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The Piper's Son

Henry Kuttner

The Green Man was climbing the glass mountains, and hairy, gnomish faces peered at him from crevices. This was only another step in the Green Man's endless, exciting odyssey. He'd had a great many adventures already-in the Flame Country, among the Dimension Changers, with the City Apes who sneered endlessly while their blunt, clumsy fingers fumbled at deathrays. The trolls, however, were masters of magic, and were trying to stop the Green Man with spells. Little whirlwinds of force spun underfoot, trying to trip the Green Man, a figure of marvelous muscular development, handsome as a god, and hairless from head to foot, glistening pale green. The whirlwinds formed a fascinating pattern. If you could thread a precarious path among them-avoiding the pale yellow ones especially-you could get through.

And the hairy gnomes watched malignantly, jealously, from their crannies in the glass crags.

Al Burkhalter, having recently achieved the mature status of eight full years, lounged under a tree and masticated a grass blade. He was so immersed in his daydreams that his father had to nudge his side gently to bring comprehension into the half-closed eyes. It was a good day for dreaming, anyway-a hot sun and a cool wind blowing down from the white Sierra peaks to the east. Timothy grass sent its faintly musty fragrance along the channels of air, and Ed Burkhalter was glad that his son was second-generation since the Blowup. He himself had been born ten years after the last bomb had been dropped, but second-hand memories can be pretty bad too.

"Hello, Al," he said, and the youth vouchsafed a half-lidded glance of tolerant acceptance.

"Hi, Dad."

"Want to come downtown with me?"

"Nope," Al said, relaxing instantly into his stupor.

Burkhalter raised a figurative eyebrow and half turned. On an impulse, then, he did something he rarely did without the tacit permission of the other party; he used his telepathic power to reach into Al's mind. There was, he admitted to himself, a certain hesitancy, a subconscious unwillingness on his part, to do this, even though Al had pretty well outgrown the nasty, inhuman formlessness of mental babyhood. There had been a time when Al's mind had been quite shocking in its alienage. Burkhalter remembered a few abortive experiments he had made before Al's birth; few fathers-to-be could resist the temptation to experiment with embryonic brains, and that had brought back nightmares Burkhalter had not had since his youth. There had been enormous rolling masses, and an

appalling vastness, and other things. Prenatal memories were ticklish, and should be left to .qualified mnemonic psychologists.

But now Al was maturing, and daydreaming, as usual, in bright colors. Burkhalter, reassured, felt that he had fulfilled his duty as a monitor and left his son still eating grass and ruminating.

Just the same there was a sudden softness inside of him, and the aching, futile pity he was apt to feel for helpless things that were as yet unqualified for conflict with that extraordinarily complicated business of living. Conflict, competition, had not died out when war abolished itself; the business of adjustment even to one's surroundings was a conflict, " and conversation a duel. With Al, too, there was a double problem. Yes, language was in effect a tariff wall, and a Baldy could appreciate that thoroughly, since the wall didn't exist between Baldies.

Walking down the rubbery walk that led to town center, Burkhalter grinned wryly and ran lean fingers through his well-kept wig. Strangers were very often surprised to know that he was a Baldy, a telepath. They looked at him with wondering eyes, too courteous to ask how it felt to be a freak, but obviously avid. Burkhalter, who knew diplomacy, would be quite willing to lead the conversation.

"My folks lived near Chicago after the Blowup. That was why."

"Oh." Stare. "I'd heard that was why so many-" Startled pause.

"Freaks or mutations. There were both. I still don't know which class I belong to," he'd add disarmingly.

"You're no freak!" They did protest too much.

"Well, some mighty queer specimens came out of the radioactive-affected areas around the bomb-targets. Funny things happened to the germ plasm. Most of 'em died out; they couldn't reproduce; but you'll still find a few creatures in sanitariums-two heads, you know. And so on."

Nevertheless they were always ill-at-ease. "You mean you can read my mind-now?"

"I could, but I'm not. It's hard work, except with another telepath. And we Baldies-well, we don't, that's all." A man with abnormal muscle development wouldn't go around knocking people down. Not unless he wanted to be mobbed. Baldies were always sneakily conscious of a hidden peril: lynch law. And wise Baldies didn't even imply that they had an... extra sense. They just said they were different, and let it go at that.

But one question was always implied, though not always mentioned. "If I were a telepath, I'd... how much do you make a year?"

They were surprised at the answer. A mindreader certainly could make a fortune, if he wanted. So why did Ed Burkhalter stay a semantics expert in Modoc Publishing Town, when a trip to one of the science towns would enable him to get hold of secrets that would get him a fortune?

There was a good reason. Self-preservation was part of it. For which reason

Burkhalter, and many like him, wore toupees. Though there were many Baldies who did not.

Modoc was a twin town with Pueblo, across the mountain barrier south of the waste that had been Denver. Pueblo held the presses, photolintypes, and the machines that turned scripts into books, after Modoc had dealt with them. There was a helicopter distribution fleet at Pueblo, and for the last week Oldfield, the manager, had been demanding the manuscript of *Psychohistory*, turned out by a New Yale man who had got tremendously involved in past emotional problems, to the detriment of literary clarity. The truth was that he distrusted Burkhalter. And Burkhalter, neither a priest nor a psychologist, had to become both without admitting it to the confused author of *Psychohistory*.

The sprawling buildings of the publishing house lay ahead and below, more like a resort than anything more utilitarian. That had been necessary. Authors were peculiar people, and often it was necessary to induce them to take hydrotherapeutic treatments before they were in shape to work out their books with the semantic experts. Nobody was going to bite them, but they didn't realize that, and either cowered in corners, terrified, or else blustered their way around, using language few could understand. Jem Quayle, author of *Psychohistory*, fitted into neither group; he was simply baffled by the intensity of his own research. His personal history had qualified him too well for emotional involvements with the past-and that was a serious matter when a thesis of this particular type was in progress.

Dr. Moon, who was on the Board, sat near the south entrance, eating an apple which he peeled carefully with his silver-hilted dagger. Moon was fat, short, and shapeless; he didn't have much hair, but he wasn't a telepath; Baldies were entirely hairless. He gulped and waved at Burkhalter.

"Ed ... urp... want to talk to you."

