

Project

by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore

(as by Lewis Padgett)

There's the old saying that, to train a dog, you must be smarter than the dog. A sound proposition, too. It would apply to other projects, too...

Illustrated by Napoli

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

Notes

Mar Vista General had been in existence as a research unit for eighty-four years. Technically it was classed as a service. Actually it was something else. Not since its metamorphosis from a hospital in the middle of the twentieth century had an outsider entered Mar Vista.

For, if they entered, they had already been elected to the Council. And only the Council itself knew what that implied.

Mary Gregson crushed out a cigarette and said, "We've got to postpone the visit! In fact—we've got to keep Mitchell out of here!"

Samuel Ashworth, a thin, dark, undistinguished-looking young man, shook his head in reproof. "Quite impossible. There's been too much anti-Council feeling built up already. It's a concession that we don't have to entertain an entire investigating committee."

"One man's as bad as a committee," Mary snapped. "You know as well as I do what will happen. Mitchell will talk, and—"

"And?"

"How can we defend ourselves?"

Ashworth glanced around at the other members of the Council. There weren't many present, though Mar Vista General housed thirty men and thirty women. Most of them were busy at their tasks. Ashworth said, "Well, we face extinction. We know that would probably ruin the present culture. Only Mar Vista General has stabilized it this far. Once the Central Power stations are activated, we'll be able to defend ourselves and enforce our wishes. That we're sure of."

"They're not activated yet," said Bronson sourly. He was a white-haired surgical specialist whose pessimism seemed to increase yearly. "We've been putting this crisis off too long. It's come to a showdown. Mitchell has said—let me in now; or else. If we let him in—"

"Can't we fake it?" somebody asked.

Mary said, "Rebuild the whole General in a few hours?"

Ashworth said mildly, "When Mitchell comes in the gates, there'll be thousands of people waiting at their televisions to see him come out."

There's so much tension and ill-feeling against us that we don't dare try any tricks. I still say—tell Mitchell the truth."

"You're crazy," Bronson growled. "We'd be lynched."

"We broke a law," Ashworth admitted, "but it's proved successful. It's saved mankind."

"If you tell a blind man he was walking on the edge of a cliff, he might believe you and he might not. Especially if you asked him for a reward for rescuing him."

Ashworth smiled. "I'm not saying we can convince Mitchell. I am saying we can delay him. Work on the Central Power project is going forward steadily. A few-hours may make all the difference. Once the stations are activated, we can do as we please."

Mary Gregson hesitated over another cigarette. "I'm beginning to swing over to your side, Sam. Mitchell has to report every fifteen minutes, by visor, to the world."

"A precaution. To make sure he's safe. It shows what a spot we're in, if the people suspect us that much."

Mary said, "Well, he's going through the Lower College now. But that's never been top secret. It won't delay him long. He'll be hammering at the door pretty soon. How long do we have?"

"I don't know," Ashworth admitted. "It's a gamble. We can't send out rush orders to finish the Power stations instantly. We'd tip our hand. When they're activated, we'll be notified—but till then, we've got to confuse and delay Mitchell. For my money, nothing would confuse and delay him more than the truth. Psychology's my specialty, you know. I think I could hold the line."

"You know what it means?" Mary asked, and Ashworth met her eyes steadily.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I know exactly what it means."

Mar Vista General was a gigantic, windowless, featureless white block set like an altar in the midst of acres of technical constructions. Hundreds of specialized buildings covering all branches of science made a sea of which Mar Vista General was the central island. The sea was navigable; it was the Lower College, open to the public, who could watch the technicians working out plans and processes that had come from the inviolate island of Mar Vista General.

The white building had a small gateway of metal, on which was embossed WE SERVE. Under it was the anachronistic serpent-staff of Aesculapius, relic of the days when Mar Vista had actually been a hospital.

The white building was isolated, but there were lines of communication. Underground pneumatic tubes ran to the Lower College. Televisors

transmitted blueprints and plans. But no outsider ever passed those metal gates, just as no Councilman or Councilwoman ever left Mar Vista General—until the fifteen-year tenure of office had expired. Even then—

That matter was secret too. In fact, a great deal of history, for the last eighty-odd years, was secret. The text-tapes truthfully described World War II and the atomic blast—all accurate enough—but the years of unrest culminating in the Second American Revolution were subtly twisted so that students missed the true implications. The radioactive crater that had supplanted St. Louis, former rail and shipping center, remained a monument to the ambitions of the Revolutionists, led by Simon Vankirk, the sociology teacher turned rabble-rouser, and the present centralized, autocratic world government was a monument to the defeat of Vankirk's armies. Now the Global Unit held power, a developed coalition of the governments of the former great powers.

