

Time Trap

by Charles L. Harness

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The Great Ones themselves never agreed whether the events constituting Troy's cry for help had a beginning. But the warning signal did have an end. The Great Ones saw to that. Those of the Great Ones who claim a beginning for the story date it with the expulsion of the evil Sathanas from the Place of Suns, when he fled, horribly wounded, spiraling evasively inward, through sterechronia without number, until, exhausted, he sank and lay hidden in the crystallizing magma of a tiny new planet at the galactic rim.

* * *

General Blade sometimes felt that leading a resistance movement was far exceeding his debt to decent society and that one day soon he would allow his peaceful nature to override his indignant pursuit of justice. Killing a man, even a very bad man, without a trial, went against his grain. He sighed and rapped on the table.

"As a result of Blogshak's misappropriation of funds voted to fight the epidemic," he announced, "The death toll this morning reached over one hundred thousand. Does the Assassination Subcommittee have a recommendation?"

A thin-lipped man rose from the gathering. "The Provinarch ignored our warning," he said rapidly. "This subcommittee, as you all know, some days ago set an arbitrary limit of one hundred thousand deaths. Therefore this subcommittee now recommends that its plan for killing the Provinarch be adopted at once. Tonight is very favorable for our plan, which, incidentally, requires a married couple. We have thoroughly catasynthesized the four bodyguards who will be with him on this shift and have provided irresistible scent and sensory stimuli for the woman. The probability for its success insofar as assassination is concerned is about seventy-eight per cent; the probability of escape of our killers is sixty-two percent. We regard these probabilities as favorable. The Legal Subcommittee will take it from there."

Another man arose. "We have retained Mr. Poole, who is with us tonight." He nodded gravely to a withered little man beside him. "Although Mr. Poole has been a member of the bar but a short time, and although his pre-legal life-- some seventy years of it-- remains a mystery which he does not explain, our catasynthesis laboratory indicates that his legal knowledge is profound. More important, his persuasive powers, tested with a trial group of twelve professional evaluators, sort of a rehearsal for a possible trial, border on hypnosis. He has also suggested an excellent method of disposing of the corpse to render identification difficult. According to Mr. Poole, if the assassins are caught, the probability of escaping the devitalizing chamber is fifty-three percent."

"Mr. Chairman!"

General Blade turned toward the new speaker, who stood quietly several rows away. The man seemed to reflect a gray inconspicuousness, relieved only by a gorgeous rosebud in his lapel. Gray suit, gray eyes, graying temples. On closer examination, one detected an edge of flashing blue in the grayness. The eyes no longer seemed softly unobtrusive, but icy, and the firm mouth and jutting chin seemed polished steel. General Blade had observed this phenomenon dozens of times, but he never tired of it.

"You have the floor, Major Troy," he said.

"I, and perhaps other League officers, would like to know more about Mr. Poole," came the quiet, faintly metallic voice. "He is not a member of the League, and yet Legal and Assassination welcome him in their councils. I think we should be provided some assurance that he has no associations with the Provinarch's administration. One traitor could sell the lives of all of us."

The Legal spokesman arose again. "Major Troy's objections are in some degree merited. We don't know who Mr. Poole is. His mind is absolutely impenetrable to telepathic probes. His fingerprint and eye vein patterns are a little obscure. Our attempts at identification"-- he laughed sheepishly-- "always key out to yourself, Major. An obvious impossibility. So far as the world is concerned, Mr. Poole is an old man who might have been born yesterday! All we know of him is his willingness to co-operate with us to the best of his ability-- which, I can assure you, is tremendous. The catasynthesizer has established his sympathetic attitude beyond doubt. Don't forget, too, that he could be charged as a principal in this assassination and devitalized himself. On the whole, he is our man. If our killers are caught, we must use him."

Troy turned and studied the little lawyer with narrowing eyes; Poole's face seemed oddly familiar. The old man returned the gaze sardonically, with a faint suggestion of a smile.

"Time is growing short, Major," urged the Assassination chairman. "The Poole matter has already received the attention of qualified League investigators. It is not a proper matter for discussion at this time. If you are satisfied with the arrangements, will you and Mrs. Troy please assemble the childless married couples on your list? The men can draw lots from the fish bowl on the side table. The red ball decides." he eyed Troy expectantly.

Still standing, Troy looked down at the woman in the adjacent seat. Her lips were half-parted, her black eyes somber pools as she looked up at her husband.

"Well, Ann?" he telepathed.

Her eyes seemed to look through him and far beyond. "He will make you draw the red ball, Jon," she murmured, trancelike. "Then he will die, and I will die. But Jon Troy will never die. Never die. Never die. Nev-- "

"Wake up, Ann!" Troy shook her by the shoulder. To the puzzled faces about them, he explained quickly, "My wife is something of a seeress." He 'pathed again: "Who is *he*?"

Ann Troy brushed the black hair from her brow slowly. "It's all confused. *He* is someone in this room-- " She started to get up.

"Sit down, dear," said Troy gently. "If I'm to draw the red ball, I may as well cut this short." He slid past her into the aisle, strode to the side table, and thrust his hand into the hold in the box sitting there.

Every eye was on him.

His hand hit the invisible fish bowl with its dozen-odd plastic balls. Inside the bowl, he touched the little spheres at random while he studied the people in the room. All old friends, except-- Poole. That tantalizing face. Poole was now staring like the rest, except that beads of sweat were forming on his forehead.

Troy swirled the balls around the bowl; the muffled clatter was audible throughout the room. He felt his fingers close on one. His hands were perspiring freely. With an effort he forced himself to drop it. He chose another, and looked at Poole. The latter was frowning. Troy could not bring his hand out of the bowl. His right arm seemed partially paralyzed. He dropped the ball and rolled the mass around again. Poole was now smiling. Troy hesitated a moment, then picked a ball from the center of the bowl. It felt slightly moist. He pulled it out, looked at it grimly, and held it up for all to see.

* * *

"Just 'path that!" whispered the jail warden reverently to the night custodian.

"You know I can't telepath," said the latter grumpily. "What are they saying?"

"Not a word all night. They seem to be taking a symposium of the best piano concertos since maybe the twentieth century. Was Chopin twentieth or twenty-first? Anyhow, they're up to the twenty-third

now, with Darnoval. Troy reproduces the orchestra and his wife does the piano. you'd think she had fifty years to live instead of five minutes."

"Both seem nice people," ruminated the custodian. "If they hadn't killed the Provinarch, maybe they'd have become famous 'pathic musicians. She had a lousy lawyer. She could have got off with ten years sleep if he'd half tried." He pushed some papers across the desk. "I've had the chamber checked. Want to look over the readings?"