"Sure," Burkhalter said, agreeably coming to a standstill and rocking on his heels. Ingrained habit made him sit down beside the Boardman; Baldies, for obvious reasons, never stood up when non-telepaths were sitting. Their eyes met now on the same level. Burkhalter said, "What's up?"

"The store got some Shasta apples flown in yesterday. Better tell Ethel to get some before they're sold out. Here." Moon watched his companion eat a chunk, and nod.

"Good. I'll have her get some. The copter's laid up for today, though; Ethel pulled the wrong gadget."

"Foolproof," Moon said bitterly. "Huron's turning out some sweet models these days; I'm getting my new one from Michigan. Listen, Pueblo called me this morning on Quayle's book."

"Oldfield?"

"Our boy," Moon nodded. "He says can't you send over even a few chapters."

Burkhalter shook his head. "I don't think so. There are some abstracts right

in the beginning that just have to be clarified, and Quayle is-" He hesitated.

"What?"

Burkhalter thought about the Oedipus complex he'd uncovered in Quayle's mind, but that was sacrosanct, even though it kept Quayle from interpreting Darius with cold logic. "He's got muddy thinking in there. I can't pass it; I tried it on three readers yesterday, and got different reactions from all of them. So far Psychohistory is all things to all men. The critics would lambaste us if we released the book as is. Can't you string Oldfield along for a while longer?"

"Maybe," Moon said doubtfully. "I've got a subjective novella I could rush over. It's light vicarious eroticism, and that's harmless; besides, it's semantically O.K.'d. We've been holding it up for an artist, but I can put Duman on it. I'll do that, yeah. I'll shoot the script over to Pueblo and he can make the plates later. A merry life we lead, Ed."

"A little too merry sometimes," Burkhalter said. He got up, nodded, and went in search of Quayle, who was relaxing on one of the sun decks.

Quayle was a thin, tall man with a worried face and the abstract air of an unshelled tortoise. He lay on his flexiglass couch, direct sunlight toasting him from above, while the reflected rays sneaked up on him from below, through the transparent crystal. Burkhalter pulled off his shirt and dropped on a sunner beside Quayle. The author glanced at Burkhalter's hairless chest and half-formed revulsion rose in him: A Baldy ... no privacy ... none of his business ... fake eyebrows and lashes; he's still a-

Something ugly, at that point.

Diplomatically Burkhalter touched a button, and on a screen overhead a page of Psychohistory appeared, enlarged and easily readable. Quayle scanned the sheet. It had code notations on it, made by the readers, recognized by Burkhalter as varied reactions to what should have been straight-line explanations. If three readers had got three different meanings out of that paragraph-well, what did Quayle mean? He reached delicately into the mind, conscious of useless guards erected against intrusion, * mud barricades over which his mental eye stole like a searching, quiet wind. No ordinary man could guard his mind against a Baldy. But Baldies could guard their privacy against intrusion by other telepaths-adults, that is. There was a psychic selector band, a-

Here it came. But muddled a bit. Darius: that wasn't simply a word; it wasn't a picture, either; it was really a second life. But scattered, fragmentary. Scraps of scent and sound, and memories, and emotional reactions. Admiration and hatred. A burning impotence. A black tornado, smelling of pine, roaring across a map of Europe and Asia. Pine scent stronger now, and horrible humiliation, and remembered pain ... eyes ... Get out!

Burkhalter put down the dictograph mouthpiece and lay looking up through the darkened eye-shells he had donned. "I got out as soon as you wanted me to," he said. "I'm still out."

Quayle lay there, breathing hard. "Thanks," he said. "Apologies. Why you don't ask a duello-"

"I don't want to duel with you," Burkhalter said. "I've never put blood on my dagger in my life. Besides, I can see your side of it. Remember, this is my job, Mr. Quayle, and I've learned a lot of things-that I've forgotten again."

"It's intrusion, I suppose. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my privacy-is important."

Burkhalter said patiently, "We can keep trying it from different angles until we find one that isn't too private. Suppose, for example, I asked you if you admired Darius."

Admiration ... and pine scent... and Burkhalter said quickly, "I'm out. O.K.?"

"Thanks," Quayle muttered. He turned on his side, away from the other man. After a moment he said, "That's silly- turning over, I mean. You don't have to see my face to know what I'm thinking."

"You have to put out the welcome mat before I walk in," Burkhalter told him.

"I guess I believe that. I've met some Baldies, though, that were... that I didn't like."

"There's a lot on that order, sure. I know the type. The ones who don't wear wigs."

Quayle said, "They'll read your mind and embarrass you just for the fun of it. They ought to be-taught better."

Burkhalter blinked in the sunlight. "Well, Mr. Quayle, it's this way. A Baldy's got his problems, too. He's got to orient himself to a world that isn't telepathic; and I suppose a lot of Baldies rather feel that they're letting their specialization go to waste. There are jobs a man like me is suited for-"

Man! He caught the scrap of thought from Quayle. He ignored it, his face as always a mobile mask, and went on.

"Semantics have always been a problem, even in countries speaking only one tongue. A qualified Baldy is a swell interpreter. And, though there aren't any Baldies on the detective forces, they often work with the police. It's rather like being a machine that can do only a few things."

"A few things more than humans can," Quayle said.

Sure, Burkhalter thought, if we could compete on equal footing with non-telepathic humanity. But would blind men trust one who could see? Would they play poker with him? A sudden, deep bitterness put an unpleasant taste in Burkhalter's mouth. What was the answer? Reservations for Baldies? Isolation? And would a nation of blind men trust those with vision enough for that? Or would they be dusted off-the sure cure, the check-and-balance system that made war an impossibility.

He remembered when Red Bank had been dusted off, and maybe that had been justified. The town was getting too big for its boots, and personal dignity was a vital factor; you weren't willing to lose face as long as a dagger swung at your belt. Similarly, the thousands upon thousands of little towns that covered America, each with its peculiar specialty -helicopter manufacture for Huron and Michigan, vegetable farming for Conoy and Diego, textiles and education and art and machines-each little town had a wary eye on all the others. The science and research centers were a little larger; nobody objected to that, for technicians never made war except under pressure; but few of the towns held more than a few hundred families. It was check-and-balance in most efficient degree; whenever a town showed signs of wanting to become a city-thence, a capital, thence, an imperialistic empire-it was dusted off. Though that had not- happened for a long while. And Red Bank might have been a mistake.