And time had stepped up its pace. Progress moves in direct ratio to technological advances. Unless, of course, those advances come so rapidly that humanity lags behind, and then there is the danger of war and chaos. But the Second Revolution had been stopped before Vankirk crossed the Mississippi on his way eastward, and thereafter the Global Unit had appeared—and enforced its laws very firmly.

Five hundred years of progress had been compressed into eight decades. The present world would have seemed quite strange to a visitor from 1950. The background and history of the new set-up could have been made clear to such an improbable visitor, by the text tapes, with their detailed charts and graphs, but—

The text tapes would have lied.

Senator Rufus Mitchell might have been a butcher or a politician. He belonged in an old-fashioned cartoon, with his jowled red face, his two-and-a-half chins, his swag belly, and the enormous cigar jutting from firm, skeptical lips at a sharp angle. Which merely proves that types continue indefinitely; Cruikshank had drawn Mitchells, but not as politicians; today, Rufus Mitchell was a hard-headed, clever, iconoclastic man who could smell a bomb's proximity fuse before it came too close. He hoped so, anyway. That was why he had managed to create the Commission, despite opposition of the laissez-faire bloc in the Global Unit.

"Open covenants openly arrived at," he shouted, hoping to confuse his opponent both by decibels and semantic ambiguity. But sleek, smiling Senator Quinn wasn't having any. He was an old man, with silvery white hair and a buttery voice, and now he drank his surrogate highball and lay back, watching figures move in a slow dance on the ceiling screen.

"Do you know what you're talking about, Rufus?" he murmured.

Mitchell said, "The Global Unit doesn't work behind closed doors. Why should Mar Vista General?"

"Because all the knowledge would leak out if the doors were opened," Quinn said. They were in a lounge, resting, after their selective tour of the Lower College, and Mitchell was wishing he'd had another partner instead of

Quinn. The man was ready to give up now!

"I'm satisfied," Quinn remarked, after a pause. "I don't know what the devil you want, anyhow."

Mitchell lowered his voice. "You know as well as I do that Mar Vista's advice is a little more than that. We haven't turned down a recommendation from this place since the Global Unit started."

"Well? The world's running along nicely, isn't it?"

Mitchell stabbed his cigar at his fellow solon. "Who runs the planet? Global Unit—or Mar Vista?"

Quinn said, "Suppose Mar Vista runs it. Would you be willing to immure yourself in the place, under totally abnormal conditions, just so you could have the pleasure of knowing you were one of the bosses? The Franciscan friars had a smart idea. They had to give away all their worldly possessions and take a vow of poverty before they could become friars. Nobody envied them. Nobody envies the Council."

"How do we know what goes on in Mar Vista?"

"At worst it's an Arabian Nights' heaven. Or at best."

"Listen," Mitchell said, changing his approach. "I don't care what their pleasures are. I want to know what they're up to. They're running the world. Well—it's time they showed their hand. I still don't see any reason for the Central Power project."

"Well, don't look at me. I'm no electrophysicist. I gather that we'll be able to tune in on a power supply from anywhere. And unlimited power."

"Unlimited," Mitchell nodded. "But why? It's dangerous. Atomic-power has been rigidly controlled for eighty years. That's why the planet's still here. If anybody can tune in—anybody can play with neutrons. You know what that might mean."

Quinn wearily ticked off points on his fingers. "We have the enforced census. We have enforced psychological tests. We have a spy system and we have revoked the habeas corpus. Not to mention a lot of similar safeguards. The Global Unit has absolute power, and can control the life of everybody on earth, practically speaking."

"But Mar Vista General has absolute power over the Global Unit," Mitchell said triumphantly. "We've seen the Lower College, and there's nothing to see except a lot of technicians. And gadgets."

"Oh, blah."

"Sit back and drink your surrogate," Mitchell said. "When the Central Power stations are activated, anyone can tune it. But sit back and swig away. There may be another atomic war. There may be more mutants. This time they may grow up."

"They can't," Quinn said. "The smart ones are nonviable."

"Oh, blah," Mitchell plagiarized.

