

Open Secret

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(as by Lewis Padgett)

NOTHING secret at all. Walk in their office any time. Only—somehow the word couldn't be spread, the world couldn't understand—

illustrated by Fax

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Notes

Mike Jerrold was the only passenger in the elevator when the operator passed out. He saw the man gasp, double up in pain, and stab out blindly at the stop button. Pressure against his soles decreased. Jerrold jumped forward and tried to catch the falling man, but didn't quite make it.

The lips looked cyanosed; that meant heart attack. Jerrold's degree was for psychiatry, not medicine, so he was at a loss. Scattered bits of half-forgotten first aid whirled into his mind and out again like a kaleidoscope. He stared around, realizing abruptly the shortcoming of an elevator aside from its functional use. Not that it was a bad elevator, per se. It was quite modern, in one of New York's best skyscrapers, and, once you were inside and the door closed, you had no way of knowing, till it opened again, whether you were ten, twenty, or thirty stories above ground level. A grab-bag sort of arrangement, though without the element of chance. The random factor could not enter into the question—as long as the operator controlled the elevator.

He'd passed out now. Jerrold grimaced, touched a button by guesswork, and felt the cage begin to rise again. The fifteenth floor, it was. In a moment the door slid noiselessly open as the car settled pneumatically into position. Jerrold looked at a plainly furnished office with a receptionist's window in the farther wall. There was a door near it, a brown carpet on the floor, but no chairs. Nor was the receptionist visible.

Jerrold started out and then, struck by a new thought, paused to drag the operator with him. He vaguely mistrusted elevators. Sometimes they started by themselves. He went to the window and said, "Hey." Nobody answered. There was no switchboard; just a comfortable chair, a desk, and a pile of magazines. Jerrold turned to the door and opened it. It swung inward, away from him. He was facing a robot.

The robot, roughly man-shaped, was sliding—he had wheels instead of feet—back and forth on the other side of a table covered with a relief map of a section of Manhattan Island, from about Fiftieth Street to the Village, and bounded by the rivers. Twinkling dots of light glimmered like fireflies all over the map. The robot had four arms, each extended into innumerable wiry cilia. He, or it, would touch one of these wires to each light that flashed, keeping that position for a variable period, sometimes a split second, sometimes much longer. The robot had no face, but a grid of shimmering wires. It was certainly alive, certainly intelligent; and Jerrold's

dark, ugly face went gray. Through an open door he could see another robot working presumably at a similar task.

He backed up, slowly and noiselessly. The robot ignored him. He closed the door. Instantly he had a feeling of illusion.

The receptionist's window was still vacant. Jerrold pulled the operator back into the elevator and thumbed the main-floor button. The car dropped sickeningly. Jerrold felt an uneasiness in his stomach. He forced himself to think only about the man at his feet.

When the panel slid open, Jerrold shouted at the starter and relinquished his charge to more capable hands. After that, he went into another elevator and this time completed his trip to the twenty-first floor, where Dr. Rob Vaneman had his offices. The girl said to go right in.

Vaneman was a big man, red-faced, bluff, gray-haired, and overwhelming. He boomed jovially at Jerrold, shook hands, and dragged out a bottle. "No," he said, putting it back. "Not yet. Let's get the business over with first, eh, Mike? Strip down and let me check that blood pressure of yours."

Jerrold obeyed. "I just got in town yesterday. Research for the U. Be here a month or so, I guess. How's tricks?"

"Fair enough. They keep me busy. I moved lately, you know."

"No, I—How's the blood pressure?"

"Up a bit. Let's try your heart." Vaneman listened and glanced at Jerrold sharply. "Been dodging taxicabs?"

"I've been—I ran into something funny. Tell you later. Let's get this done first."

Silently Vaneman completed the examination. "You're sound. You didn't need to come to New York for a check-up, Mike."

"I didn't. Research, I told you. But while I'm here—you know my metabolism and my allergies." Jerrold adjusted his tie. "Who's got the fifteenth floor in this building?"

