

GOOBEREALITY

Barnaby Quale, immaculately clad in pale yellow Gooberalls and ochre Gooberbund for his meeting with the head of Goober Enterprises, sat on the edge of the vast, hard chair reserved for personal interviewees of Harlowe Goober, waiting for the magnate to speak.

"Environmental Simulator?" Goober's voice combined the toughness of Gooberplast with the silky texture of Gooberlon. He fixed Quale with a daggerlike glance from pale blue eyes magnified by quarter-inch electrolenses, prodded the sheets of sketches and calculations before him.

"I'm a practical man, Clune," he announced. "Never went in for this what-d'y-e-call-it science stuff; a Goober hires men for that. Now suppose you leave out all the technical talk and state just what it is you're referring to."

"It's the matter I wrote to you about, six months ago, Mr. Goober," Barnaby said. "It's a new application of cybernetic theory. By harnessing a data-response syndrome to a manipulative device, using an application of the principle that's employed in the Goobervendors to synthesize a variety of products-"

"I'm familiar with the function of the Goobervendor, Gorm," the industrialist barked. "One of my finer contributions to the Great Society, ranking just after the Goobertape and just ahead of the Gooberlator." He lit up a Gooberfitter with a flourish.

"Yes, sir," Quale nodded. "But my device does more than merely produce a product to specification. It assimilates the data introduced, collates, interrelates, extrapolates and, on the basis of up to one hundred billion separate informational factors, re-creates the exocosmic matrix implied by the observed phenomena-"

"Boil that down to straight American, Clud!" Goober snapped. "I have an appointment in two minutes with the Secretary of Poverty. The program's being expanded to cover another hundred million newly qualified citizens, and Goober Enterprises will be expected to make its usual massive input to the common good." He clamped the cigar between large, square teeth and glared at Quale.

"I was wondering, Mr. Goober, if you've had time to look over my calculations and designs, and reach a decision about backing me."

"Ah, I think I recall something of the matter now, Grudd. You're the fellow who quit us to go off on his own! Some wild scheme to mock up some sort of mechanical wax museum."

"Mr. Goober, I don't think you've quite grasped the real significance of the Environmental Simulator. It's not just a gimmick! It's a research tool of the first importance! There are dozens of applications for the device! Police forces could use it to reconstruct crimes, on the basis of all available clues; historians can fill in gaps in historical situations by setting up all known data. The Simulator will fill in the gaps by extension of the known-"

"Nonsense, Greeb! A visionary scheme! Totally impractical! Goober Enterprises wouldn't put a nickel into a crank idea like this!" Goober rose, a vast, massive figure in fashionable purple Goobervelt with a touch of Gooberlace at the wrists.

"One of my people will show you the way out."

"I know the way out," Barnaby said. "I worked here for six years."

"And having deserted the firm, you now come crawling back for handouts!"

"I'm offering you a solid business deal," Quale protested. But Goober was gone, in a swirl of Gooberfumes.

* * *

Barnaby made his way from the Executive Wing, rode the Gooberlift down to ground level, took a shortcut across the Experimental Complex toward the Research Block. A new shed had been set up, he noted; a huge, slab-sided structure covering an acre or two of ground. A tall, thin man emerged from a tiny door set in one corner.

"Hey, Barney," the man hailed, "what you doing over here? Haven't seen you in months."

"Hello, Horace. Just been in to see the Old Man about my proposition. He turned me down cold."

"Say, that's too bad, Barney. Looks like he'd pay a little more attention to the man that gave him Goobervision, Goobertape, Goobertronics, the Goobervendor."

"All I did was supply the ideas, Horace; Mr. Goober got them into production. By the way, what's this?" Barnaby waved a hand at the looming structure.

Horace looked grave. "This is something big, Barney. It's called the Goobernetic Goobereality Simulator. Very hush-hush."

"Simulator?" Barnaby's eyebrows rose almost to his hairline.

"Sure. A great concept." Horace looked around. "Come on inside," he said in a conspiratorial tone. "I'll give you a peek."

Barnaby followed Horace through the door into the echoing vastness of the immense structure. Fifty feet overhead a roof of translucent Gooberplast admitted a warm, golden light. To the left was a bank of massive machines, featureless in gray housings, a control booth beside them. Otherwise, the flat, covered acres were as smooth and featureless as a parking lot.

"This one was the Old Man's own, personal idea," Horace said. "It came down right from his office, about six months ago. Top priority. We rushed her through. She's all programmed now, ready to go. He plans to give a demonstration for the industry tomorrow; I've got an idea he's working an angle to get a Cabinet appointment out of this one."

"What does it do?"

"Damnedest thing you ever saw," Horace said. He led the way to the control booth, indicated a wide panel. "You feed in your data here; it's flashed to the main cybernetic banks over in Vault One, and processed. See that big cable there? A direct tap to the main power pile. You got over 50 Goobermegs to draw on. When the red light goes on, you throw in the main switch here; that activates the Simulator, and starts the mockup going-

"Horace-you mean-it sets up a simulated environment?"

Horace gaped. "Hey, how'd you know that?"

"Look, Horace, are you sure? I was just talking to Mr. Goober-

"Oh," Horace looked relieved. "He told you about it. For a minute I was afraid there'd been a leak."

"You said there'll be a demonstration tomorrow?"

"Sure, we're all ready to go. We've already run complete tests; works like a charm. You'd swear it was the real thing."

"I suppose there'll be representatives from the leading universities here-and maybe the FBI and the Secret Service-

"Huh? Heck, no, Barney. This is a hush-hush deal. Goober Industries stands to clean up on this one. The only ones invited are Hashflash Associates, Tosscookie & Wilt, and Earp, Earp, Earp & Earp-

"Why, those are all advertising agencies!" Barnaby frowned. "What interest would they have in an Environmental Simulator?"