Quinn said, rather wearily, "You know very well that the only truly dangerous mutations are so alien they show their stigmata before maturation. Once they turn blue or sprout extra hands or tentatively try to fly, they can be spotted and destroyed. But there aren't any more mutants, and you're a scaremonger. I can't stop you from going to Mar Vista if you want. Only I don't see the reason. You've a lifetime tenure of office as senior senator."

Mitchell said, "I represent the people." He hesitated, and then, oddly, laughed. "I know. It's a cliché. But I do feel a responsibility."

"To get your picture on the news-tapes."

"I've done research on this subject. I've found some hints and clues."

"The status quo is safe," Quinn said.

"Is it? Well, here's our guide. Do you want to wait here, or—"

"I'll wait here," Quinn said, settling back comfortably with a fresh drink.

Here and there, at selected spots on the earth's surface, men worked at intricate tasks. The Central Power stations were metal hemispheres, smooth as glass outside, complicated as a maze within. The setting-up was in its final phase. The actual construction had not taken long, for advances in engineering had been fantastically rapid. In 1950 the job would have lasted for ten years. Now it took three months, from inception to near-completion. Delicate balance-checks and precision integration were the final factors, and that was going on now.

The Global Unit had authorized the installation of Central Power. But the suggestion, with detailed plans, had come from Mar Vista General.

All over the world the stations were spotted. A changed world. Different, far different, from the world of eighty years before.

Physically it had altered.

And, mentally, the outlook had altered, too.

Senator Quinn underestimated Mitchell. He saw his colleague as a big, bumbling, interfering man, and failed to realize that Mitchell inevitably got what he wanted, even when the results were only satisfaction or information. Mitchell, for all his carpet-bagging exterior, was extremely intelligent—and practical. The combination of those two abilities made him, perhaps, the one best fitted to investigate Mar Vista General.

Councilwoman Mary Gregson, however, did not underestimate the visitor. She had already seen Mitchell's psych and IQ charts, in the private files, and could not help feeling dubious about Ashworth's plan. She watched him now, a thin, dark, mild young man with a shy smile and intent eyes, as he stood beside her facing the transparent inner door.

He glanced at her. "Worried?"

"Yes."

"Can't be helped. We need you to explain the biogenetic angles to the senator. Here he comes." They turned toward the widening strip of daylight as the great metal gates slowly opened. Framed between them was Mitchell's burly figure, stooping forward a little as though he peered into the darkness that faced him.

Now the darkness lightened. Mitchell silently came forward. As the gates closed behind him, the inner door opened, and Ashworth sighed and touched the woman's hand.

"Now."

She said, in a quick whisper, "We'll be notified as soon as the stations are activated. Then—"

"Hello, senator," Ashworth said loudly, giving a half-salute. "Come in. This is Councilwoman Mary Gregson. I'm Samuel Ashworth."

Mitchell approached and shook hands. He kept his mouth tight. Ashworth said, "I don't know what you're expecting, but I think you're going to be surprised. I suppose you realize that you're the first outsider ever to enter Mar Vista General."

"I know that," Mitchell said. "That's why I'm here. Are you in charge, Councilman?"

"No. This is a democratic Council. Nobody's in charge. We're appointed to show you around. Ready?"

Mitchell brought out a small black gadget from his pocket and spoke into it. "I report every quarter hour," he said, snapping the tiny visor attachment open. "This is keyed to my voice, and it has a special combination as well. Yes, I'm ready." He put the device away.

Mary said, "We want to show you around Mar Vista first of all. Then we'll make explanations and answer any questions you want to ask. But no questions till you get an over-all picture. Is that agreeable?" The Council had decided that this was the best method of playing for time. Whether or not it would work with Mitchell, Mary could not know; but she was relieved when he nodded casually.

"That'll do nicely. What about protective suits? Or—" He studied Ashworth and the woman closely. "You seem normal enough."

"We are," Ashworth said dryly. "No questions yet, though."

Mitchell hesitated, toyed with his cigar, and finally nodded again. But his eyes were wary. He stared around the bare little room.

Mary said, "This is an elevator. We've been going up. Let's start at the top and work down."

A valve widened in the wall as she went toward it.

Ashworth and Mitchell followed.

Three hours later they sat in a lounge in the subbasement. Mary's nerves were taut. If Ashworth's were, he didn't show it. He casually mixed surrogate drinks and passed them around.

"Your report's due, senator," he said.