"I dunno." Vaneman relaxed with a grunt, poured drinks, and lit a cigar. "We're not exactly next-door neighbors. Look on the board downstairs, or ask the starter. Why?"

"I got off there just now. What I saw—" Jerrold explained. "Don't tell me I made a mistake. I know the difference between a robot and a... a gadget."

The physician grinned. "Do you? It takes a robot to fire the big navy guns—or what amounts to one. You sound medieval. Trot off to the Westinghouse labs and you'll realize that science has come a long way in a few years. My diagnosis is spinach."

Jerrold said stubbornly, "Those weren't machines. They were robots. Their coordination wasn't mechanical. One look convinced me."

"Then you'd better take another look." The Dictograph buzzed. Vaneman listened, spoke briefly, and sighed. "One more patient, and I'll be through for today. Want to meet me in the bar downstairs?"

"Right." Jerrold got up. "See you later, Rob. We've a lot to talk about."

"Six months' worth of accumulated trivia. Including robots. Saluda."

Jerrold went out and took the elevator downstairs to the bar. He had a drink. Then he searched for the address board and looked in vain for any firm listed on the fifteenth floor. The starter supplied a little more information.

"That's occupied by William Scott & Co., Research Engineers."

"Thanks," Jerrold said, and found a telephone book. William Scott & Co. wasn't listed. He fortified himself with another sidecar and took the elevator to the fifteenth floor, unable to suppress a mad feeling that the entire story might have softly and suddenly vanished away. "Like a Boojum," he murmured, evading the glance of the operator. "Uh... fifteen, please."

But the Snark wasn't a Boojum. The reception office was unchanged, and this time a girl was sitting beyond the window, a pretty redhead with pleasant green eyes and a smart-looking dress. The green eyes opened slightly, Jerrold noticed. Was the presence of a visitor that surprising?

"Good morning," she said. "Can I help you?" Her voice was low-pitched and unaffected.

Jerrold heard the elevator door slip shut behind him. He walked forward and leaned his elbows on the window ledge. "Maybe," he said. And stopped.

What the hell could he ask?

"Do you have robots here?" he said at last.

"Yes," the girl told him.

So that was that. Jerrold looked at her blankly. "Intelligent robots?"

"What would you like?" she inquired, quite pleasantly.

Jerrold felt snubbed. He glanced at the cryptically closed door. Beyond it—

He was definitely afraid of what lay beyond it. They might be listening even now.

"I'd like to have a drink with you," he said, "if you don't mind. My name's Mike Jerrold. I'm a psychiatrist. I can give you references." He grinned. "May I offer drinks, dinner, or both?"

He expected her to refuse, but she didn't. The green eyes showed humor.

"Thanks, Mr. Jerrold. But I work here—till five thirty."

"May I come back—at five thirty?"

"Uh-huh. I'm Betty Andrews. Good-by." She turned back to her magazine. Jerrold nibbled his lower lip and retreated, ringing for the elevator. The office was quite silent. The robots seemed to be noiseless.

The dreamlike quality of the situation impressed him violently as he rode the car down. Seeing the robots was shocking enough. But the girl's casual admission that they existed was subtly horrible. It was like a woolly dog story, like the yarn about the man who, discovering a talking horse, mentioned the matter to its owner, and was told, "Oh, my horse tells that story to everybody who'll listen." As a gag it was funny. In real life it was not at all amusing.

Dr. Vaneman was waiting in the bar. He leered at Jerrold over the rim of his glass. "Find your robots?" he inquired ironically.

"Yeah. The receptionist up there admitted it. Well?"

"She has a sense of humor. I hope you're not serious, Mike. Do I have to waste half an hour talking logic to you? I prefer illogic. It's more restful."

"Talk all you want," Jerrold growled, waving to the waiter. "I just happen to be firmly convinced that you've got robots on the fifteenth floor of this building, right here in New York."

"Better than termites, anyway," Vaneman said into his highball. "What harm can robots do? They're useful little folk, from all I hear."

