

Manic Perverse

By Winston K. Marks

Men had attained immortality—only direct violence could bring death. Even suicide was stopped by a field of paralyzing thought-waves. And that very inability to die drove some mad—

Illustrated by Kramer

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

Robert Mason concluded his thesis on economics with a fact which his research had proved indisputable. Behind a thousand financial titles, through a maze of subsidiaries and holding companies, he traced a single integrating force which at once avoided and escaped the antitrust laws and yet controlled everything. In short: “Universal Insurance Institute owned the world.”

Professor Collins looked up from the last page of the paper to see its author enter the blue study. His chin was set with stubborn determination. “You sent for me?”

“Good evening, Robert. Yes, I sent for you. This is splendid. Splendid. Your insight is exceptional.”

“Then you agree with my conclusion?” Mason’s hands unclenched disappointedly.

“Of course. Any student of government and finance will agree with you. U. I. has been running this planet since before you were born. It is not generally known, however. What led you to this study?”

“The conviction that all that is altruistic is not morally justified.” Mason rubbed the soft stubble of beard on his chin with embarrassment. “Who else but an insurance company would enforce the laws of mortality to such a ridiculous extent? Why, a man’s life isn’t his own.”

“You misinterpret, Robert. A man’s life is his own. His right to destroy it *is not*. But come, is your life so unhappy?”

Mason brushed aside the question. “They’ve made the world almost deathless. I’ll admit the instinct is to live, and their accident prevention campaigns and their medical centers have wiped out a great deal of misery. But, professor! A single death makes news. A highway wreck makes headlines over the world, and a successful suicide attempt—”

“Come out of your histories, Robert. Your attitude is unreasonable. The world has gratefully adjusted itself to a deathless existence. Perhaps you admire your ancestors too much. Their valor in living under certain penalty of death is most noteworthy. Perhaps you cherish that lost martyrdom a little more than most of us. Be that as it may. You are well protected against any foolish impulses.” Collins raised his hand, and the student held his retort.

The professor slipped a long finger into his bookshelf and tilted out a bound pamphlet. “A first and only edition of a prophecy written over three centuries ago. Glance over it.”

Mason settled himself and flipped through the pages. It was a long-termed prediction based on insurance trends of that time. The accumulation from premiums was vast even then. Real estate was rapidly becoming the monopoly of insurance investors. Soon, it was stated, this vast reserve of wealth would encompass industry and transportation, and an inevitable amalgamation of these interests would

weld a financial structure which would dominate every government on the globe.

In self-protection, as always, this insurance trust would continue scientific progress in the control of hazards to life and property until, at length, destruction of either became a rarity instead of an eventuality.

The author hesitated to predict immortality, but his faith in this altruistic juggernaut suggested a time when, "a claim for indemnity shall be considered a black defeat to the purpose of this supersurety company."

Was this good? The author thought so. The value of insurance lay in its doctrine of stability. When it came to pass that every major transaction was motivated by this unselfish philosophy, the millennium should have arrived.

The student slapped the book shut. "He didn't describe the millennium."

"You have it about you. By ancient standards you are a young god. He could not predict that. You see, even to the widest imagination the road of the future has humps. Only the roughest profile looms on the horizon. Who, in the past hundred years, for example, could have guessed the void in the heart of our sun? Or the impermeability of the heaviside layer to organic matter? Or the true source of the aurora?"

Mason shook his head impatiently. "Why is death denied us? With absolute birth control there can be no serious fluctuations in population."

"You have said it yourself. The instinct is to live. The impulse to suicide or murder is always a shortlived initiative. When the mood is past, the victim is invariably thankful the act was prevented. Your attitude desecrates the miraculous discovery that allows us to protect ourselves against these murderous impulses."

The old gentleman tilted back in his pneumatic rocker. "Robert, you have tried to kill yourself... no, don't deny it. You speak with conviction on a device which a majority of people scarcely realize exists. It was over a girl? And another boy, a close friend, perhaps?" He smiled. "We have long needed protection against some of love's manifestations."

"There was no girl," Mason said simply.

The professor's melancholy smile evaporated. Fine lines drew in at his eyes. "This is enough, Mason. I accept your thesis for your doctorate provided you relinquish the right to publication. Your attitude is negative. I cannot allow you to use this paper as a stepping-stone to authority on morals. Good evening!"

Before the door had closed Collins had drawn out a clean sheet of paper, written across the top: Robert Mason; and under it he began making brief notes from memory. At length he opened a file and slipped the report into a bulging folder labeled, "Manic Perverse." He frowned grimly.

