

LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN GENIUS

There can be situations in which a genius might definitely prefer that his work of genius not be associated with him. It would be a lot safer that way. . .

COLIN KAPP

ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL GILBERT

Dancing on a sea of silvery wavelets, the small boat came: under the radar towers, past the brief defenses—the clamor of its tiny engine sounding loud across the bay. The men behind the guns spared it not a second glance. It was an ordinary scene—the priest returning from the blessing of the fishing fleet and the casting of bread upon the waters. This was part of the pattern by which the village lived, a way of life almost unchanged as far as the yellowed records could remember.

Only a shrewd eye, and one equipped with good binoculars and a good memory, would have noticed that this day was different. The boat returning from its mission carried one more occupant than it had taken. Around the shadow of the headland the nuclear submarine, its assignment completed, had already slipped silently across the shelf, making for deep water.

The monastery of San Chernov was old. Its walls, built continuously up from the bedrock of the cliffs, in places dipped almost to the water. Here, past the sad harbor, the great, gray steps of the ecclesiastic landing stage showed for just how many centuries the church of San Chernov had comforted and been concerned with those who fought their living from the sea.

But it was not only the years which had left their mark on the gray and dedicated walls. Scars of the ravages of cannon shell and rocket remained an ineradicable reminder of the impact of the century into which they had survived. As though acknowledging its grudging awareness of the times, the chapel wore a copper crown whose newly acquired patina had not yet learned to live in harmony with the dull stone walls.

The boat pulled in at the landing stage at the foot of the monastery steps. A priest and one other disembarked before the novices turned the craft away to place it at anchorage safe against the tides. The priest permitted the cowl of his cloak to fall back to his shoulders, revealing his curiously sharp, ascetic face and the whitened wisps of a tonsured head—a vision of piety who might unchanged, have occupied the selfsame role at any time in the monastery's history. His companion maintained the garb intact, concealing beneath it the casual clothes of one more than usually aware of the progress of the Atomic Age. Not until they had ascended the steps and entered the great, shaded halls of San Chernov did the visitor disrobe.

The priest took the cloak from her with an air of deference.

"It is good of you to come here, Madam Karp—especially on so dangerous a journey."

"If the news that has reached us is true, the dangers involved in my coming are nothing compared to the dangers had I not come."

"May God preserve us all!" said the priest quietly. "If you would be so good as to wait here, I will inform the abbè of your arrival. He will wish to speak with you immediately."

Left alone, Marion Anderson Karp, greatly regretting that the occasion had caused her to abandon her high heels, began to examine her surroundings. The buildings were classic examples of their age, and the housekeeping was loving and meticulous. But time and war had caused many faults in the fabric, and the process of reconstruction, due to the unfitting poverty of the area, was a labor to be measured in lifetimes rather than years.

She approached the great portal, looking out appreciatively at the incredibly bright sunshine which

flooded the headland and the bay, but careful to keep her own self concealed in the shadows against any casual eye. The number of lives set at risk by her presence in San Chemo warned her to great caution, and the nuclear submarine which had delivered her to these shores showed the involvement of governments and the shadowy hand which gripped the world with cold pincers of fear.

The sound of footsteps returning across the flagged halls made her turn. It was the priest, his face nearly impassive yet made rich with the deep, searching eyes and the resolute quietude which was so characteristic of the Order in Residence at San Chemo.

"The abbe awaits you in the library, Madam Karp. If you please, I will show you the way. And may I add this is an historic occasion. Never before in the four hundred and fifty years of San Chemo's existence, has a woman been permitted to enter these walls. Unfortunately it is also an event which must be forever left unrecorded."

"Madam Karp, this is indeed a pleasure!" The abbe extended his hand towards her. Momentarily she hesitated, overwhelmed by the size and richness of the huge, dim library in which the abbe sat. "Forgive me for not rising," he continued, "but it is many years since these legs last served me."

She broke her reverie and went to him quickly. "I wasn't aware of your infirmity, Abbe Mesnil—only of your courage." She shook his hand gravely. "It is I who should apologize."

