I've gone completely around the corner?"

They were in the so-called recreation room of the Fontaine home. Recreation, so far as the Fontaines saw it, must have consisted of drinking since the room offered little beyond an elaborate auto-bar. Ed had stationed himself behind it, dialing for the three of them, while Buzz made the pitch.

Helen was garbed in a simple cotton print. Her shoes were low of heel. Her hair, in braids. Her face looked as though it had been thoroughly scrubbed not five minutes earlier.

Buzz De Kemp moved his stogie from the left side of his mouth to the right, thoughtfully. He said, "There's nothing to be afraid of in that old boy. He's a kindly old coot, as innocent as—"

"A stick of dynamite," Helen put in bitterly. "Give me another beer, Little Ed."

Ed said, "I've never seen you drink beer before."

She grunted. "Neither have I, but I'm beginning to suspect that anti-vanity curse of Tubber's covers ostentatious drinks. Nothing tastes good to me anymore except beer and dago red wine."

Buzz said, "Now look, you don't really believe Tubber put a hex on you?"

"Yes. And I have no intention of getting near enough to him for him to dream up another one, sharpy."

Buzz said, "Okay. Grant for argument that he did, really, truly put a spell on you. If he can put it on, he can take it off, can't he?"

She frowned at him, over the rim of her beer glass. "I... I don't know. I suppose so."

"Why, sure," Ed put in helpfully.

Buzz said, "So fine. You'll admit he's a sweet old duffer until you get him roused up. I've never seen him roused up but I'll take the word of you two that you heckled him into a temper the other night. But basically he's a sweet old man. So fine. Come on the air with us and apologize to him and ask him to reverse the spell."

She thought about that, pulling on her beer.

"You know," she said finally. "This'll pop like corn, but I don't particularly object to this built-in allergy I've got to cosmetics and fancy dress. I think I feel more, well, *comfortable* than I have since I was a child."

Buzz bore in. "Sure, fine. But how about all the other women in the world? Billions of them. Billions. You're young and pretty. Any style looks good on you. Even the Homespun Look. But how about all the women who don't start off with your advantages? All the rest of them are under this hex you brought on too."

Ed looked at him. "I thought you didn't believe in it?"

Buzz said, "Shut up. This is just for the sake of argument." He said to Helen, "Besides, it's Little Ed's big chance. A real blockbuster of a show. It'll get as much publicity as Orson Welles' expeditionary force from Mars back in the 1930s. But you're necessary. You're the big witness. You're the one he cursed, but in miswording it, he took in all other women as well. Little Ed needs you on the program."

Helen said decisively, "All right, I'll do it. I should have my skull candled, but I'll do it. However, I'll tell you right now, sharp, my women's intuition tells me a wheel is going to come off this go-cart."

Buzz took his stogie from his mouth and looked at the unlit tip. "Women's intuition," he said flatly. "First we get hexes and spells and now we get women's intuition. Next week I'll meet somebody who believes in fairies."

From the first, the program didn't come off exactly the way Ed Wonder and Buzz De Kemp pictured it. In fact, it didn't come off *remotely* in the manner they had pictured it.

Up until Jerry, in the control booth, signaled that the mike was hot, everything was routine. Ed Wonder had set up Studio Three for five persons, himself and four guests. There was a mike for each of them. A pad and a pencil for each, so that anyone could make notes, or doodle, or whatever. Tubber and his daughter Nefertiti had arrived a full hour before broadcast time. Helen and Buzz De Kemp came together, a half an hour later, Buzz having picked up Helen at her house, afraid that she might renege at the last moment.

Ten minutes before going on, Jerry, the engineer, had taken a level on their voices. Then they had waited. When the red light had lit, signifying that the studio was hot, Ed launched into his routine. Since his program

was live and off the cuff, rather than being taped, it could be variable. Sometimes one of his guests, and the panelists he had to help question them, would take up the full horn, effortlessly. Sometimes, however, he'd get a kook who just didn't come off and Ed would have to wind up the interview and play music and chatter for the rest of the time.

Tonight, he had a satisfied belief he wasn't going to have to play music.

He said into the mike, after the routine of station identification and the naming of the program, "Folks, tonight we've got something different. Of course, every Friday night I try to bring you something, somebody, different. We've had everything from a man who talked to horses to a woman that flew. Now, of course, to some this might not seem very far out, but on *this* program things are special. Not only did our guest talk to horses like any jockey or cowboy might do, but he got replies since he was speaking horse language. Our woman who flew didn't bother to have an airplane around her. She flew all by her lonesome. Levitation, she called it."

From the side of his eyes, Ed Wonder could see that his guest of the evening Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, wasn't taking this any too well. His daughter, sitting next to him, was showing signs of acute apprehension.

Ed hurried on. "But tonight, folks, we've got somebody here who'll really set you back. A religious prophet, crisscross my heart and point to heaven, who can cast hexes wholesale. And what's more, we're going to prove it. Because folks, we have here in the studio the man responsible for the Homespun Look, that supposed fad which has swept the globe in the past week. It's not a fad, folks, not a fad at all. It's a real, true hex which our guest of the evening, Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, has cast on all womankind. Also with us tonight is Nefertiti Tubber, daughter of our guest-in-chief; Helen Fontaine, well known Kingsburg socialite; and Buzz De Kemp, whose byline in the *Times-Tribune* you've all come to know. Mr. Kemp, who simply doesn't believe in spells, folks, will help question evangelist Ezekiel Joshua Tubber.

"Now then, first of all, Mr. Tubber, with a name like yours I assume in your revival meetings you carry on a long tradition of good Christian family."

The Lincolnesque face had been losing some of its gentle sadness as Ed progressed. Now Tubber said tightly, "Then you make an incorrect assumption, Edward. First, the meetings I have been addressing are not revivals. It is my teaching that Christianity, along with Judaism, Mohammedism, and indeed all other present day organized religions, is a

dead, profitless religion and I have no intention of reviving the corpse."

"Oh," Ed said blankly. "Ah, evidently I gained a wrong impression, folks. Then, just what were you, ah, preaching at your tent meetings over on Houston Street, Mr. Tubber?"

"A *new* religion, Edward. One fitted to our times." His voice had taken on inspiration.

Buzz De Kemp said wryly, "The human race needs another religion like it needs an extra collective aperture in the head. We've got so many religions now, we can't sort them out."

Tubber turned on him quickly. "To the contrary. But very little knowledge of religion shows that a major one has not come upon the scene for nearly fifteen hundred years. And what was that? Mohammedism, a religion, like Judaism and Christianity, born in the desert to express the religious needs of semibarbaric nomads. The great religions of the East, such as the Hindu and the Buddhist, are even older. I tell you, dear ones, that in their day perhaps these beliefs of our ancestors were positive in their effects. But the world has changed. Man has changed. There is need today for a new religion, one that fits out modern condition. One that will point out the way to a more full life, not simply parrot the words of men of past centuries who knew not the problems that would confront our generation. The proof that these hoary religions of the past are no longer valid is to be seen in the direction of our people. We play lip service to our churches, temples, synagogues and mosques but the lives we lead are without ethic."

Buzz De Kemp said sceptically, "You think it's up to you to start this new religion?"

"An individual, dear one, does not start a religion. A religion swells up from the hearts of a people to fit a need. Had the Christ been born two thousand years earlier, there would have been none to listen to his words, his time was not yet. Were the Prophet Mohammed to be born today, rather than in the 6th Century, he would meet with closed ears rather than the open acceptance of his own times. It is simply that I have been one of the first to sense this need for a new creed. I have felt it and the duty is upon me to spread the word."

Ed Wonder wasn't feeling any too happy about this. Mulligan had warned him repeatedly that he was to stay away from politics and anyone who attacked accepted religion. Mulligan didn't want any subversives or atheists on WAN.

Ed said hurriedly, "Well, folks, this is all very interesting. Our guest of

honor seems to think the world is due for a new religion. It reminds me of that chap we had on a few months ago who told us he had flown up to Jupiter and been given a New Bible which he was going to have published."

Tubber's face was growing dark again, and Nefertiti made ineffective motions to Ed Wonder which were obviously meant to turn off his present trend of chatter.

"But lets get back to this curse thing, sir. Now..."

Buzz De Kemp said, "Just a minute, Little Ed. This new religion. From what you've said, and from your lectures I've attended, I get the impression that there are socio-economic connotations to it. Now could you tell us, briefly, just what this new religion stands for?"

"Yes, of course." Tubber seemed slightly placated. "We seek the path to a better life. To Elysium, where a new society will replace that of today."

"Just a minute," De Kemp broke in. "You mean this new religion of yours plans on upsetting the present social order?"

"Exactly," Tubber said.

"Overthrowing the government?"

"Of course," Tubber said, as though nothing could be more obvious.

"You plan to establish some sort of communism...?"

"Certainly not. The Communists are not radical enough for me, dear one."

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in anguish. He could picture Fontaine, Mulligan and the whole Stephen Decatur Society, for that matter, all tuned in.

He said, hurriedly, "Now this curse thing."

"What curse thing?" Tubber said testily. It was obvious that the whole show was not going anyway similar to what he'd had in mind. "You keep talking about hexes and curses. Is this a serious program or not?"

Nefertiti put a hand on his arm and whispered, "Father..."

He shook off her gentle restraint and glared at Ed Wonder.

Buzz De Kemp was chuckling silently.

Ed looked at the would-be religious leader blankly. "The curse," he said. "The curse you put on Miss Fontaine here, and all womankind."

It was Tubber's turn to go blank. "Are you insane?" he demanded.

Ed Wonder put his hand over his eyes and leaned for a brief moment on the table.

Helen at long last said something. She leaned forward and said urgently, "Little Ed has asked me to publicly apologize to you and ask that the curse be lifted."

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber was beginning to swell. His grey streaked beard had a bristling quality.

"What curse?" he bellowed.

"Last Saturday," Helen said worriedly. "You were talking about the waste of national resources or something and that women changing styles all the time were helping to deplete our nation, however you put it. And I argued with you."

Nefertiti said placatingly, "Father forgets what he says when he speaks in wrath."

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber rumbled ominously, "I begin to suspect that thou hast brought me here to ridicule the Path to Elysium."

Ed Wonder could see his super-show melting away by the moment. "Now look here, Mr. Tubber..."

"I have told thee that I forbid being addressed as Mister..." The cult leader was beginning to breathe deeply, and for the second time Ed Wonder and Helen Fontaine witnessed his seeming growth in size.

"All right, all right," Ed said, peevisish himself. "All I can say is you don't seem very grateful for this opportunity to reach all these good folk tuned in for a bit of entertainment."

"Entertainment!" Tubber thundered. "Yes, entertainment! Thou hast brought me before the snickering multitudes to be presented as a freak, as a crank. I knew not the nature of your program, Edward Wonder." He began coming to his feet.

Nefertiti moaned, "Oh, no," so softly that none heard.

Buzz De Kemp had brought a stogie from his coat pocket and placed it in his mouth. He was grinning around it happily. He said now, "Face facts, Zeke, old boy. The only chance you've got of spreading your word around, is by the use of radio and TV. People just aren't interested in trekking out to sit on wooden chairs in tents. They want their entertainment piped into their homes. And, believe me, if you want to put your story over, you're going to have to spice it up. Get a few jollies into it." He laughed.

To his horror, Ed Wonder could see, through the heavy glass of the

studio wall, Jensen Fontaine, immediately followed by a blowing Matthew Mulligan, come storming in the direction of Jerry's control booth. Ed closed his eyes in suffering.

He opened them to find Ezekiel Joshua Tubber seemingly reared a full six and a half feet, one clinched fist on high.

"Radio!" he trumpeted. "*Now verily do I curse radio, this invention of evil which in truth hast robbed our people of all individuality. Which hast verily made of them unthinking clods awaiting foolish entertainment.*"

"Oh, brother," Buzz said happily.

"... the power..."Nefertiti moaned.

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber spun on his heel and began storming the studio door, Nefertiti chasing after him.

Ed Wonder sank back into his chair with a groan. In the control room he could see Mulligan and Fontaine. The soundproofing prevented his hearing what were obvious shouts of command on the part of the red-faced tycoon. However, Jerry didn't seem overly concerned at their words. The radio engineer was scowling down at his controls, fiddling with dials and switches.

PART TWO

5

To rescue what could be rescued from the debacle, Ed Wonder said hurriedly into his mike, "Well, folks, I'm afraid things have come a cropper tonight. Of course, that can happen on the best of shows when everything's off the cuff and you're dealing with guests who are non-pros. So we'll have a bit of music now and possible later I'll fill you in with a little background on what we *expected* to present to you tonight. Jerry, let the music go round!"

The red light flicked off indicating that Studio Three was no longer hot, and Mulligan's voice over the intercom from the control booth blatted, "Wonder! We'll see you in my office soonest!"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in suffering.

He opened them wearily, warily. Ezekiel Joshua Tubber and his daughter Nefertiti were gone. Helen Fontaine and Buzz De Kemp alone still sat at the studio table. Buzz was chuckling inanely. He brought out a kitchen match and flicked it into flame with a thumbnail and lit the stogie he'd been chewing on.

"Now that's what I'd slug a show," he proclaimed. "If I could get programs with jollies like this, I might listen to radio."

Helen said, "I'm sorry, Little Ed. Oh, *Mother*, what a mess."

Ed looked at the engineer's control booth. Jensen Fontaine and Mulligan had already left it, evidently having adjourned to the latter's office to rig up a guillotine.

Ed went to the studio's soundproof door, opened it, crossed to the control booth door and went inside. Jerry was still fiddling with his controls, scowling.

Ed said, "What's the matter?"

Jerry looked up at him, taking his pipe from his mouth the better to talk. "We're getting an one eighth of a second echo that's just as strong as the original."

"What's that?"

Jerry told him, adding, "If you want to get driven nuts rapidly, try listening to something with a one half to one tenth of a second echo." He put his pipe back in his mouth and went back to his fiddling. "I'll clear it up in a minute."

"Like the devil..." Ed muttered. He turned and left the booth. Helen and Buzz were just leaving Studio Three.

Helen said, "We're going to see Daddy with you. It wasn't your fault."

Buzz said, around his stogie, "Maybe the paper needs a radio-TV editor and you can get a job with us."

Ed glared at him. "This is a great time to make with funnies, you sloppy bum. The whole thing was your idea."

Buzz chuckled. "Sorry. I didn't know the old boy was *that* cracked. Did you dig that expression when he was laying his hex on radio? Wow, what a story it'd be if it really worked. If he could lay a hex on radio. What a story."

Ed started down the hall. He growled, "Then you'd better start writing it."

They entered the general office, Helen and Buzz bringing up the rear. Buzz said in puzzlement, "What'da you mean, chum?"

Ed stopped briefly at Dolly's desk. Dolly was frantically answering calls.

"Yes, yes we know. Reception is scrambled. The engineers are working on it. It will be all right very shortly. Thank you for calling." And then, all over again. "Yes... yes, we know the program isn't coming over. The engineers..."

Ed, Helen and Buzz continued on, the newspaperman staring back over his shoulder at the office girl. He said to Ed Wonder, "What's going on?"

"The hex is going on," Ed said. He held the door open for Helen and they entered Mulligan's office.

Jensen Fontaine stood in the center of the room, evidently counting down before blastoff. When Ed entered he roared, "Wonder, you're fired!"

"I know, I know," Ed told him. He walked over to the built-in TV screen that occupied a sizeable portion of one wall and flicked it on. Fontaine, Mulligan, and Helen and Buzz for that matter, were staring at him. It wasn't the reaction any of them, knowing Ed Wonder, had expected.

He waited for the screen to clear. It never quite did. Finally he turned the set off again. He said absently, "TV is a form of radio, too. I wonder if even radar is effected."

He turned back to Jensen Fontaine and Mulligan.

Fontaine evidently assumed that the other hadn't understood him. He bellowed again, "Giving that atheistic subversive the opportunity to speak his piece on *my* radio station, you idiot! I tell you, Wonder, you're fired!"

"I know it," Ed grunted. "So is everybody else on radio and TV. Goodnight, everybody."

Ed Wonder was awakened by the alarm's voice saying, "You are wanted on the phone."

He grumbled himself awake. He'd been dreaming of Ezekiel Joshua Tubber who was about to lay a curse on eating food. Ed Wonder and Nefertiti, who for some unknown reason had been attired in a bikini, had been frantically trying to dissuade the old man. Ed scratched his wisp of a mustache.

His elaborate TV-stereo-radio-phonograph-recorder-alarm said again, more loudly this time. "You are wanted on the telephone."

He yawned. "Oh, yeah," and switched it on. Mulligan's face faded in.

Mulligan's voice blatted, "Little Ed! Where've you been?"

He yawned again. "I haven't been anywhere. Remember? I'm fired."

"Well, now look, maybe we can do something about that. See here, Little Ed..."

Even as the other was talking, Ed Wonder switched on the TV screen. He winced when it lit up. He turned to another channel, and then another. The one-eighth of a second echo was still plaguing the radio waves. He killed it.

Mulligan was saying, "Mr. Fontaine was possibly a little hasty."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Ed told him.

"Well, at any rate, it looks like he's been talking to his daughter and Miss Fontaine seems to have taken your part. They want to see you over at their place. See here, you know what's been going on?"

"Yes," Ed said.

Mulligan ignored him. "It's sun spots, or something. There's not a station on the air that's giving any sort of reception at all."

"Yeah," Ed said. It occurred to him that neither Mulligan nor Fontaine had heard Tubber making with his curse. They'd been too busy yelling at Jerry in the control room to switch off the program.

"Well, look, Little Ed. Are you going over to see Mr. Fontaine?"

"No," Ed said. He switched off the phone, then stared down at it. He just realized that he had performed a long-time ambition that he hadn't realized he'd had. He'd hung up on Fatso.

He grunted. What neither Mulligan or Fontaine realized was that there was no point in worrying about regaining his job—not so long as there was no TV or radio.

When he'd finished shaving, showering and dressing, he decided that breakfast in his own auto-kitchen didn't appeal to him and that he'd go down to the corner drugstore and dial himself some sausage and egg. He had some thinking to do, but he was in no hurry to start. He gave a last look at himself in the bathroom mirror. Thirty-three years. Ten years spent trying to break into the thinning ranks of show business. Nearly five working himself patiently up in TV and radio. Now at thirty-three, jobless. Oh, great. But somehow he didn't feel as badly as he thought he ought to be feeling.

He turned to go and then looked back again and eyed his tiny mustache. A little wisp of mustache was to be seen on the faces of practically every aggressive young executive in the thirty to forty year age bracket. It was currently the thing.

Ed Wonder took up his jar of *NoSbav* and rubbed a smear of it across the sprig of hair. He took up a towel, and wiped the hair away. He looked back into the mirror and nodded satisfaction.

There was quite a crowd in the drug store, but Ed Wonder managed to find a seat at the fountain. Most of them were gathered around the magazine rack.

He knew the manager of the place and saw him standing nearby. "What's going on?" Ed said.

The other said, "Never had such a turnover of comic books since I've been in the business. Practically sold out already, and it's not even noon. Having more rushed in."

"Comic books?"

"Uh huh. Something's wrong with TV and even radio. One of the papers says it's Soviet Complex sabotage. Some kind of scientific thing they got over in Siberia. Anyway, until they get it fixed nobody can watch TV. It'll probably drive my wife and kids kooky, but while it still lasts I'm sure selling comic books."

Ed said emptily, "They're not going to get fixed. It's going to stay this way."

The manager looked at him. "Don't be a twitch, Little Ed. You got to have TV."

Ed didn't want to argue. He gave one more look at the empty-faced adults packed around the comic book stands, then turned and dialed his meal and coffee. He kept his mind as clear as he could of the subject that was wriggling to get through. When he started thinking about it, he was afraid it was going to hurt.

However, when he had finished, he went back to the garages beneath his apartment building and got the Volkshover. He was probably looking for trouble, sheer trouble. But he drove over to Houston Street and the lot where Tubber and his daughter had had their tents pitched. The girl had said that the old man didn't remember what he said in wrath, and evidently it was when he was in wrath that his curses came off. The thing to do was to deal with him in such manner as not to let him get stirred up. Maybe there was some way to reverse this whole thing. If he could pull it

off, then would be the time to see about getting his job back.

The lot where the tents had been was empty.

Ed looked at it blankly. He might have remembered. They had been packing up to leave when he and Buzzo had braced Tubber about appearing on the program.

He thought about it for a minute. Finally he brought the Volkshover back into the air and headed for the *Times-Tribune* building. It was a bit past noon, but Buzzo's hours were on the erratic side to say the least. There was as much chance to find him in during the lunch hour as any other time.

There seemed to be an unusual number of persons in the streets, most of them aimlessly milling around. There were long lines before the movie theatres.

By luck, Buzz De Kemp was at his desk in the city room. He looked up at Ed's approach. Ed found a chair, reversed it, so that the back pressed against his jacket front when he straddled it. They looked at each other.

Ed said finally, "Did you run the story?"

Buzz shrugged and fished a stogie from a box out of a desk drawer. "I wrote it up. It's on the eighth page of the morning edition. Somebody on rewrite thought it'd make a cute little gag piece, so he did a revision." His voice turned wry. "Improved it considerably. More jollies."

"So nobody believed you, eh?"

"Of course not. I gave up. Look at it the city editor's way. Would *you* believe it?"

"No," Ed said. "No, I wouldn't believe it."

They looked at each other for a time again.

Finally Ed cleared his throat and said, "I was just over at the lot where Tubber was holding his talks."

"And...?"

"He's gone. No sign of them left. I thought I might talk it over with him and his daughter. She seems to be lucid enough."

Buzz thought about that. "Let's go into the morgue," he said finally, getting to his feet.

Ed Wonder followed him from the city room, down a corridor into another room presided over by an ancient who was unhurriedly clipping what was evidently a pile of yesterday's edition of the *Times-Tribune* with

an enormous pair of shears. He grunted something at Buzz who grunted something in return and hence they ignored each other.

Buzz De Kemp muttered, "Tubber," and drew forth a deep file of folders. He fingered through them. "Tubber, Tubber, Ezekiel Joshua. Here it is."

He brought forth a manila folder and led the way to a heavy table, sat down and opened it. There were three very short clippings, their dates penciled in on the top of each. Buzz scanned them quickly, handed each in turn to Ed Wonder.

He leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "Simple announcements of his meetings, extending back over several years. The location of his tent, what time the sermon begins. The title of his first sermon, *Is the Nation Producing Itself Poor?* No information on where he came from or where he might be going."

Ed Wonder said gloomily, "Jensen Fontaine thinks Tubber is a pseudonym."

Buzz shook his head. "Not a name like that. Nobody but fond parents from the Bible belt would ever hang a moniker like that on a kid. Nobody'd do it to himself."

"He said he wasn't a Christian."

"Maybe not, but his folks were. Probably evangelists. When he gets all wrathed up, he inadvertently starts talking like a Holy Roller, or whatever. He must've picked that up as a kid. Listen, Little Ed, how badly do you want to find him, and why? What happened to your mustache?"

Ed scratched where his tufts of mustache had been that morning. He muttered in self-deprecation, "Maybe now that I'm no longer a bright young career man, it's not as important to look like one."

Buzz De Kemp cocked his head at him and lit the stogie he'd been only fiddling with thus far. "That doesn't sound like Little Ed Wonder," he said.

"What does *Little* Ed Wonder sound like?" Ed said, snappishly.

Buzz grinned at him. "Usually like a heel on the make."

"I don't see how you manage to put up with me," Ed snarled.

"I've wondered myself," Buzz grinned. "Maybe it's because I'm used to you. Ever notice how you put up with people you're used to? For some reason, you hate to give up anybody you've really got to know."

"So by the time you got to really know what a heel I was you were used to me and couldn't bear to avoid me, eh?"

"Something like that. Tone down. Look, how bad do you want to locate old man Tubber?"

Ed never had been able to get really sore at Buzz De Kemp's gibes, but even if he had, he wouldn't have felt like it now. "I don't know," he grumbled. "I'm probably stupid. If he laid eyes on me, he'd probably lay down a hex that'd last like hemophilia. But I've been in on this since the beginning, it's too late to try to duck out now."

Buzz De Kemp eyed him. "What's in it for you?" He blew smoke around the stogie without removing it from his mouth. "Beyond the death wish, I mean."

"Oh, great. Funnies I get," Ed muttered. "Nothing's in it for me. What in the devil *could* there be in it?"

The newspaperman shook his head. "Sure doesn't sound like Little Ed Wonder. Okay, so fine. I'll get on it. Maybe there'll be a birth record of Nefertiti, or a marriage record of the old boy, giving some idea of where they live. Maybe AP-Reuters will have something on him. Get out of here and check back with me later. I feel something like you do. In it from the beginning."

Ed Wonder went down to the corner autobar with the idea of dialing himself a stiff one. His mind on Tubber and hexes, he wasn't aware of the crowd until he was within a hundred feet of the bar's entrance. His first impression was that there had been an accident, or, more likely still, in view of the magnitude of the mob, some act of violence. A shooting, or something.

It wasn't that.

There was a policeman outside, lining up the crowd into a manageable queue. Inside, a juke box was at full blast.

"All right, everybody, all right. Stay in line," the cop was singing out, and over and over again. "Stay in line or nobody'll get in."

Little Ed said, "What's happened, Officer?"

The cop said, busily, "Get in line, buddy, get in line if you want a drink. Everybody's gotta get in line."

"Get in line for *what*?" Ed stared at him.

"A drink, a drink. You're allowed in for two drinks, or for half an hour, whatever comes off first. So get in line."

"What the devil," Ed blurted. "I don't need a drink that bad."

Somebody in the line took umbrage at that. "Oh, yeah," he said savagely. "What're ya gonna do, walk up and down the streets all day? The TV's been on the blink since..."

Somebody else chimed in their disgust, and before he could get his complaint across, a heavier voice had drowned him out.

Ed went off, flabbergasted. It had only happened the night before. Less than twenty-four hours.

As he walked back to where he had parked the Volkshover, he noticed that it wasn't only the autobars. Restaurants, ice cream parlors, drug stores, were all packed and overpacked, usually with lines out in front. All that had juke boxes had them tuned high. Proprietors were doing a land-office business, but Ed wondered where the money was coming from. Even under the welfare state, the average person didn't have the wherewithal continually to patronize restaurants and bars.