"Could be. Nobody's ever made a real robot—one with a thinking brain. Unless—" Jerrold frowned. "I wish I knew who's running those robots and why. The human colloid brain's physically limited, Rob. It's incapable of pure, disciplined thought, because it is in a human body. A robot could lay out a thought matrix and carry it through to a conclusion you or I couldn't hope to approach."

"So they could square a circle. Let 'em. First, I don't believe there are robots upstairs. Second, if there were, what of it? Third, I want another drink."

"Your damned complacency," Jerrold said. "You're molded by your environment so perfectly you've come to believe implicitly in that environment. You'll admit the existence of the impossible, but you'll rationalize it till it seems possible. If the Empire State disappeared overnight, you'd say it was a quick job of moving."

"The Empire State couldn't disappear overnight."

"True enough. That'd be much too obvious. If supermen existed now, they wouldn't do anything as overt as making a building vanish. Why should they tip their hands?"

"Mike," Vaneman said with slow emphasis, "tell me this: How could a lot of robots live on the fifteenth floor without anyone knowing about it?"

"Who'd know about it?"

"There are thousands of people riding those elevators daily—"

"Yeah," Jerrold said. "They ride 'em. Up and down. But not to the fifteenth floor. Do you realize, Rob, that once you're in one of the elevators, you can't look out till you reach the floor you want? Plenty of people go right past the fifteenth floor—past! See? It's a perfect camouflage."

"Some people get off there."

"There's that reception clerk. She takes care of solicitors. Come to think of it, peddlers and agents aren't allowed in this building."

"Cleaning women are."

"Right. Maybe they don't get past the outer office. I'm going to see the girl tonight, the receptionist."

Vaneman leered significantly. "I get it."

But Jerrold didn't trouble to reply. He drank his sidecar, a queer, troubled worry moving at the back of his brain.

He arrived an hour early for his appointment, and spent the time standing in the foyer, watching the elevator indicator dials. The ring of lights glowed in quick progression as the cars rose and fell. A panel would slide open; people would enter the car; the door would shut. Jerrold's eyes would lift to the dial. One. Two. Three. It paused at three. Then four. Five. A pause at seven. Eight. Nine—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. Stop at sixteen. Stop at fourteen. Stop at any floor but the fifteenth.

Nobody, in that hour, got on or off at the fifteenth floor.

Jerrold kept a record in his notebook, intending later to check the variables against the names of the firms on the various floors. Then he realized that that didn't matter. It was only the fact that no elevator stopped at the fifteenth that mattered.

He told the starter vaguely that he was making a survey, but the man kept watching him from time to time. Jerrold was relieved at five thirty when he saw the indicator button, for the first time, light up at fifteen. As he expected, Betty Andrews got out of the elevator. Jerrold put his notebook away.

"Hello," she said at sight of him. "Been waiting long?"

"Not long. How about that drink?"

"Swell." She led the way into the cocktail bar. "Old-fashion for me."

Later, he looked at her across the dimness, wondering what lay behind the maskless mask of her face.

She set down her glass, ran the tip of a pointed tongue across her lips, and said, "Well, Mr. Mike Jerrold?"

"Well?"

"Question. Are you trying to make me?"

He said, "No," with a frankness that was disarmingly inoffensive.

"That's good. You see, Mr. Mike Jerrold, I'm hoping I'll get a taxi ride home. I live in Brooklyn. If you've ever been on the Brighton Express at the rush hour—"

"Taxi it is. Drinks, dinner, and a ride home. Does that suit?"

"Uh-huh."

It was a cool, dim hideaway place, Jerrold reflected, sipping his sidecar and feeling the tingling warmth move slowly through his body. Seldom was it possible to get out of the world. At times these moments came. Outside was New York; here was nothing but the moment. There was—as yet, anyway—nothing sexual about the situation, nothing to stimulate Jerrold; rather it was the delicious feeling of being able to stop, to rest on his oars and drift. The girl's presence was subtly effective; she, too, had stopped. For the moment, the driving force that makes up life had ceased. They relaxed in the twilight.

