

BEGGARS IN VELVET

IT WAS like stepping on a snake. The thing, concealed in fresh, green grass, squirmed underfoot and turned and struck venomously. But the thought was not that of reptile or beast; only man was capable of the malignance that was, really, a perversion of intellect.

Burkhalter's dark face did not change; his easy stride did not alter. But his mind had instantly drawn back from that blind malevolence, alert and ready, while all through the village Baldies paused imperceptibly in their work or conversation as their minds touched Burkhalter's.

No human noticed.

Under bright morning sunlight Redwood Street curved cheerful and friendly before Burkhalter. But a breath of uneasiness slipped along it, the same cool, dangerous wind that had been blowing for days through the thoughts of every telepath in Sequoia. Ahead were a few early shoppers, some children on their way to school, a group gathered outside the barber shop, one of the doctors from the hospital.

Where is he?

The answer came swiftly. Can't locate him. Near you, though-

Someone-a woman, the overtones of her thought showed -sent a message tinged with emotional confusion, almost hysterical. One of the patients from the hospital-

Instantly the thoughts of the others closed reassuringly around her, warm with friendliness and comfort. Even Burkhalter took time to send a clear thought of unity. He recognized among the others the cool, competent personality of Duke Heath, the Baldy priest-medic, with its subtle psychological shadings that only another telepath could sense.

It's Self ridge, Heath told the woman, while the other Baldies listened. He's just drunk. I think I'm nearest, Burkhalter. I'm coming.

A helicopter curved overhead, its freight-gliders swinging behind it, stabilized by their gyroscopes. It swept over the western ridge and was gone toward the Pacific. As its humming died, Burkhalter could hear the muffled roar of the

cataract up the valley. He was vividly conscious of the waterfall's feathery whiteness plunging down the cliff, of the slopes of pine and fir and redwood around Sequoia, of the distant noise of the cellulose mills. He focused on these clean, familiar things to shut out the sickly foulness that blew from Selfridge's mind to his own. Sensibility and sensitivity had gone hand in hand with the Baldies, and Burkhalter had wondered more than once how Duke Heath managed to maintain his balance in view of the man's work among the psychiatric patients at the hospital. The race of Baldies had come too soon; they were not aggressive; but race-survival depended on competition.

He's in the tavern, a woman's thought said. Burkhalter automatically jerked

away from the message; he knew the mind from which it came. Logic told him instantly that the source didn't matter-in this instance. Barbara Pell was a paranoid; therefore an enemy. But both paranoids and Baldies were desperately anxious to avoid any open break. Though their ultimate goals lay worlds apart, yet their paths sometimes paralleled.

But already it was too late. Fred Selfridge came out of the tavern, blinked against the sunlight, and saw Burkhalter. The trader's thin, hollow-cheeked face twisted into a sour grin. The blurred malignance of his thought drove before him as he walked toward Burkhalter, and one hand kept making little darts toward the misericordia swung at his belt. He stopped before Burkhalter, blocking the Baldy's progress. His grin broadened.

Burkhalter had paused. A dry panic tightened his throat. He was afraid, not for himself, but for his race, and every Baldy in Sequoia knew that-and watched. He said "Morning, Fred."

Selfridge hadn't shaved that morning. Now he rubbed his stubbled chin and let his eyelids droop. "Mr. Burkhalter," he said. "Consul Burkhalter. Good thing you remembered to wear a cap this morning. Skinheads catch cold pretty easy." Play for time, Duke Heath ordered. I'm coming. I'll fix it. "I didn't pull any wires to get this job, Fred," Burkhalter said. "The Towns made me consul. Why blame me for it?" "You pulled wires, all right," Selfridge said. "I know graft when I see it. You were a schoolteacher from Modoc or some hick town. What the devil do you know about Hedge-hounds?"

"Not as much as you do," Burkhalter admitted. "You've had the experience."

"Sure. Sure I have. So they take a half-baked teacher and make him consul to the Hedgehounds. A greenhorn who doesn't even know those bichos have got cannibal tribes. I traded with the woodsmen for thirty years, and I know how to handle 'em. Are you going to read 'em pretty little stories out of books?"

"I'll do what I'm told. I'm not the boss."

"No. But maybe your friends are. Connections! If I'd had the same connections you've got, I'd be sitting on my tail like you, pulling in credits for the same work. Only I'd do that work better-a lot better."

"I'm not interfering with your business," Burkhalter said. "You're still trading, aren't you? I'm minding my own affairs."

"Are you? How do I know what you tell the Hedgehounds?"

"My records are open to anybody."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. My job's just to promote peaceful relations with the Hedgehounds. Not to do any trading, except what they want-and then I refer 'em to you."

"It sounds fine," Selfridge said. "Except for one thing. You can read my mind and tell the Hedgehounds all about my private business."

Burkhalter's guard slipped; he couldn't have helped it. He had stood the man's mental nearness as long as he could, though it was like breathing foul air. "Afraid of that?" he asked, and regretted the words instantly. The voices in his mind cried: Careful!

Selfridge flushed. "So you do it after all, eh? All that fine talk about you skinheads respecting people's privacy- sure! No wonder you got the consulate! Reading minds-"

"Hold on," Burkhalter said. "I've never read a non-Baldy's mind in my life. That's the truth."

"Is it?" the trader sneered. "How the devil do I know if you're lying? But you can look inside my head and see if I'm telling the truth. What you Baldies need is to be taught your place, and for two coins I'd-"

Burkhalter's mouth felt stiff. "I don't duel," he said, with an effort. "I won't duel."

"Yellow," Selfridge said, and waited, his hand hovering over the misericordia's hilt.

And there was the usual quandary. No telepath could

possibly lose a duel with a non-Baldy, unless he wanted to commit suicide. But he dared not win, either. The Baldies baked their own humble pie; a minority that lives on sufferance must not reveal its superiority, or it won't survive. One such incident might have breached the dyke the telepaths had painfully erected against the rising tide of intolerance.

For the dyke was too long. It embraced all of mankind. And it was impossible to watch every inch of that incredible levee of custom, orientation and propaganda, though the basic tenets were instilled in each Baldy from infancy. Some day the dyke would collapse, but each hour of postponement meant the gathering of a little more strength-

Duke Heath's voice said, "A guy like you, Selfridge, would be better off dead."

Sudden shock touched Burkhalter. He shifted his gaze to the priest-medic, remembering the subtle tension he had recently sensed under Heath's deep calm, and wondering if this was the blowoff. Then he caught the thought in Heath's mind and relaxed, though warily.

Beside the Baldy was Ralph Selfridge, a smaller, slighter edition of Fred. He was smiling rather sheepishly.

Fred Selfridge showed his teeth. "Listen, Heath," he snapped. "Don't try to stand on your position. You haven't got one. You're a surrogate. No skinhead can be a real priest or a medic."

"Sure they can," Heath said. "But they don't." His round, youthful face twisted into a scowl. "Listen to me-"

"I'm not listening to-"

"Shut up!"

Selfridge gasped in surprise. He was caught flat-footed, undecided whether to use his misericordia or his fists, and while he hesitated, Heath went on angrily.

"I said you'd be better off dead and I meant it! This kid brother of yours thinks you're such a hotshot he imitates everything you do. Now look at him! If the epidemic hits Sequoia, he won't have enough resistance to work up antibodies, and the young idiot won't let me give him preventive shots. I suppose he thinks he can live on whiskey like you!"

Fred Selfridge frowned at Heath, stared at his younger brother, and looked back at the priest-medic. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Leave Ralph alone. He's all right."

"Well, start saving for his funeral expenses," Heath said

callously. "As a surrogate medic, 111 make a prognosis right now-rigor mortis?"

Selfridge licked his lips. "Wait a minute. The kid isn't sick, is he?"

"There's an epidemic down toward Columbia Crossing," Heath said. "One of the new virus mutations. If it hits us here, there'll be trouble. It's a bit like tetanus, but avertin's no good. Once the nerve centers are hit, nothing can be done. Preventive shots will help a lot, especially when a man's got the susceptible blood-type-as Ralph has."

Burkhalter caught a command from Heath's mind.

"You could use some shots yourself, Fred," the priest-medic went on. "Still, your blood type is B, isn't it? And you're tough enough to throw off an infection. This virus is something new, a mutation of the old flu bug-"

He went on. Across the street someone called Burkhalter's name and the consul slipped away, unnoticed except for a parting glare from Selfridge.

A slim, red-haired girl was waiting under a tree at the corner. Burkhalter grimaced inwardly as he saw he could not avoid her. He was never quite able to control the turmoil of feeling which the very sight or thought of Barbara Pell stirred up within him. He met her bright narrow eyes, full of pinpoints of light. He saw her round slimness that looked so soft and would, he thought, be as hard to the touch as her mind was hard to the thought's touch. Her bright red wig, almost too luxuriant, spilled heavy curls down about the square, alert face to move like red Medusa-locks upon her shoulders when she turned her head. Curiously, she had a redhead's typical face, high-cheekboned, dangerously alive. There is a quality of the red-haired that goes deeper than the hair, for Barbara Pell had, of course, been born as hairless as any Baldy.

"You're a fool," she said softly as he came up beside her. "Why don't you get rid of Selfridge?"

Burkhalter shook his head. "No. And don't you try anything."

"I tipped you off that he was in the tavern. And I got here before anybody else, except Heath. If we could work together--"

"We can't."

"Dozens of times we've saved you traitors," the woman said

bitterly. "Will you wait until the humans stamp out your lives--"

Burkhalter walked past her and turned toward the pathway that climbed the steep ascent leading out of Sequoia. He was vividly aware of Barbara Pell looking after him. He could see her as clearly as if he had eyes in the back of his head, her bright, dangerous face, her beautiful body, her bright, beautiful, insane thoughts--

For behind all their hatefulness, the paranoids' vision was as beautiful and tempting as the beauty of Barbara Pell. Perilously tempting. A free world, where Baldies could walk and live and think in safety, no longer bending the scope of their minds into artificial, cramping limits as once men bent their backs in subservience to their masters. A bent back is a humiliating thing, but even a serf's mind is free to range. To cramp the mind is to cramp the soul, and no humiliation could surpass the humiliation of that.

But there was no such world as the paranoids dreamed of. The price would be too high. What shall it profit a man, thought Burkhalter wryly, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? The words might first have been spoken in this connection and no other, so perfectly did they apply to it. The price must be murder, and whoever paid that price would automatically sully the world he bought with it until, if he were a normal creature, he could never enjoy what he had paid so high to earn. Burkhalter called up a bit of verse into his mind and savored again the bitter melancholy of the poet who wrote it, perhaps more completely than the poet himself ever dreamed.