Geopolitically it was a fine set-up; sociologically it was acceptable, but brought necessary changes. There was subconscious swashbuckling. The rights of the individual had become more highly regarded as decentralization took place. And men learned.

They learned a monetary system based primarily upon barter. They learned to fly; nobody drove surface cars. They learned new things, but they did not forget the Blowup, and in secret places near every town were hidden the bombs that could utterly and fantastically exterminate a town, as such bombs had exterminated the cities during the Blowup.

And everybody knew how to make those bombs. They were beautifully, terribly simple. You could find the ingredients anywhere and prepare them easily. Then you could take your helicopter over a town, drop an egg overside-and perform an erasure.

Outside of the wilderness malcontents, the maladjusted people found in every race, nobody kicked. And the roaming tribes never raided and never banded together in large groups-for fear of an erasure.

The artisans were maladjusted too, to some degree, but they weren't antisocial, so they lived where they wanted and painted, wrote, composed, and retreated into their own private worlds. The scientists, equally maladjusted in other lines, retreated to their slightly larger towns, banding together in small universes, and turned out remarkable technical achievements.

And the Baldies-found jobs where they could.

No non-telepath would have viewed the world environment quite as Burkhalter did: He was abnormally conscious of the human element, attaching a deeper, more profound significance to those human values, undoubtedly because he saw men in more than the ordinary dimensions. And also, in a way-and inevitably-he looked at humanity from outside.

Yet he was human. The barrier that telepathy had raised made men suspicious of him, more so than if he had had two heads-then they could have pitied. As it was-

As it was, he adjusted the scanner until new pages of the typescript came

flickering into view above. "Say when," he told Quayle.

Quayle brushed back his gray hair. "I feel sensitive all over," he objected. "After all, I've been under a considerable strain correlating my material."

"Well, we can always postpone publication." Burkhalter threw out the suggestion casually, and was pleased when Quayle didn't nibble. He didn't like to fail, either.

"No. No, I want to get the thing done now."

"Mental catharsis-"

"Well, by a psychologist, perhaps. But not by-"

"-a Baldy. You know that a lot of psychologists have Baldy helpers. They get good results, too."

Quayle turned on the tobacco smoke, inhaling slowly. "I suppose... I've not had much contact with Baldies. Or too much-without selectivity. I saw some in an asylum once. I'm not being offensive, am I?"

"No," Burkhalter said. "Every mutation can run too close to the line. There were lots of failures. The hard radiations brought about one true mutation: hairless telepaths, but they didn't all hew true to the line. The mind's a queer gadget-you know that. It's a colloid balancing, figuratively, on the point of a pin. If there's any flaw, telepathy's apt to bring it out. So you'll find that the Blowup caused a hell of a lot of insanity. Not only among the Baldies, but among the other mutations that developed then. Except that the Baldies are almost always paranoidal."

"And dementia praecox," Quayle said, finding relief from his own embarrassment in turning the spotlight on Burkhalter.

"And d. p. Yeah. When a confused mind acquires the telepathic instinct-a hereditary bollixed mind-it can't handle it all. There's disorientation. The paranoia group retreat into their own private worlds, and the d. p.'s simply don't realize that this world exists. There are distinctions, but I think that's a valid basis."

"In a way," Quayle said, "it's frightening. I can't think of any historical parallel."

"No."

"What do you think the end of it will be?"

"I don't know," Burkhalter said thoughtfully. "I think we'll be assimilated. There hasn't been enough time yet. We're specialized in a certain way, and we're useful in certain jobs."

"If you're satisfied to stay there. The Baldies who won't wear wigs-"

"They're so bad-tempered I expect they'll all be killed off in duels eventually," Burkhalter smiled. "No great loss. The rest of us, we're getting what we want-acceptance. We don't have horns or halos."

Quayle shook his head. "I'm glad, I think, that I'm not a telepath. The mind's mysterious enough anyway, without new doors opening. Thanks for letting me talk. I think I've got part of it talked out, anyway. Shall we try the script again?"

"Sure," Burkhalter said, and again the procession of pages nickered on the screen above them. Quayle did seem less guarded; his thoughts were more lucid, and Burkhalter was able to get at the true meaning of many of the hitherto muddy statements. They worked easily, the telepath dictating re-phrasings into his dictograph, and only twice did they have to hurdle emotional tangles. At noon they knocked off, and Burkhalter, with a friendly nod, took the dropper to his office, where he found some calls listed on the visor. He ran off repeats, and a worried look crept into his blue eyes.

He talked with Dr. Moon in a booth at luncheon. The conversation lasted so long that only the induction cups kept the coffee hot, but Burkhalter had more than one problem to discuss. And he'd known Moon for a long time. The fat man was one of the few who were not, he thought, subconsciously repelled by the fact that Burkhalter was a Baldy.

"I've never fought a duel in my life, Doc. I can't afford to."

"You can't afford not to. You can't turn down the challenge, Ed. It isn't done."

"But this fellow Reilly-I don't even know him."

"I know of him," Moon said. "He's got a bad temper. Dueled a lot."

Burkhalter slammed his hand down on the table. "It's ridiculous. I won't do it!"

"Well," Moon said practically, "Your wife can't fight him. And if Ethel's been reading Mrs. Reilly's mind and gossiping, Reilly's got a case."

"Don't you think we know the dangers of that?" Burkhalter asked in a low voice. "Ethel doesn't go around reading minds any more than I do. It'd be fatal-for us. And for any other Baldy."

"Not the hairless ones. The ones who won't wear wigs. They-"

"They're fools. And they're giving all the Baldies a bad name. Point one, Ethel doesn't read minds; she didn't read Mrs. Reilly's. Point two, she doesn't gossip."

"La Reilly is obviously an hysterical type," Moon said. "Word got around about this scandal, whatever it was, and Mrs. Reilly remembered she'd seen Ethel lately. She's the type who needs a scapegoat anyway. I rather imagine she let word drop herself, and had to cover up so her husband wouldn't blame her."

"I'm not going to accept Reilly's challenge," Burkhalter said doggedly.