He got into his hovercar and considered it for a while. Finally he brought the vehicle to life and headed for a destination. He had the address firmly enough in mind, but had never been there. The house located, he stood before the identity screen and fanned the alert.

A voice said, "Little Ed! Come on in, I'll be right up."

Ed opened the door, stepped in and navigated a few yards down an entry way to what was obviously a living room cum library. He was astonished by the layout. The room could have been a movie set depicting a home of yesteryear. There were some prints that Ed vaguely recognized from way back, but they certainly had no faintest resemblance to the current Surrealistic-Revival School that was currently in. You'd think that the owner had hung the things for... well, possibly because he *liked* them. You could get a reputation as a twitch awfully quick doing that sort of thing. And the chairs, tables, furniture. Right from an antique shop, several decades out of style.

A voice said, "Hi, friend. Come to see about Manny Levy for that swami show?"

Ed Wonder looked at his host, bringing his mind from his surprise at the bizarre room the other affected. "Swami?" he said blankly.

"The fire walker. You called a couple of days ago about a fire walker. What's the matter with you, Little Ed? Remember me... Jim Westbrook? Sometimes panelist on the Far Out Hour, at a going rate of fifty dollars per appearance, cash in advance."

Ed Wonder shook his head. "Listen," he said. "Where've you been the last twenty-four hours?"

"Right here."

"In this house?"

"Of course. I've been doing some concentrated work."

"Haven't you turned your TV set on?"

"I haven't got a TV set."

Ed Wonder stared at him as though the offbeat engineer had gone mad. "You haven't got a TV set? Everybody's got a TV set. How do you tune in on..."

Jim Westbrook said patiently, "I suppose if something came up I wanted to follow, I could wander over to some neighbor's or friend's. But, offhand, I can't think of any such programs coming up for the past several years."

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in pain. He opened them and said, "I don't have time to go into it now, but, well, what do you do with your free time, listen to radio, go to the movies?"

"I don't have any free time," the other told him reasonably. "I get my rhabdomancy jobs once or twice a week. Then down in the cellar I've got my darkroom, electronics shop, woodworking shop, and I'm working up a small machine shop operation. Besides—"

"All right," Ed said. "That's enough. Already you sound like triplets."

"Sit down and relax," Jim said easily.

Ed looked around the room. He grimaced before sinking into one of the prehistoric-looking overstuffed chairs. Surprisingly, it was comfortable, no matter how kooky so far as style was concerned. It must have gone back to at least the 1950s.

"Listen, Jim, the swami who walks on coals is out—at least temporarily. You'll find out why, later. Just now, I don't have time to go into the detail I suspect you'd demand. What I came over to ask you is this. Are miracles possible?"

Jim Westbrook dropped into the chair opposite his guest, his face alert. "What kind of miracles?"

"Something effecting, well, everybody. Say, a universal curse."

The engineer pursed his lips. "You know, one of the difficulties with these subjects is our terminology. Use a term such as miracle, or curse, or

magic, and intellectual hackles immediately go up, as conditioned. But without getting into semantics, to answer your question, yes. There would seem to have been miracles, and, if so, there probably still are, or, at least could be."

Ed held up a hand. "Now, wait a minute. Name just one."

"You can have a dozen if you want. Moses parting the waters. Jesus feeding the multitudes with a few fish and seven loaves of bread."

Ed said, in disappointment, "It's debated whether or not either of them ever lived."

Jim Westbrook shrugged. "The Moslems are just as convinced that Mohammed performed various miracles, and nobody would deny his historicity. Or take Saint Teresa, of Avila. She could evidently levitate. I suppose that would come under the head of miracle, or magic, to most of her contemporaries and most of ours. I just object to the terms. I think that levitation is a, well, normal attribute of some persons. The fact that it is poorly understood doesn't make it a miracle when someone such as, say, Saint Dunstan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, performs the act. Or, offhand, among others I can think of who could levitate were Saints Philip Benitas, Bernard Ptolomei, Dominic, Francis Xavier and Albert of Sicily. Then there was Savonarola, who was seen floating a couple of feet or so off his dungeon cell floor just before they burned him to death."

"All of them religious fanatics," Ed complained. "I don't trust their witnesses. A fanatic religious crank can see anything when he's keyed up. I'm an old hand, what with my program."

His host twisted his mouth. "Well, then there was D. D. Home. His witnesses were far from religious cranks when they saw him float out of a window and then return through another one, ten stories off the ground. And Mrs. Guppy and the Reverend Stainton Moses, all fairly recent and all well checked upon by figures of prominence in the scientific world."

Ed Wonder was unhappy. He rubbed the end of his nose with his left forefinger. He felt an urge to scratch his now nonexistent mustache.

Jim Westbrook looked at him, eyebrows slightly raised, waiting for the next.

Just to say something, Ed made a sweeping gesture to encompass the room. "What're you trying to put over with this kooky room, Jim?" When the engineer didn't seem to get the question, he added, "All this out of date furniture, no autobar, no TV, primitive art, if you can call it art, on the walls."

Jim Westbrook said wryly, "Velazquez and Murillo weren't exactly Cro-Magnon cavewall painters, Little Ed."

"Yeah, but what do your friends think about all this twitchy layout?"

Westbrook considered him, his mouth twisted slightly in sour humor. "I don't have a great many friends, real friends, these days, Little Ed. Those I do have, usually agree with me. They think this room is comfortable, which is the basic thing, and utilitarian, which is next. Beyond that..." he laughed "... at least some of them prefer Velazquez to the Surrealistic-Revival agonies of Jackson Salvadore."

It came to Ed in a quick surprise that the heavy-set, alert engineer across from him didn't particularly like Ed Wonder. It came as a surprise, because Ed had known the other for some years and had always got along with him. He'd had him on the Far Out Hour several times, since the man had a bent for offbeat subjects and seemed to be an authority on everything from parapsychology to space travel. Above all, he had a mischievous love of baiting scientific conventional wisdom and was a veritable Charles Fort in finding material with which to butcher the sacred cow.

He had always thought of Jim Westbrook as a friend, and only now did he know the other didn't reciprocate. Before thought, he blurted, "Jim, why do you dislike me?"

The other's eyebrows went up again and he held his silence for a long moment. Finally he said slowly, "It's not the sort of question people usually ask, Little Ed. When they do, they seldom really want it answered."

"No. Tell me." Those words came out too, without volition.

Jim Westbrook leaned back in his chair. "All right, friend. The fact is I don't dislike you. I'm neutral. You know what? You're a stereotype, like practically everybody else. We're becoming a nation of stereotypes. Everybody is a stereotype. Why in the world should all girls want to look like the current sex symbol, Brigitte Loren? But they do. The short and the fat and the tall. And all ambitious young businessmen want to look exactly the same, in their Brooks Brothers suits. They're scared to death not to look exactly the same. They want to conform to the point where conformity becomes ludicrous. What in the hell has happened to our civilization? Remember when we had the term individuality? Rugged individualism? Now we're frightened not to look exactly like the man next door looks, not to live in the identically same sort of house, drive the same kind of car."

"So you think I'm just one more stereotype."

"Yes."

He had asked for it, but as the burly engineer had gone on, Ed Wonder had felt himself coming to a slow boil. Now he bit out, "But you're not, of course."

Jim Westbrook had to chuckle wryly. "I'm afraid calling a man a stereotype is something like telling him he has no sense of humor, that he isn't a good driver, or that he's a poor lover."

Ed snapped, "Not to resort to an old wheeze, but if you're so smart, why aren't you rich?"

The other cut off his amusement and there seemed an air almost of compassion in what he said. "I am rich. About as rich as a person can get, because I'm doing what I want to do and have achieved or am achieving the things I find desirable. Or did you mean money? If you meant money, I have all I need. Probably if I devoted more time, especially if I devoted all of my time, to getting more, I could. But I haven't enough time as it is to do all the things I want to do, so wouldn't it be rather silly for me to spend any more time than necessary to chasing money?"

"I've heard that bit before," Ed said. "But I've always noticed that those who have it on the ball, who are really smart, get up there on top."

Jim Westbrook said gently, "I'm not disagreeing, friend, but it might be a question of what you consider the top. A chap named Lyle Spencer, who was president of the Science Research Associates at the time, did some research on intelligence quotients. He found that engineers and scientists of top ranking average about 135 in I.Q. Top business executives went to about 120. Spencer pointed out that most presidents of corporations weren't as smart as their employees in their research departments. In fact, on averages they ranked under such mundane occupations as pharmacists, teachers, medical students, general bookkeepers, mechanical engineers and accountants. So evidently intelligence isn't the prime ingredient in getting to the top, as you call it."

Ed sneered, "Oh, great. So if somebody came along and offered you a half million, you'd say, 'No thanks, I'm too smart. I'd rather be happy, playing with my darkroom and electronics shop, down in the basement.' "

The other laughed. "I didn't say I'd refuse more money if it came along, Little Ed. I realize the advantages of having money. It's just that I'm not going to spend the balance of my life pursuing the stuff at the price of giving up what I really value." He came to his feet. "We don't seem to be hitting it off any too well today, friend. What do you say we postpone matters until another time?"

It wasn't too crude a brushoff, but brushoff it was. Disgusted more with himself than the other, Ed stood and started for the door. Jim Westbrook followed him. Evidently, the engineer hadn't been in the slightest discomfited by the radioman's words.

At the door, Ed turned and said, "Get a newspaper, or walk on over and talk to your nearest neighbors that have a TV set or radio. Maybe I'll get in touch with you again later."

"All right," Westbrook said mildly.

The bars had been packed the night before, and the time you were allowed to remain, rationed. Ed Wonder had given up his hopes of sitting in one long enough to get an edge on, and the taste of what Jim Westbrook had said to him out of his mouth. It hadn't tasted so good.

Not only had the bars been packed, but the streets as well. In all his memory, Ed Wonder couldn't remember ever having seen the streets so thronged with pedestrians. They didn't seem to have any place in particular to go. Just strolling up and down, aimlessly. The lines before the movie houses were so long as to be meaningless. Those toward the end couldn't possibly have got inside until the following day.

Ed had gone back to his own apartment and sank into his reading chair. He grunted his contempt of the overstuffed antiques in Jim Westbrook's establishment. Comfortable? Sure, but how kooky could you get?

Stereotype was he! The gall of the guy. Ed Wonder had worked his way up the hard way. He had accomplished practically straight "C"s in high school, even a few "B"s in such subjects as dramatics and gym. Sufficient grades to get him easily into college. It had been a rough row to hoe. The government subsidies had hardly covered his expenses. He'd had to drive a used car, eat at the university cafeteria, keep the same clothes until they all but showed signs of wear. Yes, Ed Wonder had obtained his education the hard way. Four years of such tough subjects as Dramatics, Debating, The Dance, Sex Techniques, and Togetherness.

Then the long years, fighting his way up. Not for Edward Wonder to go immediately from school onto the unemployment benefits. No, sir. He took temporary compensation while actually looking for employment. For ten years he had been on list at the theatres, the studios, the stations, trying to find parts. Of course, temporary compensaion paid off better than straight unemployment insurance. It meant that you were actually

trying to find a job, which was enough to show, right there, that Ed Wonder was no stereotype. The very fact that he bothered to look branded him a kook in some eyes.

Then finally the switch over to radio and TV. He'd finally, through luck, a minimum of bribery, and the romancing of the fat wife of a studio executive, made his entry into the show business of the air.

Stereotype, eh? Then how had he finally got to the point of having his own program, the Far Out Hour?

He'd show them who was a stereotype.

Stereotype!

He'd shaved off his mustache, hadn't he?

In the morning, Ed Wonder went on back to his auto-kitchen and dialed breakfast. He should have been feeling off from his disappointment of the night before, but he wasn't. He didn't know why he wasn't but there you were. The fact of the matter was, he felt all set to go. Somewhere. He didn't know exactly where.

After he'd finished eating he threw the dishes into the disposal chute and went back into the living room.

He dialed the Unemployment Bureau, listed himself as temporarily unemployed, listed himself as available for work as a program director for TV or radio, applied for temporary compensation to be deposited directly to his account.

Then he dialed the Universal Credit Administration and applied for moratorium on all installment payments. Even as he did so, Ed Wonder reflected that whatever egghead economist had dreamed up the idea of moratorium had plugged one of the biggest potential holes in the workings of the affluent society. As never-never buying had pyramided, the powers that were had suffered increasingly sleepless nights over the possible consequences of even a fairly mild recession. Had foreclosures ever begun on a grand scale, the whole thing would have avalanched, and as used products flooded the markets, factories would have closed down all over the place, aggravating the recession still more. Yes, whoever had dreamed up credit moratorium had avoided that pitfall of classical capitalism. Of course, so long as you were on moratorium, you couldn't run up any fresh installment credit, but you can't have everything, even under the Welfare State.

Business finished with, he leaned back and considered matters. He was out of work. If the automated machinery of the Welfare State's employment bureau found a potential position for him, he would be notified. Meanwhile, there was nothing to do. No point in going about haunting studios, or stations. They'd think he was a twitch if he went traipsing around on his own.

Well, you had to kill time some way. He reached out and flicked on the TV screen.

For the moment, he had forgotten. The screen was a horror of the abstract. He hurriedly cut it off again. Evidently, the stations were still trying. They simply weren't getting through.

Just for the exercise, he went on down to the corner drugstore to pick up a paper. They were all gone. Happily, the manager had a copy of his own in a back room and let Ed take it.

There were still crowds around the magazine and paperback stands.

Ed said to the other, "Business in comic books still good, eh?"

"Oh, no," the manager shook his head, beaming. "We're fresh out of comic books, already. There's no more in town. The agents say the presses are turning night and day, putting out extra editions, but for the time, we're out. Now they're buying paperbacks and magazines. Even all the more popular magazines are gone. There's not a detective paperback left, either, and no westerns." The smile left his face. "Good business, this emergency, but it sure is a horror to go home to the missus at night. We got nothing to do but yell at each other, and the kids go batty with nothing to watch."

Ed Wonder took the paper back to his apartment before opening it.

The newspapers were evidently staging a comeback, and enjoying every minute of it. With TV and radio news off the airwaves, it was back to reading again.

The heads went:

TV and Radio Scramble World-Wide President to Hold Special Press Conference

Mayor Smythe to Ration Movie and Sports Tickets

Bored Mother Kills Brood and Commits Suicide

Soviet Complex Hints West Deliberately Sabotaging TV

He began to read the details and was interrupted almost immediately by the phone.

Buzz De Kemp's face, stogie as smoke, filled the screen. "Hi, Little Ed. The great mystery has been solved."

For a moment Ed Wonder thought he meant... but no. He said, "What mystery?"

"Where Zeke and Nefertiti disappeared to."

"Oh," Ed leaned forward.

Buzz drew it out. "I really gave it the works. Everything but the F.B.I. I checked..."

"All right, all right," Ed snapped. "Let's have it."

"They moved up the river to the next town, Saugerties, and set up their tent again. Old Zeke is continuing his lecture tour."

Ed closed his eyes wearily. He'd had a mental picture of Ezekiel Joshua Tubber escaping by stowing away on a ship to Brazil, or possibly fleeing to the Soviet Complex Embassy and requesting political refuge, or possibly going to earth somewhere and hiding out.

Instead, the offbeat evangelist was a few miles up the river, continuing as though nothing had happened.

6

Ed Wonder said, "Well, great. I'll pick you up."

"Hold on, chum," the reporter took the stogie from his mouth to use as a pointer. "Maybe that old coot might be a little sore at you, but he's really down on me. I was the one that sounded off and laughed at him. It was mostly me, on the program, who got him speaking in wrath, or however his daughter puts it. I think it might be better if just you show your cheerful face, at first."

"Oh great. We'll use me for baiting the tiger, eh?"

"It was your idea to find him again. You said you were in it from the beginning. Brave man. Stout fella."

Ed growled, "You mentioned you were in it from the beginning too."

"I was, and I'm going to keep in it, but from a distance, chum, from a distance. Now look, I haven't even dared bring this up with Old Ulcers, the city ed, but you get the story on this exclusive for me and the *Times-Tribune* and we'll find some way of showing our appreciation. This is a story, Little Ed. The story of the century."

It only came home to Ed Wonder at that moment what a really big story it was. His mind flicked over into first. He could sell it to *Look at Life*, the picture magazine. He could sell it to...

His mind shifted back into low. No, he couldn't. If Buzzo couldn't even approach his city editor in a one horse town like Kingsburg, who was going to listen to Ed Wonder in Ultra-New York?

He suspected that of all those involved, the only ones who really knew that the Homespun Look and the disruption of both TV and radio were the results of curses by Tubber, were himself, Buzz and Helen. Except, of course, for Tubber himself, Nefertiti and some of the followers of the word, or whatever they called themselves.

Buzz said impatiently, "Well?"

Where he got the courage, Ed didn't know, but he said, "Okay. I'll go on up to Saugerties for whatever it's worth. I'll keep you posted. Remember, if this pays off, I'm in on the loot."

The reporter rolled his eyes upward as though making solemn promise. "De Kemp always keeps faith," he intoned.

"Yeah, sure," Ed growled, reaching his hand out to switch off the phone.

Ed took the elevator down to the cellar garage and got the Volkshover, keyed it to life, lifted it half a foot from the floor, drifted up the ramp to the street, and headed north. The streets were more crowded than ever. He had never realized just how many persons lived in this city. In the far past, he supposed, the majority had spent the day hours working, the evening watching TV, listening to the radio, or taking in a movie. Of recent years, as the number of jobs decreased, until finally the employment rolls included a far greater number of citizens than did employment lists, the average citizen led a more sedentary existence. He had seen somewhere estimates that Mr. Average Man spent eight hours a day being entertained by mass media.

Well, a wheel had come off now.

He headed north at an altitude of about ten feet, and noticed that traffic was heavier than was to be expected at this time of day. It didn't take long to figure out why. City dwellers on their way to the nearest water

for a swim, or to the nearest woods for a picnic. Largely, their faces didn't indicate that they were expecting any great treat. Probably because their portables weren't working.

It came to Ed Wonder that such entertainment of yesteryear as swimming and picnicking had fallen off since he'd been a kid. In his day, youngsters still got a kick out of self-entertainment, swimming, baseball, fishing, hiking, camping. Now such exercise had a tendency to be avoided because it interfered with listening in on this favorite program or that. Go out on a camping trip and you might miss *Robert Hope the Third's Hour*, or *I'm Squirrel For Mary*, not to speak of *The Sadistic Tale*. Of course, you could always take a portable along, but then you spent your time sitting around a campfire watching the shows, instead of in the comfort of your own home, where the mosquitos were apt to be less.

Fishing. He remembered going fishing with his father as a kid. And by himself, for that matter. He might wind up with nothing at all, or maybe a meager string of sunfish, but he'd thought it fun. Today, a kid got more of a boot out of watching somebody in the Gulf Stream or off the coast of Peru catching a half-ton marlin, or spearing a giant ray skin diving off the Great Barrier Reef of Australia. The vicarious thrill of playing a ten foot man-eating shark was evidently considerably more than tediously waiting for a four-inch sunfish to take your worm.

Saugerties was one of those never-changing New England type towns. Largely wooden houses. One storey, two storey, seldom more than three, even downtown. The type of overgrown *village* that made you wonder how it existed, its *raison d'etre*, why its population didn't emigrate to more lively climes.

Ed Wonder let his little hovercar drift to a halt before the Thornton Memorial Theatre, which like the movie houses of his own town, had a long line before it. Near the curb stood three or four disgruntled citizens who had obviously decided that the line was so long it was hopeless to expect to gain entry.

Ed called, "Hey, Buddy, could you tell me where, ah, the Reverend Tubber has his tent set up?"

"Never heard of him," Buddy said.

"How about you, Mac?" Ed said.

Mac screwed up his face. "You know, I did see something in the paper about some revival tent meeting or something. Hey, you know what? That's something we could do. We could take in this here new revival."

"Geez," Buddy said, as though in hope. "You know what? I think I'll get on home and round up the old lady and the kids and get over there before all the seats is taken."

Ed said patiently, "Could you tell me where they're set up?"

"Yeah, yeah," Mac said, evidently caught up with Buddy's idea, and ready to take off himself. "Down there about three blocks, then turn right and keep going until you wind up at the park. You can't miss it." He said that final ritual over his shoulder as he hurried off.

Ed drove three down and then to the left and eventually came to the park. Buddy and Mac were going to be disappointed. There was already a long line standing before the Tubber tent. It was still early afternoon, but the line was there.

"Standing room only," Ed muttered, hitting the drop lever. He wondered if Tubber was having a matinee. He parked and strode over to the entrance.

"Get in line, Jack. Take your turn," somebody growled at him. Faces took him in antagonistically.

Ed said, hurriedly, "I'm not here to listen to the, ah, sermon. I..."

"Sure, sure, we know, sharp. Just get in line, is all. I been standing here two hours. You try to sneak ahead of me and you get a bust in the puss, unnerstan?"

Ed felt his usual stomach tighening at the threat of physical violence and took a double step backward. He looked disconcerted at the three or four of the Tubber followers who were doing their harried best to keep order.

"The Speaker of the Word will be heard by all," one was saying, over and over again. "He is shortening his talks to half an hour so that everyone may have a chance to listen, in relays. Please be patient. The Speaker of the Word will be heard by all."

One of those in line grumbled, "Half an hour. You mean I been standing here all this time just for half an hour's show?"

Ed Wonder said, "It's not exactly a show, pal." He walked away from the line. Trying to get in the front entrance would have taken hours. Besides, it was no manner in which to consult Tubber. He was going to have to confront the prophet, if that was what you'd call him, face to face. He was liking the prospect less by the minute.

He walked around to the rear of the large tent and found that, as before,

there was a smaller tent pitched behind it. Ed Wonder hesitated. He drifted around behind the canvas habitation. There was an old-fashioned farm wagon there and a horse quietly grazing.

He took a breath consciously, and returned to the entrance. How do you knock on the door of a tent?

He cleared his throat and called out, "Anybody home?"

He could hear a stirring inside and then the flap separated and Nefertiti Tubber was there.

She looked at him and flushed. "Good afternoon, dear one," she said. Then, in a gush, "Oh, Ed, I'm sorry about the other night. I—I should have known better than to let father..."

"Sorry," he said bitterly. "So's the whole world. Listen, do you know what's happened?" She nodded dumbly. "I'll tell you what's happened," he began.

She looked quickly around them, then held back the tent flap. "Please come in, Ed."

He followed her. The rent was surprisingly large and laid out comfortably into three rooms, two of which had flapped entries of their own. The equivalent of bedrooms, Ed decided. The larger space was a combination kitchen, living and dining room, and even went to the extent of a rug being on the ground. A rag rug, homemade, of the type that Ed Wonder hadn't seen since early childhood.

There were folding chairs about the table and Nefertiti hesitantly gestured to one of them. Ed sat down and looked at her. The fact that Ezekiel Joshua Tubber himself wasn't present gave him courage.

He said accusingly, "Every TV and radio station in the world is on the blink."

She nodded. "I just found out an hour or so ago. I went into town for some supplies from a follower of the path who resides not in Elysium."

Ed let that part of her statement that sounded like straight kookery go by and stuck to the first sentence. "Did you see all those people in the streets?"

She nodded dumbly.

"How long's this been going on?"

She knew what he meant all right, all right.

"You mean... the power? The power to breathe the word?"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in weary pain. "Let's drop the twitchy language for the moment. What is it your father *does*?"

She looked at him as though nothing could be more obvious. "He exercises the power and utters the word. But usually, of course, only when he is in wrath. You and your friend, Buzz De Kemp, brought him to wrath. Just as Helen Fontaine did, before."

"It's as simple as that, eh?" Ed said sarcastically.

"Don't be angry, dear one." She frowned, in puzzlement. "It has never been so sweeping, before." Her face cleared. "Perhaps, he has never been so provoked in the past."

"But look, how can he *do* these things?"

"But he's the Speaker of the Word, the guru of the Path to Elysium, and the beloved of the All-Mother."

"Oh, great," Ed muttered, in suffering. "Ask a silly question and get a silly answer."

Involuntarily, he put out a hand and rested it on her arm. "Now look, Nefertiti, this is important..."

Her eyes narrowed slightly and her mouth seemed to go sweetly slack. He jerked his hand back.

"Pardon me!"

Her voice was throaty, "It was all right."

He cleared his own throat. He wondered how old Nefertiti Tubber was. It came to him that the girl had possibly never had a man touch her before. Not a man of her own age group.

"Look," he said again. "I keep getting the impression every time I get talking with you people that I came into the conversation half a dozen sentences late. Now just what is it that your old man... that is, your father, wants to accomplish? What's this stuff about the Communists being too mild for him. Not radical enough?"

A voice behind him said, "Ah, we have a visitor."

Ed winced, expecting a thunderbolt between the shoulders. He turned.

The man who stood there, his face in the ultimate of understanding and sadness, looked about as dangerous as a Michelangelo depiction of the Virgin nursing the Child.

Ed Wonder, nevertheless, scrambled to his feet. "Ah, good afternoon, sir... Ooop, pardon me, not sir, ah, Ezekiel, ah, dear one."

"Good afternoon, Edward." The grey-bearded prophet beamed at him. "You seek further enlightenment on the path to Elysium?" The older man sank with a sigh into one of the folding chairs. Evidently he bore no grudges whatsoever about the hassle of the other night.

Nefertiti had come to her feet too. Now she brought her father a glass of water which she had dipped out of a bucket. She walked, Ed Wonder noted, in spite of himself, as Malay women he'd seen on travelogue shows walked; head and shoulders proudly erect, the hips swaying gently.

"Well, ah, yes," Ed said hurriedly. "Fascinating subject. The way I get it, you're heading for a sort of Utopia. A..."

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber frowned. "Dear one, you have failed to understand the word. We seek not Utopia. Utopia is supposedly the perfect society and anything perfect has automatically ceased growing, hence the conception of Utopia is conservative if not reactionary. That is the mistake of many, including the so-called Communists. They think that once *their* promised land has been achieved, all progress will stop, that the millennium will have been reached. Nonsense! The All-Mother knows no stopping. The path to Elysium is forever!"

For a while there, Ed Wonder had thought he was following the old boy, but toward the end it had degenerated into gibberish.

However, Ed Wonder had dealt with twitches before. The fact that this one had the most far out abilities that the radio man had ever run into was beside the point. Twitch he was. Ed said placatingly, "Yeah, well, the way you put it makes a lot of sense. Utopia is reactionary."