/ see the country, far away,

Where I shall never stand. The heart goes where no footstep may,

Into the promised land.

Barbara Pell's mind shot after him an angry, evil shaft of scorn and hatred. "You're a fool, you're all fools, y'fu don't deserve telepathy if you degrade it. If you'd only join us in--" The thought ceased to be articulate and ran suddenly, gloatingly red with spilled blood, reeking saltily of it, as if her whole mind bathed deliciously in the blood of all humans.

Burkhalter jerked his thoughts away from contact with hers, sickened. It isn't the end of free living they want any more, he told himself in sudden realization--it's the means

they're lusting after now. They've lost sight of a free world. All they want is killing.

"Fool, fool, fool!" Barbara Pell's thoughts screamed after him. "Wait and

see! Wait until-one times two is two, two times two is four, three times two-

Burkhalter thought grimly, "They're up to something," and sent his mind probing gingerly past the sudden artificial barrier with which she had sought to blank out a thought even she realized was indiscreet. She fought the probing viciously. He sensed only vague, bloody visions stirring behind the barrier. Then she laughed without a sound and hurled a clear, terrible, paranoid thought at him, a picture of sickening clarity that all but splashed in his face with its overrunning redness.

He drew his mind back with swiftness that was pure reflex. As safe to touch fire as thoughts like hers. It was one way any paranoid could shut out the inquisitive thoughts of a non-paranoid when need arose. And of course, normally no Baldy would dream of probing uninvited into another mind. Burkhalter shuddered.

They were up to something, certainly. He must pass the episode on to those whose business it was to know about the paranoids. Barbara Pell's mind was not, in any case, likely to yield much information on secret plans. She was an executioner, not a planner. He withdrew his thoughts from her, fastidiously, shaking off the contamination as a cat shakes water from its feet.

He climbed the steep slope that led out of Sequoia to Ms home, deliberately shutting his mind from all things behind him. Fifteen minutes' walk brought him to the rustic log-and-plastic house built near the shadow of the West Canadian Forest. This was his consulate, and only the cabin of the Selfridge brothers lay farther out in the wilderness that stretched north to the Beaufort Sea that mingles with the Arctic Ocean.

By his desk a glowing red light indicated a message in the terminal of the pneumatic that stretched for six miles into the forest. He read it carefully. A delegation of Hedgehounds would arrive soon, representatives from three tribal groups. Well-He checked supplies, televised the general store, and sat down behind his desk to wait. Heath would be along soon. Meanwhile he closed his eyes and concentrated on the fresh smell of pine that blew through the open windows. But the

fresh, clean scent was sullied by vagrant thought currents that tainted the air. Burkhalter shivered.

n

Sequoia lay near the border of old Canada, now an immense wilderness that the forest had largely reclaimed. Cellulose byproducts were its industry, and there was an immense psychiatric hospital, which accounted for the high percentage of Baldies in the village. Otherwise Sequoia was distinguished from the hundreds of thousands of other towns that dotted America by the recent establishment of a diplomatic station there, the consulate that would be a means of official contact with the wandering tribes that retreated into the forests as civilization encroached. It was a valley town, bordered by steep slopes, with their enormous conifers and the white-water cataracts racing down from snowy summits. Not far westward,

beyond the Strait of Georgia and Vancouver Island, lay the Pacific. But there were few highways; transport was aerial. And communication was chiefly by teleradio.

Four hundred people, more or less, lived in Sequoia, a tight little semi-independent settlement, bartering its specialized products for shrimps and pompano from Lafitte; books from Modoc; beryllium-steel daggers and motor-plows from American Gun; clothing from Dempsey and Gee Eye. The Boston textile mills were gone with Boston; that smoking, gray desolation had not changed since the year of the Blowup. But there was still plenty of room in America, no matter how much the population might increase; war had thinned the population. And as technology advanced so did improvements in reclamation of arid and unfertile land, and the hardier strains of the kudzu plant had already opened vast new tracts for farming. But agriculture was not the only industry. The towns specialized, never expanding into cities, but sending out spores that would grow into new villages-or, rather, reaching out like raspberry canes, to take root whenever they touched earth.

Burkhalter was deliberately not thinking of the red-haired woman when Duke Heath came in. The priest-medic caught the strained, negative mental picture, and nodded.

"Barbara Pell," he said. "I saw her." Both men blurred the surface of their minds. That couldn't mask their thoughts, but

if any other brain began probing, there would be an instant's warning, during which they could take precautions. Necessarily, however, the conversation stayed oral rather than telepathic.

"They can smell trouble coming," Burkhalter said. "They've been infiltrating Sequoia lately, haven't they?"

"Yes. The minute you copped this consulate, they started to come in." Heath nibbled his knuckles. "In forty years the paranoids have built up quite an organization."

"Sixty years," Burkhalter said. "My grandfather saw it coming back in '82. There was a paranoid in Modoc-a lone wolf at the time, but it was one of the first symptoms. And since then-"

"Well, they've grown qualitatively, not quantitatively. There are more true Baldies now than paranoids. Psychologically they're handicapped. They hate to intermarry with non-Baldies. Whereas we do, and the dominant strain goes on- spreads out."

"For a while," Burkhalter said.

Heath frowned. "There's no epidemic at Columbia Crossing. I had to get Selfridge off your neck somehow, and he's got a strongly paternal instinct toward his brother. That did it-but not permanently. With that so-and-so, the part equals the whole. You got the consulate; he had a nice little racket gypping the Hedgehounds; he hates you-so he jumps on your most vulnerable point. Also, he rationalizes. He tells himself that if you didn't have the unfair advantage of being a Baldy, you'd never have landed the

consulate."

"It was unfair."

"We had to do it," Heath said. "Non-Baldies mustn't find out what we're building up among the Hedgehounds. Some day the woods folk may be our only safety. If a non-Baldy had got the consulate--"

"I'm working in the dark," Burkhalter said. "All I know is that I've got to do what the Mutes tell me."

"I don't know any more than you do. The paranoids have their Power-that secret band of communication we can't tap -and only the Mutes have a method of fighting that weapon. Don't forget that, while we can't read a Mute's mind, the paranoids can't either. If you knew their secrets, your mind would be an open book-any telepath could read it."

Burkhalter didn't answer. Heath sighed and watched pine needles glittering in the sunlight outside the windows.

"It's not easy for me either," he said. "To be a surrogate."

No non-Baldy has to be a priest as well as a medic. But I have to. The doctors up at the hospital feel more strongly about it than I do. They know how many psychotic cases have been cured because we can read minds. Meanwhile-" He shrugged.

Burkhalter was staring northward. "A new land is what we need," he said.

"We need a new world. Some day we'll get it."

A shadow fell across the door. Both men turned. A small figure was standing there, a fat little man with close-curling hair and mild blue eyes. The misericordia at his belt seemed incongruous, as though those pudgy fingers would fumble ludicrously with the hilt.

No Baldy will purposely read a nontelepath's mind, but there is an instinctive recognition between Baldies. So Burkhalter and Heath knew instantly that the stranger was a tele-path-and then, on the heels of that thought, came sudden, startled recognition of the emptiness where thought should be. It was like stepping on clear ice and finding it clear water instead. Only a few men could guard their minds completely thus. They were the Mutes.

"Hello," said the stranger, coming in and perching himself on the desk's edge. "I see you know me. We'll stay oral, if you don't mind. I can read your thoughts, but you can't read mine." He grinned. "No use wondering why, Burkhalter. If you knew, the paranoids would find out too. Now. My name's Ben Hobson." He paused. "Trouble, eh? Well, we'll kick that around later. First let me get this off my chest."

Burkhalter sent a swift glance at Heath. "There are paranoids in town. Don't tell me too much, unless--"

"Don't worry. I won't," Hobson chuckled. "What do you know about the Hedgehounds?"

"Descendants of the nomad tribes that didn't join the villages after the Blowup. Gypsies. Woods folk. Friendly enough."

"That's right," Hobson said. "Now what I'm telling you is common knowledge, even among the paranoids. You should know it. We've spotted a few cells among the Hedgehounds- Baldies. It started by accident, forty years ago, when a Baldy named Line Cody was adopted by Hedgehounds and reared without knowing his heritage. Later he found out. He's still living with the Hedgehounds, and so are his sons."

"Cody?" Burkhalter said slowly. "I've heard stories of the Cody-"

"Psychological propaganda. The Hedgehounds are barbarians. But we want 'em friendly and we want to clear the way, for joining them, if that ever becomes necessary. Twenty years ago we started building up a figurehead in the forests, a living symbol who'd be overtly a shaman and really a delegate for us. We used mumbo-jumbo. Line Cody dressed up in a trick suit, we gave him gadgets, and the Hedgehounds finally developed the legend of the Cody-a sort of benevolent woods spirit who acts as supernatural monitor. They like him, they obey him, and they're afraid of him. Especially since he can appear in four places at the same time." "Eh?" Burkhalter said.

"Cody had three sons," Hobson smiled. "It's one of them you'll see today. Your friend Selfridge has fixed up a little plot. You're due to be murdered by one of the Hedgehound chiefs when that delegation gets here. I can't interfere personally, but the Cody will. It's necessary for you to play along. Don't give any sign that you expect trouble. When the Cody steps in, the chiefs will be plenty impressed."

Heath said, "Wouldn't it have been better not to tell Burkhalter what to expect?"

"No. For two reasons. He can read the Hedgehounds' minds-I give him carte blanche on that-and he must string along with the Cody. O.K., Burkhalter?" "O.K." the consul nodded.

"Then I'll push off." Hobson stood up, still smiling. "Good luck."

"Wait a minute," Heath said "What about Selfridge?" "Don't kill him. Either of you. You know no Baldy must ever duel a non-Baldy."

Burkhalter was scarcely listening. He knew he must mention the thought he had surprised in Barbara Pell's mind, and he had been putting off the moment when he must speak her hateful name, open the gates of his thoughts wide enough to let her image slip back in, beautiful image, beautiful slender body, bright and dangerous and insane mind-

"I saw one of the paranoids in town a while ago," he said. "Barbara Pell. A nasty job, that woman. She let slip something about their plans. Covered up too fast for me to get much, but you might think about it. They're up to something planned for fairly soon, I gathered."

Hobson smiled at him. "Thanks. We're watching them.