"Are you kidding? Talk about market research! With this setup, the advertiser can penetrate right into the innermost secrets of the American scene! No more wondering what brand underarm the typical family uses; just plug in the data, and take a look!"

"But-but, Horace! He couldn't! That's invasion of privacy! And it's a perversion of the intent of the device! I meant to make a lasting contribution to human knowledge."

"You, Barney? What've you got to do with it?"

"What? Look, Horace, this is my invention-the one Mr. Goober just turned down."

"Huh? Hey, wait a minute, Barney! Are you kind of hinting around that Mr. Goober would-well-swipe your idea?"

"It looks that way-and it also looks like he's planning to use it to sell more Gooberjunk. I intended the Simulator to be used for human betterment-not for prying into people's personal business."

"Personal business? What personal business? After all, with everybody on the Government payroll-

"We're not on the Government payroll; you work for Goober Enterprises and I'm in business for myself."

"Uh-huh, same difference; Goober Enterprises does all its work on Government contract and you're registered under the Poverty Act. After all, since the hundred percent income tax went through, a fellow doesn't really have much chance on his own, does he?" Horace chuckled. "No, Barney, if you want to have a Great Society, you've got to give up a few luxuries like privacy."

"But people have some rights."

Horace wagged a finger. "Now, Barney, you can't work for Uncle Sam, live in Government housing, subsist on Government handouts, and still babble about rights, now can you?"

"Look, Horace-could you give me a demonstration?"

"Not a chance, Barney! I shouldn't even have let you on the lot. Like I said, this is under wraps."

"But I've got to see how it works! After all, it's my invention."

"You want to get me fired? Let's go, Barney. I got to lock up."

* * *

An hour later, in his cubicle on Shelf One-oh-two, Slice Six Hundred and Fifty-five, Stratum Nine, Block Seventeen of Number Forty-two Bachelors' Barracks, Barnaby looked around in annoyance at a buzz from the Gooberscope. He flipped a lever; a pert girl's face appears on the foot-square screen.

"Oh, hi, Gigi, what do you want?"

"Barnaby! Is that polite? How did the conference go? Is old Gooberpuss going to finance your invention?"

"Hah! He already has! It's ready for a big demonstration in a day or so."

"Barnaby! That's wonderful! Why didn't you tell me?!"

"The only trouble is he's squeezed me out of the picture. He's passed out the word that it's all his own idea; and when I tried to go back and demand an explanation, they told me he was in Patagonia on a big Gooberblubber negotiation."

"Why, the old crook!"

"Look out, Gigi, these Gooberscopes may be Gooberbugged. You'll lose your job, and then there'll be two of us on relief."

"Barnaby, he can't do this! You can go to court, make him pay you-"

"Sure-if I had the price of a couple of high-powered legal firms. Goober has a hundred and forty-five of the top shysters in the country on the payroll, with nothing to do but sit around inserting fine print in contracts and

fighting damage suits. Anyway, I'm not really sure it's my Simulator; I didn't see it working."

"What are you going to do, Barnaby?" Gigi's voice rose to a wail. "You've worked on this for three years! This was going to be your big prize! We were going to g-get m-m-married . . ."

"For heaven's sake, don't cry, Gigi!"

"All these years you've slaved, and old Gooberface has gotten rich off your ideas!"

"No, he hasn't; his whole salary goes for taxes, just like everybody else's."

"I don't mean his silly old salary! What about his expense account, and his representational allowance, and his Government bonuses and-"

"Sure, he lives like a king-but I'm not interested in that. All I want is to prove a man can still make it on his own. Every time I think about Goober stealing my ideas and then giving me the brushoff, I see red!"

"Now, Barnaby, don't do anything hasty."

"Hasty? After three years' work? I'm going over there and make him pay up if I have to sit on him and pound his head on the Gooberug in his own office!"

"Barnaby! Wait!"

"I'm going. So long, Gigi!"

"Then I'm going with you. I'll be down in five minutes!"

* * *

The vast Executive Tower was dark when Barnaby and Gigi left the subway at the Gooberdilly Circus stop and emerged into the wan light of early evening.

"See? I told you we'd be too late," Gigi said. "The executives never work during prime TV time."

"There are lights over at the Experimental Complex; maybe Goober's there, gloating over how he robbed me." He led the way across to the gate, spoke to the guard on duty.

"Sure, Barney, no harm in letting you look around. Hi, Gigi." He waved them past. Inside, they headed toward the shed that housed the Goobernetic Goobereality Simulator.

"Barnaby, you can't go in there," she cautioned. "You know these sheds are top secret."

"Naturally! Goober doesn't want to advertise stolen goods."

"Please, Barnaby, come back tomorrow, and discuss the matter in a gentlemanly way with Mr. Goober. Maybe he didn't mean-"

"How can I, when he's in Patagonia?" Barnaby reached for the door.

"We're trespassing!" Gigi wailed. "Let's go now, before somebody sees us . . ."

Barnaby twisted the knob; the door swung in; he stepped into the darkened interior of the shed.

Gigi's voice echoed in the wide gloom. "Barnaby! We have no business in here!"

"There's nobody here, Gigi; relax."

"Where's your invention? All I see is a big open space . . ."

"Over there; that's the computer console and the synthesizing units. You see the wires strung around the shed? They tie the whole space into a closed field. I must say, he did a first-class job of installation. All I had in mind was a little thing about the size of a phone booth."