"Nonsense, Madam . . . my child!" His face was overcome by a kind of wonder. "Please stand more fully in the light, for I think I have been misled. Seroia told me he was sending someone brilliant, but he forgot to tell me he was sending someone beautiful."

"Not beautiful," said Marion Karp reprovingly. "Truth to tell, I'm uncommonly plain."

"That isn't true, my child, but to find these virtues combined with both a sense of humor and of humility is something that happens but once in a lifetime."

"Abbe Mesnil!" Her voice sharpened. "I've not come all this way just to receive compliments."

"Indeed no! But let me say this: had I known Seroia would send . . . you . . . I would probably not have consented. What will be told in San Chemo today places the hearer at great risk. I could expect that much of a man. I would not knowingly have imposed it on a woman."

Marion Karp smiled. "Perhaps my society is less chivalrous in what it expects of a woman. And then again, perhaps not. Think what your society demands of a peasant-wife, and then ask yourself who is the more fortunate."

Abbe Mesnil's face softened. "And wisdom also! You are indeed one of the rarer kind."

A knock at the door heralded the arrival of a novice bearing refreshments on a tray. Marion Karp took the offered sweetmeats and sipped the wine appreciatively, her eyes roving the great bookshelves as if trying to summarize her host by the literary environment in which he lived and of which he seemed almost a part. What she saw impressed her. When the novice had departed she returned to the abbe's side.

"Considering you're so isolated from it, Abbe Mesnil, you're remarkably au fait with the latest developments of modern science."

The old man smiled. "Does one need to stand in a puddle in order to study animalcula, or to dwell in a vacuum in order to study the stars?"

She faltered momentarily. "My mistake, Abbe. I come so steeped in scientific method I tend to forget the power of thought. May we now come to the matter which brought me here?"

"Surely, my child! First, I will tell you about a man. Later I shall ask you to meet someone and let him tell his own story. I need scarcely warn you that what you will hear could be the cause of your own death at the hands of our secret police, if they should learn of it. Equally it could cause my death and the death of the one you shall meet. It could even bring about a pogrom which would end this church and this village."

"I understand that."

"I'm sure you do. But remember that whoever speaks to you, or who even knows of your presence here, is guilty of high treason in our modern police state. Nor are we willing traitors to the land of our own flesh. We have invited you here in the name of God and in the cause of the preservation of humankind . . . for the sake of Humanity."

"The greater cause . . ." Marion Karp was watching him closely.

"As you say—the greater cause. Even theologians must sometimes accept a compromise."

"May we now get to the point?" Her voice was edged with a hint of intolerance.

Mesnil looked at her for a long second before replying.

"For nearly four centuries our church mission has maintained the village school in San Chemo. Our basic teachings are reading, writing, figures, and the scriptures. However for students of special ability we extend the curriculum. Some we train for higher things here in the monastery, and some we even send to the seminary in Gozaro. Thus no one in the village, no matter what the circumstances of his birth, need lack for education if he can prove his ability to learn. One such exceptional student was Pietr Salmonique."

"Pietr Salmonique?"

"The name is unimportant, since no one now owns it. But the lad was gifted at figures, so much so that Brother Amarillo, who was once a lecturer in mathematics, became his personal tutor. Pietr, whose father was a hedge-cutter, proved to be not only exceptional, but brilliant. He outgrew all that we had to offer, and the seminary would have wasted his talents. Although we are a poor Order, we gave him a grant which enabled him to go to the university at San Paulo."

"That much is history." Marion Anderson Karp was still waiting for the point.

"History with a purpose." Mesnil was unruffled. "I seek first to convince you what class of man Pietr Salmonique was."

"Was?"

"Don't force me to jump ahead of my story. Pietr not only gained his doctorate, but the work he did for his thesis showed him to have one of the most brilliant minds in the country, if not in the world. I have myself no doubt that had he been able to continue his work undisturbed his name would one day have ranked alongside that of Einstein."

"He didn't continue, then?"

"The ways of God are never certain. We cannot be sure. In a totalitarian state, the truth is not always what appears at the surface. We know he joined the Government Science Institute to do some research work on fundamental physics. That was the last we ever heard of Pietr Salmonique."