We'll keep an eye on the woman too. All right, then. Good luck."

He went out. Burkhalter and Heath looked at one another.

The Mute walked slowly down the path toward the village. His mouth was pursed as he whistled; his plump cheeks vibrated. As he passed a tall pine he abruptly unsheathed his dagger and sprang around the tree. The man lurking there was caught by surprise. Steel found its mark unerringly. The paranoid had time for only one desperate mental cry before he died.

Hobson wiped his dagger and resumed his journey. Under the close-cropped brown wig a mechanism, shaped like a skull-cap, began functioning. Neither Baldy nor telepath could receive the signals Hobson was sending and receiving now.

"They know I'm here."

"Sometimes they do," a soundless voice came back. "They can't catch these modulated frequencies the helmets use, but they can notice the shield. Still, as long as none of 'em know why-

"I just killed one."

"One less of the bichos," came the coldly satisfied response. "I think I'd better stay here for a while. Paranoids have been infiltrating. Both Heath and Burkhalter think so. There's some contingent plan I can't read yet; the paranoids are thinking about it only on their own band."

"Then stay. Keep in touch. What about Burkhalter?"

"What we suspected. He's in love with the paranoid Barbara Pell. But he doesn't know it."

Both shocked abhorrence and unwilling sympathy were in the answering thought. "I can't remember anything like this ever happening before. He can read her mind; he knows she's paranoid-

Hobson smiled. "The realization of his true feelings would upset him plenty, Jerry. Apparently you picked the wrong man for this job."

"Not from Burkhalter's record. He's always lived a pretty secluded life, but his character's above reproach. His empathy standing was high. And he taught sociology for six years at New Yale."

"He taught it, but I think it remained remote. He's known Barbara Pell for six weeks now. He's in love with her."

"But how-even subconsciously? Baldies instinctively hate and distrust the paranoids."

Hobson reached Sequoia's outskirts and kept going, past the terraced square where the blocky, insulated power station sat. "So it's perverse," he told the other Mute. "Some men are attracted only to ugly women. You can't argue with a thing like that. Burkhalter's fallen in love with a

paranoid, and I hope to heaven he never realizes it. He might commit suicide. Or anything might happen. This is-" His thought moved with slow emphasis. "This is the most dangerous situation the Baldies have ever faced. Apparently nobody's paid much attention to Self ridge's talk, but the damage has been done. People have listened. And non-Baldies have always mistrusted us. If there's a blowoff, we're automatically the scapegoats."

"Like that, Ben?"

"The pogrom may start in Sequoia."

Once the chess game had started, there was no way to stop it. It was cumulative. The paranoids, the warped twin branch of the parallel telepathic mutation, were not insane; there was a psychoneurotic pathology. They had only one basic delusion. They were the super race. On that foundation they built their edifice of planetary sabotage.

Non-Baldies outnumbered them, and they could not fight the technology that flourished in the days of decentralization. But if the culture of the non-Baldies were weakened, wrecked-

Assassinations, deftly disguised as duels or accidents; secret sabotage in a hundred branches, from engineering to publishing; propaganda, carefully sowed in the proper places- and civilization would have headed for a crack-up, except for one check.

The Baldies, the true, non-paranoid mutation, were fighting for the older race. They had to. They knew, as the blinded paranoids could not, that eventually the non-Baldies would learn of the chess game, and then nothing could stop a worldwide pogrom.

One advantage the paranoids had, for a while-a specialized band on which they could communicate telepathically, a wave length which could not be tapped. Then a Baldy technician had perfected the scrambler helmets, with a high-frequency modulation that was equally untappable. As long as a Baldy wore such a helmet under his wig, his mind could be read only by another Mute.

So they came to be called, a small, tight group of exterminators, sworn to destroy the paranoids completely-in effect,

a police force, working in secret and never doffing the helmets which shut them out from the complete rapport that played so large a part in the psychic life of the Baldy race.

They had willingly given up a great part of their heritage. It was a curious paradox that only by strictly limiting their telepathic power could these few Baldies utilize their weapon against the paranoids. And what they fought for was the time of ultimate unification when the dominant mutation had become so numerically strong that in all the world, there would be no need for mental barriers or psychic embargoes.

Meanwhile the most powerful of the Baldy race, they could never know, except within a limited scope, the subtle gratification of the mental round-robins, when a hundred or a thousand minds would meet and merge

into the deep, eternal peace that only telepaths can know.

They, too, were beggars in velvet.

in

Burkhalter said suddenly, "What's the matter with you, Duke?"

Heath didn't move. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that. Your thoughts are on quicksand."

"Maybe they are," Heath said. "The fact is, I need a rest. I love this work, but it does get me down sometimes."

"Well, take a vacation."

"Can't. We're too busy. Our reputation's so good we're getting cases from all over. We're one of the first mental sanitariums to go in for all-out Baldy psychoanalysis. It's been going on, of course, for years but sub rosa, more or less. People don't like the idea of Baldies prying into the minds of their relatives. However, since we started to show results-" His eyes lit up. "Even with psychosomatic illnesses we can help a lot, and mood disorders are our meat. The big question, you know, is why. Why they've been putting poison in the patient's food, why they watch him-and so forth. Once that question's answered fully, it usually gives the necessary clues. And the average patient's apt to shut up like a clam when the psychiatrist questions him. But-" Heath's excitement mounted, "this is the biggest thing in the history of medicine. There've been Baldies since the Blowup, and only now are the doctors opening their doors to us. Ultimate empathy. A psychotic locks his mind, so he's hard to treat. But we have the keys-"

"What are you afraid of?" Burkhalter asked quietly.

Heath stopped short. He examined his fingernails.

"It's not fear," he said at last. "It's occupational anxiety. Oh, the devil with that. Four-bit words. It's simpler, really; you can put it in the form of an axiom. You can't touch pitch without getting soiled."

"I see."

"Do you, Harry? It's only this, really. My work consists of visiting abnormal minds. Not the way an ordinary psychiatrist does it. I get into those minds. I see and feel their viewpoints. I know all their terrors. The invisible horror that waits in the dark for them isn't just a word to me. I'm sane, and I see through the eyes of a hundred insane men. Keep out of my mind for a minute, Harry." He turned away. Burkhalter hesitated.

"O.K.," Heath said, looking around. "I'm glad you mentioned this, though. Every so often I find myself getting entirely too empathic.. Then I either take my copter up, or get in a round robin. I'll see if I can promote a hook-up tonight. Are you in?"

"Sure," Burkhalter said. Heath nodded casually and went out. His thought came back.

I'd better not be here when the Hedgehounds come. Unless you-

No, Burkhalter thought, I'll be all right.

O.K. Here's a delivery for you.

Burkhalter opened the door in time to admit the grocer's boy, who had parked his trail car outside. He helped put the supplies away, saw that the beer would be sufficiently refrigerated, and pressed a few buttons that would insure a supply of pressure-cooked refreshments. The Hedgehounds were hearty eaters.

After that, he left the door open and relaxed behind his desk, waiting. It was hot in the office; he opened his collar and made the walls transparent. Air conditioning began to cool the room, but sight of the broad valley below was equally refreshing. Tall pines rippled their branches in the wind.

It was not like New Yale, one of the larger towns, that was intensely specialized in education. Sequoia, with its great hospital and its cellulose industry, was more of a complete, rounded unit. Isolated from the rest of the world except by air and television, it lay clean and attractive, sprawling in

white and green and pastel plastics around the swift waters of the river that raced down seaward.

Burkhalter locked his hands behind his neck and yawned. He felt inexplicably fatigued, as he had felt from time to time for several weeks. Not that this work was hard; on the contrary. But reorientation to his new job wouldn't be quite as easy as he had expected. In the beginning he hadn't anticipated these wheels within wheels.

Barbara Pell, for example. She was dangerous. She, more than any of the others, perhaps, was the guiding spirit of the Sequoia paranoids. Not in the sense of planned action, no. But she ignited, like a flame. She is a born leader. And there were uncomfortably many paranoids here now. They had infiltrated-superficially with good reason, on jobs or errands or vacations; but the town was crammed with them, comparatively speaking. The nontelepaths still outnumbered both Baldies and paranoids as they did on a larger scale all over the world-

He remembered his grandfather, Ed Burkhalter. If any Baldy had ever hated the paranoids, Ed Burkhalter had. And presumably with good reason, since one of the first paranoid plots-a purely individual attempt then-had indirectly tried to indoctrinate the mind of Ed's son, Harry Burkhalter's father. Oddly, Burkhalter remembered his grandfather's thin, harsh face more vividly than his father's gentler one. He yawned again, trying to immerse himself in the calm of the vista beyond the windows. Another world? Perhaps only in deep space could a Baldy ever be completely free from those troubling half-fragments of thoughts that he sensed even now. And without that continual distraction, with one's mind utterly unhampered-he stretched luxuriously, trying to imagine the feeling of his body without gravity, and extending that parallel to his mind. But it was impossible.

The Baldies had been born before their time, of course- an artificially hastened mutation caused by radioactivity acting on human genes and chromosomes. Thus their present environment was wrong. Burkhalter toyed idly with the concept of a deep-space race, each individual mind so delicately attuned that even the nearest of any alien personality would interfere with the smooth processes of perfect thought. Pleasant, but impractical. It would be a dead end. The tele-paths weren't supermen, as the paranoids contended; at best they had only one fatally miraculous sense-fatal, because it had been mingled with common clay. With a genuine super-

man, telepathy would be merely one sense among a dozen other inconceivable ones.

Whereas Barbara Pell-the name and the face slid into his thoughts again, and the beautiful body, as dangerous and as fascinating as fire-whereas Barbara Pell, for instance, undoubtedly considered herself strictly super, like all the warped telepaths of her kind.

He thought of her bright, narrow gaze, and the red mouth with its sneering smile. He thought of the red curls moving like snakes upon her shoulders, and the red thoughts moving like snakes through her mind. He stopped thinking of her.

He was very tired. The sense of fatigue, all out of proportion to the energy he had expended, swelled and engulfed him. If the Hedgehound chiefs weren't coming, it would be pleasant to take a copter up. The inclosing walls of the mountains would fall away as the plane lifted into the empty blue, higher and higher, till it hung in space above a blurred featureless landscape, half-erased by drifting clouds. Burkhalter thought of how the ground would look, a misty, dreamy Sime illustration, and, in his daydream, he reached out slowly to touch the controls. The copter slanted down, more and more steeply, till it was flashing suicidally toward a world that spread hypnotically, like a magically expanding carpet.