Then Jerrold began to talk. He tried to do it casually, but he sensed that Betty wasn't deceived. She wasn't loath to answer his disguised questions, either. As a practicing psychiatrist, Jerrold had learned tact and diplomacy, but the sidewise approach was not necessary now.

How long had she been in New York? Oh, about five years. She'd been lucky to land a good job almost immediately. Yes, with William Scott & Co., on the fifteenth floor.

"He's an engineer, isn't he?"

"He doesn't exist. How did you know there were robots up there?"

"I... I walked in. You weren't there."

"Oh."

"They didn't notice me."

"They will," Betty chuckled. "They have more senses than we have, but not quite the same ones. They don't know what happens in the same room with them; they don't care. It's what happens outside the fifteenth floor that they know all about."

Jerrold said slowly, "I'm interested, naturally. If you don't think I'm prying into secrets—"

"It's not that sort of secret. They don't care how many people find out, because not many can find out."

"That door wasn't even locked. I walked right in. Betty, do you realize what we're talking about? Are you handing me a line?"

She shook her head, green eyes serious. "No, I'm not, not at all. There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you all about it, if you want to know. They don't care."

"The robots? Why don't they?"

"You won't do anything about it."

"I might tell someone else."

"He wouldn't do anything about it."

"He might tell the chief of police."

"The chief wouldn't do anything about it. It's like a stone thrown into a pond. I've seen it happen before. The ripples go out—and then they stop. The robots have all the power in the world, Mr. Mike Jerrold."

Unthinking impulse made the man look up. "Eh?"

"They run things. They make people do what they want. They've done it to me, too. When I found out first about them, I was scared. They processed me. It's painless—" She smiled a little. "You don't even realize it's happening. You think you've made your own decision. Your relative values simply shift. I was going to quit. I was processed, I realized that it was a good job, paying well, that I wouldn't be harmed, and that nothing I could do would alter things. So here I am."

"What are they?" Jerrold said in a tight voice. "I won't believe you—" He paused. "No. I saw them. They were intelligent, weren't they?"

"Sure. And they've been around for quite a while. History's full of attempts to make robots. The Golem, the homunculi—I had a good liberal education. For ages people have tried to make intelligent robots. Not too long ago someone succeeded. Or a number of technicians succeeded; I'm not sure. But the world never heard about it. Can you guess why?"

"Wait a minute." Jerrold rubbed his jaw. "You mean the perfect solvent?"

"Of course. Suppose you make the perfect solvent. What would happen? It would dissolve anything you put it in. You could make it, but you couldn't keep it. Intelligent robots are like that. If they're successful at all, it's because they have the right sort of brain—one that can think. And necessarily it's also unlimited in its scope. It's far more intelligent than we are. Look"—Betty tapped the table—"let's say, Dr. Jones makes a robot. The robot can think faster than light, a lot faster. From its creation it's brainier than its creator. What would it do?"

"It wouldn't remain a laboratory subject."

"Course not. It didn't. It processed the scientist, so Dr. Jones thought he'd failed; it left another, useless robot in its place, and it went out and hid. It didn't like this world. It wanted something different. So it simply set out to change the world, through the tools at hand."

"Tools. People?"

"Uh-huh. I think there've been lots of successful robots made, and I've an idea that they've made others, to help them change the world. The office upstairs isn't the only one, you know. It only handles a section of New

York. There are other robot offices, in Washington, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, in Europe and Asia, too. And Africa. Wherever there's a natural social control center, the robots have an office."

"That's plain crazy," Jerrold said. "How could a secret like that be kept?"

Betty's eyes were very serious. "Mr. Mike Jerrold, listen to me. The robots don't even try to keep their secret. They don't have to. You're not the first man to walk into the office and see them. There are plenty of people going around today who know there are robots on the fifteenth floor here. The same goes for Washington and Frisco—everywhere."

"That doesn't make sense. Why don't they talk?"