"So?"

"That was nearly two years ago. The silence was not unexpected. Our government is ambitious, and their Security is absolute. They had a big research station on the Mariam desert at a place called Gratz, and we presume it was to there that he went. In any event, Gratz was the center of the blowup in which you are interested. That was three months ago."

"What do you know about the Gratz blowup?"

"Only what I hear, and that is pitifully little. Even today the majority of the population in this country are unaware that the blowup even occurred. But I do not think that your observation satellites could have missed it. Some disaster happened at Gratz . . . something that wasn't a nuclear reaction because there was no radiation and no radioactive fallout. Whatever happened was some kind of particulate reaction the like of which the world has never before known. One white flame reached out from Gratz . . . and thirty thousand square kilometers of sand were burned into a film of glassy slag ten meters thick. The Gratz research station and three-small villages disappeared in that instant of time—leaving nothing but a glazed enigma."

"Your information agrees with our own," said Marion Karp evenly. "The Gratz reaction was of an unknown type. It was a far more fundamental type of particulate reaction than our own relatively crude attempts at nuclear fusion and the like. What confused us was that before your mention of Pietr Salmonique, we were reasonably certain that your Government Science Institute had no brains of a stature sufficient to carry out particulate research of that order. I still think that the resources of your country are insufficient to support research of that magnitude."

"That is substantially true, my child. But now to the reason I agreed to allow you to come here. Four days after the blowup a sick man arrived here at San Chemo asking for sanctuary. He was ill for many weeks with a delirium which seemed to be of the mind rather than the body. But in his sickness he talked

much, and, being his comforters, we listened. In a little while I'm going to ask you to talk with him yourself."

"He's still here then?"

"Our Order has gained a new brother—Brother Simon. From whence he comes we know not, but he is undoubtedly the most devout and pious amongst us." Mesnil was smiling slightly, as if to belie his own words. "Since this is a day of exceptions, I am releasing him from his vow of silence in order for you to conduct an interview. Remember, since we know nothing about him, I can vouch for nothing that he says, nor even if he is sane or mad. He bears some resemblance to Pietr Salmonique, except that Pietr had dark hair, whilst Simon's is white. Also Pietr was a young man, whilst Simon seems to have no age at all except that his eyes are old."

Her first impression was that the cell was in complete darkness, and it took many seconds for her eyes to adapt before she could make out details of the interior. The walls were of rough, unfinished stone, massive in the way of all things at San Chernob. A plain wooden bench with two coarse blankets served as bed, chair and table. Two iron pins driven into the wall made a more than adequate wardrobe. Light was admitted from one small grille placed high and recessed deeply into the mammoth blocks of stone. The sole relief in the spartan scheme was a great wooden cross upon the wall, on which a carved near-lifesize figurine of Christ hung in eternal anguish. There was also a bible. And a man.

She stood for many minutes watching the man on his knees, his hands together, head raised, eyes closed yet looking upwards to the frozen crucifixion. If he was aware of her he gave no sign, but continued his prayer with a kind of single-minded desperation; as though the world would cease to turn if he should falter. Then, by dropping his hands before him he signaled that the prayer was done.

"Simon?" Marion Karp found her voice oddly at variance with her surroundings.

"They call me the same." The man rose from his knees and turned towards her. His face was white, almost silken, against the backdrop of the hood which he pulled around his head. His eyes were deep pools of something which reflected the agony of the figure on the crucifix. As Mesnil had said, he had no age except that his eyes were old.

"The abbe asked me to listen to your story."

"You?" He was slightly incredulous. "I agreed to speak only once and then only to someone capable of comprehending what I have to say—because there is great danger in such knowledge. Only someone who understands completely what I have to tell could decide between my words and the dreams of a madman. But even a fool could attempt to use my words—and one fool did."

"I can understand."

"I think not . . ."

"You doubt my credentials?"

"You are a woman." Simon left the rest unsaid.

"Then you have never heard of Marion Anderson Karp?"

His expression changed suddenly. "Madam Karp . . . the physicist . . . forgive me! You and Curie . . . I know well of your work on particulate theory, but I had not realized that you could be so young and . . ."

