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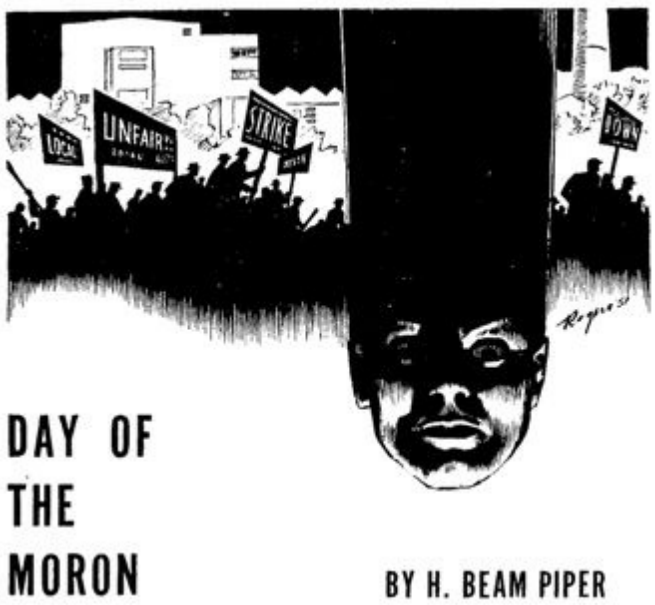

DAY OF THE MORON

BY H. BEAM PIPER

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It's natural to trust the unproven word of the fellow who's "on my side"—but the emotional moron is on no one's side, not even his own. Once, such an emotional moron could, at worst, hurt a few. But with the mighty, leashed forces Man employs now....

There were still, in 1968, a few people who were afraid of the nuclear power plant. Oldsters, in whom the term "atomic energy" produced semantic reactions associated with Hiroshima. Those who saw, in the towering steam-column above it, a tempting target for enemy—which still meant Soviet—bombers and guided missiles. Some of the Central Intelligence and F.B.I. people, who realized how futile even the most elaborate security measures were against a resourceful and suicidally determined saboteur. And a minority of engineers and nuclear physicists who remained unpersuaded that accidental blowups at nuclear-reaction plants were impossible.

Scott Melroy was among these last. He knew, as a matter of fact, that there had been several nasty, meticulously unpublicized, near-catastrophes at the Long Island Nuclear Reaction Plant, all involving the new Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactors, and that there had been considerable carefully-hushed top-level acrimony before the Melroy Engineering Corporation had been given the contract to install the fully cybernetic control system intended to prevent a recurrence of such incidents.

That had been three months ago. Melroy and his people had moved in, been assigned sections of a couple of machine shops, set up an assembly shop and a set of plyboard-partitioned offices in a vacant warehouse just outside the reactor area, and tried to start work, only to run into the almost interminable procedural disputes and jurisdictional wranglings of the sort which he privately labeled "bureau bunk". It was only now that he was ready to begin work on the reactors.

He sat at his desk, in the inner of three successively smaller offices on the second floor of the converted warehouse, checking over a symbolic-logic analysis of a relay system and, at the same time, sharpening a pencil, his knife paring off tiny feathery shavings of wood. He was a tall, sparely-built, man of indeterminate age, with thinning sandy hair, a long Gaelic upper lip, and a wide, half-humorous, half-weary mouth; he wore an open-necked shirt, and an old and shabby leather jacket, to the left shoulder of which a few clinging flecks of paint showed where some military emblem had been, long ago. While his fingers worked with the jackknife and his eyes traveled over the page of closely-written symbols, his mind was reviewing the eight different ways in which one of the efficient but treacherous Doernberg-Giardano reactors could be allowed to reach critical mass, and he was wondering if there might not be some unsuspected ninth way. That was a possibility which always lurked in the back of his mind, and lately it had been giving him surrealistic nightmares.

"Mr. Melroy!" the box on the desk in front of him said suddenly, in a feminine voice. "Mr. Melroy, Dr. Rives is here."

Melroy picked up the handphone, thumbing on the switch.

"Dr. Rives?" he repeated.

"The psychologist who's subbing for Dr. von Heydenreich," the box told him patiently.

"Oh, yes. Show him in," Melroy said.

"Right away, Mr. Melroy," the box replied.