Someone was coming. Burkhalter blurred his mind instantly and stood up. Beyond the open door was only the empty forest, but now he could hear the faint, rising overtones of a song. The Hedgehounds, being a nation of nomads, sang as they marched, old tunes and ballads of memorable simplicity that had come down unchanged from before the Blowup, though the original meanings had been forgotten.

Green grow the lilacs, all sparkling with dew; I'm lonely, my darling, since parting from you-

Ancestors of the Hedgehounds had hummed that song along the borders of Old Mexico, long before war had been anything but distantly romantic. The grandfather of one of the current singers had been a Mexican, drifting up the California coast, dodging the villages and following a lazy wanderlust that led him into the Canadian forests at last. His name had been Ramon Alvarez but his grandson's name was Kit Carson Alvers, and his black beard rippled as he sang.

But by our next meeting I'll hope to prove true, \ And change the green

lilacs for the red, white and blue.

There were no minstrels among the Hedgehounds—they were all minstrels, which is how folk songs are kept alive. Singing, they came down the path, and fell silent at sight of the consul's house.

Burkhalter watched. It was a chapter of the past come alive before his eyes. He had read of the Hedgehounds, but not until six weeks ago had he encountered any of the new pioneers. Their bizarre costumes still had power to intrigue him.

Those costumes combined functionalism with decoration. The buckskin shirts, that could blend into a pattern of forest light and shade, were fringed with knotted tassels; Alvers had a coonskin cap, and all three men wore sandals, made of soft, tough kidskin. Sheathed knives were at their belts, hunting knives, plainer and shorter than the misericordias of the townsfolk. And their faces showed a rakehell vigor, a lean, brown independence of spirit that made them brothers. For generations now the Hedgehounds had been wresting their living from the wilderness with such rude weapons as the bow one of them had slung across his shoulder, and the ethics of dueling had never developed among them. They didn't duel. They killed, when killing seemed necessary—for survival.

Burkhalter came to the threshold. "Come in," he said. "I'm the consul—Harry Burkhalter."

"You got our message?" asked a tall, Scottish-looking chief with a bushy red beard. "That thing you got rigged up in the woods looked tetchy."

"The message conveyor? It works, all right."

"Fair enough. I'm Cobb Mattoon. This here's Kit Carson Alvers, and this un's Umpire Vine." Vine was clean-shaven, a barrel of a man who looked like a bear, his sharp brown eyes slanting wary glances all around. He gave a taciturn grunt and shook hands with Burkhalter. So did the others. As the Baldy gripped Alvers' palm, he knew that this was the man who intended to kill him.

He made no sign. "Glad you're here. Sit down and have a drink. What'll you have?"

"Whiskey," Vine grunted. His enormous hands smothered the glass. He grinned at the siphon, shook his head, and gulped

a quantity of whiskey that made Burkhalter's throat smart in sympathy.

Alvers, too, took whiskey; Mattoon drank gin, with lemon. "You got a smart lot of drinks here," he said, staring at the bar Burkhalter had swung out. "I can make out to spell some of the labels, but—what's that?" "Drambuie. Try it?"

"Sure," Mattoon said, and his red-haired throat worked. "Nice stuff. Better than the corn we cook up in the woods." "If you walked far, you'll be hungry," Burkhalter said. He pulled out the oval table, selected covered dishes from the conveyor belt, and let his guests help themselves. They fell

to without ceremony.

Alvers looked across the table. "You one of them Bal-dies?" he asked suddenly.

Burkhalter nodded. "Yes, I am. Why?" Mattoon said, "So you're one of 'em." He was frankly staring. "I never seen a Baldy right close up. Maybe I have at that, but with the wigs you can't tell, of course."

Burkhalter grinned as he repressed a familiar feeling of sick distaste. He had been stared at before, and for the same reason.

"Do I look like a freak, Mr. Mattoon?" "How long you been consul?" Mattoon asked. "Six weeks."

"O.K.," the big man said, and his voice was friendly enough, though the tone was harsh. "You oughta remember there ain't no Mistering with the Hedgehounds. I'm Cobb Mattoon. Cobb to my friends, Mattoon to the rest. Nope, you don't look like no freak. Do people figger you Baldies are all sports?"

"A good many of them," Burkhalter said. "One thing," Mattoon said, picking up a chop bone, "in the woods, we pay no heed to such things. If a guy's born funny, we don't mock him for that. No so long as he sticks to the tribe and plays square. We got no Baldies among us, but if we did, I kind of think they might get a better deal than they do here."

Vine grunted and poured more whiskey. Alvers' black eyes were fixed steadily on Burkhalter.

"You readin' my mind?" Mattoon demanded. Alvers drew in his breath sharply.

Without looking at him, Burkhalter said, "No. Baldies don't It isn't healthy."

"True enough. Minding your own business is a plenty good rule. I can see how you'd have to play it. Look. This is the first time we come down here, Alvers and Vine and me. You ain't seen us before. We heard rumors about this consulate-" He stumbled over the unfamiliar word. "Up to now, we traded with Selfridge sometimes, but we didn't have contact with townsfolk. You know why."

Burkhalter knew. The Hedgehounds had been outcasts, shunning the villages, and sometimes raiding them. They were outlaws.

"But now a new time's coming. We can't live in the towns; we don't want to. But there's room enough for everybody. We still don't see why they set up these con-consulates; still, we'll string along. We got a word."

Burkhalter knew about that, too. It was the Cody's word, whispered through the Hedgehound tribes-a word they would not disobey.

He said, "Some of the Hedgehound tribes ought to be wiped out. Not many. You kill them yourselves, whenever you find them-"

"Th' cannibals," Mattoon said. "Yeah. We kill them."

"But they're a minority. The main group of Hedgehounds have no quarrel with the townsfolk. And vice versa. We want to stop the raids."

"How do you figger on doin' that?"

"If a tribe has a bad winter, it needn't starve. We've methods of making foods. It's a cheap method. We can afford to let you have grub when you're hungry."

Vine slammed his whiskey glass down on the table and snarled something. Mattoon patted the air with a large palm.

"Easy, Umpire. He don't know... listen, Burkhalter. The Hedgehounds raid sometimes, sure. They hunt, and they fight for what they get. But they don't beg."

"I'm talking about barter," Burkhalter said. "Fair exchange. We can't set up force shields around every village. And we can't use Eggs on nomads. A lot of raids would be a nuisance, that's all. There haven't been many raids so far; they've been lessening every year. But why should there be any at all? Get rid of the motivation, and the effect's gone too."

Unconsciously he probed at Alvers' mind. There was a thought there, a sly crooked hungry thought, the avid alertness of a carnivore-and the concept of a hidden weapon.

Burkhalter jerked back. He didn't want to know. He had to wait for the Cody to move though the temptation to provoke an open battle with Alvers was dangerously strong. Yet that would only antagonize the other Hedgehounds; they couldn't read Vine's mind as Burkhalter could.

"Barter what?" Vine grunted.

Burkhalter had the answer ready. "Pelts. There's a demand for them. They're fashionable." He didn't mention that it was an artificially created fad. "Furs, for one thing. And-"

"We ain't Red Indians," Mattoon said. "Look what happened to them! There ain't nothing we need from townsfolk, except when we're starving. Then-well, maybe we can barter."

"If the Hedgehounds unified-"

Alvers grinned. "In the old days," he said in a high, thin voice, "the tribes that unified got dusted off with the Eggs. We ain't unifying, brother!"

"He speaks fair, though," Mattoon said. "It makes sense. It was our granddaddies who had a feud with the villages. We've shaken down pretty well. My tribe ain't gone hungry for seven winters now. We migrate, we go where the pickin's are good and we get along."

"My tribe don't raid," Vine growled. He poured more whiskey.

Mattoon and Alvers had taken only two drinks; Vine kept pouring it down, but his capacity seemed unlimited. Now Alvers said, "It seems on the level. One thing I don't like. This guy's a baldy."

Vine turned his enormous barrel of a torso and regarded Alvers steadily. "What you got against Baldies?" he demanded.

"We don't know nothing about' em. I heard stories-"

Vine said something rude. Mattoon laughed.

"You ain't polite, Kit Carson. Burkhalter's playin' host. Don't go throwing words around."

Alvers shrugged, glanced away, and stretched. He reached into his shirt to scratch himself-and suddenly the thought of murder hit Burkhalter like a stone from a slingshot. It took every ounce of his will power to remain motionless as Alvers' hand slid back into view, a pistol coming into sight with it.

There was time for the other Hedgehounds to see the weapon, but no time for them to interfere. The death-thought anticipated the bullet. A flare of blinding, crimson light blazed

through the room. Something, moving like an invisible whirlwind, flashed among them; then, as their eyes adjusted, they stood where they had leaped from their chairs, staring at the figure who confronted them.

He wore a tight-fitting suit of scarlet, with a wide black belt, and an expressionless mask of silver covered his face. A blue-black beard emerged from under it and rippled down his chest. Enormous muscular development showed beneath the skin-tight garments.

He tossed Alvers' pistol into the air and caught it. Then, with a deep, chuckling laugh, he gripped the weapon in both hands and broke the gun into a twisted jumble of warped metal.

"Break a truce, will you?" he said. "You little pipsqueak. What you need is the livin' daylights whaled outa you, Alvers."

He stepped forward and smashed the flat of his palm against Alvers' side. The sound of the blow rang through the room. Alvers was lifted into the air and slammed against the further wall. He screamed once, dropped into a huddle, and lay there motionless.

"Git up," the Cody said. "You ain't hurt. Mebbe a rib cracked, that's all. If'n I'd smacked your head, I'd have broke your neck clean. Git up!"

Alvers dragged himself upright, his face dead white and sweating. The other two Hedgehounds watched, impassive and alert.

"Deal with you later on. Mattoon. Vine. What you got to do with this?"

"Nuthin'," Mattoon said. "Nuthin', Cody. You know that."

The silver mask was impassive. "Lucky fer you I do. Now listen. What I say goes. Tell Alvers' tribe they'll haVe to find a new boss. That's all."

He stepped forward. His arms closed about Alvers, and the Hedgehound yelled in sudden panic. Then the red blaze flared out again. When it had

died, both figures were gone.

"Got any more whiskey, Burkhalter?" Vine said.

IV

The Cody was in telepathic communication with the Mute, Hobson. Like the other three Codys, this one wore the same modulated-frequency helmet as the Mutes; it was impossible for any Baldy or paranoid to tune in on that scrambled, camouflaged wave length.