". . . Beautiful?"

"Yes . . . an old crow I could have understood."

"It's axiomatic that old crows must once have been young, and many of them beautiful also. Do you wish me to return in fifteen years?"

"Madam . . . I live up to my name. They call me Simon now—in fact it is mostly Simon the Idiot. You see how aptly the name applies. Nobody but an idiot would treat you like this."

Marion Karp laughed lightly. "I would judge you anything but an idiot."

Simon spread his hands expressively. "It is a pose I must adopt in case the police should come. If I maintain it long enough, I suspect it will even become true. But once I was . . ."

"Pietr Salmonique, the mathematician?"

"You have been primed by the abbe, Madam Karp. Therefore my life is in your hands." He gestured for her to sit on the bench, and sit beside her, looking fixedly at the symbol of the cross whilst he spoke. "When I left the university I secured a position at the Science Institute under Professor Ornado. In fact I carried Professor Ornado. He was a fool. His academic degrees were bought, and his appointment as head of the Institute was political. But he was a dangerous fool. He had a little knowledge, but no idea at all of how much he did not know."

"I have met Ornado at conferences," said Marion Karp. "Your summary agrees with my own."

"Good!" Simon was warming to his subject. "President Perdo, knowing even less about science than he does about government, thought that his expensive Science Institute should be able to give him an atomic bomb. This was ludicrous, but Ornado, to keep his position and possibly his life, became committed to make an attempt. Fortunately neither the Russians nor the Americans would supply us with the necessary isotopes. The Chinese made sympathetic noises but failed to deliver. Ornado decided to go it alone."

"That should have been fairly harmless."

"It should have been—would have been." Simon never once took his eyes from the hanging Christ. "Ornado flew against the odds because he hadn't a ghost of a chance of doing it the orthodox way. He began experimenting with hydrogen fusion, apparently under the impression that he could achieve a thermonuclear reaction by subjecting hydrogen under pressure to high-intensity arcs. By this he could have hoped to do no more than placate President Perdo, and thus prolong his own life. But then the letter arrived."

"What letter?"

"A letter from an unknown genius. No name. No address. Simply a set of equations and the suggestion of a method for producing a particulate reaction more basic than anything known in conventional nuclear physics. It could be the type of reaction by which the stars were first lit."

"Go on," said Marion Anderson Karp.

"The mathematics were horrific. I had to develop special techniques to handle the equations. Even then I was only grasping at the edge of a new unified-field theory which I doubt if the human brain has the capacity to encompass as a whole. Limiting myself to only one minuscule part of the problem, I was able to produce a working hypothesis for this new and vastly simpler kind of particulate reaction. Indeed, it was so simple that even Ornado had the type of facilities to make it work."

"And you gave your hypothesis to Ornado for his bomb?"

Simon spread his hands. "I did so with the greatest reservations. I left him in no doubt of the dangers of proceeding with something so far beyond the limits of known physics. In a conventional nuclear fission or fusion reaction, the physics of the reaction causes its own termination. Neither can become self-sustaining. But I could see no such limitation inherent in this new class of reaction. It could have consumed the world or even the universe."

"Yet Ornado still dared to try it?"

"He had nothing to lose, Madam. He would have been quite as dead at the hands of Perdo's police had he not produced a bomb. He was a very frightened man. But he was cautious. He tried quite honestly to test-fire the device under circumstances which involved the minimum risk to human life. Nobody could have predicted the actual consequences."

"What happened then?"

"The test-point was in the desert and only some thirty kilometers from Gratz. Ornado had designed that the first reaction would be a very small one. I was sent to the edge of the desert to an observation post. I think something went wrong with his timing, because I was only meters out of the desert and not yet at the post when the blowup came. It was like a sheet of white flame, not a fireball. A low, spreading mass ... an unholy tide of white fire that burned the desert sand to slag yet had no heat of its own."

"What makes you say it had no heat?" asked Marion Karp.

"There were monitors in the observation post. I looked at them later. There was no heat recorded, and no radioactivity."