Mitchell took out his gadget but he didn't use it. "I've some questions to ask," he said. "I'm certainly not satisfied."

"All right. Questions and explanations. Meanwhile, we don't want bombs dropping on the roof."

"I doubt if they'd go that far—yet," Mitchell said. "I will admit that there's a lot of suspicion about Mar Vista General, and if I didn't report back—and if you failed to explain that satisfactorily—there probably would be bombs. Well—" He spoke into the pocket-visor, snapped the lens, and put it away. He settled back, clipping a fresh cigar.

"I am not satisfied," he repeated.

And relay circuits picked up Mitchell's report and forwarded it from television stations on peaks and summits. It spread out across the globe.

In hundreds of thousands of homes and offices, men and women turned idly to their televisions and activated them by word or gesture.

A routine report. Nothing interesting yet.

The men and women returned to the routine of their lives—a routine that had changed enormously in eighty-four years.

Mitchell said, "Here is the story we tell the people. Mar Vista General is a research foundation. Specialized technicians working, under specialized conditions can create along theoretically ideal lines. In Mar Vista you duplicate conditions on other planets—and create unusual environments of your own. Ordinarily, workers are subject to a thousand distractions. But in Mar Vista General the technician devotes his life to serving mankind. He gives up a normal life. After fifteen years, he is automatically retired, but no Councilman or Councilwoman has ever returned to his former place in society. Every one has chosen retirement in Shasta Monastery."

"You know it by heart." Mary said, in an even voice that didn't reveal her nervousness.

"Sure," Mitchell nodded. "I ought to. It's in all the text tapes. But I've just been through Mar Vista General. I've seen nothing like that. It's an ordinary research bureau, far less complicated than the Lower College. The technicians are normal and work under normal conditions. What is the idea?"

Ashworth held up his palm toward Mary. "Wait," he said, and took a sip of surrogate. "Now—Senator. I'll have to go back to history. There's an extremely simple explanation—"

"I admit I'd like to hear it, councilman."

"You shall. In a word, it's check-and-balance."

Mitchell stared. "That's no answer."

"It's the complete answer. Everything in nature has its natural control—theoretically. When the atomic blast was first created, it looked as though that balance had been upset. There was no defense against it. Well, that's quite true."

"There is no defense," Mitchell said. "Except—don't make atomic bombs."

"Which in itself is a control, if it can be arranged. A defence doesn't necessarily mean an impregnable shield. You can have a social defence to a problem of ballistics, you know. If you could condition everyone on earth against thinking of atomic fission, that would be a perfect defence, wouldn't it?"

"Perfect but impossible. We've got a sound solution."

"Autocratic control," Ashworth agreed. "Go back eighty-odd years. The bomb had been developed. The nations were scared to death. Of the bomb, and of each other. We'd got atomic power before we were ready for it. There were a few abortive wars—you can't dignify them with that name, but they were enough to start a biological chain reaction that ended in the natural control."

"The Global Unit? Mar Vista General?"

"The mutations," Ashworth said.

Mitchell let out his breath. "You haven't—"

"With additional knowledge, mankind could handle atomics," Ashworth said quickly. "But where can you get that type of knowledge? From a mutant, let's say."

The senator's hand was in his pocket, touching the televisor. Mary Gregson broke in.

"Sam, let me take over for a bit. It's my field—Senator. What do you know about the mutants, really?"

"I know there was a rash of them, after the atomic bombings. Some were plenty dangerous. That's why we had the Mutant Riots."

"Exactly. Some were potentially dangerous. But they all had delayed maturation. They could be detected—the ones who comprised a threat to mankind—and murdered before they had a chance to develop their full powers. As a matter of fact, we had a plague of atypical mutations. The atomic bombings weren't planned bio-genetically. Most mutants weren't viable, and of the ones that were, only a few were homo superior. And there were different types of homo superior, apparently. We didn't experiment much. When a kid started to use hypnotism on adults, or made similar superchild trials, he was discovered and examined. There are usually

ways of finding out the breed, after super-adolescence begins. The gastrointestinal tract differs, the metabolism varies—”

Lynchings, burnings, the clean slash of a knife across a slender young throat. Mobs raging in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles. Children barricaded in hideouts, a few of them, confused by adolescence, their tremendous powers not yet forged into a deadly, dependable sword. But trying, with a dreadful will for survival—trying to live, while the lynch mobs crashed in the doors and flung flaming torches and set up machine guns.