The warden scanned them rapidly. "Potential difference, eight million; drain rate, ninety vital units/minute; estimated period of consciousness, thirty seconds; estimated durance to nonrecovery point, four minutes; estimated durance to legal death, five minutes." He initialed the front sheet. "That's fine. When I was younger they called it the 'vitality drain chamber.' Drain rate was only two v.u./min. Took an hour to drain them to unconsciousness. Pretty hard on the condemned people. Well, I'd better go officiate."

When Jon and Ann Troy finished the Darnoval concerto they were silent for a few moments, exchanging simply a flow of wordless, unfathomable perceptions between their cells. Troy was unable to disguise a steady beat of gloom. "We'll have to go along with Poole's plan," he 'pathed, "though I confess I don't know what his idea is. Take your capsule now."

His mind registered the motor impulses of her medulla as she removed the pill from its concealment under her armpit and swallowed it. Troy then perceived her awareness of her cell door opening, of grim men and women about her. Motion down corridors. Then the room. A clanging of doors. A titanic effort to hold their fading contact. One last despairing communion, loving, tender.

Then nothing.

He was still sitting with his face buried in his hands, when the guards came to take him to his own trial that morning.

* * *

"This murder," announced the People's advocate to the twelve evaluators, "This crime of taking the life of our beloved Provinarch Blogshak, this heinous deed-- is the most horrible thing that has happened in Niork in my lifetime. The creature charged with this crime"-- he pointed an accusing finger at the prisoner's box-- "Jon Troy has been psyched and has been adjudged integrated at a preliminary hearing. Even his attorney"-- here bowing ironically to a beady-eyed little man at counsels' table-- "waived the defense of nonintegration."

Poole continued to regard the Peoples' advocate with bitter weariness, as though he had gone through this a thousand times and knew every word that each of them was going to say. The prisoner seemed oblivious to the advocate, the twelve evaluators, the judge, and the crowded courtroom. Troy's mind was blanked out. The dozen or so educated telepaths in the room could detect only a deep beat of sadness.

"I shall prove," continued the inexorable advocate, "that this monster engaged our late Provinarch in conversation in a downtown bar, surreptitiously placed a lethal dose of *skon* in the Provinarch's glass, and that Troy and his wife-- who, incidentally, paid the extreme penalty herself early this-- "

"Objection!" cried Poole, springing to his feet. "The defendant, not his wife, is now on trial."

"Sustained," declared the judge. "The advocate may not imply to the evaluators that the possible guilt of the present defendant is any way determined by the proven guilt of any past defendant. The evaluators must ignore that implication. Proceed, advocate."

"Thank you, Your Honor." He turned again to the evaluators' box and scanned them with a critical eye. "I shall prove that the prisoner and the late Mrs. Troy, after poisoning Provinarch Blogshak, carried his corpse into their sedan, and that they proceeded then to a deserted area on the outskirts of the city. Unknown to them they were pursued by four of the mayor's bodyguards, who, alas, had been lured aside at the bar by Mrs. Troy. Psychometric determinations taken by the police laboratory will be offered to prove it was the prisoner's intention to dismember the corpse and burn it to hinder the work of the police in tracing the crime to him. He had got only as far as severing the head when the guards' ship swooped up and hovered overhead. He tried to run back to his own ship, where his wife was waiting, but the

guards blanketed the area with a low-voltage stun."

The advocate paused. He was not getting the reaction in the evaluators he deserved, but he knew the fault was not his. He was puzzled; he would have to conclude quickly.

"Gentlemen," he continued gravely, "for this terrible thing, the Province demands the life of Jon Troy. The monster must enter the chamber tonight." He bowed to the judge and returned to counsels' table.

The judge acknowledged the retirement and turned to Poole. "Does the defense wish to make an opening statement?"

"The defense reiterates its plea of 'not guilty' and makes no other statement," grated the old man.

There was a buzz around the advocates' end of the table. An alert defense with a weak case always opened to the evaluators. Who was this Poole? What did he have? Had they missed a point? the prosecution was committed now. They'd have to start with their witnesses.

The advocate arose. "The prosecution offers as witness Mr. Fonstle."

"Mr. Fonstle!" called the clerk.

A burly, resentful-looking man blundered his way from the benches and walked up to the witness box and was sworn in.

Poole was on his feet. "May it please the court!" he croaked.

The judge eyed him in surprise. "Have you an objection, Mr. Poole?"

"No objection, Your Honor," rasped the little man, without expression. "I would only like to say that the testimony of this witness, the bartender in the Shawn Hotel, is probably offered by my opponent to prove facts which the defense readily admits, namely, that the witness observed Mrs. Troy entice the four bodyguards of the deceased to another part of the room, that the present defendant surreptitiously placed a powder in the wine of the deceased, that the deceased drank the wine and collapsed, and was carried out of the room by the defendant, followed by his wife." He bowed to the judge and sat down.

The judge was nonplussed. "Mr. Poole, do you understand that you are responsible for the defense of this prisoner, and that he is charged with a capital offense?"

"That is my understanding, Your Honor."

"Then if prosecution is agreeable, and wishes to elicit no further evidence from the witness, he will be excused."

The advocate looked puzzled, but called the next witness, Dr. Warkon, of the Provincial Police Laboratory. Again Poole was on his feet. This time the whole court eyed him expectantly. Even Troy stared at him in fascination.

"May it please the court," came the now-familiar monotone, "the witness called by the opposition probably expects to testify that the deceased's finger prints were found on the wineglass in question, that traces of deceased's saliva were identified in the liquid content of the glass, and that a certain quantity of *skon* was found in the wine remaining in the glass."

"And one other point, Mr. Poole," added the Peoples' advocate. "Dr. Warkon was going to testify that death from *skon* poisoning normally occurs within thirty seconds, owing to syncope. Does the defense concede that?"

"Yes."

"The witness is then excused," ordered the judge.

The prisoner straightened up. Troy studied his attorney curiously. The mysterious Poole with the tantalizing face, the man so highly recommended by the League, had let Ann go to her death with the merest shadow of a defense. And now he seemed even to state the prosecution's case rather than defend the prisoner.

Nowhere in the courtroom did Troy see a League member. But then, it would be folly for General Blade to attempt his rescue. That would attract unwelcome attention to the League.

He had been abandoned, and was on his own. Many League officers had been killed by Blogshak's men, but rarely in the devitalizing chamber. It was a point of honor to die weapon in hand. His first step would be to seize a blaster from one of the guards, use the judge as a shield, and try to escape through the judge's chambers. He would wait until he was put on the stand. It shouldn't be long, considering how Poole was cutting corners.

The advocate was conferring with his assistants. "What's Poole up to?" one of them asked. "If he is going on this far, why not get him to admit all the facts constituting a prima facie case: malice, intent to kill, and all that?"

The advocate's eyes gleamed. "I think I know what he's up to now," he exulted. "I believe he's forgotten an elementary theorem of criminal law. He's going to admit everything, then demand we produce Blogshak's corpse. He must know it was stolen from the bodyguards when their ship landed at the port. No corpse, no murder, he'll say. But you don't need a corpse to prove murder. We'll hang him with his own rope!" He arose and addressed the judge.