"Then what class of reaction was it?"

"I do not know, Madam. It was beyond, anything that I know of in physics. I can only tell you what I saw."

"Was there any evidence that the reaction might have been self-sustaining?"

"I think it tended to. That was why it spread across the desert. I have no idea why it stopped when it did. But the visions of that moment will haunt me always. Madam, when I saw that white tide advancing, I knew I had helped destroy the world."

Marion Karp was silent for several long seconds.

"And you say you received the information for this in a letter? What then would you make of the person who wrote it?"

"As I see it, Madam, the reaction was part of some higher order of physical science. But I fail to see who on earth could possess that type of knowledge, or why they used it to play such a potentially disastrous trick on Ornado."

"Listen to me," said Marion Karp, "because what I'm going to say now is very secret and very important. Ornado was not the only one to have a trick played on him. Britain lost a hundred million pound research establishment following-up some anonymous information on tritium fusion. America laid-waste to a vast tract of land trying to prove a theorem on gravitic radiation which arrived in a shoebox. We don't know what happened in Russia, but from her willingness to co-operate in finding the source of this information, it's a reasonable guess that she paid dearly also. We're also sure that something desperate happened in China."

"All through letters from the same genius, Madam?"

"We think so. Somewhere on earth is someone whose extreme genius has permitted him to make a breakthrough into the next order of physics . . . perhaps a hundred, perhaps five hundred years ahead of our time. We have to find this person, Simon. Not only to prevent him from tormenting us with our own greed for power, but to be able to understand how and why such mental breakthroughs are possible. The trouble is, how do you find a genius who has a genius for remaining concealed? If there's anything more you can tell us which might be of help, I charge you to tell me now."

"I'm not sure I want you to know more about these breakthroughs, Madam. I sometimes shudder at the thought of what power your country, or mine, or some other, could acquire if they possessed access to that kind of knowledge."

"Knowledge is a tool," said Marion Karp sharply, "and like any other tool, its employment for good or evil depends on the morality of the user. It's too late to point to a certain level of science and say: 'We will stop there!' That chance was lost with the flesh of the apple in the Garden of Eden."

"The original sin," said Simon, with a wan smile. "But does the creator of this knowledge bear no responsibility for what others create from it? I've been trying to understand the motivation behind the person who wrote the letter. I don't know much about the psychology of genius, except the adage that it's akin to madness. Do you think he is mad, Madam?"

"No. Not many of my colleagues agree with me, but I see him as saner than most. There's been no evidence to suggest he's been doing more than tormenting us by displays of his own superiority. It's our own greed which has caused all the damage. One could well think that he's giving us a moral object lesson."

Despite the sullen heat, Simon shivered, and his hands moved together convulsively.

"Madam, I am only Simon the Idiot. Such speculations I must leave to those who can fairly claim to be able to judge them. For myself, I see the only answer lies in prayer."

"I should like to take you back with me to France or England so that we can learn as much as possible about this new dimension in physics."

Simon swung to face her, his eyes curiously dark and appealing. "Madam, there are times in a man's life when nothing is so important as a solid wall against which he can press his back, and a few cubic meters of eternity before him into which he can stare. Reluctantly I must point out that. I am no longer strong enough to inhabit the type of world you have to offer."

"I think you're wrong," said Marion Karp. "But if your mind is set, I should like you to tell me in detail all you remember about the Gratz experiment. In particular, I want as much as you can give me of the original equations."

He stopped, as though her profile in silhouette against the light had drawn him back towards a former world.

"I can do better than that, Madam. With swift decision he stooped and felt in a recess underneath the bench. His hand emerged clasping some sheets of folded paper.

"I had not meant anyone to have this—ever. Not after Gratz. But I think if I gave it to you, you will know best how to use it wisely."

"What is it?"

"I saved it, Madam, and no one knows I have it. It's the letter from the unknown genius."

She took the letter with a frown and opened it, feeling the texture of the paper and holding it up to the light, then holding it down so that she could see the characters inscribed upon it.

"This is the original?"

"Exactly as it arrived, Madam. I had photocopies made, but the original I kept. Now I give it to you."