Replacing the handphone, Melroy wondered, for a moment, why there had been a hint of suppressed amusement in his secretary's voice. Then the door opened and he stopped wondering. Dr. Rives wasn't a him; she was a her. Very attractive looking her, too—dark hair and eyes, rather long-oval features, clear, lightly tanned complexion, bright red lipstick put on with a micrometric exactitude that any engineer could appreciate. She was tall, within four inches of his own six-foot mark, and she wore a black tailored outfit, perfectly plain, which had probably cost around five hundred dollars and would have looked severe and mannish except that the figure under it curved and bulged in just the right places and to just the right degree.

Melroy rose, laying down knife and pencil and taking his pipe out of his mouth.

"Good afternoon," he greeted. "Dr. von Heydenreich gave me quite a favorable account of you—as far as it went. He might have included a few more data and made it more so.... Won't you sit down?"

The woman laid her handbag on the desk and took the visitor's chair, impish mirth sparking in her eyes.

"He probably omitted mentioning that the D. is for Doris," she suggested. "Suppose I'd been an Englishman with a name like Evelyn or Vivian?"

Melroy tried to visualize her as a male Englishman named Vivian, gave up, and grinned at her.

"Let this be a lesson," he said. "Inferences are to be drawn from objects, or descriptions of objects; never from verbal labels. Do you initial your first name just to see how people react when they meet you?"

"Well, no, though that's an amusing and sometimes instructive by-product. It started when I began contributing to some of the professional journals. There's still a little of what used to be called male sex-chauvinism among my colleagues, and some who would be favorably impressed with an article signed D. Warren Rives might snort in contempt at the same article signed Doris Rives."

"Well, fortunately, Dr. von Heydenreich isn't one of those," Melroy said. "How is the Herr Doktor, by the way, and just what happened to him? Miss Kourtakides merely told me that he'd been injured and was in a hospital in Pittsburgh."

"The Herr Doktor got shot," Doris Rives informed him. "With a charge of BB's, in a most indelicate portion of his anatomy. He was out hunting, the last day of small-game season, and somebody mistook him for a turkey. Nothing really serious, but he's face down in bed, cursing hideously in German, English, Russian, Italian and French, mainly because he's missing deer hunting."

"I might have known it," Melroy said in disgust. "The ubiquitous lame-brain with a dangerous mechanism.... I suppose he briefed you on what I want done, here?"

"Well, not too completely. I gathered that you want me to give intelligence tests, or aptitude tests, or something of the sort, to some of your employees. I'm not really one of these so-called industrial anthropologists," she explained. "Most of my work, for the past few years, has been for public-welfare organizations, with subnormal persons. I told him that, and he said that was why he selected me. He said one other thing. He said, 'I used to think Melroy had an obsession about fools; well, after stopping this load of shot, I'm beginning to think it's a good subject to be obsessed about.'"

Melroy nodded. "'Obsession' will probably do. 'Phobia' would be more exact. I'm afraid of fools, and the chance that I have one working for me, here, affects me like having a cobra crawling around my bedroom in the dark. I want you to locate any who might be in a gang of new men I've had to hire, so that I can get rid of them."

"And just how do you define the term 'fool', Mr. Melroy?" she asked. "Remember, it has no standard meaning. Republicans apply it to Democrats, and vice versa."

"Well, I apply it to people who do things without considering possible consequences. People who pepper distinguished Austrian psychologists in the pants-seat with turkey-shot, for a starter. Or people who push buttons to see what'll happen, or turn valves and twiddle with dial-knobs because they have nothing else to do with their hands. Or shoot insulators off power lines to see if they can hit them. People who don't know it's loaded. People who think warning signs are purely ornamental. People who play practical jokes. People who—"

"I know what you mean. Just day-before-yesterday, I saw a woman toss a cocktail into an electric heater. She didn't want to drink it, and she thought it would just go up in steam. The result was slightly spectacular."

"Next time, she won't do that. She'll probably throw her drink into a lead-ladle, if there's one around. Well, on a statistical basis, I'd judge that I have three or four such dud rounds among this new gang I've hired. I want you to put the finger on them, so I can bounce them before they blow the whole plant up, which could happen quite easily."

"That," Doris Rives said, "is not going to be as easy as it sounds. Ordinary intelligence-testing won't be enough. The woman I was speaking of has an I.Q. well inside the meaning of normal intelligence. She just doesn't use it."