"They've been processed. When the robots get around to it, they do something to the guy's mind. It doesn't hurt. He never knows it's happened. He still realizes that there are intelligent robots, and pretty often he knows what they're doing. But that's locked in his mind. He can never tell anyone, never pass on what he knows."

Jerrold pounced on a flaw. "You're telling me about it."

She gestured wearily. "I tell you, they don't care. They just never bothered in my case. It doesn't matter who I talk to. Eventually that person will come under the robots' observation, and he'll be processed. The same goes for anybody he might talk to—anybody he might convince."

"It's no way to keep a secret. Damn it! It... it seems as if those devils are so self-confident that they don't even bother to... to—"

Betty finished her drink. "Another, please. Thanks. Why talk about it, Mike? It'll only upset you, until you're processed."

"They won't process me," Jerrold said grimly.

"Hm-m-m." Betty looked unconvinced. "I told you they can control minds at a distance."

"Telepathy? Impossible. Selectivity—"

"It's not telepathy. They use a mechanism. Look, suppose you wanted to check up on a lot of people. What would you do? No detectives."

"Dictaphones—eh?"

"Call it that. And suppose you wanted to give them orders, too. Just vocal orders—limit it to humanity, for the example."

"A two-way radio."

"And suppose you didn't want those people to know what you were doing. You'd hide the radio, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Where would you hide it?"

Jerrold started to answer, paused, and looked sharply at the girl. She nodded.

"The Purloined Letter. In plain sight, but disguised. And disguised so no one could possibly discover it was a radio."

"What?"

Betty smiled crookedly. "If you were clever enough, you could disguise it as a vacuum tube and put it in a radio. You'd sell it openly—as a vacuum tube. People would buy it for one purpose, but it'd really serve two."

"It's not a radio—"

"No, it's not. But it's something everybody uses, and uses often. Built into it is a device that seems to serve a perfectly natural mechanical purpose. It does serve that purpose. But it also keeps open a connection with the robots. It keeps them in mental touch with anyone who uses that particular device."

"What is it?"

"Telephone," Betty said. "Some time ago a certain improvement was made on phones, and almost all of them have it now. The robots saw to that. Humans make the... the gadget, of course, and they make it to fulfill one obvious mechanical purpose. They don't know that the structure of the gadget makes it also a tool for the robots. That's right, Mike. All over the world there are control offices, manned by robots. They listen in on telephone conversations—not the oral ones, but the mental. They read thoughts, through that little gadget in the phone, the gadget that really belongs there to make the phone work. They issue orders through it. They process minds. They make people do what they want. They manipulate stocks, swing business deals, start wars and stop them. They run the earth, Mr. Mike Jerrold. You know that now, and they don't care if you know, because you can't stop them."

Jerrold said, "What are they trying to do?"

"I don't know," Betty told him. "I couldn't understand. They don't think the way we do. They want the world different, but I don't know how. But they're getting it the way they want. It may be swell for humans, and then again it may not. It doesn't matter a hell of a lot, does it?"

Jerrold didn't say anything. Something within him rose up in furious revolt against the thought of irrevocable future, the negation of free will. It was like driving beasts into a trap. Some would break for freedom, some would balk, some would fight. But eventually the trappers would get what they wanted. It was the sum total that counted, and Jerrold knew that telepathic control, at the right points and places, would affect the whole of humanity.

He looked at Betty again. Her skin had a pearly pallor in the dimness, and her eyes were shadowy, strange. There was an incongruity about the scene.

Jerrold said, "Excuse me," and got up. He ordered another round of drinks on his way out. In the lobby, he entered an elevator and got off at the

fifteenth floor.

The receptionist's window was closed now. But the door was still unlocked.

Jerrold went into the adjoining room. The robot was wheeling itself smoothly about the table, its wire-fingered hands manipulating the lights on the relief map of midtown Manhattan. Jerrold's stomach dropped, and a band of coldness circumscribed his middle. He stood there, waiting for the thing to notice him.