"This is important, Simon—because incidental things about the original might give us a clue to the identity of its author. Can you be sure that these haven't been confused with some of your intermediate workings?"

Simon touched the pages lightly. "Those symbols are burned into my memory. Not only what was written, but how they were written. I have thought much about the brain which guided that pen. There is no possible doubt that those are the original."

"Thank you," said Marion Karp. "I'd like to go and study these, and, if possible, speak with you again later."

"If the abbe permits it, Madam, then I am at your service. In the name of God, this person must be found."

As evening approached, a novice had come into her room and lit the oil lamps. The paucity of the illumination irritated her, and the heavy curtaining at the windows seemed to shut out what little air there was, and to increase the heat that drained out of the massive stone of the walls. When her search for a breathable atmosphere caused her to open the curtain and the heavy casement, the light attracted all sort of winged beasties out of the gathering dusk, and their phototropic spirals round the flame brought her to the instant of despair.

Across the tabletop of irregular but lovingly-tended wood, her own notes were now scattered, white and rectangular and covered with symbols heavily indebted to a civilization which had risen and been eclipsed two thousand years before. Now the messages which the page bore seemed to shriek of a similar temporal disparity with their surroundings. In the uncertain shadow cast by the ancient flame, they were things of another time.

Agonized by the conflict of clashing concepts and unresolvable formulas, she flung herself finally on the bed, spasmodically retrieving first one note and then another successive but abortive shafts of inspiration moved her like a vex child's plaything. The dimness and the heat closed more deeply round her and grew steadily more oppressive and less tolerable. Still the answers would not come. The letter which Simon had given her mocked her with its enigma. It was at once both factual and an impossibility. Something, somewhere was incredibly wrong, but the responsible factor could not be isolated or defined. For the first time since childhood, Marion Karp was beginning to feel afraid.

A knock at the door came as a welcome diversion. The priest who had fetched her in the boat now waited for her in the corridor. His quiet calm and certitude contrasted strongly with her own turmoil. For an instant she felt a twinge of something akin to envy at his ability to master the belligerent war fields of internal conflict. His composure was like a rock, whilst she felt like a reed caught in a capricious wind.

"The abbe presents his compliments, Madam Karp, and would be pleased for you to join him for supper in the library. He has asked Brother Simon also to join him, if you have no objection."

"I've no objection, of course. In any case, I need further words with Simon."

The priest led the way through the long stone corridors. He was barefoot and with tonsured head, and walked with the kind of dignity which elsewhere seemed to have vanished from the world. Almost meekly, she followed, feeling curiously like a child being led by the hand. There was something about this place which questioned her own sense of identity.

In the library the long table had been set with an elegant meal. Abbe Mesnil was already seated at its head; and tall white candles in silver candelabra cast a soft, white illumination so in keeping with the scene that it was impossible to imagine their being supplanted by any harsher form of light. On all sides the reflection from the spines of many thousands of cherished books turned back the precious glow, cradling the space within in a kind of timelessness. A womb lined with books ...

"Please be seated, my child! You seem a little weary. I hope that our somewhat spartan mode of life has not unduly taxed you."

"Spartan?" She glanced at the rich cloth, the silver, the plate and the rare cut glass, and at the lights which danced back from the old man's eyes.

"Don't judge us by what you see here. This is our day of exceptions. I doubt if this table has felt such weight this century. It is our way of showing esteem for a truly remarkable woman."

She was spared the awkwardness of composing a suitable answer by the arrival of Simon. He took his place at the table with every sign of discomfort at being so honored. After prayers had been said and a few pleasantries exchanged, he lapsed into silence and looked fixedly at the candle flames, as though fire itself was something new to him.

"Tell me," said Mesnil, as the meal progressed, "we hear so little of the world outside these days—how is my old friend Seroia?"

"Uncommonly well and in the best of spirits—but then I've seldom seen him otherwise. He's an incredible character."

"He is indeed! I recall I once asked Seroia what was his function as a consulting philosopher. He said that if a man was beset by green demons and took his problem to the church, a priest would pray for the sickness in his soul. If he took his problem to the doctor, a psychiatrist would probe for the sickness in his mind. But only a consulting philosopher would pick up a stick and help him chase the demons."