"Do you know how to work it?"

"Naturally; it's a dead steal from my drawings." He stepped inside the control booth. "All you do is set up the coordinates you want; the Simulator does the rest."

"Barnaby! You wouldn't! Mr. Goober would be furious!"

"Not any more furious than I am."

"But-but it's all set up for tomorrow's demonstration!"

"Sure, that makes it simpler. I'd better check out the instrument readings first . . ." Barnaby studied the panel. "Looks okay; all we need to do is punch that button." He pointed.

"Barnaby, wait!"

He stepped past her and closed the switch.

* * *

For a moment nothing happened; then a dim light sprang up all across the enclosed space under the luminous Gooberplast ceiling; a deep humming sound was audible, rumbling from some subterranean chamber.

"Boy, look at those power drain figures," Barnaby breathed.

"What's happening, Barnaby?" Gigi said breathlessly.

"The field is energizing. It's soaking up power like a sponge; that's to be expected, of course. Energy/matter conversion isn't an easy proposition."

There was a deafening boom! followed by a whistling of air. The door to the control booth rattled in its frame. Suddenly an opaque, gray blanket seemed to hang over the observation window.

"Barnaby! Is everything all right?"

He peered out into the mist. "I think so. Readings are all normal."

"Why is it so-so foggy out there?"

"The field shuts off incident light; it's a sort of closed space effect. The simulated environment has to be segregated from outside influences, of course, or its validity will be compromised."

"Barnaby, you've done enough for now. Let's go. We can come back some other time-"

"Go? We haven't even looked at it yet."

"That's all right; we can go up to my place and I'll make you a nice cup of coffee substitute and-"

"We can't leave now, without even seeing what kind of effect we've gotten." Barnaby stepped to the door marked authorized goobermen only and opened it. He stared out. Gigi came to his side. Where the plain concrete floor had been, a city street was visible, lined with bright shop fronts thronged with people.

"Wow!" Barnaby breathed.

"Where-where did the people come from?" Gigi whispered. "And those shops-"

"I knew it would be good," Barnaby said in a choked voice. "But this is fantastic . . ."

"Let's go back," Gigi said.

"Let's take a look," Barnaby said. He took her hand and stepped out into the street.

* * *

It was midday, and bright sunlight gleamed down from above. The passers-by jostled them in normal fashion, hurrying about their simulated business.

"It's marvelous!" Barnaby said. "Goober's technicians fed in data for a contemporary 1972 street scene, it looks like. The Simulator extrapolated, built up the charge on the environmental field, and boom! Here it is, perfect in every detail!" They strolled along, admiring the view. The pedestrians ignored them, forcing them to dodge to avoid being rammed.

"Are they-real?" Gigi asked.

"Of course not. But they'll behave as if they were." Barnaby snorted. "And Goober plans to use all this to figure out what kind of depilatory has the greatest appeal. And I suppose he'll lease it out to politicians to overhear what the typical voter is saying about the issues, and-"

"Are they just false fronts? Is there anything behind the facades?"

"Certainly; they'll be perfect, inside and out."

Gigi gave a shrill cry. "Barnaby, look! The control room! It's gone!" Barnaby stared back the way they had come. The street seemed to dwindle away into the distance.

"What happened to the control room?" the girl gasped.

"Oh, it's right there where it always was, but the closed-space effect keeps you from seeing it. Actually, we're in a sort of little universe of our own here, held together by the terrific power flowing over the surface of the field--"

"I'd feel a lot better if we could see, Barnaby. What if we get lost here?"

Barnaby laughed. "Nonsense, Gigi. All we have to do is go in a straight line to any of the walls, and . . ." he frowned. "No, that's not quite right; the field curves space . . . but if we just go back to the control room . . . but . . ."

"Barnaby! What's the matter! You look so pale!"

Barnaby swallowed hard. "Nothing-nothing at all. But maybe we'd better just find that door right away . . ." He turned, walked quickly back, groped at the empty air. A stout lady in runover shoes puffed past, ignoring him. He worked his way across the sidewalk, turned and looked back.

"I'm sure it wasn't this far along," he muttered.

"Barnaby, we were standing at least over there when we stepped into this place," Gigi said worriedly, pointing. "I remember the crack in the sidewalk."

"You must be mistaken, Gigi." Barnaby indicated a stout oak door set in the wall behind him. It bore a brass plate reading *chast & seemly studios, limited*.

"Let's try in here," he called. He opened the door, held it for Gigi. Hesitantly, she stepped inside. They were in a narrow foyer, discreetly lit, austere decorated, unobtrusively air-conditioned. Sterilized music murmured from an indefinable source.

"Look," Gigi said. "Elevators. Where could they go? There isn't anything above . . ."

"Appearances are deceiving; we're still inside the field. If we go up, we can look out of a window, and then maybe we can see the outer walls. That will tell us where we are."

"Well . . . maybe."

Barnaby pressed the button; there was a soft whoosh! of air. The doors slid aside. They entered the car.

"Four floors ought to be high enough," Barnaby said. The car moved up, eased to a stop. The doors opened. Barnaby looked out into a dimly lit residential-looking corridor, deeply carpeted, neuter-toned, silent.

"Hmmm, I guess we'll have to look around and find a window." Barnaby stepped to a blank oak panel, rapped on it. Nothing happened. He tried it. It swung open. They stepped through and stopped dead, staring. Sun streamed through lacy curtains over wide windows where flowers grew in pots. On a brand-new stepladder by a sootless fireplace set with a gleaming brass shove and poker, a well-muscled man of twenty-five with the features of a god, wearing well-pressed dark slacks and a perfectly fitted polo shirt spread a hideous pink paint on a white wall, using an immaculate brush. The paint flowed out in a flawless swath with each stroke. A beautiful girl in a starched white blouse and red slacks wielded a roller in the lower section of the wall. Her work was, if anything, more perfect than his. Not a drop had been spattered.