"May it please the court, the prosecution would like to ask if the defense will admit certain other facts which I stand ready to prove."

The judge frowned. "The prisoner pleaded not guilty. Therefore, the court will not permit any admission of the defense to the effect that the prisoner did kill the deceased, unless he wants to change his plea." He looked inquiringly at Poole.

"I understand, Your Honor," said Poole. "May I hear what facts the learned prosecutor wishes me to accede to?"

For a moment the prosecutor studied his enigmatic antagonist like a master swordsman.

"First, the prisoner administered a lethal dose of *skon* to the deceased with malice aforethought, and with intent to kill. Do you concede that?"

"Yes."

"And that the deceased collapsed within a few seconds and was carried from the room by the defendant and his wife?"

"We agree to that."

"And that the prisoner carried the body to the city outskirts and there decapitated it?"

"I have already admitted that."

The twelve evaluators, a selected group of trained experts in the estimation of probabilities, followed this unusual procedure silently.

"Then Your Honor, the prosecution rests." The advocate felt dizzy, out of his depth. He felt he had done all that was necessary to condemn the prisoner. Yet Poole seemed absolutely confident, almost bored.

"Do you have any witnesses, Mr. Poole?" queried the judge.

"I will ask the loan of Dr. Warkon, if the Peoples' advocate will be so kind," replied the little man.

"I'm willing." The advocate was beginning to look harassed. Dr. Warkon was sworn in.

"Dr. Warkon, did not the psychometer show that the prisoner intended to kill Blogshak in the tavern and decapitate him at the edge of the city?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was, in fact, the deceased dead when he was carried from the hotel?"

"He had enough *skon* in him to have killed forty people."

"Please answer the question."

"Well, I don't know. I presume he was dead. As an expert, looking at all the evidence, I should say he was dead. If he didn't die in the room, he was certainly dead a few seconds later."

"Did you feel his pulse at any time, or make any examination to determine the time of death?"

"Well, no."

Now, thought the advocate, comes the *no corpse, no murder*. If he tries that, I've got him.

But Poole was not to be pushed.

"Would you say the deceased was dead when the prisoner's ship reached the city limits?"

"Absolutely!"

"When you, as police investigator, examined the scene of the decapitation, what did you find?"

"The place where the corpse had lain was easily identified. Depressions in the sand marked the back, head, arms, and legs. The knife was lying where the prisoner dropped it. Marks of landing gear of the prisoner's ship were about forty feet away. Lots of blood, of course."

"Where was the blood?"

"About four feet away from the head, straight out."

Poole let the statement sink in, then:

"Dr. Warkon, as a doctor of medicine, do you realize the significance of what you have just said?"

The witness gazed at his inquisitor as though hypnotized. "Four feet... jugular spurt--" he muttered to no one. He stared in wonder, first at the withered, masklike face before him, then at the advocate, then at the judge. "Your Honor, the deceased's heart was still beating when the prisoner first applied the knife. The poison didn't kill him!"

An excited buzz resounded through the courtroom.

Poole turned to the judge. "Your Honor, I move for a summary judgment of acquittal."

The advocate sprang to his feet, wordless.

"Mr. Poole," remonstrated the judge, "your behavior this morning has been extraordinary, to say the least. On the bare fact that the prisoner killed with a knife instead of with poison, as the evidence at first indicated, you ask summary acquittal. The court will require an explanation."

"Your Honor"-- there was a ghost of a smile flitting about the prim, tired mouth-- "to be guilty of a crime, a man must intend to commit a crime. There must be a *mens rea*, as the classic expression goes. The act and the intent must coincide. Here they did not. Jon Troy intended to kill the Provinarch in the bar of the Shawn Hotel. He have gave him poison, but Blogshak didn't die of it. Certainly up to the time the knife was thrust into Blogshak's throat, Troy may have been guilty of assault and kidnapping, but not murder. If there was any murder, it must have been at the instant he decapitated the deceased. Yet what was his intent on the city outskirts? He wanted to mutilate a corpse. His intent was not to murder, but to mutilate. We have the act, but not the intent-- no *mens rea*. Therefore the act was not murder, but simply mutilation of a corpse-- a crime punishable by fine or imprisonment, but not death."

Troy's mind was whirling. This incredible, dusty little man had freed him.

"But Troy's a murderer!" shouted the advocate, his face white. "Sophisms can't restore a life!"

"The court does not recognize the advocate!" said the judge harshly. "Cut those remarks from the record," he directed the scanning clerk. "This court is guided by the principles of common law descended from ancient England. The learned counsel for the defense has stated those principles correctly. Homicide is not murder if there is no intent to kill. And mere intent to kill is not murder if the poison doesn't take effect. This is strange, an unusual case, and it is revolting for me to do what I have to do. I acquit the prisoner."

"Your Honor!" cried the advocate. Receiving recognition, he proceeded. This... this felon should not escape completely. He should not be permitted to make a travesty of the law. His own counsel admits he has broken the statutes on kidnapping, assault, and mutilation. The evaluators can at least return a verdict of guilty on those counts."

"I am just as sorry as you are," replied the judge, "but I don't find those counts in the indictment. You should have included them."

"If you release him, Your Honor, I'll re-arrest him, and frame a new indictment."

"This court will not act on it. It is contrary to the Constitution of this Province for a person to be prosecuted twice on the same charge or on a charge which should have been included in the original indictment. The Peoples' advocate is estopped from taking further action on this case. This is the final ruling of this court." He took a drink of water, wrapped his robes about him, and strode through the rear of the courtroom to his chambers.

Troy and Poole, the saved and the savior, eyed one another with the same speculative look of their first meeting.

Pole opened the door of the 'copter parked outside the Judiciary Building and motioned for Troy to enter. Troy froze in the act of climbing in.

A man inside the cab, with a face like a claw, was pointing a blaster at his chest.

The man was Blogshak!

Two men recognizable as the Provinarch's bodyguards suddenly materialized behind Troy.

"Don't give us any trouble, Major," murmured Poole easily. "Better get in."

* * *

The moment Troy was pushed into the subterranean suite he sensed Ann was alive-- drugged insensate still, but alive, and near. This knowledge suppressed momentarily Blogshak's incredible existence and Poole's betrayal. Concealing his elation, he turned to Poole.

"I should like to see my wife."

Poole motioned silently to one of the guards, who pulled back sliding doors. Beyond a glass panel, which was actually a transparent wall of a tile droom, Ann lay on a high white metal bed. A nurse was on the far side of the bed, exchanging glances with Poole. At some unseen signal from him the nurse swabbed Ann's left arm and thrust a syringe into it.

A shadow crossed Troy's face. "What is the nurse doing?"

"In a moment Mrs. Troy will awaken. Whether she stays awake depends on you."