Tubber looked at him questioningly.

"I see, dear one, that possibly your motive for visiting us might be other than interest in the path." He smiled benignly and looked at Nefertiti, who hadn't taken her eyes from Ed Wonder during all this. She flushed. The girl, Ed decided, seemed to be in almost perpetual blush. She couldn't be as shy as all that.

Tubber said gently, "Could it be that you have come to spark my daughter?"

Gently it might have been said, but Ed Wonder barely managed to keep his seat. All instincts told him to be up. Up and away!

"Oh, no..." he protested. "Oh..."

"Father!" Nefertiti said.

Ed didn't look at her. He suspected that Nefertiti Tubber was the color

of new bricks, if she could go pink just looking at a man. He stuttered, "Oh, no. No. I just came about the television, the radio."

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber was frowning, though such was his face that it came over more kindly than might have another man's smile. He said sadly, "How unfortunate. Truly, the All-Mother's path to Elysium is brightened by the romancing of our young. And I fear that such is the life I lead my Nefertiti that she loses the opportunity to meet pilgrims of her own age." He sighed and said, "But what is this about television and radio? As you know, Edward, I have little sympathy with the direction our mass media have taken of recent years."

Ed was finding courage in the other's quiet manner. Tubber seemed to carry no grudge at all due to the fiasco at the station the other night. Ed said, "Well, you didn't have to take it to such extreme. This lack of sympathy."

Tubber was puzzled. "I don't believe I understand, dear one."

Ed said impatiently, "The curse. The curse you put on television and radio. Holy smokes, don't tell me you've forgotten you did it!"

Tubber's eyes, bewildered, went from Ed to Nefertiti. She sat there, her wrapt concentration on Ed waning slightly as apprehension began to grow.

She said, "Father, you have probably forgotten, but you became distraught the other night on Ed's radio program. You... called upon the power to curse it."

Ed blurted, "And now there's not a TV or radio station in the world still operating."

Tubber looked at the two of them, blankly. "You mean that I called down wrath upon these admittedly perverted institutions and... it *worked*?"

"It worked, all right," Ed said glumly. "And now I'm out of a job. Several million people in the industry, in one part of the world or another are out of jobs."

"*All* the world?" Tubber said, amazed.

"Oh, father," Nefertiti protested. "You know you have the power. Remember the young man who continually practiced his hillbilly music on his guitar?"

Tubber was staring fascinatedly at Ed Wonder. He said to his daughter, "Yes, but breaking five guitar strings at a distance of a few hundred feet is

certainly nothing..."

Nefertiti said, "Or the neon sign that you complained made your eyes feel as though they were about to pop out."

Ed said, "You mean you didn't know it worked? That you cursed radio and now there's not a station, radio *or* TV, that isn't on the blink?"

Tubber said, in awe, "The powers the All-Mother can delegate are indeed wondrous."

"They're wondrous all right," Ed said bitterly. "But the thing is, can you reverse them? People are getting desperate. Why, in a little town like this, thousands are roaming the streets with nothing to do. Why even a little tent meeting like yours is packed to the limit and..."

He let the sentence dribble away. The face of Ezekiel Joshua Tubber had suddenly gone empty, tragically empty.

Tubber said, "You mean... dear one... that the large crowds I have suddenly been attracting—the capacity audiences so that I must hold a dozen talks a day. They appear..."

Ed said bitterly, "They appear because they haven't any place else to go and be entertained."

Nefertiti said in soft compassion, "Father, I was going to tell you. Multitudes of people are roaming up and down the streets. They are desperate for amusement."

Tubber's homely face, broken for a moment, was now slowly regaining strength. "Amusement!"

Ed said, "Ezekiel, don't you see? People have to do something with their time. They want to be entertained. They want to have a little fun. That's reasonable, isn't it? They like radio, they like TV. You can't stop them. So, okay, they don't know what to do with themselves. They've got to have some way to kill time."

"Kill time! Kill time!" Tubber rumbled. "Killing time is not murder, dear one. It is suicide! We are committing racial suicide with our meaningless, empty lives. Man must resume the path to Elysium, not seek methods of wasting life away!"

Ed said, "Yeah, but don't you see, ah, dear one? People don't want to listen to your message. They're well, conditioned. They want to be entertained. And you can't stop them. Okay, take away their TV and radio and..."

Even as he spoke, caught up in the argument, Ed Wonder knew he had

already said too much. Ezekiel Joshua Tubber was swelling in anger.

"Yes?" he thundered. "Take away their TV and radio and what will they do?"

Ed tried to cut it off, but the old man's strength gripped him almost as though physically. Gripped him and demanded. He said, "And they'll turn to things like movies."

"Oh, they will!"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in pain.

A new voice broke in. "There is a fresh audience, dear one. We have ushered the last group from the tent, and a new one awaits you to hear the expounding of the word."

Ed looked up. It was one of the faithful, whom he had noticed earlier at the entrance to the main tent.

Tubber stood erect, some seven feet tall, Ed Wonder estimated. At least seven feet tall, and pushing three hundred pounds.

"Ah, they do, do they? Well, verily, hear the word they shall!"

Ed Wonder, stricken dumb, looked at Nefertiti. She sat there, elbows tight against her side, as though in feminine protest at the masculine psychic power emanating from her father.

The prophet stormed from the tent.

Ed looked back at the girl again. All he could think of to say was, "I'm glad I didn't mention carnivals and circuses."

Nefertiti shook her head. "Father loves circuses," she said.

They sat there for a time, waiting. Neither knew for how long. In their silence, they could hear sounds from the larger tent, and finally the swelling thunder of Tubber's voice.

Nefertiti began to say something, but Ed interrupted her. "I know," he said. "He's speaking in wrath."

She nodded silently.

The voice reached a pitch.

Ed said, "The power." He added, dismally, "I was looking forward to seeing that production, *Ben Hur Rides Again*."

He had guessed right. Oh, he had guessed right, all right.

The proof came as he tooted the little Volkshover back into Kingsburg. For the first time in his life, Ed Wonder came upon a lynch mob. A shouting, screaming, hate-smelling crowd milling about in the ever confusion of the mob. Screaming for someone to get a rope. Screaming to go to the park to find the limb of a tree. Counterscreaming that a lamppost would do. Somewhere in the center, a mewling, fear-overcome victim was struggling in the grasps of a wild-faced, glaring-of-eye trio who seemed the leaders of the riot, if a lynch mob can be said to have leaders.

Ed could have lifted above the demonstration and gone on. All his instincts, all his fear of physical violence told him to get away from the vicinity immediately, to get away but fast, to personal safety. But the sheer fantasy of the action held him in fascination. He dropped to the street level and stared.

There must have been fully five hundred of them, and their rage was a frenzy, The yelling and shouting, the shrilling from the women members of the mob—all of it made no sense.

Ed shouted to a passing participant of the demonstration, "What the devil's going on! Where's the police!"

"We run the police off," the raging pedestrian screamed back at him, and was gone.

Ed Wonder continued to stare.

Somebody said, "The natives are restless tonight, eh? Come on, Little Ed, let's get in there. They'll kill that poor idiot."

Ed swiveled his head. It was Buzz De Kemp. He looked back at the screaming crowd again. "You think I'm completely around the bend?" His stomach had tightened in terror at the very idea of getting nearer to the raging.

"Somebody's got to help him," Buzz growled. He pulled the stogie from his mouth and threw it into the gutter. "Here goes nothing." He started for the mob.

Ed Wonder vaulted over the side of the hovercar and took a few steps after him. "Buzzo! Use your head!" The other didn't look back. He disappeared into the swirling crowd.

Ed grabbed a bystander who seemed a fellow observer of the scene, rather than a participant.

"What's happened!" Ed demanded.

From the distance came the ululations of fire sirens.

The other looked at Ed, brushed his hand away. "Movie projectionist," he shouted, above the roar. "Folks standing in line for hours, then he fouls up the projector and claims he can't fix it."

Ed Wonder stared at him. "You mean they're hanging that man because his projector broke down? Nobody's *that* kooky!"

The other growled, defensively, "You don't know, buddy. Everybody's like on edge. These folks were standing for hours to see this here new show. And that lamebrain louses up the movie machine."

Something he was going to find difficult to explain for the rest of his life happened to Ed Wonder. Something snapped. His mind, suddenly empty of the fear of the crowd, urged him into an action he wouldn't have dreamed of two minutes earlier. He began pushing through the mob after Buzz De Kemp, trying to get to the center.

He could hear himself yelling at the top of his voice: "It's not his fault! It's not his fault! It's like the TV and radio. It's all over the world. Every movie projector in the world is on the blink. It's not his fault! All movies don't work! All movies don't work!"

Somehow, impossibly, he struggled his way to the screaming crowd's middle where the three burly mob leaders were dragging their victim in the direction of the nearest lamppost. By this time, a rope had been found.

He could feel his voice cracking as he tried to make himself heard above the mob's roar. "It's not his fault! All movies don't work!"

One of the mob leaders backarmed him into a sprawl. He wondered vaguely where Buzz De Kemp was, even as he pushed himself back to his feet and grabbed at the fear-paralyzed movie projectionist. "It's not his fault! All movies don't work!"

It was then that the pressurized water hit them.

7

Helen Fontaine and Buzz De Kemp bailed him out toward noon of the next day.

Buzz came back to the cell first, one of the new Poloroid-Leicas in his hands and wearing a grin behind his stogie. There was an adhesive plaster patch above his right eye which only managed to make the sloppy newsman look rakish.

"Buzzo!" Ed Wonder blurted. "Get me out of here!"

"Just a minute," Buzz told him. He adjusted the lens aperture, brought the camera to his eyes, flicked the shutter three or four times. He said happily, "With any luck I'll get you on the front page. How does this sound? Local radioman leads lynch mob."

"Oh, bounce it, Buzz," Helen Fontaine said, coming up from behind him. She looked in at Ed Wonder and shook her head critically. "Whatever happened to the haberdasher's best friend?" she said. "I never expected to see the day when Little Ed Wonder's tie wasn't straight."

"Okay, okay, funnies I get," Ed rasped. "Follow me, says Buzz De Kemp and we'll rescue the movie projectionist like the cavalry coming over the hill at the last minute. So great. He sort of disappears and I wind up getting drenched by the fire department and then arrested by the police."

Buzz looked at him strangely. "I heard you yelling, Little Ed. About all movie projectors being on the blink. How did you know? It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes earlier that it happened. The news wasn't even on the teletype yet."

"Get me out of here," Ed snarled. "How do you think I knew? Don't be a kook."

A uniformed jail attendant came up and unlocked the cell door. "Come on," he said. "You been sprung."

The three of them followed him out.

Buzz said, "So you were there when he laid on the new curse, eh?"

"New curse?" Helen said.

Buzz said to her, "What else? Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. First he gives all women an allergy if they wear cosmetics or do themselves up in glad rags. Then he slaps his hex on radio and TV. Now all of a sudden there is a strange persistence of film being projected on a screen; it takes an eighth of a second or so for the picture to fade, so the next picture can be different. It doesn't interfere with still-life shots, but action is impossible."

They had reached the sergeant's desk and Ed collected his belongings. His situation was explained. Theoretically, he was out on bail. In actuality, Buzz was going to go to bat for him through the paper and get the charge squashed. If, by any chance, that didn't work, Helen said she'd put pressure on her father to pull some wires. Ed was of the private belief that the only circumstance under which Jensen Fontaine would pull wires for Ed Wonder was if they were wrapped around his neck.

On the street, Buzz said, "Let's go somewhere and talk."

"Somewhere is good," Ed said. "You can't get in anyplace for love or loot. Standing room only and they limit the time you can stay, so that others will have their chance."

Helen said, "We can go to the club. I'll take you in as guests."

Her General Ford Cyclone was at the curb. They got into it and Helen dialed their destination. The car rose and slipped into the traffic.

Buzz De Kemp stared out at the horde of wandering pedestrians. "Yesterday was bad enough," he said. "But today there's no school. The kids don't know what to do with themselves."

"Neither do their parents," Helen said. "Doesn't anybody work in this city? I'd think..."

"Do you?" Ed said, for some reason irritated.

"Well, that's another thing, sharp," she said huffily. "I have my charity work with the junior league and..."

Buzz said, "I looked it up. Two thirds of the population of working age in Kingsburg are on unemployment lists. Of those remaining, most put in a twenty-five hour week, some of those with more progressive—I like that term—unions, put in twenty hours." He tossed his stogie, half-smoked, onto the street. "It makes for a lot of leisure time."

The country club was a couple of miles outside the city limits. If Helen Fontaine had expected it to be comparatively empty, she was mistaken. She was far from the only one to bring guests to the club. However, they managed to slip into chairs about a table which was just being vacated as they arrived. Helen brought her credit card from her purse and laid it on the table's screen. "Gents, the eats are on me. What'll it be?"

They named their druthers, she dialed them, and when the food arrived and the first taste had been taken, said, "Okay, let's bring the meeting to order. I'm not up on this movie thing."

Ed Wonder gave them a complete rundown on the happenings in Saugerties. By the time he wound it up, they were both staring at him.

"Oh, *Mother*," Helen said. "You mean, until you told him, he didn't even know he'd done it. Radio and TV, I mean."

Buzz said, "Remember on the program? He had forgotten he put the hex on women's vanity." He looked at Helen Fontaine calculatingly. "You know, on you the Homespun Look comes off."

"Thank you, kind sir. If I could think of something about your own appearance that I could say something nice about, I would. Why don't you

get a haircut?"

"Compliment the girl, and what do I get?" Buzz complained. "A jolly. I can't afford a haircut. I'm the most improvident man in the world. I've been known to go into a cold shower and come out three dollars poorer."

Ed said gloomily, "I admit I let the cat out of the bag. Now he knows." They scowled at him and he explained. "Tubber. Now he knows he's got the power, as Nefertiti calls it. What's worse, it seems to be growing."

"What seems to be growing?" Buzz growled at him.

"The power to make with hexes. Evidently, he's always had it, but only just recently has he been using it on the grand scale."

"You mean..." Helen said, ramifications dawning.

"I mean his first two major hexes he pulled off in a rage and without knowing what he was doing. This last one he did on purpose. Now he knows he can do them on purpose."

Ed said, "Have you two considered the fact that we're the only ones in the world, except for Tubber's little group, who know what's going on?"

Buzz pulled out a fresh stogie and rammed it into his mouth. "How could I forget it? A newspaperman sitting on the biggest story since the Resurrection and he can't even write it. If I mention Tubber and his curses to Old Ulcers once more, he's promised to fire me."

"At least you've still got a job," Ed told him sourly. "Look at me. I spend a couple of years working up the Far Out Hour, a program devoted to spiritualism, ESP, flying saucers, reincarnation, levitation, and what not, and for all that time I have an endless series of cranks, crackpots and crooks as guests. So finally, a real phenomenon comes along. And what happens? I'm out of a career."

"Both of you are breaking my heart," Helen said snappishly. "Don't forget, I was runner-up on the Statewide ten best dressed women of the year poll."

Buzz looked at her. "How about your father? He was there when Tubber hexed radio. Doesn't he realize what's going on?"

Helen said, "I think about half and half. What he really thinks is that Tubber is an agent for the Soviet Complex who's been sent over to sabotage American industry. He wants the Stephen Decatur Society to investigate and place their information before the F.B.I. Matthew Mulligan agrees with him, of course."

Ed Wonder closed his eyes to hide his suffering. "Oh, great. I can just

see that bunch of kooks sniffing around Tubber's tent. The new hexes would start flying like geese."

Helen said, without a good deal of conviction. "The Society isn't composed of kooks, as you call them."

Buzz leered at her through the smoke of his newly lighted stogie. "What is it composed of?"

She laughed suddenly, "Twitches," she said.

Buzz looked at her afresh. "I think I could learn to like you," he said, nodding.

"All right, all right," Ed said. "We've got to do something. You both realize that, don't you?"

"Yes," Buzz said. "What?"

Helen said, worriedly, "Perhaps if we all went to see Tubber..."

Ed held up a hand. "Go no further, please. Here sit the three of us. Helen brought him to wrath and the result was the Homespun Look and what will eventually mean the collapse of the cosmetic and women's textile industries. Buzzo brought him to wrath and the result was the end of radio and TV. Through a fluke, I said too much and as a result he brought himself to wrath and wound up the movie industry. With a background like that do you think any of we three ought ever to let him lay eyes on us again? We seem to be a set of accident prone, with the whole human race getting the benefits."

Buzz growled around his stogie, "I think you're right, chum."

"But we've got to do something," Helen protested.

"What?" Buzz said to the unanswering group.

They had left it at that. All three resolved that something had to be done. But no one had come up with even the smallest idea.

Ed finally left them to that solution of the problem and took a cab to where he had left the Volkshover the night before. It seemed to have survived the mob and the wetting down from the fire hoses which had finally broken up the enraged crowd and led to the rescue of the hapless movie projectionist.

On the scene again, Ed could only wonder at the hysteria of a citizenry that could become that worked up over a simple matter such as not being able to see the movie for which they had stood in line. What the devil, this

was the tail end of the 20th Century, not frontier days. You didn't lynch a man because you suspected him of lousing up your evening's entertainment.

Or did you?

What had the rioter said to him? *Everybody's on edge.*

It didn't make too much sense to Ed Wonder. Admittedly, he was thoroughly familiar with the world of radio and TV and knew the dependence of most citizens on the entertainment they provided. But Ed Wonder had been a performer, rather than a passive viewer and, at least subconsciously, was contemptuous of his audiences. He viewed TV himself, only as part of his work, in common with his colleagues.

Back at his own apartment house, he remembered to go to the drug store for a newspaper before ascending to his rooms. The manager had saved a paper for him, otherwise, as the day before, the morning edition of the *Times-Tribune* was sold out.

He showered, utilized his *No-Shav* cream, and dressed in fresh clothes, and then, before sitting down to read, he dialed himself a glass of ale. The autobar failed to respond and he scowled down at it. The gadget was designed for a variety of forty different drinks, and operated through a distribution center which served this part of the city in much the same manner as his kitchenette worked. He tried dialing a Fish House Punch with the same results.

Irritated, he went to the phone and dialed the center. A harassed ash blonde appeared on the screen and before he could open his mouth, said hurriedly, "Yes, we know. Your autobar is failing to function. Unfortunately, stocks have run short due to unprecedented demand. New supplies are being rushed up from Ultra-New York. Thank you." She flicked off.

Ed Wonder grunted and sat down in his reading chair. Unprecedented demand, yet. Well, it wasn't surprising. With nothing else to do, people had upped their drinking considerably.

The paper had no inkling of the real nature of the blight on the world's entertainment media. None whatsoever. Evidently, Buzz De Kemp was the only journalist extant who realized the actuality, and his city editor had ominously warned him not to mention Ezekiel Joshua Tubber and his curses ever again. AP-Reuters and the other news services hadn't a clue. Learned articles and columns pursued this theory and that, ranging from sun spots, or radio emanations from far star systems, to sinister schemes on the part of the Soviet Complex or Common Europe to disrupt

America's balance by withholding needed restful entertainment from the man in the street. Just how this was being accomplished was moot. Those who argued against the charge, pointed out that the same disruption was taking place throughout the realm of the Soviet Complex and throughout Common Europe as well.

In fact, if anything, the problem was already greater in some lands than it was in the United Welfare States of America. England, for instance. There were riots in London, Manchester and Birmingham. Evidently they were senseless, meaningless riots, not directed toward anyone or anything in particular. Simply the rioting of crowds of people with nothing to do.

Ed Wonder felt a cold apprehension edge up his spine. He had seen that mob the night before. In fact, he had been manhandled by it.

He had skimmed quickly through the paper looking for the story of the lynch mob who had all but finished off the unhappy movie projectionist who had been blamed for the failure of the film. He had trouble, to his amazement, finding the item. Ed would have thought it called for front page coverage, in a town no larger than Kingsburg. It was probably the only attempted lynching in the city's history. But no, it was buried in the inside and the story passed over more as a joke than a serious affair in which hundreds had been sprayed with high pressure fire hoses and police brought in by the dozen to quell the fury.

Ed got it. The story was deliberately being played down. The city fathers, or whoever, didn't want to bring to the attention of the populace how easy—and perhaps how entertaining—it was to riot. Face reality, during the height of the trouble last night, that mob was having the time of its collective life—men, women and teenagers.

He went back to the front page. The president had made with some sort of gobblydygook explanation of the disruption of TV and radio. He hadn't gotten to the movies yet. When he did, that was going to be a dilly. Sun spots to foul up TV reception? Sure. Possible. Or strong radio emanations from space? Well, yes. Possible. But movies? How were they going to explain the fact that movies no longer flickered in their well-established way?

Ed shook his head. He was just as glad he wasn't chief executive of the United Welfare States of America. That job President Everett MacFerson could have.

There was another item from Greater Washington. A plea on the part of the White House for all retired actors, circus performers, vaudeville veterans, musicians, singers, carnival attractions and all others however

remotely attached to show business, and however long ago, to report to the auditorium of the nearest high school. There was a barb on the end of the plea. Failure to comply would automatically cancel any unemployment insurance benefits being enjoyed by those involved.

Ed Wonder rubbed the end of his nose with a thoughtful forefinger. That would include him. He would have to report. The conclusions were obvious. The radio-TV curse had only come about a few days ago, but already Greater Washington was deciphering handwriting on the wall. Ed wondered uneasily just how bad those riots in England had been.

He went into his kitchenette and dialed himself a lunch. It tasted nothing, in spite of the fact that he hadn't had a decent meal since the day before. He threw it, half-eaten, into the disposal chute.

He began to think about Helen. Strange about Helen. Somehow, these past few days had altered his feelings about her. He liked her fine enough, but there was no urgency about it. One week ago and she had been the most important single matter on his mind.

He took the elevator down to the street. This was a new development. There was a crowd outside the liquor store and a fat tub of a man standing in the doorway itself explaining something or other. When Ed Wonder got nearer, he got the message.

"Sorry folks, not a thing left. Sold out. Waiting for new deliveries."

"Well, how about gin or rum?" somebody called to him.

"No, I mean everything. Whiskey, gin, rum, brandy. Everything. All sold out."

"Nothing at *all*?" Somebody else said incredulously.

The proprietor was apologetic. "All I got is a few bottles of Creme de Menthe."

"What's that?" the inquirer grumbled. "Is there alcohol in it?"

"It's a cordial," Ed told him. "Sweet and tastes like peppermint. Not quite as strong as whiskey."

"How would it mix with Coke?" somebody else said.

Ed closed his eyes and shuddered.

"Well, I'll take a bottle. I gotta have something around the house. It's driving me batty." The speaker had no need to mention what it was that was driving him batty.

"Let me have one too."

The group pushed in. The fat proprietor said hastily, "Only one bottle to a customer, folks. I only got a few bottles left. And you got to realize this is special stuff. Fifteen bucks a bottle."

Ed Wonder walked back in the direction of his apartment.

On the corner a crowd was gathered. He came closer and stood on tiptoes to make out their interest. There was a trio of kids in the center, doing tricks, minor tumbling tricks. The crowd watched them glumly, although every once in a while somebody would call out encouragement. From time to time the youngsters would be tossed a coin or two. The repertoire was strictly limited.

It reminded Ed that he was going to have to go to the nearest high school and report as an unemployed member of show business. He did that the next day. It didn't take him long. There weren't as many actors, musicians and show folk in general as there once had been. And evidently no vaudeville, circus or carnival veterans at all in Kingsburg. Automation had come to the world of entertainment as well as to every other field. Given TV and a comparative handful can entertain two hundred million persons at once, where in the old days of vaudeville a couple of thousand at a time was maximum. Given movies and a dozen actors can perform a play for the million mass, while in the day of the legitimate theatre a few hundred at most could follow the show. Given radio, a pop singer's voice could become known on a worldwide basis, while a nightclub singer of old could bring alcoholic sobs to the occupants of a few score tables at best. And musicians? But here automation had reached its ultimate with the canned music of record and tape.

No, there weren't as many show business folk as there had been even a decade ago, not to speak of a quarter century or more.

Ed proved a disappointment when his turn for interview came up. They took down in detail all that he had ever done, and evidently decided it was precious little that would benefit them.

Did he think that he could act as an M.C. for vaudeville shows?

Ed Wonder sighed. Yes, he thought he could.

They'd keep in touch with him.

He left and climbed back into his hovercar.

He had to do something. Over and over it came back to him that he, Buzzo and Helen were the only three outside the Tubber circle who actually knew what was going on.

A boy with a heavy stack of papers under his arm was yelling an extra.

It came to Ed that it had been a very long time since he had heard a newsboy shouting extra. Radio and TV news commentators had put an end to that newspaper institution of old.

He made out what the boy was shouting. Race riots, somewhere or other. He didn't have to read the paper to get the picture. Bored people wandering up and down the streets with nothing to do.

Race riots. He wondered how long it would be before people got around to religious riots. Riots between races, riots between different religious creeds, riots over politics. It gave you something to take up time, didn't it?

He simply had to do something. There must be some starting point. He changed his direction. He drove out along the road to the south and eventually pulled onto the university grounds.

He was in luck and had no difficulty in finding Professor Varley Dee in his office at the Department of Anthropology. Ed Wonder had had the crisp anthropologist on the Far Out Hour several times as a panelist, but had never met him before on his home grounds.

He chuckled at Ed Wonder even as he offered him a chair. "Well, sir, even the ambitious Little Ed Wonder finds himself amid the unemployed with the disruption of the radio waves, eh? Fascinating development. Have the technicians arrived at any conclusions? What's this about sun spots?"

"I wouldn't know," Ed told him. "Every time something comes along to foul up reception, or the weather, or whatever, it's blamed on sun spots. That's all I know about the subject." Actually, he didn't want to get into the subject of TV reception with the professor. If he had, they would never gee around to the real reason for his visit.

He changed the subject, abruptly, "Look, Professor, what can you tell me about Jesus?"

Dee gimlet-eyed him. "Just who do you mean when you say Jesus?"

Ed was exasperated. "For crissake, *Jesus*. Jesus of Nazareth. Born on Christmas. Died on the cross. The founder of Christianity. Who else could I mean?"

"There are Jesuses and Jesuses, Little Ed. According to what religious sect you follow, or if you follow none at all and are interested in the historic Jesus. Do you want myth, or history?"