"Sure." Melroy got a thick folder out of his desk and handed it across. "Heydenreich thought of that, too. He got this up for me, about five years ago. The intelligence test is based on the new French Sûreté test for mentally deficient criminals. Then there's a memory test, and tests for judgment and discrimination, semantic reactions, temperamental and emotional makeup, and general mental attitude."

She took the folder and leafed through it. "Yes, I see. I always liked this Sûreté test. And this memory test is a honey—'One hen, two ducks, three squawking geese, four corpulent porpoises, five Limerick oysters, six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers....' I'd like to see some of these memory-course boys trying to make visual images of six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers. And I'm going to make a copy of this word-association list. It's really a semantic reaction test; Korzybski would have loved it. And, of course, our old friend, the Rorschach Ink-Blots. I've always harbored the impious suspicion that you can prove almost anything you want to with that. But these question-suggestions for personal interview are really crafty. Did Heydenreich get them up himself?"

"Yes. And we have stacks and stacks of printed forms for the written portion of the test, and big cards to summarize each subject on. And we have a disk-recorder to use in the oral tests. There'll have to be a pretty complete record of each test, in case—"

The office door opened and a bulky man with a black mustache entered, beating the snow from his overcoat with a battered porkpie hat and commenting blasphemously on the weather. He advanced into the room until he saw the woman in the chair beside the desk, and then started to back out.

"Come on in, Sid," Melroy told him. "Dr. Rives, this is our general foreman, Sid Keating. Sid, Dr. Rives, the new dimwit detector. Sid's in direct charge of personnel," he continued, "so you two'll be working together quite a bit."

"Glad to know you, doctor," Keating said. Then he turned to Melroy. "Scott, you're really going through with this, then?" he asked. "I'm afraid we'll have trouble, then."

"Look, Sid," Melroy said. "We've been all over that. Once we start work on the reactors, you and Ned Puryear and Joe Ricci and Steve Chalmers can't be everywhere at once. A cybernetic system will only do what it's been assembled to do, and if some quarter-wit assembles one of these things wrong—" He left the sentence dangling; both men knew what he meant.

Keating shook his head. "This union's going to bawl like a branded calf about it," he predicted. "And if any of the dear sirs and brothers get washed out—" That sentence didn't need to be completed, either.

"We have a right," Melroy said, "to discharge any worker who is, quote, of unsound mind, deficient mentality or emotional instability, unquote. It says so right in our union contract, in nice big print."

"Then they'll claim the tests are wrong."

"I can't see how they can do that," Doris Rives put in, faintly scandalized.

"Neither can I, and they probably won't either," Keating told her. "But they'll go ahead and do it. Why, Scott, they're pulling the Number One Doernberg-Giardano, tonight. By oh-eight-hundred, it ought to be cool enough to work on. Where will we hold the tests? Here?"

"We'll have to, unless we can get Dr. Rives security-cleared." Melroy turned to her. "Were you ever security-cleared by any Government agency?"

"Oh, yes. I was with Armed Forces Medical, Psychiatric Division, in Indonesia in '62 and '63, and I did some work with mental fatigue cases at Tonto Basin Research Establishment in '64."

Melroy looked at her sharply. Keating whistled.

"If she could get into Tonto Basin, she can get in here," he declared.

"I should think so. I'll call Colonel Bradshaw, the security officer."

"That way, we can test them right on the job," Keating was saying. "Take them in relays. I'll talk to Ben about it, and we'll work up some kind of a schedule." He turned to Doris Rives. "You'll need a wrist-Geiger, and a dosimeter. We'll furnish them," he told her. "I hope they don't try to make you carry a pistol, too."

"A pistol?" For a moment, she must have thought he was using some technical-jargon term, and then it dawned on her that he wasn't. "You mean—?" She cocked her thumb and crooked her index finger.

"Yeah. A rod. Roscoe. The Equalizer. We all have to." He half-lifted one out of his side pocket. "We're all United States deputy marshals. They don't bother much with counterespionage, here, but they don't fool when it comes to countersabotage. Well, I'll get an order cut and posted. Be seeing you, doctor."

"You think the union will make trouble about these tests?" she asked, after the general foreman had gone out.