"This Kem-tone is the paintier paint," she stated. "Goes on so easy, your friends will think you called in a high-priced decorator-"

"Pardon me, folks," Barnaby said. The two home decorators ignored him. He went to the window, looked out. A sheet of cardboard with a lithograph of a seed-catalog garden blocked the view.

The man on the stepladder turned to dip his brush. Barnaby stepped up to him. "Hey!" The man went on painting the same spot, in smooth effortless strokes.

"Comes in twelve delicious colors, too," the girl commented. "Lemon, lime-"

"Look!" Barnaby said. "This is an emergency. We're lost. Can you tell us-"

"Maybe they can't see us-or hear us either," Gigi suggested in an awed whisper.

"They'll hear me," Barnaby said determinedly. He seized the man's painting arm; the ladder tilted; the man swayed, crashed to the floor, upsetting the girl in red slacks who fell sideways, still painting unhurriedly. Lying on his side, the man worked his brush imperturbably, laying a pink stripe across the girl's chest. She rolled her roller in the air, smiled with pink features as the brush worked over her face.

". . . Strawberry," she cooed. "Raspberry, prune, chop suey and chicken noodle . . . "

"Let's get out of here!" Barnaby seized Gigi's hand, charged across the room, burst through a door. They were in a sunny breakfast nook. A lovely girl in a ruffled apron stood with her head sideways, one hand on hip, holding a coffee pot.

"More Chase and Sanborn's?" She smiled brilliantly.

A man with incredibly regular features looked at her happily from his chair at the table. Before him on a machine-decorated plate a symmetrical fried egg lay beside two geometrical strips of bacon. He held a clean starched napkin in his left hand. He rolled his eyes ludicrously, his tongue curling over his upper lip; he wrinkled his nose . . .

"Ummm, ummm," he said feelingly. "It's my favorite . . . "

Barnaby looked about for another door. The wall ended just beyond the table. Holding Gigi's hand, he plunged for it, jarring the table. Behind him, the man smiled as steaming coffee poured down on his knee.

The two rounded a partition, almost fell over a finely gowned woman who tilted a can of chemical over a toilet bowl. "Since I discovered new Drano," she said brightly, "old-fashioned, inferior products have been banished . . ."

A man stood watching, a finger digging at the back of his neck, a cap between his fingers. He appeared slightly ill with malaria, and his overalls needed pressing. A number of large, new tools lay scattered on the floor at his feet, together with brushes with bent bristles, bottles and cans with blurred labels, and a large and unsightly rubber plunger. He wore a marvelously intricate expression, compounding ruefulness at having been outdone by a housewife, admiration of new Drano, shame at his use of old-fashioned, inferior methods, and determination to learn from the experience, all overlaid with a smile.

Barnaby cleared his throat. "Say, can you give us a hand?"

"Next time, Lady, it's new Drano for me," the man said.

Barnaby twitched the can from the woman's hand, upended it in the plumber's hip pocket.

". . . embarrassing bathroom odors, too," the woman said gaily. Smoke poured from the plumber's pocket.

Barnaby and Gigi ducked between wet sheets on a clothes line, one gray and one white, and made for a plain door. It opened, and they stepped into a vast room with a high shadow-trussed ceiling. At its far end, television cameras were grouped around a floodlit set. The two stepped silently behind a heavy tan curtain that hung among ropes and wires, crossed the room, peeped out at the set, not more than twenty feet away. A man sat behind a broad polished desk, a green-painted wall behind him. To the left of the desk was a large gold-fringed American flag, and on the right was a blue flag with an eagle in the center and lettering around it. Barnaby read between the folds:

. . . SID . . . OF THE . . . TED . . . TES . . . MERI . . .

The man reached out to shuffle papers, glanced toward a wall block. Barnaby stared at the gray hair, the ski-jump nose, the wide bluish jaw.

"That man," he whispered. "He looks just like Nixon."

Nixon was talking: ". . . opportunity to make this report on my recent trip, and the meetings which I held with President de Gaulle, and Chancellor Brandt, during which we discussed . . ."

"Goober's cooking up some kind of political plot here!" Barnaby hissed, turning to the girl. "People will see this, and think it's the real Nixon—"

Gigi clutched at his arm, looking frightened. "Barnaby, let's go . . . !"

"They can't get away with this," Barnaby said. He stepped from behind the curtain, went toward the desk. Nixon ignored him.

" . . . easing of world tensions. We were in agreement-wholehearted agreement-as to the goals to be sought. The means-

Barnaby looked around, picked up a broom and swung it. "Scat!" he said. The desk microphone spun to the floor; papers flew. Nixon went on unperturbed:

" . . . necessitates renewed dedication on the part of each and every . . . "

Barnaby swung again. Nixon bounced from the chair, glossy silver hair still in place. " . . . taxation. However, in the near future, I have every hope . . . "

The imitation Nixon lay on the floor, legs drawn up in sitting posture. " . . . forces of Godless Communism . . . " Barnaby flailed at it, saw dust fly from the neat dark-blue suit. " . . . threat of war . . . "

He brought the heavy end down on the head of the puppet. A round glass eye rolled across the floor. The blue jaws moved: " . . . the free peoples . . . The free peoples . . . The free peoples . . . "

"Barnaby, stop!" Gigi cried.