"I'm talking about reality. The real Jesus. What I..."

"All right. Then to begin with, his name wasn't Jesus. His name was Joshua. Jesus is a Greek name, and he was a Jew. And he wasn't from

Nazareth. There was no such town as Nazareth in Palestine at that time; later on the boys worked that one in to fill in some holes in the prophecies that supposedly foretold the coming of the Messiah. And he wasn't born on Christmas. The early Christians took over that day from the pagans in one of the attempts to popularize the new religion. Christmas was originally the winter solstice, it got shoved around to December 25th through faulty calendars. It's even debatable whether Joshua died on the cross. If he did, then he died in a remarkably short time. The horror of crucifixion as a means of execution is in the time it takes the victim to die. Robert Graves made a good case for the hypothesis that Jesus survived the cross, after a cataleptic fit, and was spirited away."

Ed was bug-eyeing him.

Varley Dee said, his voice cranky, "You wanted to know about the historic Jesus. Very well. That's just the beginning. For instance, many of the more serious scholars doubt very much that Joshua had any intentions of starting a new religion. He was a good Jew and practiced that religion faithfully his whole life."

"Listen," Ed demanded. "Is there anything left at all of what I learned in Sunday school as a kid?"

The professor chuckled acidly. "Actually, quite a bit. Just what was it you wanted to know?"

Ed said, "Look, for instance the story about feeding the multitudes with two or three fish and a few loaves of bread, and then winding up with several bushels of leftover scraps."

Dee shrugged. "Probably a parable. Many of Joshua's teachings were given in parables."

"Well, some of the other miracles. Raising the dead. Curing the lepers. That sort of thing."

Dee was impatient. "Modern medicine performs miracles of that order with ease. In Joshua's day their medical procedure before pronouncing a person dead was primitive, to say the least. As a matter of fact, you don't have to go back that far. Did you know that the mother of Robert E. Lee was pronounced dead and was actually buried? She revived later and was rescued. So far as leprosy is concerned, it was and is a meaningless term, medically speaking, and in those days covered everything from skin diseases to venereal infections. Miracle healers were a dime a dozen, and a religious figure didn't get very far unless he could put on a good performance in that department. Actually, Joshua is on record as being contemptuous of his followers continually wanting him to prove himself by

such devices."

Ed Wonder squirmed in his chair. "Well, if not Jesus, how about some of the other miracle workers? Mohammed, for instance?"

Dee eyed him critically. "I would think that with your program, Little Ed, you would have had your fill of miracle workers, by this time. Certainly, down through history, we run into them. Jesus, Mohammed, Hassan Ben Sabbah..."

"That one misses me," Ed said.

"Founder of the Ismailian Shiite sect of the Moslems. His followers, the *assassins*, were fantatical beyond belief. At any rate, supposedly he performed various miracles, including teleporting himself several hundred miles at a crack."

"But..." Ed said. Professor Dee's attitude suggested a very big *but*.

"But," Dee said, "close inspection by reliable scholars into the lives of these miracle workers seldom turns up evidence of unexplainable happenings."

It was directly the opposite of what Jim Westbrook's opinion had been the other day. Ed stirred in his chair. His interview with Professor Varley Dee was netting him a zero.

He came to his feet. "Well, thanks, Professor. I won't take up any more of your time."

Dee beamed at him. "Not at all, Little Ed. Pleasure. And I look forward to appearing on your remarkable program, once again, when the present difficulties with the air waves are over."

"They're not going to be over," Ed said gloomily, as he prepared to depart.

That set the other back. "Not going to be over? Well... why?"

"Because one of the miracle workers we've been talking about slapped a hex on them," Ed said. "See you again, some time, Professor."

It was several days later before he decided to get in touch with Helen and Buzz again. Several days spent in a lethargic stew. Several days of indecision and frustration.

There should be something that he, Buzzo and Helen could do. But where was there to start? Neither of them dared get within distance of the gifted prophet. On the other hand, Ed Wonder was apprehensive over what Tubber might get around to doing all on his own. He didn't need the catalyst of Ed or the others around. He was perfectly capable of dreaming

up his own hexes. And was probably busy doing so.

He decided to call Helen Fontaine and suggest a date. Maybe being together would bring something to mind.

He didn't have to phone Helen. She beat him to it.

The audio-alarm told him he was wanted on the phone, and it was her face that lit up the screen when he flicked it on. She looked distraught.

"Little Ed! Do you know where Buzz is?"

He scowled at her. "No. The last time I saw him he was with you at the club."

"He's disappeared."

"What does that supposed to mean?"

"I've been trying to find him, to suggest we three get together again and bounce this thing around. But he's not at the paper. Nor at his apartment."

Ed had a sudden premonition. "You don't think he's gone up to see Tubber?"

Her eyes were wide. "That's also what I'm afraid of."

Ed said, "I'll be right over." He flicked off the phone and turned to go.

8

The audio said, "Two gentlemen to see you."

Ed looked at the door screen. Two men stood there. Two men he had never seen before.

He opened up and they looked at him impassively.

"You're Edward Wonder?" the first one, the older one, said.

"That's right."

"There's somebody'd like to talk to you." He brought out a wallet, flicked it open for inspection. "My name's Stevens; this is Johnson."

Ed grunted his lack of awe. "Gestapo, eh? What can I do for you?"

"You can come along," Johnson said, mildly courteous.

Ed Wonder was moved to stubbornness. "Why? What've I supposed to have done?"

The first one, Stevens, said, "Search me. Some big deal, Mr. Wonder. Now will you please come along?"

"Look, I'm a citizen, and a taxpayer." He thought about that. "At least I was until a week ago. Aren't you supposed to have a warrant, or something?"

"Evidently, that was the good old days," Stevens said, without antagonism. "Things are in a hurry now. Emergency. We were told to bring you in soonest. So we're doing it."

Ed Wonder felt more stubborn by the minute. "No," he said. "Besides, I hate coppers."

They looked at him.

He said, "That's a long time ambition. To call a police officer a copper."

Johnson said, "Swell. So now you've called somebody a copper. So lets get along."

Ed gave up. "All right. But if you think you've got an emergency, you ought to know about my emergency."

"It's probably the same one," Stevens said.

They ushered him down the elevator and to the street, one at each arm, easily, but Ed Wonder had the feeling that if he'd made a sudden dash for it, he wouldn't have got more than two feet. There was a huge hover limousine before the door. They ushered him into the front seat and took their own positions to both sides of him. Stevens dialed their destination and the hover car rose to a police level and sped south.

"Where're we going?" Ed said.

"Manhattan."

"Why?" Ed said. "Don't I get some sort of idea? I thought I was allowed to phone a lawyer, or something."

"That was the good old days," Stevens said.

Johnson was more cooperative. "Actually, Mr. Wonder, we don't know what they want you for. This is the most hush-hush operation I've ever worked on."

"Who's they?" Ed demanded, indignant again, now.

Neither of them responded to that.

Manhattan was approximately a hundred miles to the south. Stevens lessened the speed fifteen minutes later and slipped into the heavier traffic

of Ultra-New York.

They approached the New Woolworth Building, entered a vehicle portal and came to a halt before three smartly uniformed men, two of whom carried heavy caliber automatics in quick draw holsters.

Ed and his two plainclothesmen came out of the car and received the oatmeal look from the guards.

Credentials were presented and checked. The unarmed guard got on a phone and spoke into it quietly. Then he turned, nodded and showed them to an elevator.

They rose at stomach churning acceleration for what seemed a fantastically long time to Ed Wonder. They reached a peak of speed and then began to drop off. The door finally opened.

There were more guards, also armed. These too were passed. Ed Wonder's two plainclothesmen ushered him down a hall to a side corridor. He passed a window and shot a look out. They were evidently very near the top of the tallest building in Manhattan. The doors of some of the rooms they passed were open. Inside were scores, hundreds, of men and women office workers. All seemed harassed. Other rooms were being set up for further activity; I.B.M. machines being wheeled in, key punches, collators, automatic printers, sorters.

"What the devil's going on, here?" Ed demanded.

Johnson replied reasonably, "Like we told you. We don't know."

They finally reached their destination. Ed was ushered into a small anteroom, unoccupied save for a single girl at a desk.

Stevens said, "Wonder, Edward. Kingsburg. 'C' priority. Number Z-168." He handed her an envelope. She opened it and scanned the single sheet it contained. "Oh, yes. Mr. Yardborough has been waiting." She directed her voice to an interoffice communicator. "Mr. Yardborough, Mr. Wonder from Kingsburg has been brought in."

Ed said hotly, "Look here, am I under arrest? If so, I want to phone a lawyer."

She looked at him, shook her head as though too tired to answer. "Mr. Yardborough will see you now."

One of the plainclothesmen opened the inner door for Ed's passage, then closed it behind him.

Mr. Yardborough sat at a littered desk. The way Ed remembered it, an executive should never have a littered desk. There should only be one item

of business at a time before the efficient executive.

Mr. Yardborough's desk was littered to hell and gone.

He looked up, as weary in appearance as his receptionist. "Have a chair, Mr... uh... Wonder. Let me see." He took up a paper out of the mess before him, then three news clippings.

Ed Wonder sat down. At least, somewhere in here he'd find out what was going on. The whole thing looked less and less like a police matter. He began to suspect...

Yardborough said, "Edward Wonder. Program director of the Far Out Hour, broadcasting on radio from Kingsburg. This first item we have on you is a news item written by..." he checked the clipping "... Buzz De Kemp, of the Kingsburg *Times-Tribune*. It describes, somewhat tongue in cheek, your radio guest, Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, an evangelist, who, supposedly, placed a, uh, curse on the vanity of women."

Ed started to say something, but Yardborough held up a weary hand. "Just a minute. The second item is along the same line. Mr. De Kemp did another piece, also tongue in cheek, contending that this itinerant preacher, Tubber, was the cause of the so-called Homespun Look fashion fad."

Yardborough laid down the second clipping, took up a third. "The last item also carries Mr. De Kemp's byline but the style of writing seems somewhat different."

"It was redone by the rewrite desk," Ed mumbled. Things were beginning to clear.

"Indeed. Very well. This story, humorous in tone, reveals that Tubber claims to have been the cause of the current difficulties pertaining to television and radio." Yardborough put the clipping down.

Ed said, "Where'd you get those?"

The other man smiled ruefully. "Believe me, Mr. Wonder, we have copies of every newspaper in the world, in whatever language, coming in here to the top five floors of the New Woolworth Building. We have translators going through them, word by word."

Ed looked at him blankly.

Yardborough said, "Going through every newspaper in the world in hopes of finding a single hint, is only one of the operations going on in this building, Mr. Wonder. Nor is this building alone in the effort. However, suffice to say that we turned up these three items on you and Tubber. Now

then, what have you to say to elucidate?"

Ed blurted, "What do you mean, what do I have to say? Nothing. They're true."

Yardborough said, "What's true?"

"Ezekiel Joshua Tubber put a curse on women's vanity. And it worked. Then he put a curse on radio and TV. That happened on my program. It worked too."

Yardborough came to his feet. "All right, come along with me, Mr. Wonder."

"Don't you want to hear the whole story?" Ed Wonder said, surprised.

"You're already out of my jurisdiction," Yardborough told him. He gathered up the papers pertaining to Ed and led the way back into the receptionist's office. The two plainclothes-men were still there, patiently waiting as only police can patiently wait.

Yardborough snapped to them. "This man has become 'A' priority, it's your necks if anything happens to him." He said to Ed Wonder, "Follow me."

They went back into the corridor and up and down halls again. They were stopped only once by guards for identification. Finally, the four of them reached another office, larger this time, with three desks in the reception room. There were several guards about. Four or five nervous looking characters were sitting, obviously waiting for something or other, each with his own contingent of guards.

"Have a seat," Yardborough told Ed, then went on to speak to one of the girls at a desk. He put the papers before her and spoke lowly. She nodded.

Yardborough turned back to Ed Wonder. "Good luck," he said. To the two plainclothesmen he added, "Stick with him like paste until further orders."

"Yes, sir," they both said. Yardborough left.

"What the devil goes on?" Ed demanded.

Johnson seemed impressed. "You're the first 'A' priority we turned up," he said.

"Oh, great," Ed snapped. "What's 'A' priority mean?"

"Search me," the other told him.

He waited possibly half an hour before a jittery looking type issued forth from one of the several inner offices that opened off the reception room,

and called, "Edward Wonder?"

Ed stood up. His two guards came to attention.

The newcomer approached. "You're Wonder?"

"That's right."

"Come with me." Even as they walked into the inner sanctum, the other was scanning the report and Ed's three clippings. The guards stayed behind.

There were two desks inside, the second occupied by an army major who had discarded his tunic which hung over the back of a chair, and had loosened his tie. He looked as if he hadn't slept for quite a while.

The jittery looking type said, "I'm Bill Oppenheimer. This is Major Leonard Davis. You've been turned over to us as an 'A' priority."

Even as he spoke he had tossed the report and clippings to Major Davis, who began tiredly perusing them.

Oppenheimer bent over an intercom on his desk and rapped, "I have here in my office a Mr. Edward Wonder of Kingsburg, New York. I want an immediate complete on him. Send a team." He flicked off the intercom and turned back to Ed. "Sit down," he said emptily.

Ed said, "What in the devil's 'A' priority?"

"Somebody who thinks he knows what caused TV and radio to go haywire."

"Why don't you add movies?" Ed said. He was still confused. The curves were coming too fast for him to assimilate.

The army man looked up from the papers. He snapped, "We thought them separate phenomenon!"

"Well, they aren't," Ed told him definitely.

Oppenheimer sat on the edge of his desk and sighed. "Thus far, Mr. Wonder, the major and I have interviewed some three hundred persons in this office. All of them thought they knew the reason for the disruption of the air waves. All of them had been passed on to us as 'A' priority. Now, will you please tell us your story, in detail. As much detail as possible."

The major snorted and tossed the dippings and report to his desk. "First, what was that crack about the movies?"

Ed said, "The same thing that caused TV and radio to go on the blink is the cause of the movies failing to project correctly." He added. "For that matter, it's also the cause of the Homespun Look fad."

The major flicked a switch and said into his intercom, "Immediate action. It has been suggested that the failure of cinema is connected with TV and radio phenomenon. Will communicate further in due course." He flicked the switch again. "All right," he said to Ed Wonder. "The complete story."

Ed told it to them, in all the details they wanted. He brought it right up to the last, and the disappearance of Buzz De Kemp.

When he had finished they continued to goggle him for a long silent moment.

Finally, Bill Oppenheimer coughed, as though apologetically. He said to the major, "What'd you think, Lenny?"

The major knuckled his chin and twisted his mouth. "I just gave up thinking," he said. "I've heard everything, so now I don't have to think any more."

Ed was irritated. "Oh, funnies we get," he said. "Big joke."

Oppenheimer said, hopefully, "You think we ought to just throw him out?"

"I didn't ask to come here," Ed growled. "I was kidnaped." They ignored him. The major shook his head and said, "We can't throw him out. We can't throw anybody out until we've checked the story through all ways from Tuesday." He flicked his desk switch again and said, "If any of the following haven't already had pickups, get them. Also immediate completes on all. This is an 'AA' priority. Buzz De Kemp, Jensen Fontaine, Helen Fontaine, Matthew Mulligan, Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. Yes, I said Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. And Nefertiti Tubber. All are from Kingsburg, New York, except the last two, last seen in Saugerties."

Oppenheimer sighed and spoke into his own intercom. "Alice, the tape we just cut. Do it up immediately. Fifty copies. The usual distribution. It's an 'AA' now. He sticks to his story."

They both looked back at Ed Wonder, wordlessly for the moment.

The major opened his mouth to say something. Then he closed it again.

Oppenheimer said, without inflection, "Hexes."

The intercom on the major's desk reported something. The major's eyebrows went up. "Send it in immediately."

Within moments a messenger entered, deposited two copies of a report on the desks, hurried out again.

Ignoring Ed Wonder, the two read.

Oppenheimer looked up. His eyes went to Major Davis. "Crash priority?"

"Yes." The major came to his feet, reached for his tunic, changed his mind. Then, in his shirt sleeves, tie still loose, he headed for the door. He said to Ed Wonder. "Come along." Ed shrugged, got up and followed him. Oppenheimer brought up the rear, carrying the papers pertaining to Ed and the new report as well.

In the reception room, Johnson and Stevens shot to their feet and came forward.

The major said, "You're Mr. Wonder's guards?"

"Yes, sir."

The major beckoned to two of the other guards present. "You're released from your present assignment. You'll help guard Mr. Wonder. With your lives, if necessary. This is crash priority."

"Yes, sir." All four of the guards brushed back coattails so that quick draw holsters were revealed on their hips, and now instantly available.

"What the devil," Ed protested. He was ignored.

"Come along," the major said again, and led the way. This time they ascended to the above floor. The bustle here was considerably less. They went through this hall, through that. Finally winding up before a door where a guard stood. As they approached, his hand went to his gun and remained there until the major and Oppenheimer identified themselves.

Oppenheimer said to him, "Another guest. There are six of you now. You'll take it in shifts. One man outside, one in at all times. I'll send lieutenant Edmonds to arrange details. Until he turns up, all six of you stand by."

He got a chorus of *yes sirs*, then opened the door and led the way inside. It was a lavish suite.

Buzz De Kemp looked up from the chair in which he was sitting reading a paperback novel. He grinned, took his stogie from his mouth and said, "Hi, Little Ed. So they picked you up too."

Ed Wonder was beyond surprise by now. He sat down on the couch and closed his eyes.

Oppenheimer and the major looked at the newspaperman. The former said, "We've just read your report on the Tubber affair. Largely, you corroborate what Wonder has just told us. That ups you from 'AA' priority to crash."

"Well, good for us," Buzz beamed. "How many other crash priorities are there?"

"Several hundred, at least, in the United Welfare States. How many in England, Common Europe and the Soviet Complex, I'd have to check again to find out. Possibly by this time the Allied Neutral States have gotten underway as well."

Buzz whistled silently. "This thing is getting really big."

"It's as big as a war," the major said flatly.

Ed was beginning to adjust. He said peevishly, "When do we eat around here? If I've got to be a prisoner, I ought to be fed once in a while."

Oppenheimer said to him. "You're not a prisoner. You're a volunteer, working for the government."

"There's a difference?"

"We'll get in touch with you shortly."

It wasn't shortly. It wasn't until the next morning. Meanwhile their guard system had been perfected and their needs met. They had spent several hours checking with each other, but it was largely a rehashing. Buzz De Kemp on the whole had had a similar experience to that of Ed Wonder. He'd been picked up by two agents and whisked to the New Woolworth Building. They had picked him up as the writer of the articles on Tubber. When he stuck to his guns, his priority rose from 'C' to 'AA' and then, when Ed Wonder's story corroborated his, to crash.

They came for Ed and Buzz in the morning. Not Oppenheimer and Major Davis. Evidently, they were being dealt with by higher echelons now. It was a colonel with two aides who showed up to escort them to their next interview. Colonel Fredric Williams of Air Force Intelligence.

Buzz stuck his paperback in his jacket pocket, saying, "Just in case we run into the usual bureaucratic redtape. You know, hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait—I'll take along something to read."

The colonel glared at him. Buzz leered back, scooped up a handful of the stogies he had ordered the night before and jammed them into a jacket breast pocket. "I'll need fuel, too."

They followed the colonel and his aides, and the guards brought up the rear, coats still brushed back so that guns were readily handy. Ed wondered what they thought the potential danger might be, tucked away

here on the top floors of Ultra-New York's tallest skyscraper and surrounded by what seemed to be hundreds of security men.

Their destination was up still another floor, and this time there were two reception rooms, rather than one. The first was king-size, with a dozen busy desks and as many offices beyond. The second was small and presided over by a single middle-aged, less than matronly looking efficiency machine.

She said crisply, "Mr. Hopkins is waiting for you, Colonel. The others have arrived."

"Thank you, Miss Presley."

The colonel himself opened the inner door.

Whoever the architect who had designed the New Woolworth Building might have been, he had surely realized that the ultimate floor was meant for ultimate authority of one sort or another. This office bore that fact out.

Ed Wonder had never been in such an establishment in his life. Only Hollywood had prepared him for it. Even then, he looked about in amazement.

There was but one desk, which seemed to be suspended by one thin rod from the ceiling, rather than being supported on the floor. Behind it obviously sat Mr. Hopkins. The reality of who Mr. Hopkins was came immediately home to both Ed Wonder and Buzz De Kemp, the latter of whom reacted by whistling softly between his teeth.

Dwight Hopkins, the Great Compromiser. Dwight Hopkins, the power behind the throne. Dwight Hopkins who dominated western politics like a colossus.

Dwight Hopkins avoided publicity. He had no need of it. However, the right hand man, the one man brain trust, some said the alter ego, of President Everett MacFerson could not remain completely unknown to the knowledgeable citizen. President MacFerson might be, and was, a figurehead, a symbol, a public image whose actual efforts so far as governing the nation was concerned, went little beyond those of the ruling monarch of Great Britain. But while the MacFerson glamour type politicians might possess whatever it is which draws the votes of the populace, there still must be the Dwight Hopkinses behind the scenes. He had survived three administrations, having been handed down from the Democratic Republicans to the Liberal Conservatives and then back again, without change in either their policies—or his. There were seldom issues between the two parties under the Welfare State; it wasn't considered the

thing to attempt to influence the voters by raising issues. You voted for *the man you liked best*, not for principles.

Dwight Hopkins sat behind the small desk. To one side of him, in an easy chair, legs crossed, was a major general. To the other, a tall, gray civilian. Across from him, in a row, were Jensen Fontaine, Helen Fontaine and Matthew Mulligan.

Ed shot his eyes around the room again. No mistake. The Tubbers were conspicuously absent.

Hopkins nodded to the newcomers. "You must be Buzz De Kemp, you look like a newspaperman. And you're Edward Wonder. Why do they call you Little Ed?" The Hopkins voice was firm but the urgency in it had a strange easygoing quality, as though there wasn't really any great hurry, now that Hopkins had taken over.

"I don't know," Ed said.

Mulligan blurted, "See here, Wonder, if all this is your..."

The major general rumbled, "That will be enough, Mr. Mulligan. Mr. Wonder is in the same position as you are. You've been brought here to help us clear up a matter that is of first importance to the nation."

"To the world," the tall gray civilian said mildly.

Jensen Fontaine said hotly, "I demand to know if those Communists down in Greater Washington think they can pick up citizens of good repute and..."

Dwight Hopkins was looking at the small town magnate expressionlessly. He interrupted to say, "Mr. Fontaine. In your belief, what is the cause of the disruption of radio and TV and, further, of motion picture projectors?"

Jensen Fontaine bent a beady eye on the politician and said, leadingly, "My country, may she always be right..."

Hopkins said easily, "I agree with you, sir. But to answer my question."

Fontaine snapped, "I'll tell you the cause. Soviet Complex sabotage. Subversion of American industry. Underground..."

"And how would they have accomplished this?"

"That's not my job. You birds down in Greater Washington have been infiltrated. Even the Department of Justice. I suspect the C.I.A. could turn up the culprits soon enough if they weren't honeycombed with Commie agents. Furthermore..."

Dwight Hopkins said, "You are free to go, Mr. Fontaine. Our thanks for your cooperation."

Fontaine was just getting into stride. He raised an arm to wave in emphasis, and it was taken firmly by Colonel Williams. "I'll show you to the door, sir."

Mulligan's eyes went from Hopkins to the semi-struggling Fontaine. "See here, you can't treat Mr. Fontaine that way!" he blatted.

The white Hopkins' eyebrows went up. "Do your own opinions coincide with his, Mr. Mulligan?"

Mulligan was the second to be ushered out.

Dwight Hopkins looked at Helen, Buzz and Ed Wonder. "I have read the reports. You three were the ones I really wished to talk to anyway. I am sorry, Miss Fontaine, if my handling of your father seemed cavalier."

"Bounce it," Helen said, making a moue. "Daddy can use a little cavalier treatment."

The president's right hand man leaned back in his chair and regarded them solemnly.

He said, "A week ago Friday, TV and radio became inoperative. For several hours the government took no action. It was assumed that the industry would soon discover the cause and remedy it. However, when it became known that the phenomenon was worldwide, an emergency committee was named. The following day, the president released special funds to increase the size of the committee and give it more arbitrary powers. The following day the committee became a commission. And the day after, in secret session, the Congress voted unlimited resources and I was named head of this project and responsible only to the president. General Crew and Professor Braithgale here, are my assistants."

Buzz De Kemp was evidently awed not even by such as Dwight Hopkins. He had brought one of his inevitable stogies from his pocket and as he searched for matches, said around it, "You people sure seem to be in a tizzy over moron level entertainment. The major was telling us, last night, it's as important as a war. And..."

"A nuclear war, Mr. De Kemp," Hopkins said.

"Don't be silly," Helen said.

Dwight Hopkins looked at the tall gray civilian. "Professor Braithgale, will you enlighten us a bit on the ramifications of the situation which confronts us?"

The professor's voice was dry and clear, and he lectured, rather than conversed.

"What happens to a civilization when there is an economy of abundance and no publicly provided entertainment?"

The trio, Ed, Buzz and Helen, frowned simultaneously at him, but neither tried an answer. It was obviously rhetorical.

He went on. "The average human being is not capable of self-programming. At least as he is today. He can't think up tasks to occupy himself. He's never had to. Man evolved under conditions where the time and energy he had available were programmed for him; he worked, and he worked twelve to eighteen hours a day. All day, every day. Or he starved. What to do with his time was determined for him. What recreation there was, was very seldom; purely traditional games and dances were a vast relief and entertainment. He never got a chance to become bored with them—he got to play them too seldom. That situation lasted for 99.99 percent of the history of the species."

Braithgale eyed them, and his voice went drier still "Now it's true that leisure is essential for creative activity. Until there is a leisure class, a group with time to do something besides subsist, there is very little opportunity for cultural progress. But, leisure doesn't automatically produce creativity.

"So the question becomes, what happens to a culture with plenty of everything—except predetermined activity for the noncreative average man? In other words, what happens to this affluent society, this Welfare State of ours, if we take away radio, motion pictures, and especially television—television, the common man's pacifier."

Ed was scowling. "Vaudeville," he ventured. "The legitimate theatre. Circuses. Carnivals."