"On me? What do you mean?"

"Major, what you are about to learn can best be demonstrated rather than described. Sharg, the rabbit!"

The beetle-browed man opened a large enamel pan on the table. A white rabbit eased its way out, wrinkling its nose gingerly. Sharg lifted a cleaver from the table. There was a flash of metal, a spurt of blood, and the rabbit's head fell to the floor. Sharg picked it up by the ears and held it up expectantly. The eyes were glazed almost shut. The rabbit's body lay limp in the pan. At a word from Poole, Sharg carefully replaced the severed head, pressing it gently to the bloody neck stub. Within seconds the nose twitched, the eyes blinked, and the ears perked up. The animal shook itself vigorously, scratched once or twice at the bloody ring around its neck, and began nibbling at a head of lettuce in the pan.

Troy's mind was racing. The facts were falling in line. All at once everything made sense. With knowledge came utmost wariness. The next move was up to Poole, who was examining with keen eyes the effect of his demonstration on Troy.

"Major, I don't know how much you have surmised, but at least you cannot help realizing that life, even highly organized vertebrate life is resistant to death in your presence."

Troy folded his arms but volunteered nothing. He was finally getting a glimpse of the vast and secret power supporting the Provinarch's tyranny, long suspected by the League but never verified.

"You could not be expected to discover this marvelous property in yourself except by the wildest chance," continued Poole. "as a matter of fact, our staff discovered it only when Blogshak and his hysterical guards reported to us, after your little escapade. But we have been on the lookout for your type for years. Several mutants with this characteristic have been predicted by our probability geneticists for this century, but you are the first known to us-- really perhaps the only one in existence. One is all we need.

"As a second and final test of your power, we decided to try the effect of your aura on a person in the devitalizing chamber. For that reason we permitted Mrs. Troy to be condemned, when we could easily have prevented it. As you now know, your power sustained your wife's life against a strong drain of potential. At my instruction she drugged herself in her cell simply to satisfy the doctor who checked her pulse and reflexes afterwards. When the staff-- my employers-- examined her here, they were convinced that you had the mutation they were looking for, and we put the finishing touches on our plans to save you from the chamber."

Granting I have some strange biotic influence, thought Troy, still something's wrong. He says his bunch became interested in me *after* my attempt on Blogshak. *But Poole was at the assassination meeting!* What is his independent interest?

Poole studied him curiously. "I doubt that you realize what tremendous efforts have been made to insure your presence here. For the past two weeks the staff has hired several thousand persons to undermine the critical faculties of the four possible judges and nine hundred evaluators who might have heard your case. Judge Gallon, for example, was not in an analytical mood this morning because we saw to it that he won the Province Chess Championship with his Inner Gambit-- a prize he has sought for thirty years. But if he had fooled us and given your case to the evaluators, we were fairly certain of a

favorable decision. you noticed how they were not concentrating on the advocate's opening statement? They couldn't; they were too full of the incredible good fortune they had encountered the previous week. Sommers had been promoted to a full professorship at the Provincial University. Gunnard's obviously faulty thesis on space strains had been accepted by the Steric Quarterly-- after we bought the magazine. But why go on? Still, if the improbable had occurred, and you had been declared guilty of the evaluators, we would simply have spirited you away from the courtroom. With a few unavoidable exceptions, every spectator in the room was a trained staff agent ready to use his weapons-- though in the presence of your aura, I doubt they could have hurt anyone.

"Troy, the staff had to get you here, but we preferred to do it quietly. Now, why are you here? I'll tell you. Your aura, we think, will keep-- " Poole hesitated. "Your aura will keep... It... from dying during an approaching crisis in its life stream."

"It? What is this 'it'? And what makes you so sure I'll stay?"

"The staff has not authorized me to tell you more concerning the nature of the entity you are to protect. Suffice to say that It is a living, sentient being. And I think you'll stay, because the hypo just given Mrs. Troy was pure *skon*."

Troy had already surmised as much. The move was perfect. If he stayed near her, Ann, though steeped in the deadliest known poison, would not die. But why had they been so sure he would not stay willingly, without Ann as hostage? He 'pathed the thought to Poole, who curtly refused to answer.

"Now, Major, I'm going to turn this wing of the City Building over to you. For your information, your aura is effective for a certain distance within the building, but just how far I'm not going to tell you. However, you are not permitted to leave your apartment at all. The staff has demoted the Provinarch, and he's now the corporal of your bodyguard. He would be exceedingly embarrassed if you succeeded in leaving. Meals will be brought to you regularly. The cinematic and micro library is well stocked on your favorite subjects. Special concessions may even be made as to things you want in town. But you can never touch your wife again. That pane of glass will always be between you. A psychic receptor tuned to your personality integration is fixed within Mrs. Troy's room. If you break the glass panel, or in any other way attempt to enter the room, the receptor will automatically actuate a bomb mechanism imbedded beneath Mrs. Troy's cerebellum. She would be blown to little bits-- each of them alive as long as you were around. It grieves us to be crude, but the situation requires some such safeguard."

"When will my wife recover consciousness?"

"Within an hour or so. But what's your hurry? You'll be here longer than you think."

The little lawyer seemed lost in thought for a moment. Then he signaled Blogshak and the guards, and the four left. Blogshak favored Troy with a venomous scowl as he closed and locked the door.

There was complete and utter silence. Even the rabbit sat quietly on the table, blinking its eyes at Troy.

Left alone, the man surveyed the room, his perceptions palpating every square foot rapidly but carefully. He found nothing unusual. He debated whether to explore the wing further or to wait until Ann awakened. He decided on the latter course. The nurse had left. They were together, with just a sheet of glass between. He explored Ann's room mentally, found nothing.

Then he walked to the center table and picked up the rabbit. There was the merest suggestion of a cicatrix encircling the neck.

Wonderful, but frightful, thought Troy. Who, what, am I?

He put the rabbit back in the box, pulled a comfortable armchair against the wall opposite the glass panel, where he had a clear view of Ann's room, and began a methodical attempt to rationalize the events of the day.

He was jolted from his reverie by an urgent 'pathic call from Ann. After a flurry of tender perceptions, each unlocked his mind to the other.

Poole had planted an incredible message in Ann's ESP lobe.

"Jon," she warned, "it's coded to the Dar-- ... I mean, it's coded to the notes and frequencies of our last concerto, in the death house. You'll have to synchronize. I'll start."

How did Poole know we were familiar with the concerto? thought Troy.

"Think on this carefully, Jon Troy, and guard it well," urged Poole's message. "I cannot risk my

identity, but I am your friend. It-- the Outcast-- has shaped the destinies of vertebrate life on Earth for millions of years, for two purposes. One is a peculiar kind of food. The other is... you. You have been brought here to preserve an evil life. But I urge you, develop your latent powers and destroy that life!