It was two hours after sundown.

Alvers is dead, Hobson. Telepathy has no colloquialisms that can be expressed in language-symbols.

Necessary?

Yes. Absolute obedience to the Cody-a curiously mingled four-in-one concept-is vital. Nobody can be allowed to defy the Cody and get away with it.

Any repercussions?

None. Mattoon and Vine are agreeable. They got along •with Burkhalter. What's wrong with him, Hobson?

The moment the question was asked, the Cody knew the answer. Telepaths have no secrets but subconscious ones- and the Mute helmet can even delve a little into the secret mind.

In love with a paranoid? The Cody was shocked.

He doesn't know it. He mustn't realize it yet. He'd have to reorient; that would take time; we can't afford to have him in the side lines just now. Trouble's bound to pop.

What?

Fred Selfridge. He's drunk. He found out the Hedgehound chief visited Burkhalter today. He's afraid his trading racket is being cut from under him. I've told Burkhalter to stay out of sight.

I'll stay near here, then, in case I'm needed. I won't go home yet. Briefly Hobson caught sight of what home meant to the Cody; a secret valley in the Canadian wilderness, its whereabouts known only to wearers of the helmets, who could never betray it inadvertently. It was there that the technicians among the Baldies sent their specialized products-via the Mutes. Products which had managed to build up a fully equipped headquarters in the heart of the forest, a centralization, it was true, but one whose whereabouts were guarded very thoroughly from the danger of discovery by either friend or enemy. From that valley laboratory in the woods came the devices that made the Cody the legendary figure he was among the Hedgehounds-a Paul Bunyan who combined incredible physical prowess with pure magic. Only such a figure could have commanded the respect and obedience of the woods runners.

Is Burkhalter safely hidden, Hobson? Or can I-

He's hidden. There's a round robin on, but Selfridge can't trace him through that.

O.K. I'll wait.

The Cody broke off. Hobson sent his thought probing out,

across the dark miles, to a dozen other Mutes, scattered across the continent from Niagara to Salton. Each one of them was ready for the underground mobilization that might be necessary at any moment now.

It had taken ninety years for the storm to gather; its breaking would be cataclysmic.

Within the circle of the round robin was quiet, complete peace that only a Baldy can know. Burkhalter let his mind slip into place among the others, briefly touching and recognizing friends as he settled into that telepathic closed circuit. He caught the faintly troubled unrest from Duke Heath's thoughts; then the deep calm of rapport swallowed them both.

At first, on the outer fringes of the psychic pool, there were ripples and currents of mild disturbance, the casual distresses that are inevitable in any gregarious society, and especially among hypersensitive Baldies. But the purge of the ancient custom of the confessional quickly began to be effective. There can be no barriers between Baldies. The basic unit of the family is far more complete than among nontelepaths, and by extension, the entire Baldy group was bound together with ties no less strong because of their intangible subtlety.

Trust and friendship: these things were certain. There could be no distrust when the tariff wall of language was eliminated. The ancient loneliness of any highly specialized, intelligent organism was mitigated in the only possible way; by a kinship closer even than marriage, and transcending it.

Any minority group as long as it maintains its specialized integrity, is automatically handicapped. It is suspect. Only the Baldies, in all social history, had been able to mingle on equal terms with the majority group and still retain the close bond of kinship. Which was paradoxical, for the Baldies, perhaps, were the only ones who desired racial assimilation. They could afford to, for the telepathic mutation was dominant: the children of Baldy father and nontelepathic mother -or vice versa-are Baldies.

But the reassurance of the round robins was needed; they were a symbol of the passive battle the Baldies had been fighting for generations. In them the telepaths found complete unity. It did not, and never would, destroy the vital competitive instinct; rather, it encouraged it. There was give and take. And, too, it was religion of the purest kind.

In the beginning, with no senses that non-Baldies can quite

understand, you touched the minds of your friends, delicately, sensitively. There was a place for you, and you were welcomed. Slowly, as the peace spread, you approached the center, that quite indescribable position in

space time that was a synthesis of intelligent, vital minds. Only by analogy can that locus even be suggested.

It is half-sleep. It is like the moment during which consciousness returns sufficiently so that you know you are not awake, and can appreciate the complete calm relaxation of slumber. If you could retain consciousness while you slept- that might be it.

For there was no drugging. The sixth sense is tuned to its highest pitch, and it intermingles with and draws from the other senses. Each Baldy contributes. At first the troubles and disturbances, the emotional unbalances and problems, are cast into the pool, examined, and dissolved in the crystal water of the rapport. Then, cleansed and strengthened, the Baldies approach the center, where the minds blend into a single symphony. Nuances of color one member has appreciated, shadings of sound and light and feeling, each one is a grace note in orchestration. And each note is three-dimensional, for it carries with it the Baldy's personal, individual reaction to the stimulus.

Here a woman remembered the sensuous feel of soft velvet against her palm, with its corresponding mental impact. Here a man gave the crystal-sharp pleasure of solving a difficult mathematical equation, an intellectual counterpoint to the lower-keyed feeling of velvet. Step by step the rapport built up, until there seemed but a single mind, working in perfect cohesion, a harmony without false notes.

Then this single mind began building. It began to think. It was a psychic colloid, in effect, an intellectual giant given strength and sanity by very human emotions and senses and desires.

Then into that pellucid unity crashed a thought-message that for an instant made the minds cling together in a final desperate embrace in which fear and hope and friendliness intermingled. The round robin dissolved. Each Baldy waited now, remembering Hobson's thought that said:

The pogrom's started.

He hadn't broadcast the message directly. The mind of a Mute, wearing his helmet, cannot be read except by another Mute. It was Duke Heath, sitting with Hobson in the moonlit

grounds outside the hospital, who had taken the oral warning and conveyed it to the other Baldies. Now his thoughts continued to flash through Sequoia.

Come to the hospital. Avoid non-Baldies. If you're seen, you may be lynched.

In dozens of homes, eyes met in which the terror had leaped instantly to full flower. All over the world, in that moment, something electric sparked with unendurable tension from mind to sensitive mind. No non-Baldy noticed. But, with the speed of thought, the knowledge girdled the planet.

From the thousands of Baldies scattered through the villages, from helicopter and surface car, came a thought of reassurance. We are one, it

said. We are with you.

That-from the Baldies. From the paranoids, fewer in number, came a message of hatred and triumph. Kill the hairy men!

But no nontelepath outside Sequoia knew what was happening.

There was an old plastic house near the edge of town where Burkhalter had been hiding. He slipped out of a side door now into the Cool quiet of the night. Overhead, a full moon hung yellow. A fan of diffused light reached upward from Redwood Street in the distance, and dimmer paths in the air marked the other avenues. Burkhalter's muscles were rigid. He felt his throat tense with near-panic. Generations of anticipations had built up a violent phobia in every Baldy, and now that the day had come-

Barbaba Pell came dazzling into his thoughts, and as his mind recalled her, so her mind touched his, wild and fiery, gloating with a triumph his whole being drew back from, while against all judgment something seemed to force him to receive her message.

He's dead, Burkhalter, he's dead! I've killed Fred Selfridge! The word is "kill," but in the mind of the paranoid is not a word or a thought, but a reeking sensation of triumph, wet with blood, a screaming thought which the sane mind reels from.

You fool! Burkhalter shouted at her across the distant streets, his mind catching a little of her wildness so that he could not wholly control it. You crazy fool, did you start this?

He was starting out to get you. He was dangerous. His talk would have started the pogrom anyhow-people were beginning to think-

It's got to be stopped!

It will be! Her thought had a terrible confidence. We've made plans.

What happened?

Someone saw me kill Selfridge. It's the brother, Ralph, who touched things off-the old lynch law. Listen. Her thought was giddy with triumph.

He heard it then, the belling yell of the mob, far away, but growing louder. The sound of .Barbara Pell's mind was fuel to a flame. He caught terror from her, but a perverted terror that lusted after what it feared. The same fury of bloodthirst was in the crowd's yell and in the red flame which was Barbara Pell's mad mind. They were coming near her, nearer-

For a moment Burkhalter was a woman running down a dim street, stumbling, recovering, racing on with a lynch mob baying at her heels.

A man-a Baldy-dashed out into the path of the crowd. He tore off his wig and waved it at them. Then Ralph Selfridge, his thin young face dripping with sweat, shrieked in wordless hatred and turned the tide after this new quarry. The woman ran on into the darkness.

They caught the man. When a Baldy dies, there is a sudden gap in the

ether, a dead emptiness that no telepath will willingly touch with his mind. But before that blankness snapped into being, the Baldy's thought of agony blazed through Sequoia with stunning impact, and a thousand minds reeled for an instant before it.

Kill the hairy men! shrieked Barbara Pell's thoughts, ravenous and mad. This was what the furies were. When a woman's mind lets go, it drops into abysses of sheer savagery that a man's mind never plumbs. The woman from time immemorial has lived closer to the abyss than the male-has had to, for the defense of her brood. The primitive woman cannot afford scruples. Barbara Pell's madness now was the red, running madness of primal force. And it was a fiery thing that ignited something in every mind it touched. Burkhalter felt little flames take hold at the edges of his thoughts and the whole fabric that was his identity shivered and drew back. But he felt in the ether other minds, mad paranoid minds, reach out toward her and cast themselves ecstatically into the holocaust.

Kill them, kill-kill! raved her mind.

Everywhere? Burkhalter wondered, dizzy with the pull he

felt from that vortex of exultant hate. All over the world, tonight? Have the paranoids risen everywhere, or only in Sequoia?

And then he sensed suddenly the ultimate hatefulness of Barbara Pell. She answered the thought, and in the way she answered he recognized how fully evil the red-haired woman was. If she had lost herself utterly in this flaming intoxication of the mob he would still, he thought, have hated her, but he need not have despised her.

She answered quite coolly, with a part of her mind detached from the ravening fury that took its fire from the howling mob and tossed it like a torch for the other paranoids to ignite their hatred from.

She was an amazing and complex woman, Barbara Pell. She had a strange, inflammatory quality which no woman, perhaps, since Jeanne d'Arc had so fully exercised. But she did not give herself up wholly to the fire that had kindled within her at the thought and smell of blood. She was deliberately casting herself into that blood-bath, deliberately wallowing in the frenzy of her madness. And as she wallowed, she could still answer with a coolness more terrible than her ardor.