"They're sure to," Melroy replied. "Here's the situation. I have about fifty of my own men, from Pittsburgh, here, but they can't work on the reactors because they don't belong to the Industrial Federation of Atomic Workers, and I can't just pay their initiation fees and union dues and get union cards for them, because admission to this union is on an annual quota basis, and this is December, and the quota's full. So I have to use them outside the reactor area, on fabrication and assembly work. And I have to hire through the union, and that's handled on a membership seniority basis, so I have to take what's thrown at me. That's why I was careful to get that clause I was quoting to Sid written into my contract.

"Now, here's what's going to happen. Most of the men'll take the test without protest, but a few of them'll raise the roof about it. Nothing burns a moron worse than to have somebody question his fractional intelligence. The odds are that the ones that yell the loudest about taking the test will be the ones who get scrubbed out, and when the test shows that they're deficient, they won't believe it. A moron simply cannot conceive of his being anything less than perfectly intelligent, any more than a lunatic can conceive of his being less than perfectly sane. So they'll claim we're framing them, for an excuse to fire them. And the union will have to back them up, right or wrong, at least on the local level. That goes without saying. In any dispute, the employer is always wrong and the worker is always right, until proven otherwise. And that takes a lot of doing, believe me!"

"Well, if they're hired through the union, on a seniority basis, wouldn't they be likely to be experienced and competent workers?" she asked.

"Experienced, yes. That is, none of them has ever been caught doing anything downright calamitous ... yet," Melroy replied. "The moron I'm afraid of can go on for years, doing routine work under supervision, and nothing'll happen. Then, some day, he does something on his own lame-brained initiative, and when he does, it's only at the whim of whatever gods there be that the result isn't a wholesale catastrophe. And people like that are the most serious threat facing our civilization today, atomic war not excepted."

Dr. Doris Rives lifted a delicately penciled eyebrow over that. Melroy, pausing to relight his pipe, grinned at her.

"You think that's the old obsession talking?" he asked. "Could be. But look at this plant, here. It generates every kilowatt of current used between Trenton and Albany, the New York metropolitan area included. Except for a few little storage-battery or Diesel generator systems, that couldn't handle one tenth of one per cent of the barest minimum load, it's been the only source of electric current here since 1962, when the last coal-burning power plant was dismantled. Knock this plant out and you darken every house and office and factory and street in the area. You immobilize the elevators—think what that would mean in lower and midtown Manhattan alone. And the subways. And the new endless-belt conveyors that handle eighty per cent of the city's freight traffic. And the railroads—there aren't a dozen steam or Diesel locomotives left in the whole area. And the pump stations for water and gas and fuel oil. And seventy per cent of the space-heating is electric, now. Why, you can't imagine what it'd be like. It's too gigantic. But what you can imagine would be a nightmare.

"You know, it wasn't so long ago, when every home lighted and heated itself, and every little industry was a self-contained unit, that a fool couldn't do great damage unless he inherited a throne or was placed in command of an army, and that didn't happen nearly as often as our leftist social historians would like us to think. But today, everything we depend upon is centralized, and vulnerable to blunder-damage. Even our food—remember that poisoned soft-drink horror in Chicago, in 1963; three thousand hospitalized

and six hundred dead because of one man's stupid mistake at a bottling plant." He shook himself slightly, as though to throw off some shadow that had fallen over him, and looked at his watch. "Sixteen hundred. How did you get here? Fly your own plane?"

"No; I came by T.W.A. from Pittsburgh. I have a room at the new Midtown City hotel, on Forty-seventh Street: I had my luggage sent on there from the airport and came out on the Long Island subway."

"Fine. I have a room at Midtown City, myself, though I sleep here about half the time." He nodded toward a door on the left. "Suppose we go in and have dinner together. This cafeteria, here, is a horrible place. It's run by a dietitian instead of a chef, and everything's so white-enamel antiseptic that I swear I smell belladonna-icthyol ointment every time I go in the place. Wait here till I change clothes."

At the Long Island plant, no one was concerned about espionage—neither the processes nor the equipment used there were secret—but the countersabotage security was fantastically thorough. Every person or scrap of material entering the reactor area was searched; the life-history of every man and woman employed there was known back to the cradle. A broad highway encircled it outside the fence, patrolled night and day by twenty General Stuart cavalry-tanks. There were a thousand soldiers, and three hundred Atomic Power Authority police, and only God knew how many F.B.I, and Central Intelligence undercover agents. Every supervisor and inspector and salaried technician was an armed United States deputy marshal. And nobody, outside the Department of Defense, knew how much radar and counter-rocket and fighter protection the place had, but the air-defense zone extended from Boston to Philadelphia and as far inland as Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

The Long Island Nuclear Power Plant, Melroy thought, had all the invulnerability of Achilles—and no more.