"Jon Troy, the evil this entity has wreaked upon the Earth, entirely through his human agents thus far, is incalculable. It will grow even worse. You thought a sub-electronic virus caused the hundred thousand deaths which launched you on your assassination junket. Not so! The monster in the earth directly beneath you simply drained them of vital force, in their homes, on the street, in theater, anywhere and everywhere. Your puny League has been fighting the Outcast for a generation without the faintest conception of the real enemy. If you have any love for humanity, search Blogshak's mind today. The staff physicians will be in this wing of the building today, too. Probe them. This evening, if I am still alive, I shall explain more, in person, free from Blogshak's crew."

* * *

"You have been wondering about the nature of the being whose life you are protecting," said Poole in a low voice, as he looked about the room. "As you learned when you searched the minds of the physicians this morning, he is nothing human. I believe him to have been wounded in a battle with his own kind, and that he has lain in his present pit for millions of years, possibly since pre-Cambrian times. He probably has extraordinary powers even in his weakened state, but to my knowledge he has never used them."

"Why not?" asked Troy.

"He must be afraid of attracting the unwelcome attention of those who look for him. But he has maintained his life somehow. The waste products of his organic metabolism are fed into our sewers daily. He has a group of physicians and physicists-- a curious mixture!-- who keep in repair his three-dimensional neural cortex and run a huge administrative organization designed for his protection."

"Seems harmless enough, so far," said Troy.

"He's harmless except for one venomous habit. I thought I told you about it in the message I left with Ann. You must have verified it if you probed Blogshak thoroughly."

"But I couldn't understand such near cannibalism in so advanced-- "

"Certainly not cannibalism! Do we think of ourselves as cannibals when we eat steaks? Still, that's my main objection to him. His vitality must be maintained by the absorption of other vitalities, preferably as high up the evolutionary scale as possible. Our thousands of deaths monthly can be traced to his frantic hunger for vital fluid. The devitalizing department, which Blogshak used to run, is the largest section of the staff."

"But what about the people who attend him? Does he snap up any of them?"

"He hasn't yet. They all have a pact with him. Help him, and he helps them. Every one of his band dies old, rich, evil, and envied by their ignorant neighbors. He gives them everything they want. Sometimes they forget, like Blogshak, that society can stand just so much of their evil."

"Assuming all you say is true-- how does it concern my own problem, getting Ann out of here and notifying the League?"

Poole shook his head dubiously. "You probably have some tentative plans to hypnotize Blogshak and make him turn off the screen. But no one on the staff understands the screen. None of them can turn it off, because none of them turned it on. The chief surgeon believes it to be a direct, focused emanation from a radiator made long ago and known now only to the Outcast. But don't think of escaping just yet. You can strike a tremendous, fatal blow without leaving this room!

"This afternoon," Poole continued with growing nervousness, "There culminates a project initiated by the Outcast millennia ago. Just ninety years ago the staff began the blueprints of a surgical operation on the Outcast on a scale which would dwarf the erection of the Mechanical Integrator. Indeed, you won't be surprised to learn that the Integrator, capable of planar stereochronic analysis, was but a preliminary practice project, a rehearsal for the main event."

"Go on," said Troy absently. His sensitive hearing detected heavy breathing from beyond the door.

"To perform this colossal surgery, the staff must disconnect for a few seconds all of the essential neural trunks. When this is done, but for your aura, the Outcast would forever after remain a mass of senseless protoplasm and electronic equipment. With your aura they can make the most dangerous repairs in perfect safety. When the last neural is down, you simply suppress your aura and the Outcast is dead. Then you could force your way out. From then on, the Earth could go its merry way unhampered. Your League would eventually gain ascendancy and-- "

"What about Ann?" asked Troy curtly. "Wouldn't she die along with the Outcast?"

"Didn't both of you take an oath to sacrifice each other before you'd injure the League or abandon an assignment?"

"That's a nice legal point," replied Troy, watching the corridor door behind Poole open a quarter of an inch. "I met Ann three years ago in a madhouse, where I had hidden away after a League assignment. She wasn't mad, but the stupid overseer didn't know it. She had the ability to project herself to other probability worlds. I married her to obtain a warning instrument of extreme delicacy and accuracy. Until that night in the death house, I'd have abided by League rules and abandoned her if necessary. But no longer. Any plan which includes her death is out. Suffering humanity can go climb a tree."

Poole's voice was dry and cracking. "I presumed you'd say that. You leave me no recourse. After I tell you who I am, you will be willing to turn off your aura even at the cost of Ann's life. I am your... agh-- "

A knife whistled through the open door and sank in Poole's neck. Blogshak and Sharg rushed in. Each man carried an ax.

"You dirty traitor!" screamed Blogshak. His ax crashed through the skull of the little old man even as Troy sprang forward. Sharg caught Troy under the chin with his ax handle. For some minutes afterward Troy was dimly aware of chopping, chopping, chopping.

Troy's aching jaw finally awoke him. He was lying on the sofa, where his keepers had evidently placed him. There was an undefinable raw odor about the room.

The carpet had been changed.

Troy's stomach muscles tensed. What had this done to Ann? He was unable to catch her ESP lobe. Probably out wandering through the past, or future.

While he tried to touch her mind, there was a knock on the door, and Blogshak entered with a man dressed in surgeon's white.

"Our operation apparently was a success, despite your little mishap," 'pathed the latter to Troy. "The next thirty years will tell us definitely whether we did this correctly. I'm afraid you'll have to stick around until then. I understand you're great chums with the Provinarch-- ex-Provinarch, should I say? I'm sure he'll entertain you. I'm sorry about Poole. Poor fellow! Muffed his opportunities. Might have risen very high on the staff. But everything works out for the best, doesn't it?"

Troy glared at him wordlessly.

* * *

"Once we're out of here," 'pathed Troy in music code that afternoon, "We'll get General Blade to drop a plute fission on this building. It all revolves around the bomb under your cerebellum. If we can deactivate either the screen or the bomb, we're out. It's child's play to scatter Blogshak's bunch."

"If I had a razor," replied Ann, "I could cut the thing out. I can feel it under my neck muscles."

"Don't talk nonsense. What can you give me on Poole?"

"He definitely forced you to choose the red ball at the League meeting. Also, he knew he was going to be killed in your room. That made him nervous."

"Did he *know* he was going to be killed, or simply anticipated the possibility?"

"He knew. *He had seen it before!*"

Troy began pacing restlessly up and down before the glass panel, but never looking at Ann, who lay quietly in bed apparently reading a book. The nurse sat in a chair at the foot of Ann's bed, arms folded, implacably staring at her ward.

"Puzzling,, very puzzling," mused Troy. "Any idea what he was going to tell me about my aura?"

"No."

"Anything on his identity?"

"I don't know-- I had a feeling that I... we-- No, it's all too vague. I noticed just one thing for certain."