No, only in Sequoia, said the mind that an instant before had been a blind raving exhortation to murder. No human must live to tell about it, she said in thought-shapes that dripped cold venom more burning than the hot bloodlust in her broadcast thoughts. We hold Sequoia. We've taken over the airfields and the power station. We're armed. Sequoia is isolated from the rest of the world. The pogrom's broken loose here-only here. Like a cancer. It must be stopped here.

How?

How do you destroy any cancer? Venom bubbled in the thought.

Radium, Burkhalter thought. Radioactivity. The atomic bombs-

Dusting off? he wondered.

A burning coldness of affirmation answered him. No human must live to tell about it. Towns have been dusted off before-by other towns. Pinewood may get the blame this time -there's been rivalry between it and Sequoia.

But that's impossible. If the Sequoia teleaudios have gone dead-

We're sending out faked messages. Any copters coming in

will be stopped. But we've got to finish it off fast. If one human escapes- Her thoughts dissolved into inhuman, inarticulate yammering, caught up and echoed avidly by a chorus of other minds.

Burkhalter shut off the contact sharply. He was surprised, a little, to find that he had been moving toward the hospital all during the interchange, circling through the outskirts of Sequoia. Now he heard with his conscious mind the distant yelling that grew loud and faded again almost to silence, and then swelled once more. The mindless beast that ran the streets could be sensed tonight even by a nontelepath.

He moved silently through the dark for a while, sick and shaken as much by his contact with a paranoid mind as by the threat of what had happened and what might still come.

Jeanne d'Arc, he thought. She had it too, that power to inflame the mind. She, too, had heard-"voices?" Had she perhaps been an unwitting telepath born far before her time? But at least there had been sanity behind the power she exercised. With Barbara Pell-

As her image came into his mind again her thought touched him, urgent, repellently cool and controlled in the midst of all this holocaust she had deliberately stirred up. Evidently something had happened to upset their plans, for-

Burkhalter, she called voicelessly. Burkhalter, listen, We'll co-operate with you.

We hadn't intended to, but-where is the Mute, Hobson?

I don't know.

The cache of Eggs has been moved. We can't find the bombs. It'll take hours before another load of Eggs can be flown here from the nearest town. It's on the way. But every second we waste increases the danger of discovery. Find Hobson. He's the only mind we can't touch in Sequoia. We know no one else has hidden the bombs. Get Hobson to tell us where they are. Make him understand, Burkhalter. This isn't a matter affecting only us. If word of this gets out, every telepath in the world is menaced. The cancer must be cut out before it spreads.

Burkhalter felt murderous thought-currents moving toward him. He turned toward a dark house, drifted behind a bush, and waited there till the mob had poured past, their torches blazing. He felt sick and hopeless. What he had seen in the faces of the men was horrible. Had this hatred and fury existed for generations under the surface-this insane mob

violence that could burst out against Baldies with so little provocation?

Common sense told him that the provocation had been sufficient. When a telepath killed a nontelepath, it was not dueling-it was murder. The dice were loaded. And for weeks now psychological propaganda had been at work in Sequoia.

The non-Baldies were not simply killing an alien race. They were out to destroy the personal devil. They were convinced by now that the Baldies were potential world conquerors. As yet no one had suggested that the telepaths ate babies, but that was probably coming soon, Burkhalter thought bitterly.

Preview. Decentralization was helping the Baldies, because it made a temporary communication-embargo possible. The synapses that connected Sequoia to the rest of the world were blocked; they could not remain blocked forever.

He cut through a yard, hurdled a fence, and was among the pines. He felt an impulse to keep going, straight north, into the clean wilderness where this turmoil and-fury could be left behind. But, instead, he angled south toward the distant hospital. Luckily he would not have to cross the river; the bridges would undoubtedly be guarded.

There was a new sound, discordant and hysterical. The barking of dogs. Animals, as a rule, could not receive the telepathic thoughts of humans, but the storm of mental currents raging in Sequoia now had stepped up the frequency- or the power-to a far higher level. And the thoughts of thousands of telepaths, all over the world, were focused on the little village on the Pacific Slope.

Hark, hark! The dogs do bark!

The beggars are coming to town-

But there's another poem, he thought, trying to remember. Another one that fits even better. What is it-

The hopes and fears of all the years -

V

The mindless barking of the dogs was worst. It set the pitch of yapping, mad savagery that washed up around the hospital like the rising waves of a neap tide. And the patients were receptive too; wet packs and hydrotherapy, and, in a few cases, restraining jackets were necessary.

Hobson stared through the one-way window at the village far below. "They can't get in here," he said.

Heath, haggard and pale, but with a new light in his eyes, nodded at Burkhalter.

"You're one of the last to arrive. Seven of us were killed. One child. There are ten others still on their way. The rest- safe here."

"How safe?" Burkhalter asked. He drank the coffee Heath had provided.

"As safe as anywhere. This place was built so irresponsible patients couldn't get out. Those windows are unbreakable. It works both ways. The mob can't get in. Not easily, anyhow. We're fireproof, of course."

"What about the staff? The non-Baldies, I mean."

A gray-haired man seated at a nearby desk stopped marking a chart to smile wryly at Burkhalter. The consul recognized him: Dr. Wayland, chief psychiatrist.

Wayland said, "The medical profession has worked with Baldies for a long time, Harry. Especially the psychologists. If any non-Baldy can understand the telepathic viewpoint, we do. We're noncombatants."

"The hospital work has to go on," Heath said. "Even in the face of this. We did something rather unprecedented, though. We read the minds of every non-Baldy within these walls. Three men on the staff had a preconceived dislike of Baldies, and sympathized with the lynchings. We asked them to leave. There's no danger of Fifth Column work here now."

Hobson said slowly, "There was another man-Dr. Wilson. He went down to the village and tried to reason with the mob."

Heath said, "We got him back here. He's having plasma pumped into him now."

Burkhalter set down his cup. "All right. Hobson, you can read my mind. How about it?"

The Mute's round face was impassive. "We had our plans, too. Sure, I moved the Eggs. The paranoids won't find 'em now."

"More Eggs are being flown in. Sequoia's going to be dusted off. You can't stop that."

A buzzer rang; Dr. Wayland listened briefly to a transmitted voice picked up a few charts and went out. Burkhalter jerked his thumb toward the door.

"What about him? And the rest of the staff? They know, now."

Heath grimaced. "They know more than we wanted them to know. Until tonight, no nontelepath has even suspected the existence of the paranoid group. We can't expect Wayland to keep his mouth shut about this. The paranoids are a menace to non-Baldies. The trouble is, the average man won't differentiate between paranoids and Baldies. Are those people down there"-he glanced toward the window-"are they drawing the line?"

"It's a problem," Hobson admitted. "Pure logic tells us that no non-Baldy must survive to talk about this. But is that the answer?"

"I don't see any other way," Burkhalter said unhappily. He thought suddenly of Barbara Pell and the Mute gave him a sharp glance.

"How do you feel about it, Heath?"

The priest-medic walked to the desk and shuffled case histories. "You're the boss, Hobson. I don't know. I'm thinking about my patients. Here's Andy Pell. He's got Alzheimer's disease-early senile psychosis. He's screwed up. Can't remember things very well. A nice old guy. He spills food on his shirt, he talks my ear off, and he makes passes at the nurses. He'd be no loss to the world, I suppose. Why draw a line, then? If we're going in for killing, there can't be any exceptions. The non-Baldy staff here can't survive, either."

"That's the way you feel?"

Heath made a sharp, angry gesture. "No! It isn't the way I feel! Mass murder would mean canceling the work of ninety years, since the first Baldy was born. It'd mean putting us on the same level as the paranoids? Baldies don't kill."

"We kill paranoids."

"There's a difference. Paranoids are on equal terms with us. And ... oh, I don't know, Hobson. The motive would be the same-to save our race. But somehow one doesn't kill a non-Baldy."

"Even a lynch mob?"

"They can't help it," Heath said quietly. "It's probably casuistry to distinguish between paranoids and non-Baldies but there is a difference. It would mean a lot of difference to us. We're not killers."

Burkhalter's head drooped. The sense of unendurable fatigue was back again. He forced himself to meet Hobson's calm gaze.

"Do you know any other reason?" he asked.

"No," the Mute said. "I'm in communication, though. We're trying to figure out a way."

Heath said, "Six more got here safely. One was killed. Three are still on their way."

"The mob hasn't traced us to the hospital yet," Hobson said. "Let's see. The paranoids have infiltrated Sequoia in considerable strength, and they're well armed. They've got the airfields and the power station. They're sending out faked teleaudio messages so no suspicion will be aroused outside. They're playing a waiting game; as soon as another cargo of Eggs gets here, the paranoids will beat it out of town and erase Sequoia. And us, of course."

"Can't we kill the paranoids? You haven't any compunctions about eliminating them, have you, Duke?"

Heath shook his head and smiled; Hobson said, "That wouldn't help. The problem would still exist. Incidentally, we could intercept the copter flying Eggs here, but that would just mean postponement. A hundred other copters would load Eggs and head for Sequoia; some of them would be bound to get through. Even fifty cargoes of bombs would be too dangerous. You know how the Eggs work."

Burkhalter knew, all right. One Egg would be quite sufficient to blast Sequoia entirely from the map.

Heath said, "Justified murder doesn't bother me. But killing non-Baldies-if I had any part in that, the mark of Cain wouldn't be just a symbol. I'd have it on my forehead-or inside my head, rather. Where any Baldy could see it. If we could use propaganda on the mob-"

Burkhalter shook his head. "There's no time. And even if we did cool off the lynchers, that wouldn't stop word of this from getting around. Have you listened in on the catch-phrases, Duke?"

"The mob?"

"Yeah. They've built up a nice personal devil by now. We never made any secret of our round robins, and somebody had a bright idea. We're polygamists. Purely mental polygamists, but they're shouting that down in the village now."

"Well," Heath said, "I suppose they're right. The norm is arbitrary, isn't it-automatically set by the power-group? Baldies are variants from that norm."

"Norms change."

"Only in crises. It took the Blowup to bring about decentralization. Besides, what's the true standard of values? What's right for non-Baldies isn't always right for telepaths." "There's a basic standard of morals-" "Semantics." Heath shuffled his case histories again. "Somebody once said that insane asylums won't find their true function till ninety percent of the world is insane. Then the sane group can just retire to the sanitariums." He laughed harshly. "But you can't even find a basic standard in psychoses. There's a lot less schizophrenia since the Blowup; most d.p. cases come from cities. The more I work with psycho patients, the less I'm willing to accept any arbitrary standards as the real ones. This man"-he picked up a chart-"he's got a fairly familiar delusion. He contends that when he dies, the world will end. Well-maybe, in this one particular case it's true."