The six new Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactors clustered in a circle inside a windowless concrete building at the center of the plant. Beside their primary purpose of plutonium production, they furnished heat for the sea-water distillation and chemical extraction system, processing the water that was run through the steam boilers at the main power reactors, condensed, redistilled, and finally pumped, pure, into the water mains of New York. Safe outside the shielding, in a corner of a high-ceilinged room, was the plyboard-screened on-the-job office of the Melroy Engineering Corporation's timekeepers and foremen. Beyond, along the far wall, were the washroom and locker room and lunch room of the workmen.

Sixty or seventy men, mostly in white coveralls and all wearing identification badges and carrying dosimeters in their breast pockets and midget Geigers strapped to their wrists, were crowded about the bulletin-board in front of the makeshift office. There was a hum of voices—some perplexed or angry, but mostly good-humored and bantering. As Melroy and Doris Rives approached, the talking died out and the men turned. In the sudden silence, one voice, harshly strident, continued:

"... do they think this is, anyhow? We don't hafta take none of that."

Somebody must have nudged the speaker, trying without success to hush him. The bellicose voice

continued, and Melroy spotted the speaker—short, thick-set, his arms jutting out at an angle from his body, his heavy features soured with anger.

"Like we was a lotta halfwits, 'r nuts, 'r some'n! Well, we don't hafta stand for this. They ain't got no right—"

Doris Rives clung tighter to Melroy's arm as he pushed a way for himself and her through the crowd and into the temporary office. Inside, they were met by a young man with a deputy marshal's badge on his flannel shirt and a .38 revolver on his hip.

"Ben Puryear: Dr. Rives," Melroy introduced. "Who's the mouthy character outside?"

"One of the roustabouts; name's Burris," Puryear replied. "Wash-room lawyer."

Melroy nodded. "You always get one or two like that. How're the rest taking it?"

Puryear shrugged. "About how you'd expect. A lot of kidding about who's got any intelligence to test. Burris seems to be the only one who's trying to make an issue out of it."

"Well, what are they doing ganged up here?" Melroy wanted to know. "It's past oh-eight-hundred; why aren't they at work?"

"Reactor's still too hot. Temperature and radioactivity both too high; radioactivity's still up around eight hundred REM's."

"Well, then, we'll give them all the written portion of the test together, and start the personal interviews and oral tests as soon as they're through." He turned to Doris Rives. "Can you give all of them the written test together?" he asked. "And can Ben help you—distributing forms, timing the test, seeing that there's no fudging, and collecting the forms when they're done?"

"Oh, yes; all they'll have to do is follow the printed instructions." She looked around. "I'll need a desk, and an extra chair for the interview subject."

"Right over here, doctor." Puryear said. "And here are the forms and cards, and the sound-recorder, and blank sound disks."

"Yes," Melroy added. "Be sure you get a recording of every interview and oral test; we may need them for evidence."

He broke off as a man in white coveralls came pushing into the office. He was a scrawny little fellow with a wide, loose-lipped mouth and a protuberant Adam's apple; beside his identity badge, he wore a two-inch celluloid button lettered: I.F.A.W. STEWARD.

"Wanta use the phone," he said. "Union business."

Melroy gestured toward a telephone on the desk beside him. The newcomer shook his head, twisting his mouth into a smirk.

"Not that one; the one with the whisper mouthpiece," he said. "This is private union business."

Melroy shrugged and indicated another phone. The man with the union steward's badge picked it up, dialed, and held a lengthy conversation into it, turning his head away in case Melroy might happen to be a lip reader. Finally he turned.

"Mr. Crandall wants to talk to you," he said, grinning triumphantly, the phone extended to Melroy.

The engineer picked up another phone, snapping a button on the base of it.

"Melroy here," he said.

Something on the line started going *bee-beep-beep* softly.

"Crandall, executive secretary, I.F.A.W.," the man on the other end of the line identified himself. "Is there a recorder going on this line?"

"Naturally," Melroy replied. "I record all business conversations; office routine."

"Mr. Melroy, I've been informed that you propose forcing our members in your employ to submit to some kind of a mental test. Is that correct?"