"Goover must be planning on taking over the country," Barnaby called. "He's got this dummy set up to look like Nixon, and he's broadcasting it over TV. No telling what kind of conspiracy we've stumbled into here." He looked around, spotted a fire hose coiled against the wall. "Maybe a blast from that will slow things down. Dupe the American people, will he?" He lifted the hose from its bracket, stretched it across the floor, hurried back and turned the valve. A surge of water whipped the heavy canvas hose like a scorched python. Barnaby leaped for the nozzle, wrestled it into position as a spurt of water spewed forth, then fought to hold it down as a hard three-inch stream arced across the cavernous dim-lit room. The door opened, two men stepped through it, snapped over on their backs as the water hit, carrying along those behind them. Barnaby concentrated the stream on a skinny woman with a shrill voice, now raised in a patriotic number. He hosed her out the door, then cut the footing from under a fat man.

The water gushed, swirling around the light stands and cameras; sheets of white paper were afloat now; people scrambled to their feet to be knocked spinning by Barnaby's stream. Now another jet joined the first as Gigi unlimbered a second hose, giggling.

"Let's leave 'em squirting and get out of here," Barnaby called gaily. He propped the hose, holding it in place with a heavy TV camera stand, quickly set Gigi's hose up to add its volume to the attack.

"There's a door there," he pointed. "Let's try it." He slogged through the water to the small door marked EXIT in red light, found it locked. The water was ankle deep now. They tried another door.

"These hoses really put out," Barnaby said. Nixon floated past, bumped against a floodlight stand. ". . . the free peoples . . . the free peoples . . ."

The next door Barnaby tried swung open. Beyond it were stairs. They started down; dirty water flowed down the steps with them. At the ground floor, they went through a swinging door into a room filled with tall clattering machines. Rows of empty bottles advanced along moving conveyors, paused under chrome-plated nozzles that gushed red, yellow, purple, then moved on under an arm that hammered a cap on each bottle, whok! whok!

People appeared across the room. Barnaby took Gigi's hand, jumped on the nearest conveyor. Bottles flew and smashed; green liquid jetted, splattering. They leaped to the next belt. It broke; they scrambled on to the next. Behind them, bottles poured off onto the floor in an endless stream; purple liquid spurting, foaming.

"They're closing in on us!" Barnaby called over the clank of the apparatus, the crashing of glass, and the hiss of foaming beverage. "Throw bottles, Gigi!" He scooped up an armful, hurled them at the machinery; they hit and bounced off, shattered on the floor. One bottle lodged in a conveyor belt, crushed as the belt entered a slot. A moment later, there was a loud clunk! The belt piled up, writhed off onto the floor. More bottles tumbled.

Atop the machine, Barnaby saw a large valve near his hand. He turned it. The flow of orange pop increased. He turned it farther; the pop flooded out, boiling up in sudsy billows. He jumped to the next machine, twisted the valve. Purple suds mingled with orange. Gigi saw, added red foam. The attendants moved placidly about their work, now lost in bubbles, now emerging, froth-covered but undisturbed. Barnaby leaped down to the floor near the outer door, plucked an uncapped bottle from the line.

"Thirsty work!!" he said. He took a gulp, frowned, tossed the bottle into a group of whirling gears that ground to a halt with a screech of metal. "Let's get out of here . . ."

In the street, they looked back. Dense smoke poured from the top-floor windows.

"Looks like we started a fire, knocking over those arc lamps," Barnaby said. "Maybe it will attract attention and somebody will cut the power off."

"The fire is getting bigger!" Gigi called. "Look! It's leaping out the windows!"

A bell clanged, and a large red fire engine lumbered around a corner, pulled to a stop. Men in oilskins broke out hoses, connected up to hydrants. A stream of white water started up, played over the building, found a window; steam billowed. Another stream joined the first.

"This is fun!" Gigi cried. "I've never seen anything like this before!"

A torrent of water surged from the front entry of the burning building, carrying paper plates, Sunday funnies, television schedules. A man washed

out the door, a golf club in his hands. Bobbing in the flood, he shook his hips, kept his head down and swung, sending a shower of water over Barnaby and Gigi.

"Those imitation people are well made," Gigi said. "They're waterproof and everything."

A Good Humor man pedaled from a side street, his bell tinkling faintly amid the hubbub. Barnaby stepped forward, tipped him from his seat, caught the coasting vehicle. The man paddled solemnly, lying on the pavement.

"Chocolate or strawberry?" he called cheerfully.

A second pumper appeared, sending a sheet of water up as it whirled to a stop. More water poured into the windows. The smoke was denser now, the flames were visible leaping up above the roof.

"They're losing ground," Barnaby said. "The fire is gaining." Water was flowing out over the first-floor windows now. Paper clogged the gutters. In the street, the water level rose, topped the curbs. A desk floated from the building, then a chair, then a cluster of foam-rubber bras.

"We'd better get moving," Barnaby said. "The fire is into the next building; the water's rising fast!"

"Can't we watch a little longer?" Gigi asked. Nixon floated past.

"The free peoples," he said. His hair was still nicely combed. "The free peoples . . ."

"Not unless you want to swim for it!"

Gigi followed as Barnaby led the way up an alley that debouched into a wide street.

"Into the park," Barnaby called. "We'll be clear of the fire there-and maybe we can see where we are."

They scaled the fence, crossed a wide lawn, made their way along the edge of a stream. Passing a screen of trees, Barnaby held up a hand.

"I hear voices."

They stepped back behind the trees. The voices came more clearly, now:

"Darling!"

"Sweetheart!"