"You sound like a patient, yourself," Burkhalter said succinctly.

Hobson raised a hand. "Heath, I suggest you administer sedatives to the Baldies here. Including us. Don't you feel the tension?"

The three were silent for a moment, telepathetically listening. Presently Burkhalter was able to sort out individual chords in the discordant thought-melody that was focused on the hospital.

"The patients," he said. "Eh?"

Heath scowled and touched a button. "Fernald? Issue sedatives-" He gave a quick prescription, clicked off the communicator, and rose. "Too many psychotic patients are sensitive," he told Hobson. "We're liable to have a panic on our hands. Did you catch that depressive thought-" He formed a quick mental image. "I'd better give that man a shot. And I'd better check up on the violent cases, too." But he waited.

Hobson remained motionless, staring out the window. After a time he nodded.

"That's the last one. We're all here now, all of Us. Nobody's left in Sequoia but paranoids and non-Baldies."

Burkhalter moved his shoulders uneasily. "Thought of an answer yet?"

"Even if I had, I couldn't tell you, you know. The paranoids could read your mind."

True enough. Burkhalter thought of Barbara Pell, somewhere in the village-perhaps barricaded in the power sta-

tion, or at the airfield. Some confused, indefinable emotion moved within him. He caught Hobson's bright glance.

"There aren't any volunteers among the Baldies," the Mute said. "You didn't ask to be involved in this crisis. Neither did I, really. But the moment a Baldy's born, he automatically volunteers for dangerous duty, and stands ready for instant mobilization. It just happened that the crisis occurred in Sequoia."

"It would have happened somewhere. Sometime." .

"Right. Being a Mute isn't so easy, either. We're shut out. We can never know a complete round robin. We can communicate fully only with other Mutes. We can never resign." Not even to another Baldy could a Mute reveal the existence of the Helmet.

Burkhalter said, "Our mutation wasn't due for another thousand years, I guess. We jumped the gun."

"We didn't. But we're paying. The Eggs were the fruit of knowledge, in a way. If man hadn't used atomic power as he did, the telepathic mutations would have had their full period of gestation. They'd never have appeared till the planet was ready for them. Not exactly ready, perhaps," he qualified, "but we wouldn't have had quite this mess on our hands."

"I blame the paranoids," Burkhalter said. "And... in a way... myself."

"You're not to blame."

The Baldy grimaced. "I think I am, Hobson. Who precipitated this crisis?"

"Selfridge-" Hobson was watching.

"Barbara Pell," Burkhalter said. "She killed Fred Selfridge. Ever since I came to Sequoia, she's been riding me."

"So she killed Selfridge to annoy you? That doesn't make sense."

"It fitted in with the general paranoid plan, I suppose. But it was what she wanted, too. She couldn't touch me when I was consul. But where's the consulate now?"

Hobson's round face was very grave. A Baldy intern came in, offered

sedatives and water, and the two silently swallowed the barbiturates. Hobson went to the window and watched the flaring of torches from the village. His voice was muffled.

"They're coming up," he said. "Listen."

The distant shouting grew louder as they stood there in

silence. Nearer and louder. Burkhalter moved forward to Hobson's side. The town was a flaming riot of torches now, and a river of light poured up the curved road toward the hospital.

"Can they get in?" someone asked in a hushed voice.

Heath shrugged. "Sooner or later."

The intern said, with a touch of hysteria: "What can we do?"

Hobson said, "They're counting on the weight of numbers, of course. And they've got plenty of that. They aren't armed, I suppose, except for daggers-but then they don't need arms to do what they think they're going to do."

There was a dead silence in the room for a moment. Then Heath said in a thin voice, "What they think-?"

The Mute nodded toward the window. "Look."

There was a small rush toward the glass. Peering over one another's shoulders, the men in the room stared down the slope of the road, seeing the vanguard of the mob so near already that the separate torches were clearly distinguishable, and the foremost of the distorted, shouting faces. Ugly, blind with hatred and the intention to kill.

Hobson said in a detached voice, as if this imminent disaster were already in the past. "We've got the answer, you see -we know about this. But there's another problem I can't solve. Maybe it's the most important one of all." And he looked at the back of Burkhalter's head. Burkhalter was watching the road. Now he leaned forward suddenly and said,

"Look! There in the woods-what is it? Something moving-people? Listen-what is it?"

No one paid any attention beyond the first two or three words he spoke, for all of them saw it now. It happened very swiftly. One moment the mob was pouring unchecked up the road, the next a wave of shadowy forms had moved purposefully out of the trees in compact, disciplined order. And above the hoarse shouting of the mob a cry went terribly up, a cry that chilled the blood.

It was the shrill falsetto that had once been the Rebel Yell. Two hundred years ago it echoed over the bloody battlefields of the Civil War. It moved westward with the conquered rebels and became the cowboy yell. It moved and spread with westerners after the Blowup, the tall, wild men who could not endure the regimentation of the towns. Now it was the Hedgehound yell.

From the window the hospital watchers saw it all, enacted as if on a firelit stage below them.

Out of the shadows the men in buckskin came. Firelight flashed on the long blades they carried, on the heads of the arrows they held against the bent bows. Their wild, shrill, terrible yell rose and fell, drowning out the undisciplined screams of the mob.

The buckskin ranks closed in behind the mob, around it. The townsmen began to huddle together a little, until the long loosely organized mob had become a roughly compact circle with the woodsmen surrounding them. There were cries of, "Kill 'em! Get 'em all!" from the townsmen, and the disorderly shouts rose raggedly through the undulations of the Hedgehound yell, but you could tell after the first two or three minutes who had the upper hand.

Not that there was no fighting. The men at the front of the mob had to do something. They did-or tried to. It was little more than a scuffle as the buckskin forms closed in.

"They're only townsmen, you see," Hobson said quietly, like a lecturer explaining some movie scene from old newsreel files. "Did you ever think before how completely the profession of the fighting man has died out since the Blowup? The only organized fighting men left in the world are out there, now." He nodded toward the Hedgehound ranks, but nobody saw the motion. They were all watching with the incredulous eagerness of reprieved men as the Hedgehounds competently dealt with the mob which was so rapidly changing into a 'disorganized rabble now as the nameless, powerful, ugly spirit that had welded it into a mob died mysteriously away among them.

All it took was superior force, superior confidence-the threat of weapons in more accustomed hands. For four generations these had been townsmen whose ancestors never knew what war meant. For four generations the Hedgehounds had lived only because they knew unremitting warfare, against the forest and mankind.

Competently they went about rounding up the mob.

"It doesn't solve anything," Burkhalter said at last, reluctantly, turning from the window. Then he ceased to speak, and sent his mind out in rapid thoughts so that the nontelepaths might not hear. Don't we have to keep it all quiet? Do we still have to decide about-killing them all? We've saved our necks, sure-but what about the rest of the world?

Hobson smiled a grim, thin smile that looked odd on his plump face. He spoke aloud, to everyone in the room.

"Get ready," he said. "We're leaving the hospital. All of us. The non-Baldy staff, too."

Heath, sweating and haggard, caught his breath. "Wait a minute. I know you're the boss, but-I'm not leaving my patients!"

"We're taking them, too," Hobson said. Confidence was in his voice, but not

in his eyes. He was looking at Burkhalter. The last and most difficult problem was still to be met

The Cody's thought touched Hobson's mind. All ready.

You've got enough Hedgehounds?

Four tribes. They were all near the Fraser Run. The new consulate set-up had drawn 'em from the north. Curiosity.

Report to group.

Scattered across the continent, Mutes listened. We've cleaned out Sequoia. No deaths. A good many got pretty well beaten up, but they can all travel. (A thought of wry amusement.) Your townspeople ain't fighters.

Ready for the march?

Ready. They're all rounded up, men, women and children, in the north valley. Umpire Vine's in charge of that sector.

Start the march. About the paranoids, any trouble there?

No trouble. They haven't figured it all out yet. They're still in the town, sitting tight. We've got to move fast, though. If they try to get out of Sequoia, my men will kill. There was a brief pause. Then-The march has started.

Good. Use the blindfolds when necessary.

There are no stars underground, the Cody's thought said grimly.

No non-Baldy must die. Remember, this is a point of honor. Our solution may not be the best one, but--

None will die.

We're evacuating the hospital. Is Mattoon ready?

Ready. Evacuate.

Burkhalter rubbed a welt on his jaw. "What happened?" he asked thickly, staring around in the rustling darkness of the pines.

A shadow moved among the trees. "Getting the patients ready for transportation-remember? You were slugged. That violent case--"

"I remember." Burkhalter felt sheepish. "I should have

watched his mind closer. I couldn't. He wasn't thinking-" He shivered slightly. Then he sat up. "Where are we?"

"Quite a few miles north of Sequoia."

"My head feels funny." Burkhalter rearranged his wig. He rose, steadying himself against a tree, and blinked vaguely. After a moment he had reoriented. This must be Mount Nich-ols, the high peak that rose tall among

the mountains guarding Sequoia. Very far away, beyond intervening lower summits, he could see a distant glow of light that was the village.

But beneath him, three hundred feet down, a procession moved through a defile in the mountain wall. They emerged into the moonlight and went swiftly on and were lost in shadow.

There were stretcher-bearers, and motionless, prone figures being carried along; there were men who walked arm in arm; there were tall men in buckskin shirts and fur caps, bows slung across their shoulders, and they were helping, too. The silent procession moved on into the wilderness.

"The Sequoia Baldies," Hobson said. "And the non-Baldy staff-and the patients. We couldn't leave them."

"But-"

"It was the only possible answer for us, Burkhalter. Listen. For twenty years we've been preparing-not for this, but for the pogrom. Up in the woods, in a place only Mutes know about, there's a series of interlocking caves. It's a city now. A city without population. The Codys-there are four of them, really-have been using it as a laboratory and a hideout. There's material there for hydroponics, artificial sunlight, everything a culture needs. The caves aren't big enough to shelter all the Baldies, but they'll hold Sequoia's population."

Burkhalter stared. "The non-Baldies?"

"Yes. They'll be segregated, for a while, till they can face truth. They'll be prisoners; we can't get around that fact. It was a choice between killing them and holding them incommunicado. In the caves, they'll adapt. Sequoia was a tight, independent community. Family units won't be broken up. The same social pattern can be followed. Only-it'll be underground, in an artificial culture,"

"Can't the paranoids find them?"