"You'll have to."

"Listen, Doc, maybe-"

"What?"

"Nothing. An idea. It might work. Forget about that; I think I've got the right answer. It's the only one, anyway. I can't afford a duel and that's flat."

"You're not a coward."

"There's one thing Baldies are afraid of," Burkhalter said, "and that's public opinion. I happen to know I'd kill Reilly. That's the reason why I've never dueled in my life."

Moon drank coffee. "Hm-m-m. I think-"

"Don't. There was something else. I'm wondering if I ought to send Al off to a special school."

"What's wrong with the kid?"

"He's turning out to be a beautiful delinquent. His teacher called me this morning. The playback was something to hear.

He's talking funny and acting funny. Playing nasty little tricks on his friends-if he has any left by now."

"All kids are cruel."

"Kids don't know what cruelty means. That's why they're cruel; they lack empathy. But Al's getting-" Burkhalter gestured helplessly. "He's turning into a young tyrant. He doesn't seem to give a care about anything, according to his teacher."

"That's not too abnormal, so far."

"That's not the worst. He's become very egotistical. Too much so. I don't want him to turn into one of the wigless Baldies you were mentioning." Burkhalter didn't mention the other possibility; paranoia, insanity.

"He must pick things up somewhere. At home? Scarcely, Ed. Where else does he go?"

"The usual places. He's got a normal environment."

"I should think," Moon said, "that a Baldy would have unusual opportunities in training a youngster. The mental rapport-eh?"

"Yeah. But-I don't know. The trouble is," Burkhalter said almost inaudibly, "I wish to God I wasn't different. We didn't ask to be telepaths. Maybe it's all very wonderful in the long run, but I'm one person, and I've got my own microcosm. People who deal in long-term sociology are apt to forget that. They can figure out the answers, but it's every individual man-or Baldy-who's got to fight his own personal battle while he's alive. And it isn't as clearcut as a battle. It's worse; it's the necessity of watching yourself every second, of fitting yourself into a world that doesn't want you."

Moon looked uncomfortable. "Are you being a little sorry for yourself, Ed?"

Burkhalter shook himself. "I am, Doc. But I'll work it out."

"We both will," Moon said, but Burkhalter didn't really expect much help from him. Moon would be willing, but it was horribly difficult for an ordinary man to conceive that a Baldy was-the same. It was the difference that men looked for, and found.

Anyway, he'd have to settle matters before he saw Ethel again. He could easily conceal the knowledge, but she would recognize a mental barrier and wonder. Their marriage had been the more ideal because of the additional rapport, something that compensated for an inevitable, half-sensed estrangement from the rest of the world.

"How's Psychohistory going?" Moon asked after a while.

"Better than I expected. I've got a new angle on Quayle.

If I talk about myself, that seems to draw him out. It gives him enough confidence to let him open his mind to me. We may have those first chapters ready for Oldfield, in spite of everything."

"Good. Just the same, he can't rush us. If we've got to shoot out books that fast, we might as well go back to the days of semantic confusion. Which we won't!"

"Well," Burkhalter said, getting up, "I'll smooch along. See you."

"About Reilly-"

"Let it lay." Burkhalter went out, heading for the address his visor had listed. He touched the dagger at his belt. Dueling wouldn't do for Baldies, but-"

A greeting thought crept into his mind, and, under the arch that led into the campus, he paused to grin at Sam Shane, a New Orleans area Baldy who affected a wig of flaming red. They didn't bother to talk.

Personal question, involving mental, moral and physical well-being.

A satisfied glow. And you, Burkhalter? For an instant Burkhalter half-saw what the symbol of his name meant to Shane.

Shadow of trouble.

A warm, willing anxiousness to help. There was a bond between Baldies.

Burkhalter thought: But everywhere I'd go there'd be the same suspicion. We're freaks.

More so elsewhere, Shane thought. There are a lot of us in Modoc Town. People are invariably more suspicious where they're not in daily contact with-Us.

The boy-I've trouble too, Shane thought. It's worried me. My two girls-

Delinquency?

Yes.

Common denominators?

Don't know. More than one of Us have had the same trouble with our kids.

Secondary characteristic of the mutation? Second generation emergence?

Doubtful, Shane thought, scowling in his mind, shading his concept with a wavering question. We'll think it over later. Must go.

Burkhalter sighed and went on his way. The houses were strung out around the central industry of Modoc, and he cut through a park toward his destination. It was a sprawling curved building, but it wasn't inhabited, so Burkhalter filed Reilly for future reference, and, with a glance at his timer, angled over a hillside toward the school. As he expected, it was recreation time, and he spotted Al lounging under a tree, some distance from his companions, who were involved in a pleasantly murderous game of Blowup.

He sent his thought ahead.

The Green Man had almost reached the top of the mountain. The hairy gnomes were pelting on his trail, most unfairly shooting sizzling light-streaks at their quarry, but the Green Man was agile enough to dodge. The rocks were leaning-

"Al."

-inward, pushed by the gnomes, ready to-

"Al!" Burkhalter sent his thought with the word, jolting into the boy's mind, a trick he very seldom employed, since youth was practically defenseless against such invasion.

"Hello, Dad," Al said, undisturbed. "What's up?"

"A report from your teacher."

"I didn't do anything."

"She told me what it was. Listen, kid. Don't start getting any funny ideas in your head."

"I'm not."

"Do you think a Baldy is better or worse than a non-Baldy?"

Al moved his feet uncomfortably. He didn't answer.

"Well," Burkhalter said, "the answer is both and neither. And here's why. A Baldy can communicate mentally, but he lives in a world where most people can't."

"They're dumb," Al opined.

"Not so dumb, if they're better suited to their world than you are. You might as well say a frog's better than a fish because he's an amphibian."

Burkhalter briefly amplified and explained the terms telepathically.

"Well... oh, I get it, all right."

"Maybe," Burkhalter said slowly, "what you need is a swift kick in the pants. That thought wasn't so hot. What was it again?"

Al tried to hide it, blanking out. Burkhalter began to lift the barrier, an easy matter for him, but stopped. Al regarded his father in a most unfilial way-in fact, as a sort of boneless fish. That had been clear.

"If you're so egotistical," Burkhalter pointed out, "maybe you can see it this way. Do you know why there aren't any Baldies in key positions?"