A man and girl appeared, walking arm in arm. He wore a sturdy windbreaker, corduroy pants with tight legs, gum-soled shoes. His hair was cut short. He was very handsome. The girl's wind-blown dark hair was tied with a violet scarf; she wore a suede jacket and a bright woolen skirt. She looked up at him with adoring eyes.

"Down by the water," he said. "Sweetheart."

"Oh, darling . . . "

They came down the slight slope, found a secluded place on the grassy bank, sat down.

"Now . . . " the man said. He unbuttoned his jacket. The girl's lips parted, her eyes bright with expectation and longing. He leaned closer to her.

"We'd better get out of here," Barnaby muttered.

The man stretched out his hand to the girl. There was a candy bar in it.

"Have a Welch's," he said.

"They had me fooled," Barnaby said, stepping out. He went over to the couple, plucked the candy bar from the girl's fingers. They paid no attention.

"I hope this isn't one of those awful marshmallow centers," he said, offering a bite to Gigi. He patted the imitation man's pockets, " . . . rich, creamy goodness," the fellow was saying.

"Damn. No cigarettes," Barnaby said.

"Yes, and with Welch's, quality comes first," the female said softly, baring her teeth and taking a bite of empty air.

Barnaby and Gigi resumed their stealthy progress, emerged from between trees onto a graveled drive that swept in a graceful curve before a white-columned mansion. Half a dozen rich-looking people clustered around a small, cheap, but very shiny car.

"Say, that's an idea," Barnaby said. "We can cover ground quicker in that."

They crossed the lawn to the group.

" . . . luxurious cardboard interior," a gorgeous red-head purred.

"And so economical, too," a trim-moustached ambassadorial type said.

"It's what's under the hood that sells ME," an effeminate-looking undergraduate offered, raising the hood to look wonderingly at the tiny engine.

Barnaby toppled him, slammed the hood down. He helped Gigi in, then slid into the driver's seat, started up, gunned down the drive, swept through an open gate and out into a wide avenue.

The street was crowded. Barnaby slowed. A stream of traffic crowded toward a red light suspended over the street ahead. He looked curiously at the cars. They were immense, wide, low, plastered with great strips and shapes of bright chrome work, rusty at the edges.

"I never saw cars like those before," Barnaby said. "They don't seem to be made for humans."

"They're the new '73 models," Gigi said. "I saw pictures in this week's

Ogle."

"I guess the fire has jammed traffic," Barnaby said. "We don't want to be stuck here if it spreads . . ." He backed, gunned forward, squeaked between two cars with a screech of metal, swerved to avoid a hurtling fire engine.

The cars ahead jammed the street solidly. A policeman blew a whistle, held up a hand as Barnaby bore down on him. He turned his back, motioned an opposing stream across the car's path.

"I've got to beat them!" Barnaby accelerated, bounced the cop aside, sent two dummy pedestrians high in the air; the on-rushing car clipped the midget car's rear bumper; Barnaby cut the wheel hard, humped up onto the sidewalk. Imitation pedestrians went down, bounced aside, spun against the aluminum walls, smiling and chatting. Barnaby shifted to second. A heap of pleased-looking dummies ground along in front of the car, piling higher. The little car's wheels spun, shifted down. The car groaned under the weight of its burden. Barnaby reversed, tried again.

"Look!" Gigi screamed. A three-foot wall of water surged down on them from the street ahead, bearing on its crest paper, TV sets, empty bottles, more paper . . .

The tide swirled around the sides of the car.

"All that water they're pumping-and the drains are clogged with paper!" he looked down. Playing cards, prayer books, horoscopes, racing forms, greeting cards, ticker tape, efficiency reports, tax forms . . .

"They use a lot of paper here," he said. Nixon floated past. "The free peoples . . ." he said, "the free peoples . . ."

"If the water gets much deeper, we've had it!" Barnaby called.

A swirl of smoke drifted across the street. A tongue of flame leaped high. Sparks shot skyward in a bright column as a building collapsed.

Barnaby gunned the car; it jittered forward. Water boiled up over the wheels, surged higher, seeped in under the doors.

"The upholstery is dissolving!" Gigi called over the roar of water and fire. "We'll have to get inside a building, up on an upper floor!"

"And burn alive? I'd rather drown-"

A small aluminum rowboat appeared, riding the flood.

"Catch it, Barnaby!" Gigi squealed. He flung the car door open, scrambled on the hood. As the boat whirled past, he lunged, caught the rope trailing from the bow.

"Get in, Gigi!" The girl scrambled over the thwart; Barnaby jumped, tossed overboard the sign reading be the neighborhood outdoor man! keep a boat in your backyard!

"Who's got a backyard?" Barnaby muttered, unshipping the oars. The boat whirled, steadied, shot into an alley. Barnaby plied the oars, steered around a flooded-out Dempster Dumpster.

"Barnaby, can't you row us away from the fire?" Gigi quavered. Barnaby looked over his shoulder; the current was carrying the boat directly toward a dense pall of billowing black smoke.

"It's all I can do to keep us head-on, so we don't capsize," he gasped.

"Ohhh, Barnaby, I'm scared!"

The smoke ahead was shot through with orange light now; a leaping tower of fire showed briefly at roof-top level. The current bubbled and frothed, smelling faintly of raspberry soda.

"Barnaby, maybe we'd better swim for it."

"Stay in the boat-maybe I can maneuver it down a side street."

Sparks whirled, settling over the boat. Gigi yelped and slapped at an ember. The water was up to door-top level along the street now, a furious torrent.

"Good-bye, Barnaby!" Gigi threw herself into his lap, her arms around his neck.