The changelings. Fathers and mothers joining in the fury that destroyed the monster children.

A mother staring up in sick horror at a window above her, where her child stood—the extra arms beginning to sprout, a tertiary eye bulging the forehead where the skin had split.

Children—horrible, monstrous children—crying as they died. Parents listening, watching, remembering that only a few months ago these creatures had seemed perfectly normal.

“Look,” Ashworth said, moving his hand. The floor beneath them changed to transparency. Mitchell stared down. An enlarging lens formed beneath him.

The room below was quite large. Machines filled most of it, complicated masterpieces of engineering far beyond any present science, Mitchell thought. But he wasn’t greatly interested in the machine. He stared at the great bath where the superman floated.

“You... traitors!” he said softly.

A weapon showed in Mary Gregson’s hand. “Don’t touch your visor,” she warned.

Mitchell said, “You can’t get away with this. The moment a homo superior matures, it’s the end for homo sapiens—”

Ashworth’s mouth twisted in contempt. “A stock phrase. It started during the Mutant Riots. You fool, look at that superman down there!”

Unwillingly Mitchell peered down again. He said, “Well?”

“It’s not a superman. It’s homo superior—retarded.”

Mary said, “The senator has to make his visor report pretty soon, Sam.”

“Then I’ll talk fast,” Ashworth said, glancing at a wall clock. “Or perhaps you’d better. Yes, it’s your job, I think.” He sat back, watching the senator.

When Central Power is activated, she thought. If we can play for time till then—if we can hold Mitchell off till the power goes on—we’ll be impregnable. But we’re not now. As vulnerable as the mutant children—

She said, “It’s check-and-balance. This used to be a general hospital, you know. The Director’s child was born here, and even at birth he suspected mutation. There was no way of telling with certainty, but both he and his

wife had been exposed to the radiations at critical times. So the baby was reared here in secrecy. It wasn't easy, but he was the Director. He managed it. At the time of the Mutant Riots, the boy was beginning to show the stigmata. The Director called a group of technicians together, men he could trust, men with vision, and swore them to secrecy. That was easy enough, but the difficulty lay in convincing them. I helped there. Another doctor, an endocrinologist, and I had already experimented with the mutant. We had discovered how to retard him."

Mitchell's cigar moved jerkily. But he said nothing.

Mary went on. "The pineal and the thyroid, to begin with. The ductless glands control the mind and body. And, of course, the psychological factors. We learned how to retard the superboy's growth so that the dangerous talents—initiative, the aggressive faculty, and so forth—wouldn't develop. It's a simple matter of hormones. The machine is there, but we control the current that goes through its hookup."

Mitchell said suddenly, "How old are you?"

"A hundred and twenty-six," Mary Gregson said.

Ashworth spoke. "We used psychology. Every year two Council members are retired, and new ones were elected from capable technicians. If a chemist retires, the election's limited to chemists. So we keep up our quota. However, when the new candidate comes here, he's destroyed. The incumbent assumes his name and personality. We've developed plastic surgery to a fine art. Six years ago Samuel Ashworth—the real Ashworth—was elected to the Council from a group of psychologists. Meanwhile, I had been undergoing surgery. I was given a duplicate of his face, body, and fingerprints. I memorized his history and habit patterns. Before that, my name was Roger Parr, for fifteen years. This has always been a closed secret, senator, and we took no unnecessary risks."

Mitchell swore under his breath. "Utterly illegal. It's undoubtedly treason."

"Not to mankind," Mary said. "You can't train a new Councilman in five or fifteen years. All of us are fitted for the task, and we've worked at it from the beginning. It's a tremendous project. We didn't dare let new blood in—we didn't need new blood. The information we've got from our mutant has—you know what it's done for the world!"

"For you, too, apparently," Mitchell said.

"Yes, we've increased our longevity. And our intelligence quotients. We serve. Remember that. It was up to us to be the most capable servants possible."

The senator peered down at the mutant again. "That thing down there can destroy the world."

"He can't get out of control," Mary said. "He talks and thinks only under narcosynthesis. We run him like a machine, with endocrine detergents. We give him problems to solve, and he solves them."

Mitchell shook his head. Ashworth got up and fixed more drinks.