"Not exactly. I'm not able to force anybody to submit to anything against his will. If anybody objects to taking these tests, he can say so, and I'll have his time made out and pay him off."

"That's the same thing. A threat of dismissal is coercion, and if these men want to keep their jobs they'll have to take this test."

"Well, that's stated more or less correctly," Melroy conceded. "Let's just put it that taking—and passing—this test is a condition of employment. My contract with your union recognizes my right to establish standards of intelligence; that's implied by my recognized right to dismiss any person of 'unsound mind, deficient mentality or emotional instability.' Psychological testing is the only means of determining whether or not a person is classifiable in those terms."

"Then, in case the test purports to show that one of these men is, let's say, mentally deficient, you intend dismissing him?"

"With the customary two weeks' severance-pay, yes."

"Well, if you do dismiss anybody on those grounds, the union will have to insist on reviewing the grounds for dismissal."

"My contract with your union says nothing whatever about any right of review being reserved by the union in such cases. Only in cases of disciplinary dismissal, which this is not. I take the position that certain minimum standards of intelligence and mental stability are essentials in this sort of work, just as, say, certain minimum standards of literacy are essential in clerical work."

"Then you're going to make these men take these tests, whatever they are?"

"If they want to work for me, yes. And anybody who fails to pass them will be dropped from my payroll."

"And who's going to decide whether or not these men have successfully passed these tests?" Crandall asked. "You?"

"Good Lord, no! I'm an electronics engineer, not a psychologist. The tests are being given, and will be evaluated, by a graduate psychologist, Dr. D. Warren Rives, who has a diploma from the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is a member of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Rives will be the final arbiter on who is or is not disqualified by these tests."

"Well, our man Koffler says you have some girl there to give the tests," Crandall accused.

"I suppose he means Dr. Rives," Melroy replied. "I can assure you, she is an extremely competent psychologist, however. She came to me most highly recommended by Dr. Karl von Heydenreich, who is not inclined to be careless with his recommendations."

"Well, Mr. Melroy, we don't want any more trouble with you than we have to have," Crandall told him, "but we will insist on reviewing any dismissals which occur as a result of these tests."

"You can do that. I'd advise, first, that you read over the contract you signed with me. Get a qualified lawyer to tell you what we've agreed to and what we haven't. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?... No?... Then good morning, Mr. Crandall."

He hung up. "All right; let's get on with it," he said. "Ben, you get them into the lunch room; there are enough tables and benches in there for everybody to take the written test in two relays."

"The union's gotta be represented while these tests is going on," the union steward announced. "Mr. Crandall says I'm to stay here an' watch what you do to these guys."

"This man working for us?" Melroy asked Puryear.

"Yes. Koffler, Julius. Electrical fitter; Joe Ricci's gang."

"All right. See to it that he gets placed in the first relay for the written test, and gets first turn for the orals. That way he can spend the rest of his time on duty here for the union, and will know in advance what the

test is like." He turned to Koffler. "But understand this. You keep your mouth out of it. If you see anything that looks objectionable, make a note of it, but don't try to interfere."

The written tests, done on printed forms, required about twenty minutes. Melroy watched the process of oral testing and personal interviewing for a while, then picked up a big flashlight and dropped it into his overcoat pocket, preparatory to going out to inspect some equipment that had been assembled outside the reactor area and brought in. As he went out, Koffler was straddling a chair, glowering at Doris Rives and making occasional ostentatious notes on a pad.

For about an hour, he poked around the newly assembled apparatus, checking the wiring, and peering into it. When he returned to the temporary office, the oral testing was still going on; Koffler was still on duty as watcher for the union, but the sport had evidently palled on him, for he was now studying a comic book.

Melroy left the reactor area and returned to the office in the converted area. During the midafternoon, somebody named Leighton called him from the Atomic Power Authority executive office, wanting to know what was the trouble between him and the I.F.A.W. and saying that a protest against his alleged high-handed and arbitrary conduct had been received from the union.

Melroy explained, at length. He finished: "You people have twenty Stuart tanks, and a couple of thousand soldiers and cops and undercover-men, here, guarding against sabotage. Don't you realize that a workman who makes stupid or careless or impulsive mistakes is just as dangerous to the plant as any saboteur? If somebody shoots you through the head, it doesn't matter whether he planned to murder you for a year or just didn't know the gun was loaded; you're as dead one way as the other. I should think you'd thank me for trying to eliminate a serious source of danger."