Marion Karp laughed. "I think there you have the essential Seroia. To him, all things are possible."

"Is it that which leads him to be involved with your present problem?"

"His appointment as head of the investigating body was the unanimous choice of several Governments—and I think they were right. We're faced with the task of locating an improbable genius who disseminates impossible physics for an inscrutable reason. I doubt if anyone in the world is better qualified to handle it than Seroia."

"But between ourselves, just what are the chances of finding this person?"

Marion Karp pursed her lips. "It's a question of intellectual stature. I see this now as a fight between two minds, Seroia's and that of our unknown genius. We know Seroia's potential, but we've no real measure the other."

Abbe Mesnil leaned back. "I wonder if we really do know Seroia's potential. I remember he was playing with a theory that the sum-total human knowledge, past, present and future, is already contained in the human mind. That what we think as discovery is in reality only a triggered rediscovery of knowledge already inherent within us. This would go a great way to explain sudden leaps of inspiration which are subsequently proven to have great scientific truth."

"I've heard him speak of the idea but I scarcely considered it seriously."

"I doubt if he spoke of it seriously. But you can't dismiss the idea too lightly. The idea of a metered release of knowledge into our expanding technology is well in accordance with the observed facts of scientific progress. But Seroia was interested in the trigger mechanism by which increments of this knowledge are released. He theorized that if one could gain conscious control of trigger, then there would be almost no limits to the rate at which scientific progress could be made."

"As a scientist," said Marion Karp, with a slight hint of disdain, "I can assure you that scientific

progress depends on no such mumbo jumbo. There's not the slightest evidence in support of such a trigger mechanism."

"But there is!" said Mesnil reproachfully. "It's what you call scientific method. A fairly recent innovation, historically speaking, but it's a technique with all the hallmarks of a rapid-firing trigger mechanism. Currently it doubles the total of human knowledge every seven years. But think for how many hundreds of centuries human progress lay relatively static before its introduction."

She pretended to be cross. "Abbe Mesnil, this is nothing but a philosophic parlor game. You know perfectly well that the success of scientific method needs no such ridiculous explanation. It's a discipline, and like most other forms of discipline, it's designed to ensure a more efficient approach to a given task. As a leader of a disciplined Order, you must at least agree with that."

"Touché!" Mesnil grinned like a schoolboy caught in the midst of a prank. "It's a pity, my child, you could not be with us more often. It is rare in San Cherno to hear spirited dissension. Believe me, its effect is tonic. But I digress. I was on the point of saying that Seroia was looking at the possibility of the existence of an even faster trigger."

"Which he obviously didn't find."

"I don't know whether he found it or not. Seroia is a canny old bird at the best of times. But I'm tempted to wonder now if your genius does not have access to this kind of knowledge."

From somewhere in the monastery the long chime of a bell was a pulse marking the hours, days, the years and the centuries, yet itself remaining virtually unchanged. Beyond that, the silence of the night lay like a sullen sheet of lead, a heavy insulant separating San Cherno from the other kind of world which lay outside.

"I admit it's a possibility," said Marion Karp finally, but her voice lacked conviction. "However, it does nothing to solve the problem of identity. In fact, it makes the situation worse. From what we know at the moment the genius could be any of a wide range of gifted individuals. Even Seroia himself, or you, Abbè Mesnil—or Simon here. Genius need leave no outward traces. We've always assumed that he must be a trained research scientist, but if your theory was to hold true, then almost anyone on earth could qualify."

"Could not one approach the problem from the aspect of motivation. Such misuse of a God-given privilege is both an irresponsible and criminal act. Surely that gives you some clue to the type of character you're seeking?"

"Is it really criminal?" asked Marion Karp. "There's no crime in writing letters to fools, even if the fools destroy themselves in their eagerness to use what they've failed to understand."

"It's a moral crime to give a lethal weapon to a child," said Mesnil quietly.

Something in his voice caused her to look at him quickly, but the old eyes reflected only the dancing flames, and the old face reflected only the deep lines of a lifetime's thinking.