"Sure I do," Al said unexpectedly. "They're afraid."

"Of what, then?"

"The-" That picture had been very curious, a commingling of something vaguely familiar to Burkhalter. "The non-Baldies."

"Well, if we took positions where we could take advantage of our telepathic function, non-Baldies would be plenty envious-especially if we were successes. If a Baldy even invented a better mousetrap, plenty of people would say he'd stolen the idea from some non-Baldy's mind. You get the point?"

"Yes, Dad." But he hadn't. Burkhalter sighed and looked up. He recognized one of Shane's girls on a nearby hillside, sitting alone against a boulder. There were other isolated figures here and there. Far to the east the snowy rampart of the Rockies made an irregular pattern against blue sky.

"Al," Burkhalter said, "I don't want you to get a chip on your shoulder. This is a pretty swell world, and the people in it are, on the whole, nice people. There's a law of averages. It isn't sensible for us to get too much wealth or power, because that'd militate against us-and we don't need it anyway. Nobody's poor. We find our work, we do it, and we're reasonably happy. We have some advantages non-Baldies don't have; in marriage, for example. Mental intimacy is quite as important as physical. But I don't want you to feel that being a Baldy makes you a god. It doesn't. I can still," he added thoughtfully, "spank it out of you, in case you care to follow out that concept in your mind at the moment."

Al gulped and beat a hasty retreat. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"And keep your hair on, too. Don't take your wig off in class. Use the stickum stuff in the bathroom closet."

"Yes, but... Mr. Venner doesn't wear a wig."

"Remind me to do some historical research with you on zoot-suiters," Burkhalter said. "Mr. Venner's wiglessness is probably his only virtue, if you consider it one."

"He makes money."

"Anybody would, in that general store of his. But people don't buy from him if they can help it, you'll notice. That's what I mean by a chip on your shoulder. He's got one. There are Baldies like Venner, Al, but you might, sometime, ask the guy if he's happy. For your information, I am. More than Venner, anyway. Catch?"

"Yes, Dad." Al seemed submissive, but it was merely that. Burkhalter, still troubled, nodded and walked away. As he passed near the Shane girl's boulder he caught a scrap: -at the summit of the Glass Mountains, rolling rocks back at the gnomes until-

He withdrew; it was an unconscious habit, touching minds that were sensitive, but with children it was definitely unfair. With adult Baldies it was simply the instinctive gesture of tipping your hat; one answered or one didn't. The barrier could be erected; there could be a blank-out; or there could be the direct snub of concentration on a single thought, private and not to be intruded on.

A copter with a string of gliders was coming in from the south: a freighter laden with frozen foods from South America, to judge by the markings. Burkhalter made a note to pick up an Argentine steak. He'd got a new recipe he wanted to try out, a charcoal broil with barbecue sauce, a welcome change from the short-wave cooked meats they'd been having for a week. Tomatoes, chile, mmm-what else? Oh, yes. The duel with Reilly. Burkhalter absently touched his dagger's hilt and made a small, mocking sound in his throat. Perhaps he was innately a pacifist. It was rather difficult to think of a duel seriously, even though everyone else did, when the details of a barbecue dinner were prosaic in his mind.

So it went. The tides of civilization rolled in century-long waves across the continents, and each particular wave, though conscious of its participation in the tide, nevertheless was more preoccupied with dinner. And, unless you happened to be a thousand feet tall, had the brain of a god and a god's life-span, what was the difference? People missed a lot- people like Venner, who was certainly a crank, not batty enough to qualify for the asylum, but certainly a potential paranoid type. The man's refusal to wear a wig labeled him as an individualist, but as an exhibitionist, too. If he didn't feel ashamed of his hairlessness, why should he bother to flaunt it? Besides, the man had a bad temper, and if people kicked him around, he asked for it by starting the kicking himself.

But as for Al, the kid was heading for something approaching delinquency. It couldn't be the normal development of childhood, Burkhalter thought. He didn't pretend to be an expert, but he was still young enough to remember his own formative years, and he had had more handicaps than Al had now; in those days, Baldies had been very new and very freakish. There'd been more than one movement to isolate, sterilize, or even exterminate the mutations.

Burkhalter sighed. If he had been born before the Blowup, it might have been different. Impossible to say. One could read history, but one couldn't live it. In the future, perhaps, there might be telepathic libraries in which that would be possible. So many opportunities, in fact-and so few that the world was ready to accept as yet. Eventually Baldies would not be regarded

as freaks, and by that time real progress would be possible.

But people don't make history-Burkhalter thought. Peoples do that. Not the individual.

He stopped by Reilly's house, and this time the man answered, a burly, freckled, squint-eyed fellow with immense hands and, Burkhalter noted, fine muscular co-ordination. He rested those hands on the Dutch door and nodded.

"Who're you, mister?"

"My name's Burkhalter."

Comprehension and wariness leaped into Reilly's eyes. "Oh, I see. You got my call?"

"I did," Burkhalter said. "I want to talk to you about it May I come in?"

"O.K." He stepped back, opening the way through a hall and into a spacious living room, where diffused light filtered through glassy mosaic walls.

"Want to set the time?"

"I want to tell you you're wrong."

"Now wait a minute," Reilly said, patting the air. "My wife's out now, but she gave me the straight of it. I don't like this business of sneaking into a man's mind; it's crooked. You should have told your wife to mind her business-or keep her tongue quiet."

Burkhalter said patiently, "I give you my word, Reilly, that Ethel didn't read your wife's mind."

"Does she say so?"

"I... well, I haven't asked her."

"Yeah," Reilly said with an air of triumph.

"I don't need to. I know her well enough. And... well, I'm a Baldy myself."

"I know you are," Reilly said. "For all I know, you may be reading my mind now." He hesitated. "Get out of my house. I like my privacy. We'll meet at dawn tomorrow, if that's satisfactory with you. Now get out." He seemed to have something on his mind, some ancient memory, perhaps, that he didn't wish exposed.

Burkhalter nobly resisted the temptation. "No Baldy would read-"

"Go on, get out!"

"Listen! You wouldn't have a chance in a duel with me!"

"Do you know how many notches I've got?" Reilly asked.