"What was that?" asked Troy. He stopped pacing and appeared to be examining titles on the bookshelves.

"He was wearing your rosebud!"

"But that's crazy! I had it on all day. You must have been mistaken."

"You know I can't make errors on such matters."

"That's so." Troy resumed his pacing. "Yet, I refuse to accept the proposition that both of us were wearing my rosebud at the same instant. Well, never mind. While we're figuring a way to deactivate your bomb, we'd also better give a little thought to solving my aura."

"The solution is known-- we have to assume that our unfortunate friend knew it. Great Galaxy! What our League biologists wouldn't give for a chance at this! We must change our whole concept of living matter. Have you ever heard of the immortal heart created by Alexis Carrel?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"At some time during the Second Renaissance, early twentieth century, I believe, Dr. Carrel removed a bit of heart tissue from an embryo chick and put it in a nutrient solution. The tissue began to expand and contract rhythmically. Every two days the nutrient solution was renewed and excess growth cut away. Despite the catastrophe that had overwhelmed the chick-- as a chick-- the individual tissue lived on independently because the requirements of its cells were met. This section of heart tissue beat for nearly three centuries, until it was finally lost in the Second Atomic War."

"Are you suggesting that the king's men can put Humpty Dumpty together again if due care has been taken to nourish each part?"

"It's a possibility. Don't forget the skills developed by the Muscovites in grafting skin, ears, corneas, and so on."

"But that's a long process-- it takes weeks."

"Then let's try another line. Consider this: The amoeba lives in a fluid medium. He bumps into his food, which is generally bacteria or bits of decaying protein, flows around it, digests it at leisure, excretes his waste matter, and moves on. Now go on up the evolutionary scale past the coelenterates and flatworms, until we reach the first truly three-dimensional animals-- the coelomates. The flatworm had to be flat because he had no blood vessels. His food simply soaked into him. But cousin roundworm, one of the coelomates, grew plump and solid, because his blood vessels fed his specialized interior cells, which would otherwise have no access to food."

"Now consider a specialized cell-- say a nice long muscle cell in the rabbit's neck. It can't run around in stagnant water looking for a meal. It has to have its breakfast brought to it, and its excrement carried out by special messenger, or it soon dies."

Troy picked a book from the shelf and leafed through it idly.

Ann wondered mutely whether her nurse had been weaned on a lemon.

"This messenger," continued Troy, "is the blood. It eventually reaches the muscle cell by means of a capillary-- a minute blood vessel about the size of a red corpuscle. The blood in the capillary gives the cell everything it needs and absorbs the cell waste matter. The muscle cell needs a continuously fresh supply of oxygen, sugar, amino-acids, fats, vitamins, sodium, calcium, and potassium salts, hormones, water, and maybe other things. It gets these from the hemoglobin and plasma, and it sheds carbon dioxide, ammonium compounds, and so on. Our cell can store up a little food within its own boundaries to tide it over for a number of hours. But oxygen it must have, every instant."

"You're just making the problem worse," interposed Ann. "If you prove that blood must circulate oxygen continuously to preserve life, you'll have yourself out on a limb. If you'll excuse the term, the rabbit's circulation was decisively cut off."

"That's the poser," agreed Troy. "The blood didn't circulate, but the cells didn't die. And think of this a moment: Blood is normally alkaline, with a pH of 7.4. When it absorbs carbon dioxide as a cell

excretion, blood becomes acid, and this steps up respiration to void the excess carbon dioxide, via the lungs. But so far as I could see, the rabbit didn't even sigh after he got his head back. There was certainly no heavy breathing."

"I'll have to take your word for it; I was out cold."

"Yes, I know." Troy began pacing the room again. "It isn't feasible to suppose the rabbit's plasma was buffered to an unusual degree. That would mean an added concentration of sodium bicarbonate and an increased solids content. The cellular water would dialyze into the blood and kill the creature by simple dehydration."

"Maybe he had unusual reserves of hemoglobin," suggested Ann. "That would take care of your oxygen problem."

Troy rubbed his chin. "I doubt it. There are about five million red cells in a cubic millimeter of blood. If there are very many more, the cells would oxidize muscle tissue at a tremendous rate, and the blood would grow hot, literally cooking the brain. Our rabbit would die of a raging fever. Hemoglobin dissolves about fifty times as much oxygen as plasma, so it doesn't take much hemoglobin to start an internal conflagration."

"Yet the secret must lie in the hemoglobin. You just admitted that the cells could get along for long periods with only oxygen," persisted Ann.

"It's worth thinking about. We must learn more about the chemistry of the cell. You take it easy for a few days while I go through Poole's library."

"Could I do otherwise?" murmured Ann.

* * *

"...thus the effect of confinement varies from person to person. The claustrophobe deteriorates rapidly, but the agoraphobe mellows, and may find excuses to avoid the escape attempt. The person of high mental and physical attainments can avoid atrophy by directing his every thought to the destruction of the confining force. In this case, the increment in mental prowess is 3.1 times the logarithm of the duration of confinement measured in years. The intelligent and determined prisoner can escape if he lives long enough."

-- J. and A. T., An Introduction to Prison Escape, 4th Edition, League Publishers, p. 14.

In 1811 Avogadro, in answer to the confusing problems of combining chemical weights, invented the molecule. In 1902 Einstein resolved an endless array of incompatible facts by suggesting a mass-energy relation. Three centuries later, in the tenth year of his imprisonment, Jon Troy was driven in near-despair to a similar stand. In one sure step of dazzling intuition, he hypothesized the viton.

"The secret goes back to our old talks on cell preservation," he explained with ill-concealed excitement to Ann. "The cell can live for hours without proteins and salts, because it has means of storing these nutrients from past meals. But oxygen it must have. The hemoglobin takes up molecular oxygen in the lung capillaries, ozonizes it, and since hemin is easily reduced, the red cells give up oxygen to the muscle cells that need it, in return for carbon dioxide. After it takes up the carbon dioxide, hemin turns purple and enters the vein system on the way back to the lungs, and we can forget it.

"Now, what is hemin? We can break it down into etiopyrophorin, which, like chlorophyll, contains four pyrrole groups. The secret of chlorophyll has been known for years. Under a photon catalyst of extremely short wave length, such as ultraviolet light, chlorophyll seizes molecule after molecule of carbon dioxide and synthesizes starches and sugars, giving off oxygen. Hemin, with its etiopyrophorin, works quite similarly, except that it doesn't need ultraviolet light. Now-- "

"But animal cell metabolism works the other way," objected Ann. "Our cells take up oxygen, and excrete carbon dioxide."

"It depends which cells you are talking about," reminded Troy. "The red corpuscle takes up carbon dioxide just as its plant cousin, chlorophyll, does, and they both excrete oxygen. Oxygen is just as much an excrement of the red cell as carbon dioxide is of the muscle cell."

"That's true," admitted Ann.