"I'm not sure that I agree with your simile, Abbe Mesnil," she said, changing the subject with a slight hint of impatience. "But if you'll permit, there are still a few questions I'd like to put to Simon. There are some peculiarities about the Gratz blowup which need more explanation. Simon, I understood you to say the reaction had no heat of its own. It should have had—must have had. Surely your instrumentation was at fault?"

"Madam, there was no heat. There were a dozen monitors at the post, all recently calibrated and all reading true ambient. Not one of them recorded the slightest deviation during the blowup. Besides which, I was there at the edge of the desert. If there had been heat I would have felt it."

"But the sand . . ."

"The sand was fused by molecular, not thermal action."

"And I tell you that's impossible."

"Since the reaction was of a type unknown, my child, I'm intrigued to know why you think it ought to have been otherwise? How do you determine the impossibilities in an impossible event?" Mesnil's intercession was soft but shrewd.

"Certain things are predictable given the basic principles, Abbe. I've spent all afternoon trying to understand the thermodynamics of a theoretical model of the reaction."

"But why, Madam?" Simon turned and looked at her with some surprise. "There were no thermodynamic considerations involved."

"You must be mistaken, Simon. In that class of reaction they can't be avoided." A hint of annoyance sharpened her voice.

"Excuse me, Madam! You had had those equations for a few hours only. I worked with them for eleven months. From them I forged the working hypothesis from which Ornado built his test device. With respect, I submit it is you who have failed to comprehend." His dark eyes glowed with the earnestness of his conviction.

"Then you're either not the mathematician you've been acclaimed to be—or else you're hiding something. I suspect the latter, Simon, because the letter you gave to me was not the original letter received." Her voice was hard and full of steel, like the closing of a trap. "What do you answer to that?"

Simon looked back again to the white flames of the candle.

"What can I say—except that God is my witness."

"Permit me to intrude, my child," said Mesnil gently. "I'm afraid you've both been victims of a slight deception. The letter which Simon gave to you was not the original. But Simon knew nothing of the substitution—and you could not have known it either, Madam Karp. Except that you wrote the original yourself."

"What's this!" Marion Anderson Karp spun like a tiger to face Abbe Mesnil, her anger causing her to half rise from the chair.

Mesnil retained his eternal calm, and put his long fingers gently on her hand.

"Peace, my child! There is nowhere you can go, and nothing you can do. So please relax and take wine with us. It's a pity to spoil our day of exceptions."

"I don't want your damned wine! You know you can't substantiate your accusation."

"I can, Madam Karp, because you walked into a carefully baited trap. The original letter—your letter—was brought to me by Ornado, to whom I have long been mentor and comforter. As with all things I find beyond my ken, I sent the letter to Seroia. He sent back a similar letter and asked us to use it as though it were the original. It was Seroia's reaction which fused the sands at Gratz yet had no heat of its own."

"So that's why there was no thermal radiation?" An angry comprehension lit her face.

"Just so, my child! But you found the point significant, thus betraying a prior knowledge of what the reaction was initially designed to be. You stand condemned out of your own mouth. Seroia suspected you—but left to me the task of establishing the proof. And that is how you find a genius who has a genius for remaining undetected. You turn such cleverness back upon itself."

The anger drained from her face to leave a residue of helplessness. Slowly she slipped back into her chair. A rueful smile played at her lips as she watched the abbe fill her glass.

"So Seroia wins after all! You realize, of course, that to produce that cold reaction at Gratz means that Seroia has access to knowledge far in excess of anything I attained?"

"Was that what you were trying to prove—that you had the best brain in the world—of greater stature even than Seroia?"

"In a way; I suppose . . ."

"Then you were lost from the start, my child. Stature is as much dependent on quality as on magnitude. Seroia has one quality which you have yet to gain—maturity. What knowledge Seroia has, I do not know, nor is it important. He uses his prowess kindly and wisely. He would never give a loaded weapon to a child."

"What will become of me now?"

"That you must ask Seroia when he comes. He said something about the time being right to teach you the art of chasing demons instead of being one."