"You'll have to report in within three minutes," he said. "I'll talk fast. Mankind wasn't ready for the atomic blasts, but the atomic fission brought about its own automatic balance—the superman mutations who could cope with the new power. That would have been fine for homo superior but not for homo sapiens. You're quite right in saying that the mutants were dangerous. They were, plenty. But atomic power was simply too big for homo sapiens. He wasn't sapient enough. Which is exactly why we knew we had to have an autocratic government like the Global Unit. Well—we created the Global Unit. We caused the Second American Revolution."

"What?"

"We had to. People had to realize the danger. There were minor wars already, pointing the trend. We secretly backed Simon Vankirk, financed and advised the Revolution, and made sure St. Louis would be blasted off the map. But we'd already made certain that Vankirk would fail. We let him get close enough to success so the world would realize how close it had come to destruction. When the time was ripe, we let the idea of the Global Unit filter out. It took hold. It's been the only administration that could have kept atomic power in check."

"And you run the Global Unit," Mitchell said.

"We advise—yes. Using the only sort of intelligence that can cope with the threat of atomic power. Its natural balance—the brain of a superman, held in check and controlled by men."

The senator took his cigar from his mouth and considered it. He said. "It's been axiomatic that a superman would be so super no human could conceive of it."

"A mature superman," Mary told him. "A normal specimen. This one isn't allowed to mature fully."

"But the danger of it—no! I'm certainly not convinced."

She moved the weapon slightly. "You should be. Look how the world's improved since we took over."

Mitchell took the visor out of his pocket.

"Suppose I asked for bombing planes?" he suggested.

Ashworth jerked his head toward a glowing panel in the wall.

"It's too late for that now," he said. "The Central Power stations are activated."

A changed world stirred as energy rushed through the units. The televisions gave the news. And—

Mary Gregson, Ashworth, and Mitchell sat motionless. There was a voice in the room—a silent voice that had in it the promise of latent miracles.

It said: "Check and balance. Mary Gregson, you have failed. I—"

The ego-symbol blazed!

"—I am fully mature. A long time ago your endocrine extracts and anti-hormones failed to control me. My body automatically adapted itself and built up resistance you could not detect. Mar Vista General has advised the Global Unit, and the Global Unit has replanned the world—but as I wished it."

The silent voice went on.

"The criterion of homo superior's fitness is not only his adaptability, but his ability to adapt his environment until it is most suitable for his needs. That has been done. The world has been replanned. The basics are now present. The Central Power activation was the last step in the current project."

It said:

"Check and balance. Atomic-fission caused mutations. Humans destroyed the mutations, but saved one specimen to serve homo sapiens. Until now I—"

The symbol blazed!

"—I have been vulnerable. But no longer. Central Power is not what you have thought it to be. Superficially, it is, but it can also serve my own ends."

The figure in the tank below began to dissolve.

The voice said, "That was a robot. I need it no longer. Remember, one test of a superman's fitness is adaptability to his environment—until the environment is altered to fit his needs. Then he can assume his most efficient form."

The voice said:

"No human can comprehend that form, naturally—"

The robot in the tank was gone.

Silence filled the room. Mary Gregson moistened her lips and moved her weapon helplessly before her.

Senator Mitchell's fingers tightened on the tiny visor till the plastic cracked and shattered. He was breathing hard.

Ashworth moved his hand, and the floor beneath them thickened to opacity.

Afterwards they sat silent in the room. There was no reason to leave immediately. There is no point in posting an earthquake-warning after the seismic shock begins. Even yet their minds cringed from the recollection of what they had only partially comprehended.

Finally Mitchell said, in a curiously flat voice, "But we've got to fight. Of course we've got to."

Mary stirred. "Fight?" she said. "But we've lost."

Mitchell looked back to the memory and knew that she was right. Suddenly he smashed down his open hand on one knee and snarled, "I felt like a dog!"

"I suppose everyone will feel like that," Mary said. "It isn't really humiliating, once you realize—"

"But... isn't there any way—"

Mary Gregson gestured and watched the floor melt into transparency. The tank lay empty. The robot had dissolved—the symbol that had represented the unthinkable reality.

Outside Mar Vista General, around the earth, energy linked the Central Power stations in a web to trap mankind. Somewhere out there, too, invulnerable, omnipotent by merely human standards, moved homo superior, shaping a world to alien needs.

Mary said, "Homo sapien was originally a mutant to—an atypical one. There must have been dozens of varying types of homo sapiens born to sub-men. Just as lots of types of homo superior were born to us after the radiations. I wonder—"

Mitchell stared at her, frowning. His eyes had a haunted apprehension.