"And that's where the viton comes in," continued Troy. "It preserves the status quo of cell chemistry. Suppose that an oxygen atom has just been taken up by an amino-acid molecule within the cell protoplasm. The amino-acid immediately becomes unstable, and starts to split out carbon dioxide. In the red corpuscle, a mass of hemin stands by to seize the carbon dioxide and offer more oxygen. But the exchange never takes place. Just as the amino-acid and the hemin reach toward one another, their electronic attractions are suddenly neutralized by a bolt of pure energy from me: the viton! Again and again the cells try to exchange, with the same result. They can't die from lack of oxygen, because their individual molecules never attain an oxygen deficit. The viton gives a very close approach to immortality!"

"But *we* seem to be getting older. Perhaps your vitons don't reach every cell?"

"Probably not," admitted Troy. "They must stream radially from some central point within me, and of course they would decrease in concentration according to the inverse square law of light. Even so, they would keep enough cells alive to preserve life as a whole. In the case of the rabbit, after the cut cell surfaces were rejoined, there were still enough of them alive to start the business of living again. One might suppose, too, that the viton accelerates the re-establishment of cell boundaries in the damaged areas. That would be particularly important with the nerve cells."

"All right," said Ann. "You've got the viton. What are you going to do with it?"

"That's another puzzler. First, what part of my body does it come from? There must be some sort of a globular discharge area fed by a relatively small but impenetrable duct. If we suppose a muscle controlling the duct-- "

"What you need is an old Geiger-Müller," suggested Ann. "Locate your discharge globe first, then the blind spot on it caused by the duct entry. The muscle has to be at that point."

"I wonder-- " mused Troy. "We have a burnt-out cinema projection bulb around here somewhere. The vacuum ought to be just about soft enough by now to ionize readily. The severed filament can be the two electron poles." He laughed mirthlessly: "I don't know why I should be in a hurry. I won't be able to turn off the viton stream even if I should discover the duct-muscle."

Weeks later, Troy found his viton sphere, just below the cerebral frontal lobe. The duct led somewhere into the pineal region. Very gingerly he investigated the duct environment. A small but dense muscle mass surrounded the entry of the duct to the bulk of radiation.

On the morning of the first day of the thirty-first year of their imprisonment, a few minutes before the nurse was due with the *skon* hypo, Ann 'pathed to Troy that she thought the screen was down. A joint search of the glass panel affirmed this.

Ann was stunned, like a caged canary that suddenly notices the door is open-- she fears to stay, yet is afraid to fly away.

"Get your clothes on, dear," urged Troy. "Quickly now! If we don't contact the League in the next ten minutes, we never shall."

She dressed like an automaton.

Troy picked the lock on the corridor door noiselessly, with a key he had long ago made for this day, and opened the portal a quarter of an inch. The corridor seemed empty for its whole half-mile length. There was a preternatural pall of silence hanging over everything. Ordinarily, someone was always sitting about the corridor at this hour. He peered closely at the guard's cubicle down the hall. His eyes were not what they once were, and old Blogshak had never permitted him to be fitted with contacts.

He sucked in his breath sharply. The door of the cubicle was open, and two bodies were visible on the floor. One of the bodies had been a guard. The green of his uniform was plainly visible. The other corpse had white hair and a face like a wrinkled, arthritic claw. It was Blogshak.

Two mental processes occurred within Troy. To the cold, objective Troy, the thought occurred that the viton flow was ineffective beyond one hundred yards. Troy the human being wondered why the Outcast had not immediately remedied this weak point in the guard system. Heart pounding, he stepped back within the suite. He seized a chair, warned Ann out of the way, and hurled it through the glass panel. Ann stepped gingerly through the jagged gap. He held her for a moment in his arms. Her hair was a pure white, her face furrowed. Her body seemed weak and infirm. But it was Ann. Her eyes were shut and she seemed to be floating through time and space.

"No time for a trance now!" he shook her harshly, pulling her out of the room and down the corridor. He looked for a stair. There was none.

"We'll have to chance an autovator!" he panted, thinking he should have taken some sort of bludgeon with him. If several of the staff should come down with the 'vator, he doubted his ability to hypnotize them all.

He was greatly relieved when he saw an empty 'vator already on the subterranean floor. He leaped in, pulling Ann behind him, and pushed the button to close the door. The door closed quietly, and he pushed the button for the first floor.

"We'll try the street floor first," he said, breathing heavily. "Don't look around when we leave the 'vator. Just chatter quietly and act as though we owned the place."

The street floor was empty.

An icy thought began to grow in Troy's mind. He stepped into a neighboring 'vator, carrying Ann with him almost bodily, closed the door, and pressed the last button. Ann was mentally out, but was trying to tell him something. Her thoughts were vague, unfocused.

If they were pursued, wouldn't the pursuer assume they had left the building? He hoped so.

A malicious laughter seemed to follow them up the shaft.

He gulped air frantically to ease the roar in his ears. Ann had sunk into a semi-stupor. He eased her to the floor. The 'vator continued to climb. It was now in the two hundreds. Minutes later it stopped gently at the top floor, the door opened, and Troy managed to pull Ann out into a little plaza.

They were nearly a mile above the city.

The penthouse roof of the City Building was really a miniature country club, with a small golf course, swimming pool, and club house for informal administrative functions. A cold wind now blew across the closely cut green. The swimming pool was empty. Troy shivered as he dragged Ann near the dangerously low guard rail and looked over the city in the early morning sunlight.

As far as he could see, nothing was moving. There were no cars gliding at any of the authorized traffic levels, no 'copters or transocean ships in the skies.

For the first time, Troy's mind sagged, and he felt like the old man he was.

As he stared, gradually understanding, yet half-unbelieving, the rosebud in his lapel began to speak.

* * *

Mai-kel condensed the thin water of cosmic gas into several suns and peered again down into the sterechron. There could be no mistake-- there was a standing wave of recurrent time emanating from the tiny planet. The Great One made himself small and approached the little world with cautious curiosity. Sathanas had been badly wounded, but it was hard to believe his integration had deteriorated to the point of permitting oscillation in time. And no intelligent life capable of time travel was scheduled for this galaxy. Who, then? Mai-kel synchronized himself with the oscillation so that the events constituting it seemed to move at their normal pace. His excitement multiplied as he followed the cycle.

It would be safest, of course, to volatilize the whole planet. But then, that courageous mite, that microscopic human being who had created the time trap would be lost. Extirpation was indicated-- a clean, fast incision done at just the right point of the cycle.

Mai-kel called his brothers.

* * *

Troy suppressed an impulse of revulsion. Instead of tearing the flower from his coat, he pulled it out gently and held it at arm's length, where he could watch the petals join and part again, in perfect mimicry of the human mouth.

"Yes, little man, I am what you call the Outcast. There are no other little men to bring my message to you, so I take this means of-- "

"You mean you devitalized every man, woman, and child in the province... in the whole world?" croaked Troy.