It ignored him completely.

It was man-size, but with a horrible functionalism man did not possess. It was alien. It went about its business, with sublime self-confidence, and its intelligence was obvious. The cilia touched the lights; sometimes they lingered, and Jerrold knew why. Processing—He skirted the robot at last and went into the next room. It was identical with the first, though the robot was dissimilar. Its head was a gleaming ball, featureless, and it moved on three jointed legs. It worked on a relief map of the lower tip of Manhattan, from the Battery to Wall Street.

Wall Street—

There were many rooms; there were robots in all of them, each somewhat different, each working on a different sector of the five boroughs. Jerrold had a feeling that they never stopped; that they would stop only when they had achieved their goal. He had a brief, perverse hope that one of them would notice him. It was discomfiting to be ignored, like a... gnat.

He went back to the first office and gingerly touched the map. Nothing happened. He gripped the tower of the Empire State and tried to snap it off; it was impossible. The plastic was unbreakable.

Jerrold, sweat beads on his face, took hold of the robot's arm. He tried to move that, too. He was dragged around in the creature's wake, quite unable to force the arm into the slightest deviation from its course.

They worked; they were invulnerable. That was the sum total of Jerrold's findings. Whether or not they would be invulnerable to a really powerful weapon, or to acid—

Betty was waiting when he got back to the bar. Jerrold sat down, and they drank in silence.

"It doesn't do any good, really," she said at last. "I know you can't help feeling as you do. But after you're processed, you'll be much happier about all this."

"I had to find out," he said. "Convince myself."

"And you're convinced."

"Yeah. Damn those things! They—"

"It was our own mistake, trying to build intelligent robots. Quite as silly as having a contest to see who can stay longest under water without

breathing. The one who wins—drowns.”

Jerrold held out his hand; it was trembling slightly. He made a grimace of worried uneasiness.

“The bottom’s dropped out.”

“You thought the ice was solid all the way down. That’s why. But it doesn’t matter, Mike. It doesn’t matter, really.”

“Those inhuman devils, forcing humanity into a social pattern to suit their own needs—No!”

Betty moved her shoulders, settling herself like a cat. “We might have followed that pattern anyway, without the robots. You know that, don’t you?”

“I’ve got to think this out.” Jerrold tried to focus his mind; it was curiously difficult. As he had said, the bottom had dropped out. He’d discovered that he had an incurable disease, and the psychological result was the same.

In a way it was odd how convinced he was of the robots’ invulnerability. Their self-confidence was sublime. They did not try to protect themselves. Protection was automatically a part of their plan to remold the world into—into what?

Jerrold didn’t want to find out. He didn’t much care. Humanity has developed on a belief in free will. Men know they can make their own ultimate decisions, and they feel that those decisions may be important. For want of a nail—

The part influences the whole. Otherwise, there was futility. It was not pleasant to feel that the part had no slightest influence upon the whole, that, inevitably, the herd would be driven into the predestined trap, that, no matter how the fish might flop and wriggle, the net was unalterably lifting and closing. A man might aim at a star—well and good. If his motives coincided with the aims of the robots, he’d be allowed to fulfill his plan. On the other hand—Jerrold met Betty’s quiet gaze.

“Nor all your tears wash out a word of it,” she said. “It’s no use, Mr. Mike Jerrold.”

“The moving finger’s anthropomorphic. We wouldn’t object so much to that. Man made God in his own image. It’s the reason men are willing to obey kings—they know that kings are flesh and blood like themselves, and want much the same things. There’s the same common denominator. There isn’t with those damned creatures upstairs.”

“They’re not made in our own image. If you’d only realize that in a little while you won’t care—”

Jerrold set down his glass with a bang. He stood up, face strained, lips tight. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. “I don’t like the feeling of being watched.”

Betty went out with him, a rather quizzical smile on her lips. They hailed a

taxi and found a restaurant. Jerrold didn't eat much. His mind went like a squirrel in a cage.