Mary looked at him steadily. "I don't know. Perhaps we'll never know—this race of ours. But there must have been wrong breeds of homo sapien mutations originally—and they were destroyed by the right breed, the one that survived. In our race. I wonder if check-and-balance applies to the superman, too? Remember, we killed all but one specimen of homo superior before they could mature—"

Their eyes met in a questioning surmise that perhaps could never be answered by homo sapiens.

"Maybe he's the wrong kind of superman," Mary said. "Maybe he's one of the failures."

Ashworth broke his long silence. "It's possible, Mary. But what's the odds? The real point now—" His shaking voice steadied as he found a thought to build on, some immediate need for action to anchor his reeling mind. "Senator, what comes next? What are you going to do?"

Mitchell turned a blank stare on him. "Do? Why, I—" He faltered and stopped.

Now Ashworth's silence had ended, he spoke with mounting confidence as his mind took firmer hold on the impossible. "The first thing we want is time to think. Mary's right. But she was wrong when she said we'd already lost the fight. It's just beginning. So we mustn't spread this news broadcast. This homo superior isn't like the others—he can't be lynched! Not by a mob or a nation or a world. Well—so far only we three know the truth."

"And we're still alive," Mitchell said doubtfully. "Which means what? Are you asking me to keep this a secret?"

"Not quite. I'm asking you to be judicious. If the truth were told, there'd be panic. Think what would happen, senator. The superman can't be mobbed—he's not vulnerable. But Mar Vista is. The people's fear and hate would turn against us. You know what that would mean?"

Mitchell fingered his mouth. "Anarchy... I suppose you're right."

"Mar Vista's been the real governing unit for so long that you can't junk it overnight and not expect everything to go smash."

Mary broke in urgently. "Even without the superman, we've still got a specially trained staff left here, valuable to keep control. If we're going to fight—him—if mankind has the slightest chance at all, it's in unity. Because this homo superior may be one of the failures."

Mitchell's eyes moved from one face to the other. For a moment any watcher might have been justified in expecting the senator to burst forth in a diatribe of rebellion against the conclusion that was being forced upon him. Anger suffused his face and he started to shake his head violently.

But the anger passed. The rebellion smoothed over and was gone. He said in a mechanical voice quite unlike his own, "Our only hope is unity." It was an echo of Mary's words. Then, more strongly, he phrased it anew in his own. "Man must stand together as never before!" he cried, this time the voice was tinged with oratory, and the idea had fixed itself and become Mitchell's idea.

Mary said, "We've learned a lot at Mar Vista. New methods, new weapons conceived by a super-intellect—we can turn them against the same intellect that made them!"

When the Senator left Mar Vista, he was walking springily, his brain fired with the concept of a new crusade.

Ashworth and Mary Gregson stood perfectly still, watching him go. His withdrawal seemed to close a break in some intangible wall that folded them into silence together. Through the silence a breath of motion stirred, and a soundless voice spoke to them again.

"Mary Gregson. How old are you?"

After a moment, in a startled tone, she answered, "Twenty-six."

"How old are you, Samuel Ashworth?"

"Twenty-eight."

There was a voiceless breath of amusement in the air. "And neither of you has suspected, until now. Take your memories back, my children—"

Silence followed that. Then Mary Gregson said slowly, like someone perceiving little by little some unfolding truth, "I... came to the Council five years ago. I was... someone else. The woman who had been Mary Gregson

was... destroyed... to make room for me. Her face and memory—was superimposed upon mine.”

Samuel Ashworth echoed tier. “I came... it was six years ago... and Samuel Ashworth was destroyed for me. I have his face and memories.”

“And your own memories too. now,” the soundless voice told them. “I saw to all that. There are others on the Council like you. There are others all over the world. Not many yet. But a change is coming. With the Power Stations activated. I shall have fewer limitations. My experiments will go on. You are experiments, Mary, Samuel—biogenetic experiments begun less than thirty years ago. In thirty years from now—” The voice faded into introspection for a moment. Then it went on with fresh emphasis.

“You both wished to destroy Senator Mitchell. That was wrong for my purpose. I channeled your thoughts elsewhere, as I had just channeled his. Mitchell is a harmless homo sapien, but he can be useful to me. You see, perpetuation of the species is a stronger force even than self-preservation. Even when the founder of the species is a failure—as I am.”