"Yes. Within the past few months, my appetite has been astonishingly good, and I have succeeded in storing within my neurals enough vital fluid to carry me into the next sterechron. There I can do the same, and continue my journey. There's an excellent little planet waiting for me, just bursting with genial bipedal life. I can almost feel their vital fluid within me, now. And I'm taking you along, of course, in case I meet some... old friends. We'll leave now."

"Jon! Jon!" cried Ann, from behind him. She was standing, but weaving dizzily. Troy was at her side in an instant. "Even *he* doesn't know who Poole is!"

"Too late for any negative information now, dear," said Troy dully.

"But it isn't negative. If *he* doesn't know, then he won't stop you from going back." Her voice broke off in a wild cackle.

Troy looked at her in sad wonder.

"Jon," she went on feverishly, "your vitons help preserve the status quo of cells by preventing chemical change, but that is only part of the reason they preserve life. Each viton must also contain a quantum of time flow, which dissolves the vital fluid of the cell and reprecipitates it into the next instant. This is the only hypothesis which explains the preservation of the giant neurals of the Outcast. There was no chemical change going on in them which required stabilization, but something had to keep the vital fluid alive. Now, if you close the duct suddenly, the impact of unreleased vitons will send you back through time in your present body, as an old man. Don't you understand about Poole, now, Jon? You will go back thirty years through time, establish yourself in the confidence of both the League and the staff, attend the assassination conference, make young Troy choose the red ball again, defend him at the trial, and then die in that horrible room again. You have no choice about doing this, *because it has already happened!* Good-by, darling! You are Poole!"

There was an abrupt swish. Ann had leaped over the guard rail into space.

A gurgle of horror died in Troy's throat. Still clutching the now-silent rose in his hand, he jammed the viton muscle with all his will power. There was a sickening shock, then a flutter of passing days and nights. As he fell through time, cold fingers seemed to snatch frantically at him. But he knew he was safe.

* * *

As he spiraled inward, Troy-Poole blinked his eyes involuntarily as though reluctant to abandon a languorous escape from reality. He was like a dreamer awakened by having his bedclothes blown off in an icy gale.

He slowly realized that this was not the first time he had suddenly been bludgeoned into reality. Every seventy years the cycle began for him once more. He knew now that seventy years ago he had completed another identical circle in time. And the lifetime before that, and the one prior. There was no beginning and no ending. The only reality was this brief lucid interval between cycles, waiting for the loose ends of time to cement. He had the choice at this instant to vary the life stream, to fall far beyond Troy's era, if he liked, and thus to end this existence as the despairing toy of time. What had he accomplished? Nothing, except retain, at the cost of almost unbearable monotony and pain, a weapon pointed at the heart of the Outcast, a weapon he could never persuade the young Troy to use, on account of Ann. Troy old had no influence over Troy young. Poole could never persuade Troy.

Peering down through the hoary wastes of time, he perceived how he had hoped to set up a cycle in the time stream, a standing wave noticeable to the entities who searched for the Outcast. Surely with their incredible intellects and perceptions this discrepancy in the ordered universe would not go unnoticed. He had hoped that this trap in the time flow would hold the Outcast until relief came. But as his memory returned he realized that he had gradually given up hope. Somehow he had gone on from a sense of duty to the race from which he had sprung. From the depths of his aura-fed nervous system he had always found the will to try again. But now his nervous exhaustion, increasing from cycle to cycle by infinitesimal amounts, seemed overpowering.

A curious thought occurred to him. There must have been, at one time, a Troy without a Poole to guide-- or entangle-- him. There must have been a beginning-- some prototype Troy who selected the red ball by pure accident, and who was informed by a prototype staff of his tremendous power. After that, it was easy to assume that the first Troy "went back" as the prototype Poole to scheme against the life of the Outcast.

But searching down time, Troy-Poole now found only the old combination of Troy and Poole he knew so well. Hundreds, thousands, millions of them, each preceding the other. As far back as he could sense, there was always a Poole hovering over a Troy. Now he would become the next Poole, enmesh the next Troy in the web of time, and go his own way to bloody death. He could not even plan a comfortable suicide. No, to maintain perfect oscillation of the time trap, all Pooles must always die in the same manner as the first Poole. There must be no invariance. He suppressed a twinge of impatience, at the lack of foresight in the prototype Poole.

"Just this once more," he promised himself wearily, "then I'm through. Next time I'll keep on falling."

* * *

General Blade sometimes felt that leading a resistance movement was far exceeding his debt to decent society and that one day soon he would allow his peaceful nature to override his indignant pursuit of justice. Killing a man, even a very bad man, without a trial, went against his grain. He sighed and rapped on the table.

"As a result of Blogshak's misappropriation of funds voted to fight the epidemic," he announced, "The death toll this morning reached over one hundred thousand. Dose the Assassination Subcommittee have a recommendation?"

A thin-lipped man rose from the gathering. "The Provinarch ignored our warning," he said rapidly. "This subcommittee, as you all know, some days ago set an arbitrary limit of one hundred thousand deaths. Therefore this subcommittee now recommends that its plan for killing the Provinarch be adopted at once. Tonight is very favorable for our-- "

A man entered the room quietly and handed General Blade an envelope. The latter read it quickly, then stood up. "I beg your pardon, but I must break in," he announced. "Information I have just received may change our plans completely. This report from our intelligence service is so incredible that I won't read it to you. Let's verify it over the radio."

He switched on the instrument. The beam of a local newscasting agency was focused tridimensionally before the group. It showed a huge pit or excavation which appeared to move as the scanning newscaster moved. The news comments were heard in snatches. "No explosion... no sign of any force... just complete disappearance. An hour ago the City Building was the largest structure in... now nothing but a gaping hole a mile deep... the Provinarch and his entire council were believed in conference... no trace-- "

General Blade turned an uncomprehending face to the committee. "Gentlemen, I move that we adjourn this session pending an investigation."

Jon Troy and Ann left through the secret alleyway. As he buttoned his topcoat against the chill night air, he sensed that they were being followed. "Oh, hello?"

"I beg your pardon, Major Troy, and yours, madam. My name is Poole, Legal Subcommittee. You don't know me-- yet, but I feel that I know you both very well. Your textbook on prison escape has inspired and sustained me many times in the past. I was just admiring your boutonniere, Major. It seems so lifelike for an artificial rosebud. I wonder if you could tell me where I might buy one?"

Troy laughed metallically. "It's not artificial. I've worn it for weeks, but it's a real flower, from my own garden. It just won't die."

"Extraordinary," murmured Poole, fingering the red blossom in his own lapel. "Could we run in here for a cocktail? Bartender Fonstile will fix us something special, and we can discuss a certain matter you really ought to know about."

The doorman of the Shawn Hotel bowed to the three as they went inside.