"Now, don't misunderstand my position, Mr. Melroy," the other man hastened to say. "I sympathize with your attitude, entirely. But these people are going to make trouble."

"If they do, it'll be my trouble. I'm under contract to install this cybernetic system for you; you aren't responsible for my labor policy," Melroy replied. "Oh, have you had much to do with this man Crandall, yourself?"

"Have I had—!" Leighton sputtered for a moment. "I'm in charge of personnel, here; that makes me his top-priority target, all the time."

"Well, what sort of a character is he, anyhow? When I contracted with the I.F.A.W., my lawyer and their lawyer handled everything; I never even met him."

"Well—He has his job to do, the same as I have," Leighton said. "He does it conscientiously. But it's like this—anything a workman tells him is the truth, and anything an employer tells him is a dirty lie. Until proven differently, of course, but that takes a lot of doing. And he goes off half-cocked a lot of times. He doesn't stop to analyze situations very closely."

"That's what I was afraid of. Well, you tell him you don't have any control over my labor relations. Tell him to bring his gripes to me."

At sixteen-thirty, Doris Rives came in, finding him still at his desk.

"I have the written tests all finished, and I have about twenty of the tests and interviews completed," she said. "I'll have to evaluate the results, though. I wonder if there's a vacant desk around here, anywhere, and a record player."

"Yes, sure. Ask Joan to fix you up; she'll find a place for you to work. And if you're going to be working late, I'll order some dinner for you from the cafeteria. I'm going to be here all evening, myself."

Sid Keating came in, a short while later, peeling out of his overcoat, jacket and shoulder holster.

"I don't think they got everything out of that reactor," he said. "Radioactivity's still almost active-normal—about eight hundred REM's—and the temperature's away up, too. That isn't lingering radiation; that's prompt radiation."

"Radioactivity hasn't dropped since morning; I'd think so, too," Melroy said. "What are they getting on the breakdown counter?"

"Mostly neutrons and alpha-particles. I talked to Fred Hausinger, the maintenance boss; he doesn't like it, either."

"Well, I'm no nuclear physicist," Melroy disclaimed, "but all that alpha stuff looks like a big chunk of Pu-239 left inside. What's Fred doing about it?"

"Oh, poking around inside the reactor with telemetered scanners and remote-control equipment. When I left, he had a gang pulling out graphite blocks with RC-tongs. We probably won't get a chance to work on it much before thirteen-hundred tomorrow." He unzipped a bulky brief case he had brought in under his arm and dumped papers onto his desk. "I still have this stuff to get straightened out, too."

"Had anything to eat? Then call the cafeteria and have them send up three dinners. Dr. Rives is eating here, too. Find out what she wants; I want pork chops."

"Uh-huh; Li'l Abner Melroy; po'k chops unless otherwise specified." Keating got up and went out into the middle office. As he opened the door. Melroy could hear a recording of somebody being given a word-association test.

Half an hour later, when the food arrived, they spread their table on a relatively clear desk in the middle office. Doris Rives had finished evaluating the completed tests; after dinner, she intended going over the written portions of the uncompleted tests.

"How'd the finished tests come out?" Melroy asked her.

"Better than I'd expected. Only two washouts," she replied. "Harvey Burris and Julius Koffler."

"Oh, *no*!" Keating wailed. "The I.F.A.W. steward, and the loudest-mouthed I-know-my-rights boy on the job!"

"Well, wasn't that to be expected?" Melroy asked. "If you'd seen the act those two put on—"

"They're both inherently stupid, infantile, and deficient in reasoning ability and judgment," Doris said. "Koffler is a typical adolescent problem-child show-off type, and Burris is an almost perfect twelve-year-old schoolyard bully. They both have inferiority complexes long enough to step on. If the purpose of this test is what I'm led to believe it is, I can't, in professional good conscience, recommend anything but that you get rid of both of them."

"What Bob's getting at is that they're the very ones who can claim, with the best show of plausibility, that the test is just a pretext to fire them for union activities," Melroy explained. "And the worst of it is, they're

the only ones."

"Maybe we can scrub out a couple more on the written tests alone. Then they'll have company," Keating suggested.