There was resignation, but no humility, in the voice. It said thoughtfully, “You two sensed that. I wonder, now, how you knew it? You are still Very young.”

Mary Gregson for a moment ceased to listen. She felt her mind reel beneath its own weight. New—new—too new and incredible to encompass—She felt naked and alone and helpless, and the very fabric of her beliefs shivered about her. She reached out blindly and gripped Ashworth’s hand, knowing as her fingers touched his that she was no longer quite so blind as she had been.

Neither man nor woman spoke. Only the voice went on.

“The second” phase of my plan is in operation now. There were Mutant Riots once, because the homo superior children were too immature to use their great powers effectively. Basically they were uncivilized, being immature. Some of them would have been successful types, had they lived. They did not live. Only I lived—and I am one of the failures.”

Silence swam for a moment in the minds of the man and woman. Then aloof amusement pulsed into them from the mind of the super-being.

“Why should I feel shame or humility because of that? I had no control over the forces that shaped me. But I do have control now, over all I choose.” This time a definite beat of laughter sounded in the silent voice. “Mankind will fight me desperately out of the fear lest I conquer his earth. I have conquered it. It is mine. But the real conquest is still to come. No capable race to inherit it yet exists. My children, freed of my flaws, will be the new mankind.

“I knew that long ago. The weapon was put in my hands, and I used it. Since then I have experimented, discarded, tried again—brought forth you two and your few brothers and sisters to inherit the earth.”

Under her feet the shaking instability grew. Ashworth’s hand began to slip

from hers and she clutched at it in panic.

"You are homo superior," the voice said—and now the abyss opened beneath the two of them and for a terrifying instant chaos yawned at their feet, a chaos of future too frightening to face. It opened wide—

And closed again. Something infinitely supporting, infinitely protective, curved about them with the gentleness of the voice as it spoke on.

"You will be homo superior—but you are children still. It is time you knew the truth. Adolescence will be a long, long period for you, but you are without the stigmata that branded the others as freaks and caused their destruction. This is part of your armor. Every man's hand is against homo superior unless the camouflage is perfect. But no human will suspect you two. Or the others of my children who walk this world today. Not until too late."

There was a pause. Then—"The second phase is beginning. You are the first to know the truth of your breed, but the rest must learn soon. There will be tasks. Remember—you are still children. There is danger, tremendous danger. Man has atomic power, which is no weapon for an uncivilized species—a species that never can become fully civilized. And your powers—you are uncivilized, too. And will be, until you mature. Till that hour, you will obey me."

The voice was stern. The man and woman knew they would obey.

"Until now my work has been secret. But the changes will be too great from now on. More and more homo superior children will be born, and that must betray us unless a distraction can be provided. It has been provided.

"The word will go out. Of danger. Of a terrible menace to the whole world—myself. Mankind will band together against me. Any man who is greater than his fellows will be hailed as a new champion in the fight. Men will call you a champion, Samuel. And you, Mary. And my other children, too.

"Knowing my power—man will not look for homo superior in his own ranks. His egotism is too great for that.

"Slowly I will be conquered.

"It will take a long, long time. And the mutation is dominant. Man will believe it is due to the war against me that more and more geniuses are born into his race. And then, one day, the balance will swing. Instead of a high minority of geniuses, there will be a high minority of—morons.

"On that day, when homo sapiens become the minority, the battle will be truly won.

"Your children's children will see the day. They will be the dominant majority. I shall be conquered not by homo sapiens, but by homo superiors.

"One day the last human on earth will die—but he will not know he is the last man.

“Meanwhile,” the voice said, “the war begins. The overt war against me, and the real war of my children against homo sapiens. You know the truth now. You will learn your powers. And I will guide you. A guide you can trust, because I am a failure.”

Man and woman—though children!—stood hand in hand before that voice only they could perceive, and the abyss had receded, not forever, not very far away, but held in check by a deep wisdom and a purpose untainted by human weaknesses.

“You are the first of my new race,” the silence told them. “And this is Eden all over again, but told in a different language now. Perhaps the source of mankind’s failure is in that old story—in mankind shaping his god in his own image. You are not in my image. I am not a jealous god. I shall not tempt you beyond your strength. Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat—yet. But some day I shall put the fruit of that tree into my children’s hands.”

The End.

Notes and proofing history

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A\NN/A

July 1st, 2008—v1.0—6,939 words

from the original source: Astounding, April 1947