Two miles away Robert Mason's two-person vehicle reached its ceiling. Deliberately he had neglected to set his destination, so each time a collision impended within ten miles ahead the compensators dragged at the motors or spurted the craft forward. Mason didn't mind the jerky motion. The authorities advised against uncharted travel as conducive to bumps and bruises. It was the nearest "unsafe" experience a man could enjoy in this age.

The curious compulsion was strong upon him again. Certainly a man could die if he wanted to.

Involuntarily his mind sought ways to thwart this eternal conspiracy. For a moment he considered the *apandemic field* itself. No, that was useless. One could not escape the microwaves that permeated every cubic foot of space and matter from the Earth's core to the boundary of the Earth's atmosphere.

Constantly, insidiously tuned to the sensitive vibrations of the electrostatic brain field of man, their precise wave length interfered with that nervous emanation peculiar to the mental depression of suicide. Another broader band covered the several murder impulse emanations. Coincidence, of brain and apandemic waves overloaded synaptic gaps,

The individual slipped into momentary unconsciousness. Uncontrolled, the brain reverted to normal vibration, and the interference disappeared.

Mason shook his blond head desperately. This past hectic year the mood had been growing on him until what had once been mere curiosity now gripped his whole soul. The condition was unreal inasmuch as it denied self-debate on the desirability of living or dying. An atavistic fear of death sought justification, and there was only one mad way to justify this fear—to die.

His mind roved over his present potentialities. Altitude eight thousand feet. Speed six hundred miles per hour. Trapdoor in the luggage compartment behind him. With an easy motion he touched the panel. A red light on the dash and a whistling suction told him that the metal floor plate had slid aside. His ears popped as the air pressure dropped sharply in the cabin.

Now! He needn't step through the hole. All he need do was sit beside it and relax. Splendid! The pitching craft would ultimately toss his loose body through the wide aperture. He need not make the overt move.

Gently he leaned forward, pressed his hands down behind him, raised himself three inches from the leather seat. It should work. It was subtle.

Not good enough.

Robert Mason settled back stiff and erect, his body swaying now and then. The tenseness left his mouth.

He became aware. A deep muscular relaxation brought a heavy sigh. "Damn!"

It had been the same thirty-one times before. Each time he thought he had achieved finesse. The difficulty lay in the mind. He knew there were foolproof ways to kill himself. But at the instant of their conception—blackness! No use trying to remember, for obviously they had been too direct. The rope, for instance.

A low bench under a tree with a suitable limb. A length of rope. But no, he couldn't climb the tree, for it occurred to him that once out on the limb to tie the rope, all he need do was relax or willfully consider suicide. The fall might have been fatal.

He had found himself prone at the trunk with bits of bark slivered into his cheek.

Some of his aborted efforts had been messy, some embarrassing. As at the infirmary last week.

Swallowing a heavy but nonfatal dose of narcotic, he had staggered into the campus hospital shrieking, "Migraine!" The preliminary treatment for this deep-seated mysterious malady was a hypodermically given sedative. The combination of drugs should have gained him his end. He counted on the uncertainty of persuading the intern to inject him to keep him from the paralytic state of mind. But when the man in white rustled up with the syringe, a drop of the cold solution exuded from his nervous needle and splashed to Mason's bare skin. Instantly he stiffened in unconsciousness. The doctor recognized both the condition and the ruse, slapped Mason to his senses and promised to commit him to indefinite psychiatric confinement when he saw him again.

Thank heavens they couldn't prove anything. Thank God you can't see a headache.

A terrible loneliness filled Mason as the lights of Chicago thrust their halo over the black horizon. Why couldn't he throw off this deadly compulsion that distorted his waking thoughts into morbid nightmares of fruitless struggle? Why was he unique in his inability to adapt himself?

He tilted the nose of his craft down and drove it in a power dive at the distant beacon. The landing beam picked up his controls. The vicious dive ended in a silent glide.

The confidential psychiatric committee of the Senate met in a small conference room on the seventieth level of the Universal Insurance Institute Building. The chairman addressed himself to the last witness.

"This committee owes you an apology, Professor Collins. Your earlier reports have been substantiated from a dozen sources. There is no longer any doubt that the condition you have described and named *manic perverse* exists and is spreading. We agree that steps must be taken to remedy this before we have a general obsession on our hands.