"Hey, Gigi-how can I row-"

A deafening boom! blanked off the crash of the flood. The light winked from the scene; abruptly, it was night, sparkling with blazing floodlights that showed a heaving surface of dirty water clotted with flotsam, a fallen wall, the dim bulks of massive machines.

"Gigi! We're back!" Barnaby held on as the boat swept past the remnants of the control room at terrific speed, dashed for a wide, lighted doorway over which Barnaby caught a glimpse of the words goober enterprises blazoned in gold. Then with a rush the boat was past the portal, sliding down a wide corridor, rocking wildly as the subsiding flood surged around a corner, curled through an open door. The keel grounded with a soggy squeak; the last of the water soaked into the deep-pile carpet. From behind a massive desk, Harlow Goober glared, his electrolenses like tiny windows in a purple balloon. He opened his mouth and bellowed.

* * *

"It really wasn't my fault," Barnaby Quale said to his cellmate. "All I did was-"

"Yeah, I heard all about you, bub. Some caper. I seen the excitement on the tube. Like a kind of a bubble of force, the guy said, two blocks wide and gaining ten feet an hour. They couldn't get inside for nothing. And power for the whole state was dimmed out for three hours!"

"There must have been some malfunction," Barnaby said. "The field wasn't supposed to expand. Of course, since it was a closed-space effect, no

external force could have any influence on it. But as for power, how was I to know Goober was tapping the state power pile? That's a Federal offense."

"Maybe-but with his pull, who's to care?"

There was a clank of feet from the corridor; a uniformed guard appeared at the barred door.

"Okay, you guys, on yer feet. You got a Very Important Visitor . . . "

The massive, paunched figure of Harlowe Goober hove into view.

"There you are, Clune! Where you deserve to be!" He held out a hand and a small nervous man hovering at his heels placed a floral-patterned tissue in it. He mopped at his jowls. "After all Goober Industries has done for you, you turn on her and savage her! In your frenzy, you stooped to sabotage! You-

"All I did was try out your Goobereality machine, Mr. Goober," Barnaby said flatly. "And what I saw in there-

"Ah-we'll go into that later, Gerb; I came here this morning to offer you forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness, Creen; out of consideration of your past services-

"You mean inventing all the things that you've made a fortune on? Think nothing of it, Mr. Goober; I enjoy my work. And after all, you were paying me union scale, and I wasn't even a member."

Goober shook his head. "Ever the lone wolf, eh, Deeb? But that's enough gossiping; I'm in a hurry." He held out a hand and the small courtier placed a document in it. Goober offered it through the bars.

"Just sign this contract, and I'll overlook your running amok-

"I didn't run amok, Mr. Goober; I just wanted to see how my Environmental Simulator worked. Your engineers did a first-class job of building it. But the things I saw in there-

"Shhh! Corporate secrets, Kerp! Just sign this and we can go along and have a quiet chat in my office."

"I'm not signing anything, Mr. Goober. When I tell all I know-

"A raise, Gorp! I think you deserve it. After all, a perfect attendance record during the six years you were with us-

"Nope. I'm going to blow the lid off. Tapping public power, eh? And-

Goober was shaking his head pityingly. "Kipp, do you really think anyone will listen?"

"Sure." Barnaby indicated his roommate. "This fellow here already knows about it."

"Fellow," Goober said in a kindly tone, rolling an electrolens on the man,

"do you know anything detrimental to the best interests of Goober Enterprises?"

"Sure, Mr. Goober! I mean, heck no, Mr. Goober! I mean, say, I'll sign anything you like, only just get me outa here-"

"You'll be sprung by nightfall, my man," Goober said grandly. "I can see there's been a miscarriage of justice."

"An abortion, you mean!" Quale shouted. "Look here, Goober-"

"All I want from you, my dear Queeb, is a full report on your findings while inside the environmental field. Decree of verisimilitude, accuracy of detail, consistency of illusion, tactile, olfactory and-"

"Go take a look for yourself!" Barnaby snapped. "I'm not one of your guinea pigs."

"In the name of science, Geep! I appeal to your sense of intellectual responsibility! You were there, a trained observer-"

"Send in your own crew, or is the thing permanently off the air?"

"The Simulator is back in readiness for use; it wasn't damaged, thank heaven! But I've had to postpone the demonstration indefinitely."

Quale laughed sharply. "Having a little trouble getting volunteers, are you?"

"It's your fault, Queep! You scared the wits out of us-I mean out of them. The field interface was like a wall of rubbery steel! Then when it started to expand, it simply gobbled up everything it touched. Dissolved the experimental shed as though it were a cookie in hot water. Used the matter to convert into the illusion, I suppose.

"And the power drain! It was rising at the rate of seventy-two percent per hour! And we were helpless to shut it down. You know about the automatic interlocks that operate during a power flow; the Governor suggested a fusion bomb, but our calculations revealed the Simulator would merely consume the energy and put on a spurt. If the Simulator hadn't shorted out-due to the flood, I assume-it would be growing yet. It's a Frankenstein, Geel! And it's all your fault!

"Now, the least you can do is tell me what you saw in there! What was it like? Plenty of brand names in evidence, I assume. You saw consumers in action; what were they consuming? I spent over a hundred thousand dollars programming typical audience characteristics into that panel. I have a right to know what the machine came up with!"

Barnaby sat back on his bunk, folded his arms. "Nuts to you, Goober," he said. "Figure it out for yourself."

Goober turned an unusual shade of magenta.

"I'll see you sealed in concrete five hundred feet underground, Gerp!" he grated. He whirled, collided with his toady, snarled and stalked away.