Afterward, they danced at a roof garden. Beneath them lay New York. Jerrold guided Betty to a terrace, and they stood alone, looking out into the dim city below.

"We're on top," he said at last. "Like humanity. But it's a long way down."

She drew the wrap closer about her shoulders. "We won't know it. It may not even be down."

"Guided. No, not even that. Led. Driven. Without realizing that we're not the masters." He searched for the faint lights of Brooklyn. "All over the world, people making plans, struggling and suffering and being crucified, because they think it's worth while. Fighting for what they think they want. And if they eventually get it, it'll only be because the robots want the same thing. We're blind in darkness. Blinder than the blind. If only—" His gaze went up to the empty sky, seeking an answer where there was none.

"What will happen? Man won't conquer the stars. That's one dream he'll never fulfill. But the robots will. They'll have no trouble in building spaceships. Maybe they can do that now, only they're not ready. And we thought the super-race would be a mutation of man!"

Betty didn't answer. When Jerrold turned to her, she lifted her face as though expecting his mouth to seek hers. There was no passion in the kiss; there was something deeper, a blind, desperate search for reassurance, a hunger that could never be sated. It was a man's hunger for the unattainable. And it was bitter.

He drew back suddenly. Betty's eyes glowed with a faint reflection of the lights beyond them. She was warm, human, attainable—and it did not matter.

"I'm... awfully credulous," Jerrold said unsteadily.

"You saw them. They make you believe. It's because they're what they are."

"I suppose so. That's why I feel it's hopeless to try to do anything."

"Quite hopeless."

"Just the same—"

There was silence. After a time Jerrold said, "Aren't there places in the world where their power doesn't reach?"

"The unimportant places. The ones that don't matter. They control only the key spots; that's all that's necessary." She moved into his arms, her gaze holding his. "I'm very lonely, Mr. Mike Jerrold. I like you to hold me. Do you know what may happen to us?"

"What?" he asked softly.

"Marriage," she said, shrugging a little. "Or not. It doesn't matter. You'll be processed. That's inevitable. You won't be able to tell anyone about the robots. It would be nice to be with you as long as this lasts. I can afford to tell the truth, because I know there's no time to waste."

"I'm going to fight," Jerrold said. "The robots can't be invulnerable. Somehow, somewhere, there must be a way—"

"There is no way." She shivered. "Take me home, please. I'm not afraid. I can't be afraid; I was processed against it. It's just that—Take me home."

Jerrold did, and her face stayed with him during the long ride back to Manhattan. She had become a symbol, perhaps a symbol of humanity, resigned, going down to an unknown but predestined doom. In the background the inhuman silhouettes of the robots loomed. They were alien. There was not even a standard matrix for them. Their shape did not matter, as long as they were functionally designed to fulfill their tasks.

Jerrold did not sleep that night. It rained, the hot, sticky rain of the New York summer, and he walked the streets, his steps inevitably returning to the building where Betty worked. On the fifteenth floor, without lights—they needed none—the robots worked untiringly, directing the destinies of mankind. Through—something—in all the telephones of the five boroughs they listened to thoughts and molded those thoughts. And men believed that their decisions were their own!

In most cases they were. But not the important ones, not the judgments that helped to work out the robot plan. Sacrifice and gallantry were words. The net lifted and closed, and there was no possible escape. For man himself had woven that net.

The hot rain pelted against Jerrold's gaunt cheeks. His footsteps rang hollow, echoing softly through the canyonlike streets.

He went back to his apartment and yanked the telephone from its cord, dropping the instrument into a closet. Then he found his automatic, loaded it, and picked up a light traveling bag. The chance was worth taking.

He knew where to buy the strong corrosive acid he wanted, and, to make certain, he got several quarts. Then he waited till morning.

At eight he was entering the foyer of the building, just in time to catch a glimpse of Betty Andrews disappearing into the elevator. Suddenly Jerrold felt cold. He sprinted forward, shouting the girl's name, but he was too late; the panel slid shut.

The starter touched his arm. "Next car, please."