"There are no stars underground. The paranoids may read the minds of the Sequoians, but you can't locate a mind by telepathic triangulation. Only Mutes know the location of the caves, and no paranoid can read a Mute's thoughts. They're on their way now to join us-enough Mutes to take

the Sequoians on the last lap. Not even the Hedgehounds will know where they're going."

"Then the secret will be safe among telepaths-except for the Hedgehounds. What if they talk?"

"They won't. Lots of reasons. For one, they have no communication to speak of with the outside world. For another, they're under an autocracy, really. The Codys know how to enforce their rules. Also, have you thought how the towns would react if they knew Hedgehounds had cleaned out a whole village? To save their own skins the Hedgehounds will keep their mouths shut. Oh, it may leak out. With so many individuals involved you never can be absolutely sure. But I think for an extemporaneous plan, it'll

work out well enough." Hobson paused and his mind brushed with the keenness of a quick glance against Burkhalter's mind. "What's the matter, Burk? Still worried about something?"

"The people, I suppose," Burkhalter admitted. "The humans. It doesn't seem exactly fair, you know. I'd hate to be cut off forever from all contact from the rest of the world. They-"

Hobson thought an explosive epithet. It was much more violent thought than voiced. He said, "Fair! Of course it isn't fair! You saw that mob coming up the road, Burk-did they have fairness in mind then? If anyone ever deserved punishment that mob does!" His voice grew milder. "One thing we tend to lose sight of, you see. We grow up with the idea of indulgence toward humans pounded into us to such an extent we almost forget they're responsible people, after all. A pogrom is the most indefensible concerted action a group can be guilty of. It's always an attack by a large majority on a defenseless minority. These people would have killed us all without a qualm, if they could. They're lucky we aren't as vicious as they were. They deserve a lot worse than they're getting, if you ask me. We didn't ask to be put in a spot like this. There's unfairness involved all around, but I think this solution is the best possible under the circumstances.

They watched the procession below moving through the moonlight. Presently Hobson went on. "Another angle turned up after we put this thing in motion, too. A mighty good one. By sheer accident we're going to have a wonderful laboratory experiment going on in human relations. It won't be a deadend community in the caves. Eventually, we think the Baldies

and the non-Baldies will intermarry there. The hospital staff are potential good-will ambassadors. It'll take careful handling, but I think with our facilities for mind reading and the propaganda we can put out adjusted by the readings, things will work out. It may be the basis for the ultimate solution of the whole Baldy-human problem.

"You see, this will be a microcosm of what the whole world ought to be-would have been if the Blowup hadn't brought us telepaths into being ahead of our normal mutation time. It will be a community of humans dominated by tele-paths, controlled by them benevolently. We'll learn how to regulate relations with humans, and there'll be no danger while we learn. It'll be trial and error without punishment for error. A little hard on the humans, perhaps, but no harder than it's been for generations on the Baldy minority all over the world. We might even hope that in a few years' time the experiment may go well enough that even if the news leaked out, the community members would elect to stay put. Well, we'll have to wait and see. It can't be solved any better way that we know of. There is no solution, except adjustment between the races. If every Baldy on earth committed voluntary suicide, there'd still be Baldies born. You can't stop it. The Blowup's responsible for that, not us. We ... wait a minute."

Hobson turned his head sharply, and in the rustling night silences of the forest, broken only by the subdued noises of the proposition far below, they listened for a sound not meant for ears.

Burkhalter heard nothing, but in a moment Hobson nodded.

"The town's about to go," he said.

Burkhalter frowned. "There's another loose end, isn't there? What if they blame Pinewood for dusting Sequoia off?"

"There won't be any proof either way. We've about decided to spread rumors indicating two or three other towns along with Pinewood, enough to confuse the issue. Maybe we'll say the explosion might have come from an accident in the Egg dump. That's happened, you know. Pinewood and the rest will just have to get along under a slight cloud for awhile. They'll have an eye kept on them, and if ,-they should show any more signs of aggression... but of course, nothing will happen. I think ... look, Burkhalter! There she goes!"

Far away below them the glow that was Sequoia lay like a lake of light in the mountains' cup. As they watched, it

changed. A nova flamed in incandescent splendor, whitening the men's faces and showing the pines in starkly black silhouette.

For an instant the soundless ether was full of a stunning, mindless cry that rocked the brain of every telepath within its range. Then there was that terrible void, that blankness of cessation into which no Baldy cares to look. This time it was a mighty vortex, for a great many telepathic minds perished together in that nova. It was a vortex that made the mind reel perilously near its great, sucking brink. Paranoid they may have been, but they were telepathic too, and their going shook every brain that could perceive the passing.

In Burkhalter's mind a reeling blindness struck. He thought, Barbara, Barbara....

It was an utterly unguarded cry. He made no effort to hush it from Hobson's perception.

Hobson said, as if he had not heard, "That's the finish. Two mutes in copters dropped the eggs. They're watching now. No survivors. Burkhalter-"

He waited. Slowly Burkhalter pulled himself out of that blind abyss into which the beautiful, terrible, deadly image of Barbara Pell whirled away toward oblivion. Slowly he brought the world back into focus around him. "Yes?"

"Look. The last of the Sequoians are going by. You and I aren't needed here any more, Burk."

There was significance in that statement. Burkhalter shook himself mentally and said with painful bewilderment, "I don't ... quite get it. Why did you bring me up here? Am I-" He hesitated. "I'm not going with the others?"

"You can't go with them," the Mute said quietly. There was a brief silence; a cool wind whispered through the pine needles. The pungent fragrance and freshness of the night washed around the two telepaths. "Think, Burkhalter," Hob-son said, "Think."

"I loved her," Burkhalter said. "I know that now." There was shock and

self-revulsion in his mind, but he was too stunned by the realization for much emotion to come through yet.

"You know what that means, Burkhalter? You're not a true Baldy. Not quite." He was silent for a moment. "You're a latent paranoid, Burk," Hobson said.

There was no sound or thought between them for a full minute. Then Burkhalter sat down suddenly on the pine needles that carpeted the forest floor.

"It isn't true," he said. The trees were reeling around him.

"It is true, Burk." Hobson's voice and mind were infinitely gentle. "Think. Would you-could you-have loved a paranoid, and such a paranoid as that, if you were a normal telepath?"

Dumbly Burkhalter shook his head. He knew it was true. Love between telepaths is a far more unerring thing than love between blind and groping humans. A telepath can make no mistake about the quality of the beloved's character. He could not if he wished. No normal Baldy could feel anything but utter revulsion toward the thing that had been Barbara Pell. No normal Baldy-

"You should have hated her. You did hate her. But there was something more than hate. It's a paranoid quality, Burk, to feel drawn toward what you despise. If you'd been normal, you'd have loved some normal telepathic woman, someone your equal. But you never did. You had to find a woman you could look down on. Someone you could build up your Cgo by despising. No paranoid can admit any other being is his equal. I'm sorry, Burk. I hate to say these things."

Hobson's voice was like a knife, merciless and merciful, excising diseased tissue. Burkhalter heard him, and trod down the latent hatred which the truth-and he knew the truth of it-brought out in his double mind.

"Your father's mind was warped too, Burk," Hobson went on. "He was born too receptive to paranoid indoctrination-"

"They tried their tricks on him when he was a kid," Burkhalter said hoarsely. "I remember that."

"We weren't sure at first about what ailed you. The symptoms didn't show till you took on the consulate. Then we began to build up a prognosis, of sorts. You didn't really want that job, Burkhalter. Not subconsciously. Those heavy fatigues were a defense. I caught that daydream, of yours today-not the first one you've had. Daydreams concerned with suicide-another symptom, and another means of escape. And Barbara Pell-that was the payoff. You couldn't let yourself know what your real feelings were, so you projected the opposite emotion-hatred. You believed she was persecuting you, and you let your hatred have full freedom. But it wasn't hatred, Burk."

"No. It wasn't hatred. She... she was horrible, Hobson! She was horrible!" "I know."

Burkhalter's mind boiled with violent emotions, too tangled to sort out. Hatred, intolerable grief, bright flashes of the paranoid world, memory of Barbara Pell's wild mind like a flame in the wind.

"If you're right, Hobson," he said with difficulty, "you've got to kill me. I know too much. If I'm really a latent paranoid some day I might betray-Us."

"Latent," Hobson said. "There's a world of difference-if you can be honest with yourself."

"I'm not safe if I live. I can feel-disease-back in my mind right now. I-hate you, Hobson. I hate you for showing me myself. Some day the hate may spread to all Mutes and all Baldies. How can I trust myself any more?"

"Touch your wig, Burk," Hobson said.

Bewildered, Burkhalter laid a shaking hand upon his head. He felt nothing unusual. He looked at Hobson in complete confusion.

"Take it off, Burk."

Burkhalter lifted off the wig. It came hard, the suction caps that held it in place giving way with reluctance. When it was off, Burkhalter was amazed to feel that there was still something on his head. He lifted his free hand and felt with unsteady fingers a fine cap of wires like silk, hugging his skull. He looked up hi the moonlight and met Hobson's eyes. He could see the fine wrinkles around them, and the look of kindness and compassion on the Mute's round face. For an instant he forgot even the mystery of the strange cap on his head. He cried voicelessly,

Help me, Hobson! Don't let me hate you!

Instantly into his mind came a firm, strong, compassionate locking of thoughts from many, many minds. It was a communion more intimate and of a different quality than anything he had ever felt before. And it was to the mind as the clasp of many supporting hands would be to the body when the body is weary and in infinite need of support.

You're one of us now, Burkhalter. You wear the Helmet. You are a Mute. No Paranoid can ever read your mind.

It was Hobson's thought that spoke to him, but behind it spoke the thoughts of many others, many trained minds from

hundreds of other Mutes, all speaking as if in a chorus that echoed and amplified all Hobson said.

But I ...I'm a latent-

The hundreds of minds blended into a cohesive unit, the psychic colloid of the round robin, but a different, more intense union, wrought into something new by the caps that filtered all their thoughts. The unit became a single mind, strong and sane and friendly, welcoming the newcomer. He did not find miraculous healing there-he found something better.

Truth. Honesty.

Now the warp in his mind, the paranoid quirk and its symptoms and illogic, became very clear. It was the highest kind of psychoanalysis, which only a Baldy can know.

He thought, It will take time. The cure will take-

Hobson was standing behind him. I'll be with you. Until you can stand alone. And even then-we'll all be with you. You are one of us. No Baldy is ever alone.