"Ever dueled a Baldy?"

"I'll cut the notch deeper tomorrow. Get out, d'you hear?"

Burkhalter, biting his lips, said, "Man, don't you realize that in a duel I could read your mind?"

"I don't care ... what?"

"I'd be half a jump ahead of you. No matter how instinctive your actions would be, you'd know them a split second ahead of time in your mind. And I'd know all your tricks and weaknesses, too. Your technique would be an open book to me. Whatever you thought of-

"No." Reilly shook his head. "Oh, no. You're smart, but it's a phony set-up."

Burkhalter hesitated, decided, and swung about, pushing a chair out of the way. "Take out your dagger," he said. "Leave the sheath snapped on; I'll show you what I mean."

Reilly's eyes widened. "If you want it now-

"I don't." Burkhalter shoved another chair away. He un-clipped his dagger, sheath and all, from his belt, and made sure the little safety clip was in place. "We've room enough here. Come on."

Scowling, Reilly took out his own dagger, held it awkwardly, baffled by the sheath, and then suddenly fainted forward. But Burkhalter wasn't there; he had anticipated, and his own leather sheath slid up Reilly's belly.

"That," Burkhalter said, "would have ended the fight."

For answer Reilly smashed a hard dagger-blow down, curving at the last moment into a throat-cutting slash. Burkhalter's free hand was already at his throat; his other hand, with the sheathed dagger, tapped Reilly twice over the heart. The freckles stood out boldly against the pallor of the larger man's face. But he was not yet ready to concede. He tried a few more passes, clever, well-trained cuts, and they failed, because Burkhalter had anticipated them. His left hand invariably covered the spot where Reilly had aimed, and which he never struck.

Slowly Reilly let his arm fall. He moistened his lips and swallowed. Burkhalter busied himself re-clipping his dagger in place.

"Burkhalter," Reilly said, "you're a devil."

"Far from it. I'm just afraid to take a chance. Do you really think being a Baldy is a snap?"

"But, if you can read minds-

"How long do you think I'd last if I did any dueling? It would be too much of a set-up. Nobody would stand for it, and I'd end up dead. I can't duel, because it'd be murder, and people would know it was murder. I've taken a lot of cracks, swallowed a lot of insults, for just that reason. Now, if you like, I'll swallow another and apologize. I'll admit anything you say. But I can't duel with you, Reilly."

"No, I can see that. And-I'm glad you came over." Reilly was still white. "I'd have walked right into a set-up."

"Not my set-up," Burkhalter said. "I wouldn't have dueled. Baldies aren't so lucky, you know. They've got handicaps- like this. That's why they can't afford to take chances and antagonize people, and why we never read minds, unless we're asked to do so."

"It makes sense. More or less." Reilly hesitated. "Look, I withdraw that challenge. O.K.?"

"Thanks," Burkhalter, said, putting out his hand. It was taken rather reluctantly. "We'll leave it at that, eh?"

"Right." But Reilly was still anxious to get his guest out of the house.

Burkhalter walked back to the Publishing Center and whistled tunelessly. He could tell Ethel now; in fact, he had to, for secrets between them would have broken up the completeness of their telepathic intimacy. It was not that their minds lay bare to each other, it was, rather, that any barrier could be sensed by the other, and the perfect rapport wouldn't have been so perfect. Curiously, despite this utter intimacy, husband and wife managed to respect one another's privacy.

Ethel might be somewhat distressed, but the trouble had blown over, and, besides, she was a Baldy too. Not that she looked it, with her wig of fluffy chestnut hair and those long, curving lashes. But her parents had lived east of Seattle during , the Blowup, and afterward, too, before the hard radiation's effects had been thoroughly studied.

The snow-wind blew down over Modoc and fled southward along the Utah Valley. Burkhalter wished he was in his copter, alone in the blue emptiness of the sky. There was a quiet, strange peace up there that no Baldy ever quite achieved on the earth's surface, except in the depths of a wilderness. Stray fragments of thoughts were always flying about, subsensory, but like the almost-unheard whisper of a needle on a phonograph record, never ceasing. That, certainly, was why almost all Baldies loved to fly and were expert pilots. The high waste deserts of the air were their blue hermitages.

Still, he was in Modoc now, and overdue for his interview with Quayle. Burkhalter hastened his steps. In the main hall he met Moon, said briefly and cryptically that he'd taken care of the duel, and passed on, leaving the fat man to stare a question after him. The only visor call was from Ethel; the playback said she was worried about Al, and would Burkhalter check with the school. Well, he had already done so-unless the boy had managed to get into more trouble since then. Burkhalter put in a call and reassured himself. Al was as yet unchanged.

He found Quayle in the same private solarium, and thirsty. Burkhalter ordered a couple of dramzowies sent up, since he had no objection to loosening Quayle's inhibitions. The gray-haired author was immersed in a sectional historical globe-map, illuminating each epochal layer in turn as he searched back through time.

"Watch this," he said, running his hand along the row of buttons. "See how

the German border fluctuates? And Portugal. Notice its zone of influence? Now-" The zone shrank steadily from 1600 on, while other countries shot out radiating lines and assumed sea power.

Burkhalter sipped his dramzowie. "Not much of that now."

"No, since... what's the matter?"

"How do you mean?"

"You look shot."

"I didn't know I showed it," Burkhalter said wryly. "I just finagled my way out of a duel."

"That's one custom I never saw much sense to," Quayle said. "What happened? Since when can you finagle out?"

Burkhalter explained, and the writer took a drink and snorted. "What a spot for you. Being a Baldy isn't such an advantage after all, I guess."

"It has distinct disadvantages at times." On impulse Burkhalter mentioned his son. "You see my point, eh? I don't know, really, what standards to apply to a young Baldy. He is a mutation, after all. And the telepathic mutation hasn't had time to work out yet. We can't rig up controls, because guinea pigs and rabbits won't breed telepaths. That's been tried, you know. And-well, the child of a Baldy needs very special training so he can cope with his ultimate maturity."

"You seem to have adjusted well enough."

"I've-learned. As most sensible Baldies have. That's why I'm not a wealthy man, or in politics. We're really buying safety for our species by foregoing certain individual advantages. Hostages to destiny-and destiny spares us. But we get paid too, in a way. In the coinage of future benefits- negative benefits, really, for we ask only to be spared and accepted-and so we have to deny ourselves a lot of present, positive benefits. An appeasement to fate."