"One peculiar tendency of the victims explains the lack of knowledge on our part. Each considers himself alone in his predicament. However, it is unlikely this condition will remain secret, and when the story breaks—"

He glanced around the chamber. Every man present was a potential betrayer.

"The most contagious epidemics have been psychological. This one could prove as vicious as the old mass war hysterias. Therefore, I have proposed a discontinuation of the apandemic field."

Bald and gray heads bobbed back in dismay.

"It's barbaric! We can't save by destroying."

"Mass hysteria will pass. Mass suicide is final."

"Mr. Chairman, I demand your resignation!"

Another senator was on his feet to second the motion, when the chairman stretched out both hands for silence. His words were calm and delivered with a slow smile.

"You shall have my resignation if you wish, but first—"

Pale, red-eyed Robert Mason shivered on a lonely beach of icy Lake Michigan. His feet were numb from the slush, and a cold wind bit through his light clothing. But all desire for comfort was gone. His obsession had obscured his last grain of reason.

The world before him was gray water and gray skies. Low over his horizon a black sun beckoned him, and in his madness he stepped forward. Foot-high waves slopped at his knees. The water felt strangely warm. Another step, a soft splash to his right—he whirled.

A hundred feet down the rocky, snow-spotted beach a young girl in a bathing suit was entering the light surf. Mason wanted to hide from her, but it was too late. She had seen him and stopped also. They stared dumbly at each other.

"You little fool, this beach is forbidden. It's unpatrolled this time of year," he shouted hoarsely.

Defiantly she yelled back, "What are you doing, surf fishing?"

"I didn't come here to bathe."

“Neither did I.”

The figures moved together, slowly stumbling through the waves. Their hands touched and clasped, and they didn't speak again. The explanation was so simple neither could miss it. They had a common purpose.

Even under the sodden clouds Mason saw that her wind-tossed hair was beautiful. She had no right to die. But then neither did he. For a moment he felt sorry for them both, and he saw the same emotion in her pale expression. In both the long-bred compulsion battled with another emotion, a belated desire to live and love. But the compulsion was the stronger. They turned side to side, hands still clasped, and started off the sharp drop-off.

Half exultant, half panicky, they struck out through the bitterness of water in which ice floes still lived.

Mason fought off the numbness which he thought to be the tardy apandemic paralysis. And then he fought harder, spurred suddenly by an overwhelming force inside him.

“Go back!” he screamed at the girl. A wave dropped away, and down the trough he glimpsed the girl's face, white, incredulous. Her lips moved. Then a cramp doubled him beneath the surface. Someone had jerked a steel drawstring in his stomach. His head thumped hard against his submerged knees.

And then she was standing beside him, peering through the window of his oxygen tent. She was truly beautiful, even in the starched white of a hospital dressing gown. His head throbbed and hurt worse than the terrible congestion in his lungs. But neither pneumonia nor sulfanalimide could quench his fierce thirst to live now.

“We can die,” he whispered. “We can die, so—now we can live.”

She couldn't hear, but she nodded. She understood; between them was a bond welded by the presence of death, a rare and precious phenomenon in this age.

“—let me confess. At Professor Collins' and my insistence, the president exercised his authority granted in the Emergency Clause in the Apandemic Control Act. Pending ratification by the Senate and the World Congress, the apandemic field has been discontinued. For three days, seventy-two hours, now, the restraint has been nonexistent.”

He selected a report from his brief case and read from it. When he finished there was silence. “So you see, gentlemen, these hourly statistics indicate a mortality increase so slight as to be negligible. The effect is better than we dared hope. A properly prepared publicity on the whole matter is next in consideration. His excellency, the president, has suggested a continuation of this brief moratorium of immortality during which the remainder of the victims of manic perverse delusions shall be free to dispose of their lives or their obsessions.”

“And then,” demanded a pessimistic senator, “when we have buried these uncounted multitudes—what then?”

“Regenerate the field, but keep in better contact with our department of psychiatry henceforth.”

The chairman closed his case and stood up. “This is merely a proposal, of course, pending your ratification.”

“And if we refuse to ratify?”

“Come, senator, we must face the facts.”

And the Senate subcommittee faced the fact—that their chairman was also Congressional Representative of Universal Insurance Institute. They could demand his resignation and possibly impeach the president, but to what end? Universal Insurance Institute was unimpeachable, omnipotent and, after all, *altruistic*.

To a man they shrugged their shoulders and voted to recommend ratification.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A\NN/A
January 19th, 2008—v1.0
from the original source: *Astounding*, October, 1941