* * *

"Boy, you're nuts to rile Mr. Goober thataway," Barnaby's roomy said pityingly. "Look at me: I'm getting sprung, and by tonight I'll be putting on the feedbag with a swell doll down at Ration House Number Seventy-nine. All you hadda do was go along with the gag and you coulda been sitting pretty too."

"Nuts to Goober," Barnaby said shortly. He went to the door, fiddled with the lock. There was a click; the door swung open an inch.

"Hey!" Barnaby said. "It's not locked . . ."

"So what. Look, whyncha send word to Goober that you been thinking-"

"I can walk right out," Barnaby said. He poked his head out and looked along the corridor.

"Are you nuts? What's out there? Without you got a job, you're better off right here. You get three squares, plenty TV, lotsa sob-sisters sending in bound volumes of Playboy and the National Geographic. You got security here, man. Don't knock it!"

"I've got an idea," Barnaby said. "In fact, I've got a couple of ideas. Listen, friend, if they ask, just tell them you didn't notice me leaving. Say you were asleep. You can do that much for a fellow jailbird, can't you?"

"I think yer cookie's crumbled, pal, but if that's the way you want it, okay."

"Thanks. Arrividerci!" Barnaby slipped through the door and moved off toward the light at the far end.

* * *

"Barnaby!" Gigi squeaked. "Where did you-"

"Shhh! Don't attract any attention." Quale eased through the door into the girl's six by eight cubicle. "I'm glad you were here, Gigi. I was afraid you'd be in jail too."

"In jail! Oh, Barnaby, is that where-"

"Yep. Goober tried to buy me off, but I didn't go for it. For a while I had ideas about exposing Goober's racket, but a legal expert I ran into pointed out the impracticality of that."

"But, Barnaby-if you don't go to work for Mr. Goober-"

"And give up the last shred of hope for independence? I'd rather starve!"

"But what can we do?"

Barnaby took her hand. "You did say 'we'?"

"Of course, Barnaby Quale. You're insane, but I love you . . . and I guess it's because you are insane-wanting to do things your own way, when the Government's got a program for everything already taped."

"I hoped you'd feel that way. We'll lie low till dark and then make our move. Listen, here's what I have in mind . . .

* * *

It was dark in the Experimental Complex, except for the floodlit circles where workmen still toiled to clear away the last of the ring of debris left by the flash flood from the abruptly terminated simulated environment. Barnaby and Gigi rounded the end of the Admin Building, surveyed the site of last night's holocaust. Where the big shed had been, only the massive shapes of the equipment housings squatted against bare ground.

"You see? The field got out of hand," Barnaby breathed. "It developed some kind of self-perpetuating feedback; started cannibalizing everything around, and building itself bigger. Naturally, the apparatus itself was exempt because it was isolated from the field by the way the antennas were strung. And it had the whole state's power supply to draw on. And come to think of it, with the emergency interlock system, it can tap the whole supply for North America-and probably South America too."

"Barnaby, what if somebody catches us? After last night-"

"We won't think about that. Let's go." Keeping the shadows, he approached the tarp-covered control console. While Gigi watched nervously for patrolling guards, Barnaby cut through tie-down ropes, lifted the Gooberplast cover, slipped under it.

"Barnaby, hurry!" Gigi hissed.

"Sure, it will only take a few minutes . . ." He switched on a small flashlight, propped it by the panel.

"Now, let's see," he muttered. "First I'll have to code in some instruction about interactions between the environment and the external observers, namely Gigi and myself . . ."

The tarp twitched. "Barnaby! They see us! There's a spotlight!"

"Hold on just a minute longer!" Quale called. "I'm almost done!" He punched keys, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. ". . . weather . . . crops . . . architecture . . . vegetation . . ."

A siren wailed. Barnaby heard a hoarse voice shout. Gigi squeaked. He scrambled from under the tarp, took her hand. "Okay, if everything works, we're ready . . ." He jumped to the large lever, hauled it down. The humming noise started up. There were clicks and rumbles from underground. The big red light on the panel blinked on. Barnaby reached, punched the ACTIVATE button. The humming deepened. A dim light sprang up; something seemed to shimmer at the center of the bare expanse of concrete . . .

"Get ready!" Barnaby took Gigi's hand.

There was a dull boom! and the air whistled furiously past Barnaby's head. A curtain of gray fog hung before him. He swallowed hard, took a step, felt a tingle as the mist parted before him . . .

* * *

Bright sunlight gleamed on a grassy field where immense wildflowers nodded to a gentle breeze. Woods clothed the nearby hills, and on the crest of a low mountain a castle stood, pennants fluttering from its towers. An odor of spring filled the air.

"Barnaby, it's lovely!" Gigi breathed. "Do you really think we're safe here?"

"Certainly. It is nice, isn't it? I had to work pretty fast, but I think I got it all in."

"Barnaby! I just happened to think. What about the people? Will it just . . . convert them too?"

"They'll be screened and modified to fit the specs. After all, they're part of the environment, too."

There was a sound behind them; they turned. A vast man in a blue jacket and knee breeches was standing looking about with a perplexed smile. He saw Barnaby and the girl and doffed his pointed hat with a jingle of bells.

"Greetings, friends," he called.

"Why, it's Mr. Goober!" Gigi gasped.

Barnaby nodded approvingly. "If it handled Goober, we're in," he said. "Come on, let's explore."

"Why, look," Gigi said, "it's a paved road . . . "

"Of course," Barnaby nodded approvingly.

Gigi looked back. "Shouldn't we take Mr. Goober with us? He's just sitting there, smelling the flowers."

"He'll be all right," Barnaby said. "This is his chance to make new friends." He took Gigi's hand and together they started off along the yellow brick road.