"Yeah... yeah."

Jerrold's eyes lifted to the indicator. The lights slid swiftly around the dial. Two. Three. Four—Fifteen. It stopped there, and then descended again.

Jerrold went into the next car. "Fifteen," he said.

He got off at fifteen. Betty was sitting behind the window, and there was

no surprise in her eyes when she saw him.

"Hello, Mike," she said.

"Hello. I'm going in there." He looked toward the door.

"They won't hurt you."

"Do you think—" Jerrold's lips clamped together. "Listen," he said. "I'd like to take you and go off somewhere, in the backwoods, maybe, where those devils can't reach us. Would you go with me?"

"It's no use." Her voice was calm with acceptance of an inevitable reality.

"Don't be a fool. They've got you hypnotized."

"They don't need to use hypnotism. No, Mike. They're not hard masters. They'd let us do anything we wanted, because we couldn't want anything that would harm them. If you want me, I'll be here. And if you want me, you'll come back. Only you won't feel the same way then. About the robots, I mean. You'll have been processed."

Jerrold made a hoarse, inarticulate sound and swung away, thrusting the door open. The robot was still there, gliding noiselessly around the relief map on the table, its fingers busy.

Jerrold took out his gun and emptied it at the robot. He aimed carefully. The wire grid that served for a face looked most vulnerable.

He'd expected bullets to fail, so he wasn't too disappointed. He set down the bag, opened it, and took out the acid.

It was strong acid. But it harmed neither the robot nor the relief map.

Jerrold went out, carefully closing the door behind him. He didn't look at Betty, though he could feel her eyes on him as he rang for the elevator, stepped into the car, and turned. He saw her then, a brief glimpse when the panel closed.

"Twenty-first," he said to the operator.

Vaneman wasn't in his office.

"If you'll wait, Mr. Jerrold—"

"Yeah. O. K." He didn't want to wait in the anteroom, with the girl stealing glances at his mussed hair, his untidy clothes. He walked into Vaneman's private office, and the receptionist, after a startled jerk, made no move to stop him.

Jerrold was halfway across the room when the telephone rang. He was not really conscious of lifting the receiver to his ear. He heard the receptionist's voice saying, "Dr. Vaneman is on the wire, Mr. Jerrold."

Jerrold said, "Yeah?"

"Lo, Mike," Vaneman's deep rumble came. "I'll be delayed about half an

hour. The girl said you'd just come in. Wait for me, eh?"

"O. K."

Jerrold cradled the receiver. His face was gray, and an empty sickness was in his stomach. He stepped back, staring at the telephone.

The gadget—

The robots controlled telephones. A moment ago, they had been en rapport with his mind, listening, ready to issue their commands. It had been a mistake to pick up the receiver. Jerrold had done that automatically.

And he had not been processed.

His sense of relative values remained unaltered. His plans were the same. He still intended to convince Vaneman of the truth, to show the physician what was in the suite on the fifteenth floor, to induce Vaneman to use his influence with the authorities. He still planned to fight the robots by publicizing their activities.

He had not been processed. Which meant, obviously, that Betty had lied on one point. The rest had been truth. Only one vital factor was a lie.

The instrument the robots used was not a telephone.

Perhaps Betty thought it was. She had been processed. The robots controlled her mind. Naturally they would not let her reveal the secret of their power—the nature of their weapon.

It was not a telephone.

"It's something everybody uses, and uses often. Built into it is a device that seems to serve a perfectly natural mechanical purpose. It does serve that purpose. But it also keeps open a connection with the robots. It keeps them in mental touch with anyone who uses that particular device."

Betty had said that.

Something everybody uses—

Jerrold backed up against the desk and let his gaze swing slowly, probingly, around the room. He looked carefully at every object. In the end, he was no wiser.

Not a telephone. But what—

Jerrold's nails dug into his sweaty palms. He stared around again, feeling the net closing about him. Not a telephone. What, then—

He'd find out, of course. But he'd never know it.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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