The professor nodded. "Yes, but I submit that they would provide but a drop in the bucket, even when and if we get them organized and train the needed talent. How much time can people spend that way?"

Buzz brought his paperback from his jacket pocket and waved it at the other. "There's reading."

Braithgale shook his head. "The average human does not like to read, Mr. De Kemp. It requires that they contribute a great deal of mental activity themselves. They have to visualize the actions from the words, imagine the voice tones, the facial expressions, and so forth. They are not up to such creative labor."

The professor seemed to switch subjects. "Do you recall ever having read of the riots which swept Constantinople during Justinian's reign as a result of a minor squabble over the horse races? Well, several tens of thousands of persons lost their lives."

He remained silent for a moment, looking at them, to achieve emphasis. Then, "It is my belief that the thing that eventually destroyed Rome was the growth of an immense leisure class. Rome was no longer a subsistence culture, the colonies supported it. The populace was awarded free food. They had leisure but no self-programming creativity."

Braithgale wound it up. "A man wants something to do. But if he hasn't the ability to invent something to do, what happens when you take away his TV, his radio, his movies?"

Ed said, "I've been reading of the riots in England—and in Chicago, for that matter."

The major general rumbled to Hopkins, "We've got to bear down some more on those darned journalists. They're letting too much of that sort of report get through."

Dwight Hopkins didn't answer him. Instead, he tapped a thick sheaf of papers on his desk and spoke to Ed, Buzz and Helen. "Frankly, your account astonishes me and leaves me incredulous. However, you have this in your favor; you corroborate each other. Hadn't it been for the matter of the cinema, which is utterly inexplicable in terms of atmospheric disturbances, I admit that I would not be inclined to consider your account at all. However... what is the trouble, Mr. De Kemp?"

They all looked at the rumpled newsman who was, in turn, goggling the pocketbook he held in his hands. "I must've picked up the wrong copy," he said, unbelievably. "But I couldn't have." He looked up at them, as though accusingly. "This thing's in French."

Ed scowled down at it, wondering at the other's confusion. "That's not French. It looks like German to me."

Helen said, "It's not German. I studied German a bit. It looks like Russian."

Buzz said defensively, "Don't be kooky. It's not even in the Cyrillic alphabet. I say it's French. But it couldn't be. I was reading it just before I came in here. And the cover illustration is the same and . . ."

Professor Braithgale unfolded his lanky form and came to his feet. "Let me see that," he said drily. "I can read and write in all the Romance languages, German, Swedish and Russian. I don't know what has come up

but..." His sentence drifted off. His usually quiet gray eyes boggled. "It is... it is in Sanscrit, I think."

"Let me see that," Hopkins said crisply. "What's the controversy?"

The professor handed him the paperback suspense novel. "Why, it looks like Italian to me. I don't know the language but..."

"Holy smokes," Ed breathed. "He's done it again. He's hexed fiction."

"What!" the major general rumbled. "Are you utterly insane?"

"No, look," Ed was on his feet. "That report you have in front of you. You can still read it, can't you? I can. I can read these papers I had in my coat pocket. Look at this newspaper." He was excitedly showing them. "The news you can read. But look here at the comic page. All the writing is jabber. It looks like it's in German to me, but I don't read German. He's hexed fiction."

"Sit down," Dwight Hopkins rasped. Into his desk communicator he said, "Miss Presley. I want you to send in several books, both fiction and nonfiction. I also want an immediate report on why Ezekiel Joshua Tubber and his daughter have not been picked up."

"Yes, sir," Miss Presley's efficient voice came through clearly. "The Tubbers have not been found, as yet. The operatives who were sent for them report that they have left Saugerties. Evidently, the itinerant preacher was extremely upset due to the fact that his message was not being listened to."

Hopkins said crisply, "Is there any hint as to their destination?"

"One of their followers said they were going to Elysium. There is no such community listed, sir, in any of the sixty-four States. It might be in Common Europe, or..."

"That will be sufficient, Miss Presley," Dwight Hopkins said. He flicked off the intercom and looked at Braithgale and then at the major general. The latter rumbled, "What's the matter?"

But Braithgale knew what the matter was. He said, slowly, "Elysium. Another word for the Elysian Fields of the Ancient Greeks."

"What the blazes are the Elysian Fields?" the general demanded.

Dwight Hopkins said, "Paradise." He ran a hand over his chin, as though checking his morning shave. "Our friend Tubber has gone to Heaven."

PART THREE

9

"Heaven!" Colonel Fredric Williams blurted from the background where he had been keeping his trap shut through all this. "You mean this necromancer is dead?"

Ed Wonder was shaking his head. "That's not it. Elysium is some gobblydygook word they use in this new religion of Tubber's. They talk about being pilgrims on the road to Elysium, that sort of thing. Elysium is, well, sort of like Utopia, except Tubber is against Utopia. He says the idea is reactionary. I forget why. Something about Utopia being perfect, and perfection means stagnation, or..."

"Wait a minute," Braithgale said, "you're giving me a headache."

"Talking about Zeke Tubber and his religion would give anybody a headache," Buzz said. He paused a moment for dramatic emphasis, then said, "I think I know where Tubber and his daughter have gone."

Hopkins looked at Buzz, stunned momentarily.

Buzz said, "He's at a cooperative colony near Bearsville, in the Catskills. I heard Tubber mention the place in one of his talks. He invited anybody in the audience who was ready for..." Buzz twisted his mouth "... the promised land, to come to Elysium and join up. It's evidently in the tradition of Robert Owen's New Harmony colony, Llano, down in Louisiana, and Josiah Warren's Village of Equity."

Major General Crew rumbled, "What are you talking about, Mister?"

Professor Braithgale was looking at Buzz with a new respect. He turned his head and said to the army man, "Cooperative colonies. Utopias. There was quite a movement in their favor back in the 19th Century. Most were based on religion, some not. The Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, turned out to be the most successful. They were intelligent enough to adapt when this teaching or that didn't prove out. The others went under."

Ed said, "We might have known they didn't go very far. Tubber travels in a horse and wagon."

"Horesonvagen?" the general rumbled. "What's that, some new German model?"

"Horse and wagon, a horse and wagon," Ed told him. "A wagon pulled

by a horse."

The army man stared at him in disbelief. "You mean like in Western movies?"

"Please, Scotty," Dwight Hopkins said, without looking at him. The general shut up and Hopkins said to Ed Wonder thoughtfully, "You seem to be our best authority on Ezekiel Joshua Tubber."

He was interrupted by the arrival of Miss Presley who bore an armload of books. Even the efficient Miss Presley was looking as though something a bit disconcerting had happened, such as Gabriel blowing his horn, or the Atlantic disappearing. She put the books on Hopkins' desk and said, "Sir, I... I..."

"I know, Miss Presley. That will be all for now."

Dwight Hopkins took the books up and examined them one by one, while the others looked at him. He put the last one down and rubbed his eyes with his forefingers in resignation. "It still looks like Italian to me."

The general blurted, "All of them?"

"No. Not all of them. The nonfiction is still readable. In fact," he picked up one hard cover volume. "This novel is still in English. *Huckleberry Finn*."

"*Huckleberry Finn*?" Helen said. "Mark Twain?"

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in mute appeal to high powers. "Oh, great. This is a new one. This hex is selective. Anything Tubber doesn't like, becomes jibberish. Anything he approves of, we can still read. Holy smokes, talk about censorship. I thought I noticed something about that page of comic strips."

"What was that?" Buzz asked him.

"I could still read *Pogo*. *Buzz Sawyer, Junior* and *Little Orphan Annie* were jibberish, but I could still read *Pogo*."

Professor Braithgale took up the newspaper. "You're right," he said. "At least our prophet has a sense of humor."

"Oh, *Mother*," Helen muttered. "All I can say is that we'd better develop one too."

Hopkins said, slowly, "Mr. Wonder, when your group entered this office, I was admittedly prone to think you just one more set of the eccentrics we have been digging up since the crisis first arose. Now, however, this has developed to the point where no scientific explanation seems possible. I am ready to throw this commission's full resources behind you."

"Behind *me*?" Ed blurted. "Why *me*?"

The president's right hand man was not fazed. "Because you are our nearest thing to an authority on Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. You were present at three of his, ummm, performances. Besides, as the director of your Far Out Hour, I am sure you are highly knowledgeable in the field of the, ah, far out. And certainly this is about as far out as it is possible to get."

"But..." Ed wailed.

Dwight Hopkins held up a hand. "I do not mean to suggest that your hypothesis—that Ezekiel Tubber has caused our crisis by a series of curses—is the only one my commission will continue to investigate. Far from it. However, we will set up a new department with you at the head and with full resources."

"No," Ed said with finality.

Buzz looked at him strangely. He said around his stogie, "You haven't said yet, *what's in it for me?* Little Ed."

Ed Wonder turned on him desperately, "I know what's in it for me. Sure I was present at three of his performances, as Hopkins calls them. I've seen the old buzzard three times and each time the results were worse. What do you think will happen next time? He's getting arrogant..."

"*Getting* arrogant?" Braithgale laughed bitterly.

"... He's beginning to feel his oats." Ed swung on Hopkins. "He started off innocent. Not knowing what he was doing. Evidently, one of his first curses was brought on by some teenager practicing hillbilly music on his guitar. Tubber broke the guitar strings..."

"What's miraculous about that?" the general rumbled.

"... at a distance. Then there was something else that brought him to wrath, as his daughter calls it. A neon sign, or something. So he laid a curse on it. What happened, I don't know. Maybe it stopped flickering."

From the background Colonel Williams said, "I wish he'd lay a hex on the neon sign across from my house. The darn thing. . ."

General Crew looked at him and the colonel shut up.

Ed said desperately, "When he laid that Homespun Look hex on women, he didn't know he had done it. Evidently when he gets really wrathed up, he forgets what he says. He was astonished when I told him he'd cursed radio. As surprised as anybody else that it'd worked. But look at this now. He's cursed all light reading. All fiction—except what he likes. Listen, I'll bet you he wasn't even sore when he laid that one on."

Dwight Hopkins frowned. "I'm becoming more convinced by the moment," he said. "And Wonder, you're our man."

"I am not. I keep telling you. This kook is as nutty as almond cookies. Suppose he spots me and is reminded all over again of some of the arguments I've had with him, remembers that hardly anybody'll listen to him. Suppose he gets wrathful again and lays down a hex on all unbelievers. You know what that'd mean? He doesn't have more than a couple of hundred believers all together. I tell you, that twitch is more dangerous than the H-Bomb."

General Crew said thoughtfully, "A sniper. The best marksman in the service. Posted on a hill, with a Winchester Noiseless and a Mark 8 telescopic sight. This Elysium, from what De Kemp has said, is in the hills. A small community, away from any city. A sniper..."

Buzz grinned at him. "And how about this possibility, General? Suppose something goes wrong and Zeke lays a spell on gunpowder? Better still, all explosives? What would happen to the Cold War thaw if all of a sudden no explosives would work?"

The general scowled at him. "The curses are universal. In that case, explosives wouldn't work for the Commies, either."

Buzz took his stogie from his mouth and examined the tip, which was burning unevenly. "They wouldn't need explosives," he said. "The Chinese alone could overrun us with butcher knives made in those backyard steel mills of theirs."

Helen said, "Besides, assassination is out of the question. Actually, like Buzz was saying the other day, Tubber is a kindly old gent who just happens..."

"Kindly old gent," Ed muttered bitterly.

"... to have some powers we simply don't understand. He isn't seem to understand them either. Very well. I think Little Ed should go and confront him. There's nothing to suggest he has anything against Ed personally. Besides, he dotes on that daughter of his and she has a crush on Little Ed."

Silence dropped. All eyes went to Ed Wonder.

Ed lowered his lids in utter suffering. "That's a lie!" he wailed.

"Buzz?" Helen said.

Buzz De Kemp had been trying to get his stogie to burn straight. Now he nodded and said with a twang, "Yep, right as rain. Nice curvy little

wench, blue eyeballs, cheeks shiny as red apples, set up real nice. Any sapsucker can see there's nothing better she'd like to do than spoon with Little Ed Wonder."

"Oh, great," Ed moaned. "Funnies."

Dwight Hopkins said, "Wonder, I'll have an office and staff assigned to you."

"No," Ed said.

Dwight Hopkins looked at him deliberately. "I can pick up this phone, Mr. Wonder and in moments have a presidential order drafting you into the armed forces. In which case you will be under the orders of General Crew, here, and will do as you are told."

Ed muttered, "The old army volunteer system. You, you, and you."

The general beamed at him.

Ed surrendered. "All right," he said. "How about another drink?"

For approximately thirty of his thirty-three years, Edward Wonder had wanted to be a big executive. He had wanted it so badly he could taste it distinctly. To the extent possible in a stratified, stagnant society he had worked to that end. He had been raised in the folklore of his people including that wheeze about any citizen of the welfare state being just as good as any other citizen of the United Welfare States and with an equal chance of working his way up to the presidency, or wherever. Unfortunately, he discovered that it's hard working one's way up, when there is precious little work to do, and the overwhelming majority displaced by automation. Those who did still maintain jobs, and hence had higher incomes than those on the unemployment lists, clung to them. Cherished them with a bitter jealousy, and to the extent possible passed them on to progeny, relatives, or at least friends.

No. As he had grown older, it had become increasingly obvious just how small a chance Ed Wonder had of ever becoming a big executive with underlings to do his bidding, telephones and intercoms in which to snap his profound orders. In fact, at the time of his first confronting of Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, he had about decided that his sole chance was going to be through marriage with Helen Fontaine.

But now he was a big executive.

And Helen Fontaine was one of his assistants.

So was Buzz De Kemp, and Ed was acquiring more assistants by the minute. In fact, he was swamped with them and couldn't remember the names of a fraction.

Dwight Hopkins' promise of resources couldn't have been more highly fulfilled. Within a quarter hour, Ed Wonder had been assigned a suite of offices. Within the hour, his staff was moving in. Among others were Mr. Yardborough, whose first name turned out to be Cecil, and Bill Oppenheimer and Major Leonard Davis. Two of the leg men were Johnson and Stevens, and Ed's liaison man with Dwight Hopkins was Colonel Fredric Williams. Hopkins had decided that Project Tubber should be on the ultra-hush side, in view of its nature, and assigned to it anyone who had already anything to do with Wonder's investigation. Had the story broken in the newspapers, Hopkins suspected even his gilt-edge reputation wouldn't have been done any good.

Ed stared gloomily at his desk screen.

He hadn't the vaguest idea where to begin. In his files were nothing more than his own report on Tubber, Buzz's report and that of Helen Fontaine. It was no use looking at them. He knew everything covered. Which was precious little.

He flicked the screen to life and cleared his throat. "Miss... ah—" He had forgotten his receptionist's name.

"Randy, sir. Randy Everett."

Ed looked at her and sighed. "Randy, on you the Homespun Look is unfortunate."

"Well, yes sir. But to tell you the truth, if I wear cosmetics..."

"You itch."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

"I'm a crystal gazer," Ed told her. "Look, send in Mr. De Kemp." He flicked off the intercom. It was his first act as head of Project Tubber.

Buzz came shambling in, stogie at the tilt. He looked about the office appreciatively and whistled softly between his teeth. "So, at long last Little Ed Wonder is a big shot. Work hard, save your money, and vote straight Democratic Republican and you too can get to the top. Shucks, you didn't even have to marry the boss' daughter."

"Shut up," Ed told him, "or I'll get General Crew to draft you into the service." He grunted at the picture. "Buzzo De Kemp, the sloppiest yardbird in the army."

"Jollies we get," Buzz said, dropping into a chair.

"Listen, Buzzo," Ed said. "What do I do first?"

Buzz looked at the tip of his stogie critically, then let his eyes go around the office in thought. "We might go about finding out what a curse is. The next time we—you, that is, I'm going to be A.W.O.L. at that point—the next time you go up against Tubber, it'd be better if you had some ammunition."

"A curse? Everybody knows what a curse is."

"So fine. What?"

Ed thought about it. He flicked his desk switch. "Major Davis, please." Lenny Davis' face appeared in the screen.

"Yes, sir." The major wasn't yet quite used to having as his chief the man he'd been interrogating and considering throwing out of the office but a day previously.

Ed said, "We want to find out just what a curse is. Send in some scientists who know what curses are."

The major looked at him blankly. "What kind of scientists know what a curse is, sir?"

"How would I know?" Ed told him curtly. He flicked off the set.

Buzz De Kemp was impressed.

Ed said, "What do we do now?"

"Have lunch," Buzz told him. "We ought to pick up Helen. What's Helen doing?"

"She's in charge of the Homespun Look department," Ed said. "She's going to find out everything possible about the Homespun Look."

Buzz looked at the end of his stogie. "That's a good idea. You got some scientists working with her?"

Ed Wonder pursed his lips. "No. You're right. If we've got unlimited resources, we better use them. The devil only knows how much time we've got before Tubber goes into his act again." He flicked on his desk switch. "Major Davis."

The major's face was even slightly more harassed than it had been the evening before, Ed decided. The major said, "Yes, sir."

"Lenny," Ed told him, "send up a few scientists to Miss Fontaine's office. We want to know what it is that makes women itch."

The major opened his mouth, shook his head, and closed it again. "Yes, sir."

When the army man's face had faded from the screen, Buzz looked at it thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "I don't think the major is going to last very long. He's already getting sort of a greenish look around the gills."

Ed Wonder stood up. "There's more where he came from," he said.

When they got back from lunch and crossed the outer offices of Ed Wonder's suite, he could only notice that they'd moved in another score or so of staff, and a selection of I.B.M. machines complete with operators and files of punched cards. Ed wondered vaguely what they were going to use them for. Possibly nothing. Dwight Hopkins probably just wanted them to be handy and ready, just in case a use for them did come up.

Randy, his receptionist, said, "Professor McCord is waiting in your office, Mr. Wonder."

"Who the devil is Professor McCord?"

"Major Davis sent him, sir."

"Oh. He's probably an expert on either hexes or itching, then."

After Ed and Buzz had entered the inner office, Randy Everett looked after them for a long frustrated moment, somewhat as though she had put her last dime in a pay telephone and got the wrong number.

Professor McCord came to his feet at their entry. They went through the usual banalities, finally winding up seated.

Professor McCord said, "I was picked up by two security officers and rushed here to your office. I submit that although I am available for my country's service, I haven't the vaguest idea of..."

Ed said, "What are you a professor of?"

"Ethnology, specializing in the African Bantu tribes."

Buzz said, selecting a fresh stogie from his jacket pocket. "The major is sharper than I thought he was. Professor, what is a curse?"

The other's eyes came around to the newspaperman. "You mean is the sense that a witchman might curse someone?" When the two nodded, he went on. "It is the expression of a wish that evil befall another. A calling down of something wicked, harmful on some victim."

"Well, that's not exactly the word, possibly," Ed Wonder said. "Possibly

the word I want is spell, or hex."

The professor obviously hadn't the vaguest idea of what they wanted of him. He said, "A spell is usually a combination of words, or pretended words, supposed to accomplish something magical. The term, if I'm not mistaken, is derived from the Old English. A hex is much the same thing, an act of witchcraft. It is American idiom, originally derived from the Germanic." The professor was frowning puzzlement.

So were both Ed Wonder and Buzz De Kemp.

Ed said, "I know, I know. But I didn't want just definitions. Now, take one of your Bantu witchdoctors. He puts a spell on somebody, usually because somebody else paid him to do it, right? Okay. Just what does he *do*?"

Professor McCord looked at him blankly.

Buzz said, "How does he go about it? How is it accomplished?"

The professor said, "Well, in actuality, each witchman will have a different procedure. Usually an elaborate mumbo-jumbo involving unusual ingredients to stir together, and an incantation involving magical words."

Ed leaned forward. "We know that. But, what we wanted to know was, just what *is* a curse? You know, what *is* it...?"

The professor blinked at him.

"What we're trying to do is find out what a curse, a hex, a spell really is."

"Why, I just told you."

They looked at each other for a long unprofitable moment. Finally, he said. "Do you believe in the devil? You know, Lucifer?"

"No. What has that got to do..."

"Or black magic?"

"I don't believe in any kind of magic."

Ed had him. He pointed a finger. "Then how come a witchdoctor can cast a spell on somebody? Don't tell me they can't. Too much evidence exists."

"Oh," Professor McCord nodded. "I see what you're driving at, at last. Do you know what a liban is? I took my doctorate in their study."

"I thought on my kooky Far Out Hour I'd heard of everything in this

line, but evidently not."

The ethnologist's face took on a pleased expression. "The libans are such a vital part of African witchcraft that I'm amazed they are known so little. A liban isn't exactly a witch-man, since he's born into the caste and can't enter into it from outside. They're just a handful of families, not numerous. He's the *Eminence grise* in the tribe and they wouldn't dare do anything without his advice. For instance, if the warriors are going out on a raid, he lets them know whether or not it's going to be a success, gives them little bags of sacred dust, or some such, to tie to their daggers. What I wish to impart is that the liban is not a fake. His position is hereditary, comes down for a thousand years and more. Believe me, if a liban puts a curse on a tribesman, the curse works."

"How?" Buzz said flatly.

The professor looked at him. "Because everybody involved knows it will work. The victim, the liban, and all the other members of the tribe."

It was the same sort of answer Ed had got from Varley Dee. It accomplished nothing. The fact of the matter was, hardly anybody, of all the billions of persons involved, even knew that Ezekiel Joshua Tubber existed, not to speak of knowing he was laying hexes right and left.

Buzz said to Ed, "What's all this about libans got to do with Tubber?"

"Tubber?" Professor McCord said. "Tubber who?"

"Ezekiel Joshua Tubber," Ed said wearily. "You wouldn't know about him."

"You mean *Josh* Tubber?" McCord said. "Academecian Ezekiel Joshua Tubber?"

"*Academecian*?" Buzz said.

"Josh was taking his academecian degree in political economy while I was studying for my doctorate," McCord said. "A surpassing scholar."

Ed Wonder closed his eyes in mute appeal to the higher up.

But Buzz said quickly, "Then you knew him when he was younger. Look, at that time did he have any ideas about starting, say, a new religion? A religion with a lot of socio-economic angles?"

Ed said, "More important, did he ever say anything to you about an ability, a *power* to curse things? To put a spell on, well, ha ha, say TV?"

Professor McCord said, "Don't be ridiculous."

Ed flicked his desk switch. "Bill Oppenheimer," he said.

Oppenheimer's face filled the screen. It was the first time Ed Wonder had seen the other since his interview of the day before. Oppenheimer said, "Yes, sir."

Ed said, "You're now in charge of backtracking on Tubber. As a beginning, we've got a line on his schooling. He took an academecian's degree in economics at..." he put a hand up to hold Oppenheimer and looked at McCord. "What college?"

"Harvard."

Ed Wonder looked at him in reproach. "It couldn't have been some jerkwater college in the Bible belt. It has to be Harvard." He looked back at Oppenheimer. "Harvard. Put a team on this. We want everything, anything, we can get on Tubber. What he studied. Every book he ever opened has to be analyzed, word for word. Run down his classmates, and find out every detail they can remember. Dig into his social life. Latch onto any women he ever dated, they'd be at least middle-aged by now. He's got a daughter. Find out who he married. What happened to her. If she's still alive... Well, I don't have to tell you. We want a complete rundown on every phase of Tubber's life. Clear this with General Crew, if necessary. If you need manpower, there's the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and the Secret Service."

"Got it," Oppenheimer said. "Yes, sir." His face faded from the screen.

Buzz said, "That's telling them. Little Ed, you've got the makings of a really big cheese."

McCord said, somewhat intrigued, "If you're interested in checking on Josh Tubber, you won't get much at Harvard. He took only his academecian's degree there. As I recall, he took his doctorate at the Sorbonne, and, if I'm not mistaken, studied earlier at either Leyden or Heidelberg. Classical Philosophy, I believe."

"Philosophy?" Ed Wonder repeated.

"A predilection for Ethical Hedonism, as I recall," McCord nodded.

Buzz finished his drink, as though desperate. "Hedonism," he said. "Tubber? You mean like the eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die, bit?"

"Hedonism goes further into reality than that, you know," McCord said stiffly. "Briefly, Epicurus taught that men not only in fact seek pleasure, but further that they ought to do so since pleasure alone is good. However, his definition of pleasure is the crucial..."

"All right," Ed said. "So Tubber put in a hitch studying philosophy. Look, Professor, I'm going to turn you over to a brace of my assistants

who'll take down everything you can remember about Tubber, and also everything you can think of about libans, witchdoctors, spells and curses."

When the professor was gone, Ed looked at Buzz who looked back at him.

Finally Ed flicked his screen and said, "Major Davis." When Davis' face faded in, Ed said, reproachfully, "Lenny, ethnologists might be scientists but they don't know what curses are. Round us up some scientists who can tell us what a curse is. Snap into this, Lenny. We want results."

Major Leonard Davis looked at him plaintively, opened his mouth in what was obviously going to be protest or at least complaint, but then dosed it again. "Yes, sir," he said. "Scientists who know what a curse is." His face faded.

Buzz said approvingly, "You're catching onto this routine fast."

They looked at each other some more.

Finally Ed flicked on his switch and said, "Get me James C. Westbrook. He lives just south of Kingsburg."

Randy said, "Yes, sir," and in moments, Jim Westbrook's face faded in on the screen.

He said, "Hello, Little Ed. Sorry, I'm awfully busy. If you don't mind..."

Ed Wonder ignored his words. "Listen, the other day when we were talking about miracles, you said you believed in them. That is, that you believe in things happening that we can't explain by our present scientific knowledge."

Jim Westbrook, in the phone screen, looked as though he were in a hurry, but he took the time to say, "I'm glad you qualified, friend, I don't like the term miracle."

Ed said, "Well, look, do you believe in hexes?" He waited for the other's disclaimer.

"Sure," Westbrook said. "I've looked into the subject a bit."

"Now, I'm not talking about this voodoo sort of thing where the victim is convinced he's going to fall sick if the voodoo priest puts a spell on him, and then, of course, does. I mean..."

Westbrook said, "Really, I'm in a hurry but... Look, friend, the witchman does not have to convince his victim he's going to be a victim. The victim gets convinced because he *does* get sick. I've found that it most bodaciously is not something to play games with. It does not depend on faith or belief, on either the part of the victim or of the practitioner. In the

same way that dowsing rods work for people who are completely positive they don't work."

"Go on," Ed told him.