"Paying the pipery" Quayle nodded.

"We are the pipers. The Baldies as a group, I mean. And our children. So it balances; we're really paying ourselves. If I wanted to take unfair advantage of my telepathic power-my son wouldn't live very long. The Baldies would be wiped out. Al's got to learn that, and he's getting pretty antisocial."

"All children are antisocial," Quayle pointed out. "They're utter individualists. I should think the only reason for worrying would be if the boy's deviation from the norm were connected with his telepathic sense."

"There's something in that." Burkhalter reached out left-handedly and probed delicately at Quayle's mind, noting that the antagonism was considerably lessened. He grinned to himself and went on talking about his own troubles. "Just the same, the boy's father to the man. And an adult Baldy has got to be pretty well adjusted, or he's sunk."

"Environment is as important as heredity. One complements the other. If a child's reared correctly, he won't have much trouble-unless heredity is involved."

"As it may be. There's so little known about the telepathic mutation. If baldness is one secondary characteristic, maybe-something else-emerges in the third or fourth generations. I'm wondering if telepathy is really good for the mind."

Quayle said, "Humph. Speaking personally, it makes me nervous-"

"Like Reilly."

"Yes," Quayle said, but he didn't care much for the comparison. "Well-anyhow, if a mutation's a failure, it'll die out. It won't breed true."

"What about haemophilia?"

"How many people have haemophilia?" Quayle asked. "I'm trying to look at it from the angle of psychohistorian. If there'd been telepaths in the past, things might have been different."

"How do you know there weren't?" Burkhalter asked.

Quayle blinked. "Oh. Well. That's true, too. In medieval times they'd have been called wizards-or saints. The Duke-Rhine experiments-but such accidents would have been abortive. Nature fools around trying to hit the ... ah... the jackpot, and she doesn't always do it on the first try."

"She may not have done it now." That was habit speaking, the ingrained caution of modesty. "Telepathy may be merely a semisuccessful try at something pretty unimaginable. A sort of four-dimensional sensory concept, maybe."

"That's too abstract for me." Quayle was interested, and his own hesitations had almost vanished; by accepting Burkhalter as a telepath, he had tacitly wiped away his objections to telepathy per se. "The old-time Germans always had an idea they were different; so did the Japanese. They knew, very definitely, that they were a superior race because they were directly descended from gods. They were short in stature; heredity made them self-conscious when dealing with larger races. But the Chinese aren't tall, the Southern Chinese, and they weren't handicapped in that way."

"Environment, then?"

"Environment, which caused propaganda. The Japanese took Buddhism, and altered it completely into Shinto, to suit their own needs. The samurai, warrior-knights, were the ideals, the code of honor was fascinatingly cockeyed. The principle of Shinto was to worship your superiors and subjugate your inferiors. Ever seen the Japanese jewel-trees?"

"I don't remember them. What are they?"

"Miniature replicas of espaliered trees, made of jewels, with trinkets hanging on the branches. Including a mirror- always. The first jewel-tree was made to lure the Moon-goddess out of a cave where she was sulking."

It seemed the lady was so intrigued by the trinkets and by her face reflected in the mirror that she came out of her hideout. All the Japanese morals were dressed up in pretty clothes; that was the bait. The old-time Germans did much the same thing. The last German dictator, Hitler, revived the old Siegfried legend. It was racial paranoia. The Germans worshiped the house-tyrant, not the mother, and they had extremely strong family ties. That extended to the state. They symbolized Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup. And, finally, mutations."

"After the deluge, me," Burkhalter murmured, finishing his dramzowie. Quayle was staring at nothing.

"Funny," he said after a while. "This All-Father business-"

"Yes?"

"I wonder if you know how powerfully it can affect a man?"

Burkhalter didn't say anything. Quayle gave him a sharp glance.

"Yes," the writer said quietly. "You're a man, after all. I owe you an apology, you know."

Burkhalter smiled. "You can forget that."

"I'd rather not," Quayle said. "I've just realized, pretty suddenly, that the telepathic sense isn't so important. I mean -it doesn't make you different. I've been talking to you-"

"Sometimes it takes people years before they realize what you're finding out," Burkhalter remarked. "Years of living and working with something they think of as a Baldy."

"Do you know what I've been concealing in my mind?" Quayle asked.

"No. I don't."

"You lie like a gentleman. Thanks. Well, here it is, and I'm telling you by choice, because I want to. I don't care if you got the information out of my mind already; I just want to tell you of my own free will. My father ... I imagine I hated him ... was a tyrant, and I remember one time, when I was just a kid and we were in the mountains, he beat me and a lot of people were looking on. I've tried to forget that for a long time. Now"-Quayle shrugged-"it doesn't seem quite so important."

"I'm not a psychologist," Burkhalter said. "If you want my personal reaction, I'll just say that it doesn't matter. You're not a little boy any more, and the guy I'm talking to and working with is the adult Quayle."

"Hm-m-m. Ye-es. I suppose I knew that all along-how unimportant it was, really. It was simply having my privacy violated.... I think I know you better now, Burkhalter. You can-walk in."

"We'll work better," Burkhalter said, grinning. "Especially with Darius."

Quayle said, "I'll try not to keep any reservation in my mind. Frankly, I

won't mind telling you-the answers. Even when they're personal."

"Check on that. D'you want to tackle Darius now?"

"O.K." Quayle said, and his eyes no longer held suspicious wariness.

"Darius I identify with my father-"

It was smooth and successful. That afternoon they accomplished more than they had during the entire previous fortnight. Warm with satisfaction on more than one point, Burkhalter stopped off to tell Dr. Moon that matters were looking up, and then set out toward home, exchanging thoughts with a couple of Baldies, his co-workers, who were knocking off for the day. The Rockies were bloody with the western light, and the coolness of the wind was pleasant on Burkhalter's cheeks, as he hiked homeward.

It was fine 'to be accepted. It proved that it could be done. And a Baldy often needed reassurance, in a world peopled by suspicious strangers. Quayle had been a hard nut to crack, but-Burkhalter smiled.