"Hexing happens the same way. I found out one Halloween party. If you want some, well, unusual, let's say, emotional feelings, try figuring out how to go about taking off a hex you didn't believe you could put on, because hexes don't exist, only the poor victim is very well hexed and you don't know anything about unhexing whatsoever. Friend, it's about six degrees worse than the amateur hypnotist who's gotten somebody into a trance, imposed a posthypnotic suggestion, and now can't unsuggest the thing. At least, there are books on hypnotism in the libraries to tell what to do in that case. But try finding a book on unhexing somebody you've accidentally and unbelievably hexed. Friend, it's a matter of *I didn't know the gun was loaded!*"

Jim Westbrook began to say more, but then darted a glance down at his wrist. "Listen, Little Ed, I can't spend any more time with you talking about hexes."

"That's what you think," Ed grinned at him.

Westbrook scowled. "What does that supposed to mean, friend?"

Ed said, happily, "You've just been drafted into talking your head off about every aspect of hexes you know about, pal."

The other said, "Little Ed, you better see a doctor. So long." He cut the connection.

Ed Wonder said happily, "Stereotype, eh?" He flicked the intercom switch. "Major Davis," he said.

The major's face came on and he said, both warily and wearily, "Yes, sir."

"There's a James C. Westbrook, who lives on the outskirts of Kingsburg. Have him brought in immediately and take down everything he knows about hexes. And, Major, listen. He might not want to come. However, he's, ah, crash priority. You'd better send four men."

"Yes, sir, to speed things up, do we have anything else on him, sir. Where does he work? What does he do? He might not be at home."

Ed Wonder said, "He's a consulting engineer, specializes on rhabdomancy."

"Rhabdomancy," Major Davis said blankly.

"Yes, rhabdomancy, radiesthesia. He operates dowsing rods."

Major Davis looked as though he had been cruelly hurt. "Yes, sir. Crash priority. Pick up this man who operates dowsing rods." His face faded pathetically from the screen.

10

Ed Wonder had been assigned an apartment in the New Woolworth Building while Helen Fontaine and Buzz De Kemp found accommodations in nearby hotels. In the morning, Ed Wonder got down to his office early, but evidently not early enough. His assistants, male and female, in the outer offices were in a flurry of activity. He wondered, vaguely, what they were doing. He hadn't issued enough in the way of directions to have kept a fraction of them busy.

He stopped at one desk long enough to say, "What are you doing?"

The young man looked up. "Incantations," he said. He had a pile of books, pamphlets and manuscripts before him and a mike connected to a dicto in his left hand.

"Incantations?" Ed said.

The other had gone back to his perusal, now he looked up again. He obviously didn't recognize Ed as his chief. For that matter, Ed didn't recognize him. He had never seen him before.

The other said, "Incantations. The chanting or uttering of words purporting to have magical powers. I'm accumulating basic data."

"You mean we've got a full time man working on nothing but finding out about incantations?"

The young man looked at him pityingly. "*I'm* translating incantations in Serbo-Croat. They've got fifty-odd others on other languages. Now, if you'll please excuse me." He went back to his books.

Ed Wonder went into his own office.

There had been a few matters which had come up that Randy Everett informed him about. The extent of the offices allotted to Project Tubber had been upped considerably during the night, as well as the number of personnel. They were now working on a three shift basis. Ed hadn't known about that.

Mr. De Kemp hadn't come in yet but had called to let them know he was feeling indisposed.

At that point in Miss Everett's report, Ed snarled, "Indisposed! Call that bum and tell him to get in here, hangover or no hangover. Tell him I'll send a squad of marines, if he doesn't."

Randy said, "Yes, sir."

Ed said, "Put Major Davis on."

The face that faded into the phone screen had a major's leaves on the shirt collar, but it wasn't the face of Major Davis.

Ed Wonder said, "Where's Lenny Davis?"

"Davis isn't with us any more, sir. He had a breakdown of some sort or other. My name is Wells."

"Oh, he did, huh? Well, look here Wells, no more breakdowns among you army types, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"If there are any breakdowns around here, I'll have them."

"Yes, sir."

Ed tried to remember why he had called Major Davis, and couldn't. He flicked off the screen. It lit up again immediately to display the face of Colonel Fredric Williams.

The colonel said, "Dwight Hopkins wants to see you immediately, Wonder."

"Okay," Ed said. He got to his feet. He wished that Buzzo were here to back him. There were angles to this big executive bit.

At the entry to Project Tubber, Johnson and Stevens, the two security heavies, fell in behind him. Evidently, he was still under guard. It was just as well. He couldn't have found his way to the Hopkins offices otherwise. He had the vague feeling that this whole commission, or whatever its official name was, had grown by half again during the night. The crush was greater in the corridors, still more equipment was being shoved up and down the halls, and more offices were being filled with desks, files, phones, intercoms and all the other paraphernalia of bureaucracy.

He was admitted immediately to Dwight Hopkins' presence and found the president's right hand man winding up a conference with fifteen or twenty assorted efficient-looking types, only several of whom were in uniform. Ed wasn't introduced and the others filed out with the exception of Professor Braithgale, the one among them all that Ed Wonder had recognized.

Hopkins said, "Sit down, Mr. Wonder. How does Project Tubber go?"

Ed held up his hands, palms upward. "How could it go? We just got started yesterday afternoon. We're investigating the nature of a curse. Or at least trying to. We're trying also to get as complete rundown on Tubber as we can, on the off chance that we'll find some clue as to how he got this power of his."

Hopkins shifted slightly in his chair, as though what he was about to say didn't appeal to him. He said, "Your hypothesis, the Tubber hypothesis, is strengthening in its appeal, Mr. Wonder. It occurs to me that one aspect of this crisis might be unknown to you. Did you know that radar was not effected?"

"I wondered about that," Ed told him.

"But that isn't what has our technicians rapidly going off their minds. Neither is radio as used in international commerce, shipping, that sort of thing. But above all, neither are educational motion pictures. I spent an hour last night, on the edge of insanity, watching the current cinema idol, Warren Waren, come through perfectly in a travelogue sort of documentary used to promote the teaching of geography in our high schools. He had donated his time. But when we attempted to project one of his regular films. *The Queen and I*, using what our research people assured me was identical type film and using the same projector, we got that fantastic holdover of the image on the screen."

Dwight Hopkins' gaze was steady, but there was somehow, behind his eyes, a frantic look.

Ed said, "TV, in the way we use it in telephones, isn't effected either. The curse is selective, just as in books. Non-fiction isn't effected, nor even the kind of fiction Tubber likes. What the devil, not even his favorite comic strip is changed. But none of this is news, why'd you bring it up?"

Professor Braithgale spoke up for the first time. "Mr. Wonder, it was one thing considering your hypothesis along with anything, absolutely anything, else. But we are rapidly arriving to the point where your theory is the only one that makes sense. The least sensible of all comes nearest to making sense."

"What happened to sun spots?" Ed srud.

Hopkins said, "On the face of it, such activity might disrupt radio, but it would hardly be selective. At the remotest, it wouldn't exercise censorship over our lighter fiction."

"So you're beginning to suspect that I'm not as kooky as you first

thought."

The bureaucrat ignored that. He said, "The reason we brought you in, Mr. Wonder, is that we wish to consult you on a new suggestion. It has been proposed that we use telephone lines to pipe TV programs into the homes. A crash program would be started immediately. Within a month or so every home in the United Welfare States of America would have its entertainment again."

Ed Wonder stood up and leaned on Dwight Hopkins' desk and looked down into the older man's face. "You know the answer to that silly idea as well as I do. How would you like to upset the economy of this country by fouling up telephone and telegraph, to go along with TV and radio?"

Hopkins stared at him.

Ed Wonder stared back.

Braithgale coughed. "That's what we were afraid of. Then you think..."

"Yes, I do. Tubber would lay a hex on your new wired TV as soon as it started up."

It seemed a stronger Edward Wonder than they had spoken to only the day before. Dwight Hopkins looked at him calculatingly. He said, finally, "Professor, suppose you tell Mr. Wonder the latest developments pertaining to the crisis."

Ed returned to his chair and sat down.

The tall gray professor's voice took on its lecture tone. "Soap box orators," he said.

"What in the devil is a soap box orator?" Ed demanded.

"Possibly a bit before your time. They were already on their way out when radio began nationwide hookups and the programs began to offer consistent entertainment to the masses. We still had a remnant of the soap box orators in the 1930s but short of a few exceptions such as Boston Common and Hyde Park in London, they disappeared by the middle of this century. They are open air speakers who talk to their audiences from improvised stands. In the old days, when large numbers of our people strolled the streets of a pleasant spring or summer evening, these speakers were able to attract and hold their audiences."

"Well, what did they talk about?" Ed scowled.

"Anything and everything. Some were religious cranks. Some had things to sell such as patent medicine. Some were radicals, Socialists, Communists, I.W.W.S, that sort of thing. This was their opportunity to

reach the people with whatever their message might be."

Ed said, "Well, so what? Let them talk. It'll give the people something to do, especially until you get the circuses, carnivals and vaudeville going again."

Braithgale said, "Don't lay too much store by live entertainment, Wonder. Only a limited number of persons can watch a live performance. Vaudeville becomes meaningless if you are too far from the stage, so does legitimate theatre or a circus. Perhaps it was that which bankrupted Rome. They had to build ever more arenas so that their whole population could crowd into them. They simply couldn't keep that many shows going."

"But what's wrong with these soap box orators?"

Braithgale said, "Mr. Wonder, with the coming of cinema, radio, and finally, capping it all, television, the voice of dissent faded from the land. Minority parties and other malcontents could not afford the high costs of utilizing these media themselves. They were thrown back on distributing leaflets, pamphlets and little magazines or weekly newspapers. And, of course, we know how few people actually read anything necessitating concentrated thought. Even those of us who do read are presented daily with so much material that we are highly selective. In pure self-defense, we must look at the title or headline of the reading material offered us, and make a quick decision. Few in the minority groups have the skills or the resources to present their material in the attractive manner in which the more oppulent publishers do. It boils down to the fact that the beliefs of the dissenters against our affluent society have not been reaching the people."

It was beginning to get through to Ed Wonder.

Hopkins finished the story. "But now, every night, there are tens of thousands of belligerent amateur orators standing on our street corners, harranging people with nothing else to do but listen, people desperate for something to do."

"You mean these, ah, soap box orators are organized? They've got some kind of definite bug that..."

Hopkins held up a thin hand. "No. No, not yet. But that is just a matter of time. Sooner or later one of them will come up with an idea that appeals to the mob. He'll attract followers, other street corner harrangers. The condition of the country being the way it is now, almost any really popular idea would sweep in like wildfire. A new religion. More likely a new political theory, however far right or left."

"Oh," Ed said. He could understand the workings of politician Dwight Hopkins' mind now. The administration had definite irons in the fire. Tubber's efforts might threaten the political climate. However, Ed still didn't see where he came in.

They weren't long in enlightening him.

Hopkins said, "Mr. Wonder, time is running out on us. We must have some action. It will be necessary to contact this Ezekiel Joshua Tubber."

"I think it's a good idea. Go ahead. Maybe you can appeal to his patriotism, or something. No, come to think of it, patriotism is out. He thinks the country is being run by a bunch of idiots. He's against the welfare state."

"Little Ed," Hopkins said smoothly, "I am afraid that it is going to have to be you who sees Tubber. I can think of no one else to whom we can entrust the assignment."

"Oh, no you don't. Listen, why not send a few of the F.B.I. boys? Or maybe the C.I.A. They're *used* to trouble. I hate it."

Hopkins was at his most persuasive. "If Tubber is at the root of our troubles, sending police officers of any description could well prove disastrous. If he is not, then it could only make us look foolish. No, you are the one. He knows you, his daughter is evidently attracted to you."

"But you need me to handle my department, Project Tubber," Ed said desperately.

"Mr. De Kemp can handle matters until your return."

"I'm expendable, huh?" Ed said bitterly.

"If you must put it in that manner, yes," Hopkins told him.

"Well, you're just going to have to get another patsy. I'm afraid to get within miles of that old kook," Ed Wonder told them definitely.

They had given him a highly detailed map of the Catskill area in which was located Elysium. It wasn't too far from the Ashokan reservoir, nor from the once artist colony of Woodstock.

Ed passed through that town, on to Bearsville and beyond to a hamlet called Shady. From there a dirt side road led off some miles to the community of Elysium. There were a couple of signs along the way. Ed Wonder had never had the little Volkshover over a dirt road before. However, beyond churning up quite a screen of dust left behind, there

seemed no special effect.

He passed a small cottage, laid back from the road. Perhaps cabin would be the better term. There was an extensive garden of both flowers and vegetables around it. Ed Wonder drove on, passing another, somewhat similar abode, though not an exact duplicate. In the back of his mind he identified the places as summer houses; someone who wanted to get away from it all, get back to nature during the warm months. The idea didn't exactly appeal to him, although, come to think of it, there were desirable aspects to this sort of...

Then it came to him as another cottage appeared to the left.

This was Elysium.

There were little side roads going off in this direction and that. Obviously, to other habitations.

His face twisted. People lived here *all year around*? Stuck off here away from, well, from civilization?

It came to him that there were neither TV nor radio antennas. Nor, for that matter, telephone wires. It came to him, as a shock, that there couldn't under the circumstances be any community distribution center. These people must actually cook their own food.

He let the Volkshover settle to the ground so that he could consider other aspects. Three of the cottages were in view now. And there wasn't a hovercar in sight, aside from his own.

"You'd go batty," he muttered.

There were some youngsters in a grove off a way, playing in the trees. They were scampering around the branches like a tribe of monkeys. Ed Wonder's first response was to wonder why their parents were allowing them to risk their necks so obviously. Say what you wanted to against TV but at least it kept the kids off the streets and out of dangerous play. A kid could get himself in some risky situations if allowed to horse around as these were. Then something else came to him. Perhaps children should be exposed to a certain degree of danger in their play. Perhaps a broken arm or so, while going through the process of growing up, came under the head of education and had value in the way of experience.

He was going to go over to the youngsters to ask directions, but then, in the distance, saw someone he recognized. He dropped the lift lever and at slow speed proceeded in her direction. It was one of Tubber's followers. One of the women who had acted as receptionist at the tent entrance there in Kingsburg, the first night Ed and Helen had come afoul of Ezekiel

Joshua Tubber.

Ed pulled up beside her and said, "Ah... loved one..."

She stopped and frowned, evidently surprised to see a hovercar on the streets—if they could be called streets—of Elysium. She obviously didn't recognize him. She said hesitantly, "Good afternoon, loved one. Could I be of assistance?"

Ed climbed out of the beetle and said, "You don't remember me. I've attended a couple of the meetings of, ah, the Speaker of the Word." He should have planned this out better. The fact of the matter was, he hadn't a clue to what he was going to find here and was playing it by ear.

He said, "I thought I'd come and see Elysium."

Her face lost stiffness. "You are a pilgrim?"

"Well, maybe not exactly. I'd just like to know more about it." He fell in beside her, leaving the car where it was. Parking was no problem in Elysium. "I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?"

"Oh, no." She continued to walk along. "I'm only delivering some of my things to the printer."

"Printer?"

"That building there. It's our print shop."

Ed Wonder looked at that building there, which they were approaching. It looked little different from the cottages. "You mean you print. . ."

"Just about everything." She didn't look quite as grim as he'd remembered her at the tent meeting in Kingsburg. Come to think of it, Ed decided, he had *expected* her to look grim at the tent meeting. A dedicated Holy Roller, or something, all set to froth at the mouth against dancing, drink, card playing and similar sins.

He said, even as they approached the door. "You mean books?" Ed Wonder's conception of the printing of books involved acres of Rube Goldberg printing presses, entirely automated, with huge rolls of paper unwinding at flashing speed at one end and finished volumes flowing out, to be wrapped and boxed, again automatically, at the other. All at the rate of thousands per hour, if not per minute. This whole building couldn't have been more than thirty by forty feet, at most.

He followed her through the door.

"Books, pamphlets, even a little weekly newspaper we send out to pilgrims throughout the nation who are not yet quite ready to join us in Elysium." She greeted one of the two men who occupied the print shop.

"Kelly, I've finally got the last two verses."

Kelly had been standing before what Ed vaguely recognized to be a primitive type of printing press. With his left leg he was stomping up and down on a treadle, somewhat similar to the powering of the early sewing machine. At the same time he was picking up sheets of paper with his right hand, inserting them deftly into the moving press, removing them just as deftly with his left hand, repeating the process over and over again.

Kelly said, "Hi, Martha. Good. Norm can set them up."

Ed was watching in fascination. If the other got his hand caught between that type and. . .

Kelly grinned at him. "Never saw a platen press before?"

"Well, no," Ed said.

Martha said, "Kelly, this is a new pilgrim. He's been to some of Josh's meetings."

They exchanged banalities. For a time, Ed watched in complete astonishment. He realized he couldn't have been more surprised if he had come into a room where women were carding wool and then utilizing spinning wheels to make thread. Had he known it, that was going to come later.

While Martha and Kelly got into some technical discussion about the book they were evidently in the process of producing, Ed wandered over to where the room's other occupant was working.

This worthy looked up and grinned a welcome. "Name's Haer, loved one," he said. "Norm Haer."

"Ed," Ed told him. "Ed Wonder. What in the devil are you doing?"

Haer grinned again. "Setting body type. This is a California type box. Ten point, Goudy Old Style."

"I thought you set type on a machine that looks something like a typewriter."

Haer laughed. "That was the old fashioned way. Here in Elysium we set it by hand." His hand darted, flicked out, flicked back again. The lines of type in his hand-held tray were slowly growing.

Ed said, a faint exasperation in his voice: "Look, what's the point? Ben Franklin used to print like this but since then we've dreamed up a few improvements."

The typesetter's fingers never stopped their flying. He was evidently the

sort who remained in almost perpetual good humor. At least, thus far, his face had never lost its smile.

"There's several angles," he told Ed. "One, there's a lot of satisfaction in turning out a finished product with your own hands. Preferably a superior product. Something went out of the production of commodities when a shoemaker no longer makes footwear starting out with leather and winding up with a finished pair of shoes, but instead stands before a gigantic machine, which he doesn't understand, watching a few gauges and periodically throwing a switch, or pushing a button, for four or five hours a day."

Ed said, "Oh, great, but that first shoemaker of yours turned out maybe one pair of shoes a day, and the second one ten or twenty thousand."

The printer grinned. "That's right. But the second one has ulcers, hates his wife and is an incipient alcoholic."

Ed Wonder said suddenly, "What did you use to do before you got this job setting type for Tubber? You don't sound like some uneducated, small time..." He let the sentence dribble away. It didn't sound very diplomatic.

Norm Haer was laughing. "I'm not setting type for Tubber, but for Elysium. I used to be managing director of World-Wide Printing Corporation. We had offices in Ultra-New York, Neuve Los Angeles, London, Paris and Peking."

Ed had experienced the ruggedness of trying to climb the pyramid in the Welfare State. When only a third of the nation's potential working force was needed in production, the competition could get fierce. He said, in compassion. "Got all the way to the top but then they bounced you, eh?"

"Not exactly," Haer grinned. "I was too big a stockholder for that. I happened to read one of Josh Tubber's pamphlets one day. So the next day I got hold of everything of his I could locate. And the next week I told World-Wide what they could do with their job and came here to Elysium to help set up this shop."

The man was obviously halfway around the corner, good humor or not. Ed left that line of thought. "What are you working on now?" he said.

"A limited edition of Martha Kent's latest verse."

"Martha Kent?" Ed Wonder knew the name. Poetry wasn't his forte but American Nobel Prize winners weren't so common that you didn't hear of them. "You mean she's given you permission to bring out a book of hers!"

"That's not the way I'd put it," Haer grinned. "It's more a matter of Martha bringing it out herself."

"Martha!" Ed blurted. His eyes went accusingly over to where the woman with whom he had entered the shop was talking with Kelly as he ran his foot-operated platen press. "You mean that's Martha Kent?"

"As ever was," Haer chuckled.

Ed Wonder muttered some sort of goodbye and rejoined the other two. He said, in accusation, "You're Martha Kent."

"That's right, loved one," she smiled.

"Look," Ed demanded. "I don't want to appear dense, but why're you bringing out a book of your latest poems through a little one horse outfit like this?"

"Never let Josh Tubber know I said this," she said, and there was a quick elfin quality in her face, "but to make money."

"Make money!" Ed said in disgust.

Kelly ran out of paper, stopped peddling, wiped his hands on his apron and walked to a nearby pile of books. He took one up and returned with it to the newcomer. He handed it to Ed without speaking.

Ed turned it over in his hands. It was bound in leather. Somehow it was different. He opened it and fingered through the pages. The paper was heavy and had sort of an antique finish. He had never heard of the author. He had a strange feeling that he was handling a work of art.

The other two watched him, a disconcerting amusement in their air.

To say something, Ed said, "I've never seen paper like this, where did you get it?"

"We made it," Kelly said.

Ed closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them and said, "What do you need money for? You evidently make everything." He pointed a finger accusingly at Martha Kent's dress. "That's homespun, isn't it?"

"Yes. But obviously we can't do completely without money, even in Elysium. For instance, we need postage to mail our publications. Sometimes we need medicines. We have to buy salt. Oh, you'd be surprised."

"Look," Ed said plaintively. "You, Martha Kent, write a book that's potentially a bestseller. You bring it in here and put out a limited edition by setting it by hand, printing it yourself by footpower on paper you made yourself. So how many copies do you print. A thousand?"

"Two hundred," Martha said.

"So you sell them for how much apiece? A hundred dollars?"

"Two dollars," Martha said.

Ed closed his eyes again, this time in pure anguish. He said, "Two dollars for a book like this? I'm no biblomaniac, but a first edition, limited edition, hand produced Martha Kent would be all but priceless. But aside from that, if you simply put the manuscript in the hands of any major publisher, you'd realize a small fortune."

Kelly said reasonably, "You don't understand. We don't need a small fortune. It's just that right at the present Elysium could use about four hundred dollars, for medicine and..."

Martha interrupted hurriedly to say, "But don't let Josh Tubber know our motivation. Josh isn't always very practical. He'd be indignant if he knew we were so crass as to publish this work for the sake of raising money."

Ed had given up. He said bitterly, "What would he do with them? Give them away?"

Martha and Kelly said in unison, and as though nothing were more reasonable, "Yes."

Ed said, "I'm going outside to get some air."

He walked back in the direction of the Volkshover, refusing to allow himself to start tearing his hair.

All right, darn it, give them every benefit of the doubt. This little community set in the hills and woods of the Catskills had its virtues. Good clean air. Tremendous scenery—there in the background was Overlook Mountain. Good place to raise children, possibly. Although, the devil knows where they'd get their schooling. He pulled himself up on that one. If Tubber held an academecian's degree and Martha Kent was one of his followers, then Ed suspected there were others capable of teaching school, in some sort of little red schoolhouse tradition.

All right. So it had its qualities, although it might be another thing in the winter. His eyes went around to two or three of the cottages. They all had chimneys. Holy smokes, these people actually burned wood. Logs, evidently, that they cut themselves. Not even oil heat in the winter! How stoneage could you get?

Come to think of it, though, it was probably beautiful here in the winter. Especially when the snow was newly fallen. Ed Wonder had a custom, when there'd been a heavy new snowfall, of driving out from Kingsburg into the country, just to look at the snow in the early morning,

on the tree limbs, on the fields—before man and sun destroyed it. Of course, he never left the main roads. This would be different. It occurred to him that a really heavy snowfall would snow them in here, so that they couldn't get down to even Woodstock for supplies.

He drew himself up again. They didn't have to get down to Woodstock, or anywhere else, for supplies. They grew their own supplies, evidently.

But how about medical care, in case one of them fell ill while they were snowed in? He didn't know, possibly some of them had medical training. They seemed to have everything else.

All right, given all their qualities. They were still as kooky as a bunch of Alice in Wonderland hatters. Getting themselves off here, living like a bunch of pioneers. No TV, no radio. He wondered how often the kids had been allowed to go into town to the movies. And then decided probably never. Perhaps he didn't know Ezekiel Joshua Tubber too well, but it was obvious that the prophet didn't exactly hold with modern films, with their endless violence, crime and what Tubber probably thought were perverted values.

What in the devil did they *do* with themselves?

And that kooky conversation he'd just had with Martha Kent, Kelly the printer, and Haer the typesetter. There must have been months put into that book of hers. What was to be the product of all that work? Four hundred dollars. How did they arrive at that sum? They'd needed that exact amount for something of which the colony was in want. Oh, great. What was wrong with eight hundred dollars, giving them a reserve of half for future colony needs? Hadn't that even occurred to anyone? Hadn't Professor McCord told Ed that Tubber had a degree in economics? What did they teach in the Harvard School of Economics these days?

He restrained himself again on the tearing of hair bit.

At that point, he spotted somebody else he knew, disappearing into one of the cottages. It was Nefertiti Tubber.

He called to her, but evidently wasn't heard.

Ed Wonder took a deep breath, straightened his spine, ran his index finger around the inside of his collar and performed one of the bravest acts of his life. He marched up to the cottage and knocked on the door.

Her voice called, "Come in, loved one."

He opened the door and stood there a moment. From time to time, in his reading he had come upon the term quaking. Characters would quake. He had never got quite a clear picture of what quaking amounted to. Now

he knew. Ed Wonder was quaking.

However, unless the Speaker of the Word was off in one of the two smaller rooms which the cottage seemed to boast, besides the larger one which opened off the road, Nefertiti was alone. There was nothing in Nefertiti Tubber to quake about. Ed stopped quaking.

She said, "Why, Edward. Loved one. You've come to me."

It wasn't exactly the way the followers of Tubber usually pronounced loved one.

Ed closed the door behind him and cleared his throat.

She came closer, her arms at her sides, and stood before him.

It was as simple as that. He didn't have to think about it at all. If he had, maybe he wouldn't have. Wouldn't have done what came so naturally.

He took her very firmly and kissed her very truly, as old Hemingway used to put it, smack on the kisser. She had a kisser built to order for kissing. But evidently hadn't put it to much practice.

Nefertiti Tubber seemed highly in favor of rectifying that shortcoming. She didn't stir. Her face continued to be held up to his, her eyes, open, not closed, were dreaming.

He kissed her again.

After a time he remembered to say, nervously, "Ah... where's your father, ah... honey?"

She stirred, as though impatient of talk. "He's gone into Woodstock to meditate over a few glasses of beer."

Ed closed his eyes in quick appeal to his guardian angels, if any. "Ezekiel Joshua Tubber on the town having a few brews?"

"Why not?" She took him by the hand and led him to the couch. It was, he noted, absently, obviously of hand construction, even the padding, the bolsters and pillows. Somebody had put a great deal of work into this piece of furniture. She seated herself comfortably beside him, not relinquishing his hand.

Ed said, "I don't know. I just kind of thought your father would be against drinking. In fact, any day I expected my autobar to start making with buttermilk, or something, when I dialed a highball."

It came to him that this was an opportunity he should be taking advantage of, instead of spending it necking. No matter how desperately Nefertiti Tubber might be in need of practice.

He said, "Look Nefertiti... by the way, did you know the original bearer of your name was the most beautiful woman in antiquity?"

"No," she sighed. She snuggled his arm more tightly around her waist. "Tell me more."

He said, "I suppose your father gave you the name because Nefertiti's husband, Amenhotep, was the first pharaoh to teach that there was only one god." Ed Wonder had picked up that bit of knowledge from Professor Varley Dee on the Far Out Hour one night. A religious twitch guest had been of the belief that the Hebrews had been the first to teach monotheism.

"Well, no," she said. "Actually, it was a press agent. My real name is Sue."

"Press agent!"

"Ummm," she said distantly, as though impatient of talk. "Back when I was a stripper."

"Back when you were WHAT?"

"Doing a strip tease act, on the Borsch Circuit."

Ed Wonder sat belt upright. His eyes goggled her. "Listen," he said desperately. "I'm hearing things wrong. I could have sworn you said you were a strip teaser on the Borsch Circuit."

"Ummm, put your arm around me again, Edward. That was before my father rescued me and brought me to Elysium."

Ed knew that the best possible thing he could do was change the subject. Change it to anything. But he couldn't. Any more than he could have kept from wrigging a loose tooth with his tongue, no matter what the pain.

"You mean to tell me that your father allowed you to do a strip tease act, on the Borsch Circuit or anywhere else?"

"Oh, that was before he was my father."

Ed Wonder closed his eyes, resigned to anything.

Nefertiti summed it up quickly. "I was an orphan and, well, sort of kid-crazy to get into show business. So I ran away from the orphanage and lied about my age. I was fifteen. And, well, finally I got a job with a troupe doing real live shows. I was booked as Nefertiti the Modest, the girl who blushes all over. But we didn't do so well, because who wants to see real live shows any more when all the truly good acts are on TV? Anyway, to make it short..."

"The shorter the better," Ed muttered.

"... father rescued me." Her tone went apologetic. "It was the first time I heard him speak in wrath. Then he brought me here, and sort of adopted me."

Ed didn't ask what *sort of adopted* meant. He said, "The first time you heard him speak in wrath? What did he do?"

Nefertiti said uncomfortably, "Uhh, he kind of burned the nightclub building down. Sort of, uhh, like a bolt of lightning, kind of."

He brought his twirling mind back to approximate place and present, with a great effort. He simply had to use this opportunity to advantage. He couldn't sit here and blabber as these curves were thrown at him.

"Look," he said firmly, disengaging his hand from hers and half-turning to stare at her levelly, seriously, "I didn't come here just to see you."

"You *didn't*?" There was hurt in her face.

"Well, not entirely," he said hurriedly. "I've been given a very responsible job by the government, Nefertiti. Very responsible. Part of my duty is to find out... well, to find out more about your father and this movement of his."

"Oh, wonderful. Then you'll have to spend a great deal of time here in Elysium."

He kept himself from answering with an emphatic negative to that and said, "Now, to start at beginnings. I'm a little confused about this new religion your father is trying to spread."

"But about what, Edward? It's perfectly simple. Father says all great religions are quite simple, at least before they are corrupted."

"Well, for instance, who is this All-Mother you're always talking about?"

"Why, you are, Edward."

11

After a long moment, Ed Wonder opened his eyes again. He said, slowly, "I keep getting the impression that every other sentence is being left out of this conversation. What in the name of Mountain Moving Mohammed are you talking about?"

"The All-Mother. You're the All-Mother, I'm the All-Mother, that little bird singing out there, it's the All-Mother. The All-Mother is everything.

The All-Mother is life. That's the way father explains it."

"You mean, something like Mother Nature?" Ed said with a certain relief.

"Exactly like Mother Nature. The All-Mother is transcendent. We pilgrims on the path to Elysium aren't so primitive as to believe in a, well, *god*. Not a personal, individual god. If we must use such terms, and evidently we do, in order to spread our message, then we must use All-Mother as a symbol of all life. Father says that woman was man's earliest symbol when searching for spiritual values. The Triple Goddess, the White Goddess was all but universal in the first civilizations. Even down into modern times, Mary has almost been deified by Christians. Note that even atheists refer to *Mother* Nature, rather than *Father* Nature. Father says that those religions that have degraded women, such as the Moslems, are contemptible and invariably reactionary."

"Oh," Ed Wonder said. He knuckled his chin ruefully. "I suppose you people aren't quite as kooky as I first had figured out."

Nefertiti Tubber hadn't heard that. Her face was twisted thoughtfully. "We could probably have that cottage, up next to the laboratory," she said.

The import of that didn't get through to him at first. "Laboratory?" he said.

"Ummm, where Doctor Wetzler is working on his cure."

"Wetzler! You don't mean..."

"Ummm, Felix Wetzler."

"You mean Felix Wetzler is up here in this backwoods... that is, in this little community?"

"Of course. They had him working on some sort of pills to give women curly hair, or something. So he gave up in disgust and came here."

"Felix Wetzler, working up here. Balls of fire, he's the most famous... What kind of a cure is he working on?"

"For death. We could have the cottage right next to him. It will be finished in a day or two. And. . . "

Ed Wonder shot quickly to his feet. It had got through to him now. "Look," he said hurriedly. "Like I told you, I've got this important government assignment. I have to see your father."

She was unhappy, but she stood too. "When will you be back, Ed?"

"Well, I don't know. You know how it is. The government. I'm working

directly under Dwight Hopkins himself. Duty first. All that sort of kookery." He began edging toward the door.

She followed him. At the door she held up her face again, for his kiss. "Edward, do you know when I fell in love with you?"

"Well, no," he said hurriedly. "I wouldn't know when that happened."

"When I heard them calling you little Ed. You don't like to be called Little Ed. But they all call you that. They don't care that you hate it, they don't even know you do."

He looked into her. Suddenly everything was different He said, "You never called me that."

"No."

He bent down and kissed her again. She didn't seem to need practice as much as he had thought earlier. He tried again, just to be sure. She hardly needed practice at all.

Ed said, "I'll be back."

"Of course."

He found Ezekiel Joshua Tubber seated at a table in a corner of Dixon's Bar.

The drive down from Elysium, through Shady and Bearsville, had been accomplished in a state of mental confusion.

But now that he considered it, he had never been in a state other than one of confusion every time he came up against Tubber and his movement. The man had started out seemingly a Bible belt itinerant revivalist, and wound up with an academecian's degree in political economy from Harvard. His daughter had started off as a simple, slightly plumpish girl in gingham print dress who blushed, and had wound up an ex-strip teaser and only a sort-of-adopted member of the Tubber family. The new religion had started off just one more sect of cranks, and now was revealed to have among its followers Nobel Prize winner Martha Kent, and ultra-top research biochemist Felix Wetzler.

However, he was, beginning to lose his fear of Ezekiel Joshua Tubber. The Lincolnesque prophet—if that were the term—was beginning to take on aspects of reality.

Ed Wonder had brought himself up sharp at that point. Reality, his neck. There was no reality in a situation that embraced the laying on of

worldwide hexes, just because an elderly twitch got himself into a tizzy against this or that aspect of modern society, from time to time.

He spotted the Tubber horse and wagon pulled up before a smallish auto bar which read simply *Dixon's*. Ed Wonder began fumbling in his pockets for a coin for the parking meter; there being an empty place right next to the wagon. However, at this point he saw a cop coming along the street toward him and scowling unbelievably at each meter in its turn.

When he came abreast of Ed's Volkshover, Ed said, "What seems to be the matter, Officer?"

The other looked at him unbelievably. "These here parking meters. Something crazy's happened."

Ed Wonder could see it coming, but he couldn't help saying, "What?"

"There's no slot for the coin to go in. There's gotta be a slot. There was a slot yesterday. There's always been a slot for the coins to go in. This is crazy. You'd think they were hexed, or something."

"Yeah," Ed said, wearily. He climbed out of the hovercar and made his way toward Dixon's.

There was a blast of juke box music emanating from the auto bar. Ed Wonder set his shoulder against it, and pushed his way in. For some reason, since the elimination of radio and TV, everybody seemed to have tuned up their juke boxes to the cyclonic point.

Tubber was seated in a corner, a half-full glass of beer before him. In spite of the fact that the place was packed, his table was empty except for himself. He looked up at Ed's approach and smiled gentle welcome.

"Ah, dear one. Will you share a glass of beer with me?" Ed steeled himself and took a chair. He said bravely, "Sure, I'll have a glass of beer. What surprises me is that you're having one. I thought all you reformers were on the blue-nosed side. How come the pilgrims on the path to Elysium aren't morally opposed to the demon alcohol?"

Tubber chuckled again. At least the old boy seemed to be in a good humor. He raised his voice over the blast of the juke box. "I see you are beginning to pick up some of our symbolic terminology. But why should we be opposed to the blessing of alcohol? It is one of the All-Mother's earliest gifts to mankind. So far back as we can trace, in history and prehistory, man was aware of alcoholic beverages and enjoyed them." He held up his glass of beer. "We have written records of the brewing of beer going back some 5000 years B.C in Mesopotamia. By the way, were you aware of the fact that when the Bible mentions wine, in its earlier books, it

is referring to barley wine, which is, of course, actually beer. Beer is a much older beverage than wine."

"No, I didn't know it," Ed said. He dialed himself a Manhattan, feeling a need for some more substantial backing than beer would promote. "But most religions point out that alcohol can be a disaster. The Mohammedans don't allow it at all."

Tubber shrugged pleasantly, after darting a disapproving glance over at the juke box which was now rendering a Rock'n' Swing version of *Silent Night*. He all but yelled to get his voice above the alleged music. "Anything can be a disaster if overdone. You can drink enough water to kill yourself. What in the name of the All-Mother is that piece they're playing? It seems, very vaguely, to be familiar."

Ed told him.

Tubber looked disbelief. "That's *Stille Nacht*? Dear one, you are jesting."

Ed figured they'd gone through enough preliminary pleasantries. He said, "Look here, Mr. Tubber..."

Tubber bent an eye on him.

"...Uh, that is, Ezekiel. I've been assigned to contact you and try to come to some understanding on these developments of the past couple of weeks. I don't suppose there's any need of telling you that the world is going to pot by the minute. There are riots going on in half of the larger cities of the world. People are going batty for lack of something to do. No TV, no radio, no movies. Not even comics or fiction, to read."

"Surely you are mistaken. Why, the world's classics haven't been effected through my righteous actions."

"The world's classics! Who the devil reads classics? The people want something they can read without thinking! After a hard day, people can't concentrate."

"A hard day?" Tubber said mildly.

"Well, you know what I mean."

The bearded religious leader said gently, "That is the difficulty, dear one. The All-Mother designed man to put in a hard day, as you call it. A full day. A productive day. Not necessarily a physically hard day, of course. Mental endeavor is just as important as physical."

"*Just* as important," Ed said. "More important. Anybody knows that."

"No," Tubber said mildly. "The hand is as important as the brain."

"Yeah? Without the brain where would man be?"

"And where without the hand?"

"Some of the monkeys have hands and haven't got very far."

"Such animals as dolphins and whales have brains and haven't gotten very far either. Both are needed, dear one. The one as badly as the other."

Ed said, "We're getting away from the point. The point is that the world's on the point of collapse because of this, these... well, whatever it is you do."

Tubber nodded and dialed himself another beer. He scowled at the juke box which was now roaring out a hill billy lament, complete with vocal twang. The hill billy twang, it came to Ed Wonder, intensified as each decade went by. He wondered if a hundred years ago there had actually been a twang in Ozark speech.

"Fine," Tubber said.

"What?" Ed asked. The juke box had distracted him.

"You said the world is on the point of collapse." The Speaker of the Word nodded satisfaction. "After the collapse, perhaps all will take up the path to Elysium."

Ed finished his Manhattan and dialed another. "Now look," he said aggressively, "I've been checking on some of your background. You're a well-educated man. You've been around. In short, you're not stupid."

"Thank you, Edward," Tubber said. He scowled again over at the juke box. They had to shout to make themselves heard.

"All right. Now suppose everything you say about the Welfare State is correct. Let's concede that. All right. I've just been over to Elysium. I've seen how you live there. Okay. It's fine for some people. Some people must love it. Nice and quiet. Good place to write poetry, or do handicrafts or scientific experiments, maybe. But, holy smokes, do you expect *everybody* to want to live like that? You've got this tiny community of a few dozen households. The whole world can't join up. It's a small basis thing. You keep talking about taking the road to Elysium. Suppose everybody did, how would you pack four or five billion people into that little Elysium of yours?"

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber had heard him out. Now he chuckled. Broke off his humor to scowl still once again at the source of music. The juke box never went silent. There was always someone to drop in another coin.

"You fail to understand the word, dear one. Our term Elysium has a

double meaning. Obviously, we do not expect the whole world to join our little community. It is but an example for others to heed. We are but indicating that it is possible to lead full, meaningful lives without resort to the endless products of present mechanical society. Perhaps we go to the extreme, for the sake of emphasis. I utilize horse and wagon to illustrate that five hundred horsepower hovercars, gulping up petroleum products at a disastrous rate for the sake of obtaining a speed of two hundred miles an hour, are redundant. There are many examples to illustrate that too often we utilize complicated machinery simply for machinery's sake."

Ed shouted, "I don't get that."

Tubber said, "Take the abacus. For years we have been sneering at the Japanese, Chinese and Russians because they are so backward as to use the abacus in their businesses, their banks and so forth, instead of our electrical adding machines. However, the fact is that the abacus is more efficient and actually faster than the usual electric adding machine, and most certainly less apt to break down." The old boy glowered in the direction of the juke box. "Verily, that device is an abomination."

Ed said, in exasperation, "But we can't scrap all the mechanical devices we've invented over the past couple of hundred years."

"Nor would I wish to, loved one. It is quite true that you can't un-invent an invention any more than you can unscramble scrambled eggs. However, the world has gone far beyond the point of intelligent usage of these discoveries."

The old man thought a moment. "Let me give you a hypothetical case. Suppose a high pressure entrepreneur conceives of something that to this point no one had dreamed of wanting. Let us take some thing out of the dear sky. Let us say an electric martini stirrer."

"It's been done," Ed said.

Tubber stared at him. "Surely you jest."

"No, I read about it. Back in the early 1960s. About the same time they came out with electric toothbrushes."

"It's still as good an example as any," Tubber sighed. "Very well, our idea man hires some highly trained engineers, some of our best technicians, to design the electric martini stirrer. They succeed. He then turns to industry and orders a large number of the devices. Industry tools up, using a great many competent, highly trained men, and a good deal of valuable materials. Finally, the martini stirrers are finished. Our entrepreneur must now market them. He turns to Madison Avenue and

invests in advertising and public relations. To this point, nobody in the United Welfare States of America had the vaguest desire for such a device, but they are soon educated. Advertising through every medium; campaigns conceived of by some of the most clever brains our country can produce. Side by side go the public relations men. It is mentioned in some columnist's blather that Mary Malone, the TV star, is so pleased with her martini stirrer that she has begun having cocktails before lunch as well as before dinner. It is understood the Queen's bartender invariably uses one. It is dropped that Think Watson the Fourth of I.B.M.-Remington wouldn't dream of drinking a martini mixed otherwise."

"I get your drift," Ed said. "So everybody buys one. But what harm's done? It keeps the country going."

"That it keeps the modern economy going is quite true. But at what a cost! Our best brains are utilized contriving such nonsense and then selling it. On top of that, we are using up our resources to the point that already we are a have-not nation. We must import our raw materials. Our mountains of iron, our seas of oil, our once seemingly endless natural resources have been flushed down the sewers of this throwaway economy. On top of it all, what do you suppose this sort of thing is doing, ultimately, to the intellects of our people? How can a people maintain their collective dignity, integrity and sense of fitness if they can be so easily coerced into desires for nonsense things, status symbols, nothing things, largely because the next door neighbor has one, or some third rate cinema performer does?"

Ed dialed another drink, desperately. "All right, so maybe electric martini stirrers are on the redundant side. But it's what people *want*."

"That's what people are *taught* to want. We must reverse ourselves. We have solved the problems of production of abundance, now man should settle down and take stock of himself, work out his path to his destiny, his Elysium. The overwhelming majority of our scientists are working either on methods of destruction, or the creation of new products which our people do not actually need nor want. Instead, they should be working upon the curing of man's ills, delving into the secrets of the All-Mother, plumbing the ocean's depths, reaching out to the stars."

"All right, but you've seen that people simply aren't interested in your ideas. They want their TV, their radio, their movies back. They aren't interested in your path to Elysium. You admit that, you've even given up your lectures."

"In a weak moment," Tubber nodded. "This very day I plan to resume

my efforts. Nefertiti and I will depart for the city of Oneonta where my tent will again..." He broke off, to glower once more at the thundering juke box which was blasting out a Rock'n'Swing revival of *She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain*. "In the name of the All-Mother, how can anyone wish to listen to that?"

Ed shouted reasonably. "It's your own fault. You've taken away TV, radio and movies. People aren't used to silence. They want music."

"Dost thou call *that* music!" The infinitely sad face of the aged Speaker of the Word was beginning to change in a manner that came back to Ed Wonder in a growing dismay.

"Now look," Ed said hurriedly. "It's a natural reaction. People are packing into restaurants, bars, dancehalls. Any place where they can get a little entertainment. The juke box manufacturers are running on a three shift basis. Records are being turned out wholesale, as fast as they can press them..." He cut himself off sharply. It wasn't the right thing to say.

Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, Speaker of the Word, was swelling visibly.

Ed Wonder stared at him numbly. It came to him that Moses must have looked something like this when he came down from the mountain with his Ten Commandments and found the Hebrews worshiping the Golden Calf.

"Ah, they do! Then verily do I curse this abomination! This destroyer of the peace so that man cannot hear himself think! Verily do I say, that they who wish music shalt have music!"

The volume of the multi-colored music machine fell off sharply, and the six white horses that were coming 'round the mountain sudden dissolved into, "... we'll sing as we go marching on. . ."

Ed Wonder lurched to his feet. He felt a sudden, dominating urge to get out of there. He muttered something to Ezekiel Joshua Tubber in the way of farewell, and hustled toward the door.

As he escaped, the last he saw of the hex-wielding prophet Tubber was still glaring at the juke box.

Somebody standing at the bar growled, "Who in blazes played that one?"

The record player swung into the chorus, "Glory, Glory Hallelujah. Glory, Glory Hallelujah..."

Ed Wonder toiled the little Volkshover down the freeway toward Ultra-New York.

So great. He'd warned Hopkins. He seemed to act as a catalyst around Tubber. He couldn't get within talking distance of the Speaker of the Word without a new hex resulting. Not that the old boy wasn't up to getting wrathed up about something on his own. Ed wondered if the hex on the parking meters applied only to those in Woodstock, or if the phenomenon were worldwide. Evidently, Tubber's mysterious power didn't have to be universal in scope. When he'd broken the guitar strings, it hadn't been all of the guitar strings in the world, evidently, but only the ones on the individual guitar. And from what Nefertiti had suggested, when he had burned down the roadhouse where she had been performing, the lightning had hit only the one place, not every roadhouse on earth.

Ed muttered, "Thank the All-Mother for small favors."

He stopped along the way for a sandwich and cup of coffee at a trucker's stop.

Half a dozen customers were gathered around the establishment's juke box, staring at it in bewilderment. The record player was grinding out, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where..."

One of the truckers said, "Jesus, no matter what I punch it comes out, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*."

One of the others looked at him in disgust. "What'd'ya talking about? That's not *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. That's *Little Town of Bethlehem*."

Somebody else chimed, "Both you guys are kooky. I remember that song from when I was a kid. It's *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*."

A Negro shook his head at them. "*Mother*, but you folks just ain't up on spirituals. That there's *Go Down Moses*. No matter what you punch on this here crazy machine, it comes out *Go Down Moses*."

Ed Wonder decided to forget about the sandwich. So far as he was concerned, he was still hearing, and over and over again, all about the glory of the coming of the Lord, and glory, glory Hallelujah.

He left the place and got back into the Volkshover. He wondered how long it would be before everyone gave up and stopped sticking coins in juke boxes.

He set out again for Manhattan and the New Woolworth building. Okay, he'd warned them. All he could say was it was lucky old Tubber liked

an occasional beer himself, otherwise probably every bottle of booze in the country would have been turned into vintage orange pop, just as soon as the Speaker of the Word got around to thinking about all the people who were spending their time in bars, rather than listen to the need for hiking down the path to Elysium like good pilgrims.

At the New Woolworth Building, his identification got him past the preliminary guards and up to the five—only it was now ten—floors devoted to Dwight Hopkins' emergency commission.

He found Helen Fontaine and Buzz De Kemp in his own office, bent over a portable phonograph and eyeing it accusingly as though the device had malevolently betrayed them.

When Ed entered, Buzz pulled his stogie from his mouth and said, "You'll never believe this, but..."

"I know, I know," Ed Wonder growled. "What is it *you* hear?"

Helen said, "It's fantastic. For me, it comes out *I Come to the Garden Alone*."

"No, listen," Buzz insisted, "listen to those words. If you follow Me. I will make you fishers of men, if you'll follow me.' Clear as a bell."

It still sounded like "Glory, Glory Hallelujah" to Ed Wonder. He slumped down in the chair behind his desk.

Buzz took the record from the machine and put on another one. "But listen to this. The other was supposedly a Rock'n'-Swing piece, but this label reads the first movement of the Peer Gynt Suite." He flicked the switch on. The first movement of the Peer Gynt Suite came out *The Morning*, as it was supposed to do.

Ed was interested. "It's selective again."

They looked at him.

Buzz said accusingly, "What's selective again?"

"The hex."

Buzz and Helen stared accusingly at Ed.

Ed said defensively, "We were talking in a bar and they had the juke box tuned up to full volume and, well, he had to shout to be heard."

"Oh, fine," Buzz said. "Why didn't you get him out of there?"

Helen said wearily, "So he got wrathful about juke boxes. Heavens to Betsy, can't anybody ever turn him off before he gets mad? He's not only fouled up juke boxes but all popular records, and I imagine tapes."

Ed said, "I never did like juke boxes anyway. He also evidently didn't have a dime to stick in a parking meter. So..."

"Hey, now we're getting somewhere," Buzz said. "Don't tell me he laid a hex on parking meters."

"There's no slot in them, any more," Ed told him. "Listen, did anything important happen while I was gone?"

"No, master," Buzz said. "Everything stops when Your Eminence is absent. We dragged in a bunch of professors, doctors and every sort of scientist from biologist to astronomer. They're still going at it, but it's all we can do to convince one out of a hundred that we're serious when we ask what a curse is. We've put a few dozen of them to work—supposedly—to research the subject. But nobody knows where to start. You can't get a hex into a laboratory. You can't measure it, weigh it, analyze it. Of the whole bunch we've turned up exactly one who believes hexes can happen."

"We have?" Ed said, surprised.

"A guy named Westbrook. All that worries me is, he's probably a twitch." Buzz threw his stogie into the wastebasket.

"Jim Westbrook? Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten I'd put out a call for him to be picked up. Jim Westbrook's no twitch. He used to act as a panelist on my Far Out Hour. What has he come up with?"

"He's suggested we draft the whole Parapsychology Department of Duke University, just as a beginning. Then he suggests we send to Common Europe, to the Vatican, in Rome, with a request for a team of their top exorcisers."

"Who in the devil needs exercise at a time like this?"

"Exorcisers, exorcisers. The archives of the Church probably contain more information on exorcising of evil spirits and such like than any other library in the world. Westbrook figures that taking off a hex is a related subject. He also suggests that we butter up Number One, in the Kremlin, and see if we can get into whatever archives remain of the Russian Orthodox Church, and also approach the Limeys for any dope the Church of England might have back in some lower bookshelves. All of them have the exorcising of evil spirits in their dogma."

Ed grunted wearily, "I suppose I ought to go and report to Hopkins, but if I know him and Braithgale, they'd keep me up half the night. Tubber gave me an earful of this program of his."

"Father got hold of one of Tubber's pamphlets. He says that the path to Elysium is super-communism."

Buzz grunted, "Jensen Fontaine is about as competent of judging Zeke Tubber's program as a eunuch is the Miss America competition."

"Funnies we get," Ed complained. "At any rate, I'm too tired to think. What do you say we go to the apartment they've assigned me and have a few quick ones, then call it a night?"

Buzz fumbled for a fresh stogie, looking slightly embarrassed. "Uh, Little Ed..."

"Listen," Ed said. "I'm getting fed up with that handle. The next guy who calls me *Little* Ed, gets awarded a fat lip."

Buzz De Kemp blinked at him. "Chum, you just don't sound like the old Lit... that is Ed Wonder, atall. Atall."

Helen said, "I'm afraid we'll have to take a rain check, Ed. Buzz and I have a date for this evening."

Ed looked from one of them to the other. "Oh?" He touched the end of his nose reflectively. "Well, *good*."

Helen said, as though in defense, "I figure even though I can't be a clotheshorse myself, anymore, possibly I can teach this bum to look more of a credit to his profession."

"You've got your work cut out for you, sister," Buzz leered at her. "I'm the type who can buy a two hundred dollar suit, and before I get out of the tailor shop I already look like I've slept in it."

"Funnies," Ed groaned. "Good night."

12

He was about to sit down to breakfast and the morning paper when Colonel Fredric Williams came bustling in. Ed Wonder looked up at him.

"Special meeting in Mr. Hopkins' office, Wonder," he rapped.

"I haven't finished my breakfast."

"No time. Several important developments."

Ed rolled up the paper and stuck it into his jacket pocket, took a quick scalding sip of his coffee and came to his feet. "All right, let's go."