Ethel would be pleased. In a way, she'd had a harder time than he'd ever had. A woman would, naturally. Men were desperately anxious to keep their privacy unviolated by a woman, and as for non-Baldy women-well, it spoke highly for Ethel's glowing personal charm that she had finally been accepted by the clubs and feminine groups of Modoc. Only Burkhalter knew Ethel's desperate hurt at being bald, and not even her husband had ever seen her unwigged.

His thought reached out before him into the low, double-winged house on the hillside, and interlocked with hers in a warm intimacy. It was something more than a kiss. And, as always, there was the exciting sense of expectancy, mounting and mounting till the last door swung open and they touched physically. This, he thought, is why I was born a Baldy; this is worth losing worlds for.

At dinner that rapport spread out to embrace Al, an intangible, deeply-rooted something that made the food taste better and the water like wine. The word home, to telepaths, had a meaning that non-Baldies could not entirely comprehend, for it embraced a bond they could not know. There were small, intangible caresses.

Green Man going down the Great Red Slide; the Shaggy Dwarfs trying to harpoon him as he goes.

"Al," Ethel said, "are you still working on your Green Man?"

Then something utterly hateful and cold and deadly quivered silently in the air, like an icicle jaggedly smashing through golden, fragile glass. Burkhalter dropped his napkin and looked up, profoundly shocked. He felt Ethel's thought shrink back, and swiftly reached out to touch and reassure her with mental contact. But across the table the little boy, his cheeks still round with the fat of babyhood, sat silent and wary, realizing he had blundered, and seeking safety in complete immobility. His mind was too weak to resist probing, he knew, and he remained perfectly still, waiting, while the echoes of a thought hung poisonously in silence.

Burkhalter said, "Come on, Al." He stood up. Ethel started to speak.

"Wait, darling. Put up a barrier. Don't listen in." He touched her mind gently and tenderly, and then he took Al's hand and drew the boy after him out into the yard. Al watched his father out of wide, alert eyes. Burkhalter sat on a bench and put Al beside him. He talked audibly at first, for clarity's sake, and for another reason. It was distinctly unpleasant to trick the boy's feeble guards down, but it was necessary.

"That's a very queer way to think of your mother," he said. "It's a queer way to think of me." Obscenity is more obscene, profanity more profane, to a telepathic mind, but this had been neither one. It had been cold and malignant.

And this is flesh of my flesh, Burkhalter thought, looking at the boy and remembering the eight years of his growth. Is the mutation to turn into something devilish?

Al was silent.

Burkhalter reached into the young mind. Al tried to twist free and escape, but his father's strong hands gripped him. Instinct, not reasoning, on the boy's part, for minds can touch over long distances.

He did not like to do this, for increased sensibility had gone with sensitivity, and violations are always violations. But ruthlessness was required. Burkhalter searched. Sometimes he threw key words violently at Al, and surges of memory pulsed up in response.

In the end, sick and nauseated, Burkhalter let Al go and sat alone on the bench, watching the red light die on the snowy peaks. The whiteness was red-stained. But it was not too late. The man was a fool, had been a fool from the beginning, or he would have known the impossibility of attempting such a thing as this.

The conditioning had only begun. Al could be reconditioned. Burkhalter's eyes hardened. And would be. And would be. But not yet, not until the immediate furious anger had given place to sympathy and understanding.

Not yet.

He went into the house, spoke briefly to Ethel, and televised the dozen Baldies who worked with him in the Publishing Center. Not all of them had families, but none was missing when, half an hour later, they met in the back room of the Pagan Tavern downtown. Sam Shane had caught a fragment of Burkhalter's knowledge, and all of them read his emotions. Welded into a sympathetic unit by their telepathic sense, they waited till Burkhalter was ready.

Then he told them. It didn't take long, via thought. He told them about the Japanese jewel-tree with its glittering gadgets, a shining lure. He told them of racial paranoia and propaganda. And that the most effective propaganda was sugar-coated, disguised so that the motive was hidden.

A Green Man, hairless, heroic-symbolic of a Baldy.

And wild, exciting adventures, the lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness. Adult Baldies could listen, but they did not; young telepaths had a higher threshold of mental receptivity, and adults do not read the books of their children except to reassure themselves that there is nothing harmful in the pages. And no adult would bother to listen to the Green Man mindcast. Most of them had accepted it as the original daydream of their own children.

"I did," Shane put in. "My girls-"

"Trace it back," Burkhalter said. "I did."

The dozen minds reached out on the higher frequency, the children's wavelength, and something jerked away from them, startled and apprehensive.

"He's the one," Shane nodded.

They did not need to speak. They went out of the Pagan Tavern in a compact, ominous group, and crossed the street to the general store. The door was locked. Two of the men burst it open with their shoulders.

They went through the dark store and into a back room where a man was standing-beside an overturned chair. His bald skull gleamed in an overhead light. His mouth worked impotently.

His thought pleaded with them-was driven back by an implacable deadly wall.

Burkhalter took out his dagger. Other slivers of steel glittered for a little while-

And were quenched.

Venner's scream had long since stopped, but his dying thought of agony lingered within Burkhalter's mind as he walked homeward. The wigless Baldy had not been insane, no. But he had been paranoid.

What he had tried to conceal, at the last, was quite shocking. A tremendous, tyrannical egotism, and a furious hatred of nontelepaths. A feeling of self-justification that was, perhaps, insane. And-we are the Future! The Baldies! God made us to rule lesser men!

Burkhalter sucked in his breath, shivering. The mutation had not been entirely successful. One group had adjusted, the Baldies who wore wigs and had become fitted to their environment. One group had been insane, and could be discounted; they were in asylums.

But the middle group were merely paranoid. They were not insane, and they were not sane. They wore no wigs.

Like Venner.

And Venner had sought disciples. His attempt had been foredoomed to failure, but he had been one man.

One Baldy-paranoid.

There were others, many others.

Ahead, nestled into the dark hillside, was the pale blotch that marked Burkhalter's home. He sent his thought ahead, and it touched Ethel's and paused very briefly to reassure her.

Then it thrust on, and went into the sleeping mind of a little boy who, confused and miserable, had finally cried himself to sleep. There were only dreams in that mind now, a little discolored, a little stained, but they could be cleansed. And would be.