He followed the colonel from the suite. His two bodyguards, Johnson and Stevens, fell in behind them in the hall. There was the bureaucratic mind for you, Ed decided. Yesterday they had sent him up to Elysium,

right into the camp of the supposed enemy, without a peashooter in the way of protection. But now, in this ultra-commission on the top of the New Woolworth Building, supposedly it wasn't safe for him to walk down the corridor unguarded.

Hopkins was not alone. In fact, his office was crowded. This time Ed Wonder recognized almost all of them. Braithgale, General Crew, Buzz and Helen, Colonel Williams, and the more important members of Ed's Project Tubber team. Evidently, of all the different branches of investigation of the disasters, his project was rapidly gaining the ascendancy.

When they were seated, Hopkins turned a baleful eye on them, stressing Ed and Buzz De Kemp. He said, "Before we get to Mr. Wonder's report on his visit to Elysium, there are a couple of other developments. Mr. Oppenheimer?"

Bill Oppenheimer, he who with Major Davis had originally upped Ed and Buzz to crash priority, came to his feet, jittering characteristically. He said, "To make it brief, very young children, all idiots and most morons, aren't effected."

"Aren't effected by what?" General Crew rumbled.

Oppenheimer looked at him. "By any of the hexes. They can even hear radio, see television." Bill Oppenheimer sat down.

Hopkins said, "Mr. Yardborough."

Cecil Yardborough came to his feet. "This is very preliminary. We've hardly started on this line, however, we should speed things up now that we've taken over the Parapsychology Department of Duke." He looked at Ed Wonder, as though expecting opposition to what he was about to say. "One of our researchers who's had considerable experience in ESP has suggested a scientific explanation for Tubber's power."

He couldn't have gotten more attention had he suddenly levitated.

Yardborough went on. "Our Doctor Jeffers suggests that Ezekiel Joshua Tubber has, probably unknowingly, developed telepathy beyond the point ever known before. Most telepathists can contact but one other person at a time, some can communicate with two or three, a very small number have been known to pass a thought on to a large number of persons within a limited distance." Yardborough's eyes swept around them. "Doctor Jeffers believes Tubber to be the first human being who can telepathically contact the whole species simultaneously, regardless of language."

Braithgale unfolded his long legs, recrossed them the other way. He said mildly, "What has that got to do with the hexes?"

Yardborough said, "That is but one half of the Jeffers hypothesis. He also is of the opinion that Tubber is able to hypnotize through telepathy. That is, he doesn't have to be before the person hypnotized. He can be any distance away."

A sigh, as though of relief, drifted through the room.

"It doesn't hold up," Ed Wonder said flatly.

They turned to him, and there seemed to be glare in the expression of all, even Helen and Buzz.

He gestured with his hands, palms upward, "Okay. I know. Everybody wants it to hold up. People are built that way. They go batty if something comes along they can't label. They've simply got to have an explanation for everything. However, this Doctor Jeffers doesn't explain Tubber's power. Sure, maybe I'd buy it for the TV-radio curse, and even the movie curse. It might even cover the juke box curse."

"Juke box curse!" somebody blurted.

Hopkins said evenly, "We've begun to receive reports of it. Go on, Mr. Wonder."

"However, it won't cover physical things Tubber's done, like sealing up the slots in parking meters, and setting a nightclub on fire with lightning because the proprietor was throwing shows involving teen-age kids stripping. It wouldn't even cover breaking a set of guitar strings at a distance."

Jim Westbrook, seated off to one side, and noticed now by Ed Wonder for the first time, said, "Perhaps the fellow owning the guitar only *thought* the strings were broken, under Tubber's hypnosis." But the big consulting engineer didn't sound as though he believed it himself.

Ed said, "We simply don't know. Perhaps there's something in nature that when there's a need for a certain type of person the race produces him. Possibly nature figures there's a need for a man with Tubber's powers right now. There was a need for a Newton when he came along. Can we explain him? There was a rash of super-geniuses in such cities as Florence at the time of the Renaissance. Can anybody explain the fantastic abilities of Leonardo and Michelangelo? Devil knows, the times called for them. The race *had* to be pulled out of the Dark Ages."

Dwight Hopkins sighed and ran a gaunt hand over his mouth and chin. "Very well," he said. "However, Mr. Yardborough, see that Doctor Jeffers' line of investigation is continued. Crash priority. We leave no possibilities unexplored. The national emergency is growing geometrically."

"And now," Hopkins continued, "we come to another, very uncomfortable aspect. General Crew, please."

The general lumbered to his feet, and even before opening his mouth his face dyed mahogany. He took up a newspaper from Hopkins' desk and shook it.

"Who is the traitor who leaked this whole story to AP-Reuters!"

Ed Wonder snatched his own paper from his jacket pocket, ripped it open to the front page. It glared 72 point type:

TV-MOVIE-RADIO COLLAPSE LAID TO RELIGIOUS LEADER

He didn't have to read it. He knew it would all be there.

"I thought nobody'd believe you," he snapped at the reporter.

Buzz grinned at him, took his stogie from his mouth and pointed at Ed's chest with it. "That's where my stroke of genius came in. This was my story, from the beginning, and I just had to see it in print. You left me in charge, yesterday. So I sent a couple of the boys up to Kingsburg and had them haul Old Ulcers right out of the city room and down here. I showed him around. Showed him all the staff we've got working on Project Tubber. Finally it got through to him. Whether or not he believes it himself, the biggest story of the century cracked right in his own town. I had the piece already written up. He just took it with him."

"And AP-Reuters picked it up from the *Times-Tribune*, you kook!" Ed snarled at him. "You know what you've done?"

"I know what he's done," Hopkins said, the evenness of his voice for once tried. "He's made a laughing stock of the administration. I thought it was made clear that this phase of our investigation was to be kept under wraps until more definite data was available."

Ed Wonder was on his feet, his face working. "He's done more than that! He's signed the death warrant of Tubber and his daughter!"

Buzz scowled at him, defensively. "Don't be silly, chum. I didn't mention where they were. They're safely tucked away in the little Elysium hamlet of theirs. Sure, a lot of people might be sore at them. A good chance of teaching old Zeke a lesson. He'll find out what a heel practically everybody in the world figures he is."

Ed snarled, "He isn't in Elysium. He's in Oneonta, with that pint-sized revival tent of his, spreading the message. Come on, Buzz! You started this. Let's go. They'll lynch him."

Buzz threw his stogie on the floor. "Good grief," he muttered, heading for the door.

The general was standing too. "Wait a minute! Perhaps this is for the best."

Ed Wonder flung a contemptuous glare at him. "Like that other brainstorm of yours. Getting a sniper to shoot him from a distance. Just consider two of the ramifications, soldier. One, suppose Tubber starts flinging hexes at a mob out to lynch him. Do you have any idea what they might consist of? Or, number two, suppose the crowd does get to him and finishes him off. Do you think his hexes end with his death? How do we know?"

Buzz was through the door and on his way to the outer offices. Ed started after him.

"One moment," Dwight Hopkins called, his famed poise shot to hell. "I can phone the local police in Oneonta."

"No good," Ed called back over his shoulder. "Tubber and Nefertiti know me, but some heavy-handed cops might just intensify the fireworks."

In the anteroom, Johnson and Stevens hustled to their feet.

Ed ripped out at them, "Phone down to the garage. Have the fastest police car available ready for us, by the time we get there. Hurry, you flatfooted clowns!"

He charged down the corridor in the direction of the elevators.

Buzz had summoned one by the time he arrived. They hurried into it, banged the descent button, and their legs all but folded under them at the plunge.

The car was waiting. Ed flashed his identity and they bustled into the front seat. "How do you work this thing?" Buzz demanded. "I've never had an automatic."

Ed Wonder had used Helen's General Ford Cyclones from time to time. He rapped, "Here," and dialed the number to take them across the George Washington Bridge. Meanwhile he snatched up the road map and located the coordinates for Oneonta. The upstate New York town wasn't a much greater distance than Kingsburg, but situated further west. They'd have to go to Binghamton, as the closest route.

They agonized along the way. It would be nearly noon before they arrived. They had no way of knowing where Tubber had set up his tent. They had no way of knowing how soon he would begin his lecture. If it were anything like Saugerties, it wouldn't be just one meeting scheduled, but several throughout the day. He'd possibly start quite early.

Ed Wonder didn't expect him to get through the first talk. Once the audience found out who he was, that would be it. He cursed silently, inwardly. Perhaps they had already found out. Possibly the Oneonta *Star* had already run a notice. The *Star* was undoubtedly a subscriber to AP-Reuters; if some bright reporter connected the two stories and revealed that the controversial prophet was in town, it would mean the end already.

They could have saved themselves the anxiety over the time that would be taken locating Tubber's tent. From afar, the roar of the mob could be heard. Throwing on the manual operation, Ed Wonder hit the lower part of town without diminution of speed.

"Hey, take it easy, chum," Buzz De Kemp blurted.

"A siren," Ed spit out at him. "There must be some button or something. Find it! This car should have a siren."

Buzz fumbled. The siren's whine ululated, wave over wave. They shrilled through the small Catskill city, traffic pulling away, right and left, such traffic as there was. Ed Wonder suspected that the greater part of the town was in on the show.

They could spot the action now. There was fire. As they pulled closer, they could see that it was obviously the tent.

All over again, it was the lynch scene of the movie projectionist in Kingsburg. It was basically the same, though ten times over in size. Far beyond the point where it could have been controlled by the police.

The mob numbered thousands, roaring, shouting, shrilling, screaming. But here on the outskirts they were principally milling around, the crowd hampered by its very size, unable to see what was going on in the center. Ineffective in the developments.

From their height in the hovercar, Ed Wonder and Buzz De Kemp could make out the activity. In the dead center, Ezekiel Joshua Tubber and his daughter were being buffeted this way and that, framed in the light of the burning tent behind them. There was no sign of other followers of the

rejected prophet. Even in the excitement of the moment, Ed had a quick thought go through his mind. The desertion of Jesus, even by Peter, at the time of the betrayal to the Romans. Where were the followers, no matter how small a handful? Where were the pilgrims on the path to Elysium?

He slugged the lift lever, bringing them up to ten feet, shot toward the center of the shouting, club brandishing, fist brandishing mob. The smell of hate was everywhere. The fearful smell of hate and death, found seldom other than in mobs and in combat. The yells had become one, one blast of roaring rage.

Buzz yelled, "It's impossible. Let's get out of here. It's too late. They'll get us too!" The reporter's eyes were popping fear.

Ed banged toward the center of the melee.

He yelled at Buzz, "Take the wheel, it's on manual. Bring it down right above them!"

He squirmed over the seat into the back. He'd spotted something there earlier. Even as Buzz De Kemp grabbed at the wheel, steadying them, Ed tore the submachinegun from its rack.

"Hey!" the reporter yelled at him, still goggle-eyed.

With the butt, Ed Wonder knocked the glass out of the right rear window. The siren continued its screaming. The mob's leaders—a dozen of them, manhandling the bearded prophet, who seemed dazed, and Nefertiti, screaming and scratching to get to her father—stared up. The siren was getting through to them for the first time.

Ed stuck the gun through the window, pointed up. He had never handled a similar weapon before. He pulled the trigger and the roar blasted back through the heavy hovercar, deafening him as he bucked the kick.

For the nonce, at least, it was effective. Below him, men scattered. He emptied the clip into the air.

"Down!" he yelled at Buzz.

"Don't be crazy! We can't..."

Ed leaned over the seat and knocked the lift lever up. Even before the limousine had hit earth, he had torn open the car door. He used the riot gun as a club, dashing for the staggering old man.

The sheer audacity of the attack was its success. Still swinging the heavy gun by its blisteringly hot barrel, he pulled and tugged the repudiated reformer toward and into the car's back seat. He spun and

threatened the temporarily flabbergasted crowd with the submachinegun, as though it were still loaded, yelling, "Nefertiti!" He couldn't see her.

Buzz screamed, "Let's get out of here!"

"Shut up!" Ed roared.

She came crying and stumbling, her clothes half torn from her, through the ranks of the bewildered lynchers. Less than gently, Ed Wonder pushed her into the back seat, grabbed hold of the ascending vehicle. He felt a hand grab his foot. He kicked back and down. The hand let go and they were off and free.

"They'll be after us!" Buzz yelled back at him. "A thousand cars will be after us."

Everything went out of Ed Wonder. It was all he could do to keep from vomiting. He was trembling as with a paroxysm of ague. "No they won't," he said, his voice shaking. "They'll be afraid of the gun. A mob is a mob. Brave enough to take on the killing of an old man and a girl. Not brave enough to face a submachinegun."

Nefertiti, still blubbering in hysteria, was working over her father. Getting him straight on the seat, at the same time trying to rearrange her own torn clothing.

Tubber made the first sound since the rescue. "They hate me," he said, dazed. "They hate me. They would have destroyed me."

Buzz De Kemp had at last shaken off his panic of the height of the excitement. "What'd you expect?" he grumbled. "An egg for your beer?"

They had a little difficulty in getting the torn and battered Tubber pair into the New Woolworth Building, but Ed had recovered by now. He glared down the guards at the entry, grabbed the phone and snapped, "General Crew. This is crash priority. Wonder, speaking."

Crew came on in seconds.

Ed snapped, "I've got Tubber. We're coming up immediately. Have Dwight Hopkins ready in his office, and the top men on my staff. I want everybody who's informed on Project Tubber." He looked at the guards. "And, oh yeah, tell these kooks to let us pass." He threw the phone to the armed guard, and started toward the elevator.

Buzz was supporting the elderly prophet at one side, Nefertiti from the other.

They went directly to the topmost floor.

Buzz said, "We ought to take them to your apartment. Miss Tubber is in bad enough shape, but the old boy is just short of being in shock."

"That's how we want him," Ed Wonder muttered lowly. "Come on."

Hopkins was at his desk, the others came hurrying in, one or two at a time.

Ed got the pathetic old man seated on a leather couch, Nefertiti next to him. The others stood, or took seats, staring at the cause of the crisis which was shaking the governments of very affluent nation on earth. At the moment, he didn't look as though he could have shaken a meeting of a small town Board of Education.

Ed said, "All right. Let me introduce Ezekiel Joshua Tubber, the Speaker of the Word. It's now up to you gentlemen to convince him that his curses should be lifted." Ed sat his own self down, abruptly.

For a long moment there was silence.

Dwight Hopkins, his voice tense below the crisp efficiency, said, "Sir, as spokesman for President Everett MacFerson and the government of the United Welfare States of America, I can only plead with you to reverse whatever it is you have done—if, indeed, it was you—to bring the nation to the brink of chaos where it now stands."

"Chaos," Tubber muttered, brokenly.

Braithgale said, "Three quarters of the population are spending the greater part of their time wandering aimlessly up and down the streets. It will take only a spark, and sparks are already beginning to fly."

Nefertiti said indignantly, glaring around at them, "My father is ill. We were almost killed. This is no time to badger him."

Dwight Hopkins looked at Ed Wonder, questioningly. Ed shook his head, infinitesimally. Ezekiel Joshua Tubber was at bay, they would either come to terms with him now or anything might develop when he recovered strength and poise. It was brutal, perhaps, but the situation was brutal.

Ed said, explaining to the others. "Yesterday, Ezekiel Tubber explained part of his beliefs to me. His sect thinks the country is choking on its own fat and at the same time heading for destruction by using up its resources, both natural and human, at a headlong speed. He thinks we ought to plan a simpler, less frenetic society."

The dazed reformer looked up at him, shook his head in exhaustion.

"That's not exactly the way I would put it... loved one."

Jim Westbrook, slumped in a heavy chair, hands in pockets, said, dryly, "The trouble is, you've started at the wrong end. You've been trying to get to the people. Change their way of looking at things. The fact is, friend, the people are slobs, and always have been. There hasn't been a period in history when, given the chance, the man in the street hasn't made a slob of himself. Given the license and freedom from reprisal, they'll wallow in sadism, debauchery, destruction. Look at the Romans and their games. Look at the Germans when they were given the go-ahead by the Nazis to eliminate the inferior races, the non-Aryans. Look at any combat soldiers, of any nationality."

Tubber shook his shaggy head, bearlike, and the faintest brace of the old spark was there. "You err, loved one," he protested, brokenly. "Human character is determined by environment rather than heredity. Human faults are imparted by bad training. The vices of the young spring not from nature, who is equally the kind and blameless mother of all her children; they derive from the defects of education."

It was Westbrook's turn to shake his head. "Sounds good, but it doesn't work out that way. You can't put more into a container than its capacity to hold. Average I.Q. is one hundred. Half the population is below that and you can subject most of them to education for life and it's not going to take."

The exhausted prophet was in there pitching. "No, your belief is a common fallacy. True, average I.Q. is one hundred, but actually few of us go more than ten points either above or below that figure. The moron is as seldom found amongst us as is the genius with his I.Q. of 140 or above. The less than one percent who are geniuses are precious gifts to the race and should be sought out and given every opportunity to develop their talents, and cherished. Those who fall below 90 in their I.Q. are our unfortunates and every effort should be made, in all charity, to see that they lead as full lives as possible."

Dwight Hopkins said smoothly, "I thought your basic complaint was against our affluent society and the Welfare State. But here you develop the usual do-gooder philosophy. All men are equal, so we should sacrifice the products of the successful to those who have lost the race."

Tubber brought himself up more erect. "Why are we so contemptuous of the so-called do-gooder? Is it so reprehensible to attempt to do good? Man would seem to be his own worst enemy. We all claim to desire peace, but at the same time sneer at the conscientious objector. We claim to desire a

better world, and then sneer at those who suggest reform as do-gooders. But that is beside the question you ask. My objection to the welfare state and our present society is not that we have solved the problems of production, but that the machine has slipped beyond our control and runs amuck. I do not begrudge the productive person the product of his efforts. The right to products is exclusive, but the right to means should be common. This is so, not merely because raw materials are provided by the All Mother, by nature, but also because of the heritage of installations and techniques which is the real source of human wealth and because of the collaboration that makes each man's contribution so much more effective than if he worked in solitude. But this question of rewarding the more intelligent while penalizing he whom the All-Mother saw fit to equip with a lower I.Q. is no longer pertinent. In an economy of scarcity, it is obvious that the greatest contributors to society should reap greater rewards, but in our affluent society why should we begrudge anyone an abundance? We have never begrudged either air nor water to our meanest criminal because there has always been an abundance of both. In the affluent society, the meanest citizen can have a decent home, the best of food, clothing and the other necessities and even luxury. I would be a fool indeed, if I railed against this."

General Crew rumbled, "What is this, a sermon? Let's get to the point. Does this man admit to—somehow or other—creating the disturbances that have hashed up what amounts to all our entertainment media? If so, there should be laws that..."

"Shut up," Ed Wonder told him, without inflection.

The general looked at him unbelievably, but obeyed orders.

Jim Westbrook said, "We got away from the original point. Our Ezekiel Tubber, here, believes that he can change the present admittedly chaotic society by changing the eternal slob who is the basic unit of society. He can't. I would think he would have seen reality when the mob attacked him, as soon as they found it was he who robbed them of their idiot diversions."

Tubber had recovered enough to glare at him. "Your common man, as you called him before, has been made a slob, it is not inherent. My efforts have been to attempt to remove some of the devices that have been utilized to gouge out his brains. Almost any one of these slob, as you call them, could have been, could still be, I contend, a worthy pilgrim along the path to Elysium. Suppose you took the child of a highly educated, well-to-do family, and, in the hospital, through a nurse's mistake, had it substituted for a slum child. Do you think for a moment that the slum

child, in its new environment, wouldn't average out as well as his fellows? Or that the *good* family's offspring, through mistake now being raised in the poorest part of town, wouldn't average out the same as *his* fellows?"

Nefertiti glared around at them. She said, "Father..." but then turned to Hopkins and then to Ed. "He's tired. He ought to have a doctor. Those people, they kicked him, hit him."

"The eternal slobs," Westbrook murmured, dryly.

Ed Wonder said, "Just one more minute, honey." He turned to Tubber. "All right, suppose we concede everything you've said, so far. Under the Welfare State the country is going to pot, and what we ought to do is change it the way you'd like to see it changed. But I want to remind you of something you said to me the first time we talked together. I think I can remember it, almost exactly. I called you sir, and you said: *The term sir, a variation of sire, comes down to us from the feudalist era. It reflects the relationship between noble and serf. My efforts are directed against such relationships, against all authority of one man over another. For I feel that whoever puts his hand on me to govern me is a usurper and a tyrant; I declare him to be my enemy.*"

"I fail to understand your point, loved one."

Ed pointed a finger at him. "You object to others controlling you, your thoughts, your actions. But that is exactly what you, with your power—whatever it is—have been doing to all the rest of us. *All* of us. You, the supposed do-gooder, to use that term again, are in fact the biggest tyrant of all history. Genghis Khan was a piker, Caesar an upstart, Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin small timers. Compared with..."

"Stop!" Tubber cried.

"What comes next?" Ed demanded, making his voice contemptuous. "Are you going to rob us of speech, so that we can't even complain against your decisions?"

Tubber looked at him, the Lincolnesque sadness there as never before, the hurt manifest.

"I... I didn't know. I... thought..."

Dwight Hopkins moved in smoothly. "I suggest a compromise, sir, ah, that is, Ezekiel. You for all your efforts have failed to bring your message—whatever its merits or lack of them—to the people whom you love but who have thus far rejected you. Very well, my compromise is this. That for one hour each day you shall be on the air. On every TV and radio throughout the world. There shall be, for that hour, no other programs to

compete with you. This one hour a day shall be yours, so long as you wish it."

Both Nefertiti and her prophet father were staring at him.

"And... in return?" Tubber wavered.

"In return, all your, ah, hexes, shall be lifted."

The shaken prophet hesitated. "Even though I were on the air each day, perhaps they would not listen."

Buzz De Kemp chuckled around his stogie. "That's no problem, Zeke, old chum. One more hex. Your very last one, you should promise. A hex urging everyone to listen. Not necessarily to believe in your program, but merely to listen."

"I... I don't even know if it is possible to reverse..."

"We can try," Dwight Hopkins urged smoothly.

General Crew said, thoughtfully. "Come to think of it, I have three daughters. Since that curse against cosmetics and vanity, life has been more bearable. I can even get into the bathroom in the morning. Couldn't we just retain that one?"

"The one against juke boxes," Braithgale murmured. "I loathe juke boxes."

"My own pet peeve," Buzz said, rolling his stogie from one side of his mouth to the other, "is comic books. I'd say..."

Jim Westbrook laughed suddenly. "For my books, friend, you can keep the hex on radio and TV."

Dwight Hopkins glared at them. "That will be all of this nonsense, gentlemen."

The elderly prophet took a deep breath.

"Now verily do I say..."

Aftermath

Ed Wonder, assistant producer of WAN-TV, came bustling into the general offices of the station. He tipped a wink to Dolly.

"Nice hairdo you've got there."

"Thanks, Lit... uh, that is Mr. Wonder."

Ed grinned at her. "That reminds me. You might take a cold cloth back to Jerry in the control room of Studio Three. He's got a bloody nose. That

boy'll never learn my name."

Dolly began to come to her feet. "Mrs. Wonder is in your office," she said.

"Fine," Ed told her. He headed for his private office.

Nefertiti was standing at the window when he came in. She turned around.

Ed took her hands and held back from her, pretending to consider the new dress critically. "Shopping again, eh? Darling, you were meant to be a clotheshorse."

"Isn't it wonderful! Oh, Ed, I almost forgot. There's a cable from Buzz and Helen. They're in Bermuda."

"The honeymooners, eh?"

The intercom on the desk lit and Dolly said, "Mr. Fontaine is in Mr. Mulligan's office, Mr. Wonder. He wants to see you."

Ed kissed his bride. "Hold on, honey. I'll be back shortly and take you to lunch. I want to show you off."

He headed for Mulligan's office, wondering what Fontaine wanted now. Every time the station owner entered the place, WAN-TV lost money. He'd be better off if he stayed home and let the pros run the business.

Jensen Fontaine glared up at him from the desk. Fatso Mulligan wasn't present.

"What's the crisis, sir?" Ed said, sitting down and reaching for a cigarette.

"It's that blasted Communist, Tubber!"

"My father-in-law isn't a Communist, Mr. Fontaine. Get Buzzo to fill you in on that some time. Among the other proof is the fact that it took a lot of arm-twisting on the part of the Reunited Nations to get the Soviet Complex to agree to allow him time on their stations."

"I say he's subversive! Why I ever let you talk me into using our station as the origin of his worldwide broadcasts, I'll never know!"

Ed said easily, lighting his smoke and flicking the match to the ashtray on the desk, "Gives us a lot of prestige, for one thing. And the time immediately before and after Josh's hour is worth its weight in emeralds. Business is booming. Everybody's happy."

Fontaine's baleful glare hadn't let up an iota.

"But he's spreading that confounded blasted subversive message of his to every man, woman and child who can get to a TV or radio set."

"That was the deal," Ed said reasonably. "Dwight Hopkins had his work cut out getting everyone to agree. But it was the only way to call off the crisis."

Jensen Fontaine pounded a scrawny hand on the desk. "You still don't understand," he cried. He pointed dramatically to a pile of mailbags stacked in one corner. "Letters. Letters from every country on earth. It's bad enough that this ultra-radical spews out his underground..."

"Hardly underground," Ed murmured.

"... subversion in English, but they translate it in every country in the world."

"Part of the agreement," Ed said reasonably. He looked at the mail sacks appreciatively. "The fan mail continues to grow, eh? Holy smokes, what a rating."

Fontaine looked as though he were about to blow a gasket. "Is it impossible to get through to you, Ed Wonder! Don't you realize what that idiot Dwight Hopkins and those Communists down in Greater Washington have done in making that agreement with Tubber?"

Ed's eyebrows went up. "I thought I did," he said. "They've given my father-in-law the chance to put his message on the air."

"Yes! But didn't they consider the possible results?"

Ed looked at him questioningly.

The station owner dramatically pointed to the mail sacks. "Those letters are running ten to one in favor of Tubber's program. Don't you understand? They're beginning to *believe* in him."

"Holy smokes," Ed said.

"Have you seen the public opinion polls? People are beginning to follow this... this... madman. At the rate we're going, by next election he could vote in this Elysium nonsense of his!"

"Holy smokes," Ed said.

THE END