"No, I can't do that." Doris was firm on the point. "The written part of the test was solely for ability to reason logically. Just among the three of us, I know some university professors who'd flunk on that. But if the rest of the tests show stability, sense of responsibility, good judgment, and a tendency to think before acting, the subject can be classified as a safe and reliable workman."

"Well, then, let's don't say anything till we have the tests all finished," Keating proposed.

"No!" Melroy cried. "Every minute those two are on the job, there's a chance they may do something disastrous. I'll fire them at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

"All right," Keating shook his head. "I only work here. But don't say I didn't warn you."

By 0930 the next morning, Keating's forebodings began to be realized. The first intimation came with a phone call to Melroy from Crandall, who accused him of having used the psychological tests as a fraudulent pretext for discharging Koffler and Burris for union activities. When Melroy rejected his demand that the two men be reinstated, Crandall demanded to see the records of the tests.

"They're here at my office," Melroy told him. "You're welcome to look at them, and hear recordings of the oral portions of the tests. But I'd advise you to bring a professional psychologist along, because unless you're a trained psychologist yourself, they're not likely to mean much to you."

"Oh, sure!" Crandall retorted. "They'd have to be unintelligible to ordinary people, or you couldn't get away with this frame-up! Well, don't worry, I'll be along to see them."

Within ten minutes, the phone rang again. This time it was Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man.

"We're much disturbed about this dispute between your company and the I.F.A.W.," he began.

"Well, frankly, so am I," Melroy admitted. "I'm here to do a job, not play Hatfields and McCoys with this union. I've had union trouble before, and it isn't fun. You're the gentleman who called me last evening, aren't you? Then you understand my position in the matter."

"Certainly, Mr. Melroy. I was talking to Colonel Bradshaw, the security officer, last evening. He agrees that a stupid or careless workman is, under some circumstances, a more serious threat to security than any saboteur. And we realize fully how dangerous those Doernberg-Giardanos are, and how much more dangerous they'd be if these cybernetic controls were improperly assembled. But this man Crandall is talking about calling a strike."

"Well, let him. In the first place, it'd be against me, not against the Atomic Power Authority. And, in the second place, if he does and it goes to Federal mediation, his demand for the reinstatement of those men will be thrown out, and his own organization will have to disavow his action, because he'll be calling the strike against his own contract."

"Well, I hope so." Leighton's tone indicated that the hope was rather dim. "I wish you luck; you're going to need it."

Within the hour, Crandall arrived at Melroy's office. He was a young man; he gave Melroy the impression of having recently seen military service; probably in the Indonesian campaign of '62 and '63; he also seemed a little cocky and over-sure of himself.

"Mr. Melroy, we're not going to stand for this," he began, as soon as he came into the room. "You're using these so-called tests as a pretext for getting rid of Mr. Koffler and Mr. Burris because of their legitimate union activities."

"Who gave you that idea?" Melroy wanted to know. "Koffler and Burris?"

"That's the complaint they made to me, and it's borne out by the facts," Crandall replied. "We have on record at least half a dozen complaints that Mr. Koffler has made to us about different unfair

work-assignments, improper working conditions, inequities in allotting overtime work, and other infractions of union-shop conditions, on behalf of Mr. Burris. So you decided to get rid of both of them, and you think you can use this clause in our contract with your company about persons of deficient intelligence. The fact is, you're known to have threatened on several occasions to get rid of both of them."

"I am?" Melroy looked at Crandall curiously, wondering if the latter were serious, and deciding that he was. "You must believe *anything* those people tell you. Well, they lied to you if they told you that."

"Naturally that's what you'd say," Crandall replied. "But how do you account for the fact that those two men, and only those two men, were dismissed for alleged deficient intelligence?"

"The tests aren't all made," Melroy replied. "Until they are, you can't say that they are the only ones disqualified. And if you look over the records of the tests, you'll see where Koffler and Burris failed and the others passed. Here." He laid the pile of written-test forms and the summary and evaluation sheets on the desk. "Here's Koffler's, and here's Burris'; these are the ones of the men who passed the test. Look them over if you want to."

Crandall examined the forms and summaries for the two men who had been discharged, and compared them with several random samples from the satisfactory pile.

"Why, this stuff's a lot of gibberish!" he exclaimed indignantly. "This thing, here: ... five Limerick oysters, six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers, seven hundred Macedonian warriors in full battle array, eight golden crowns from the ancient, secret crypts of Egypt, nine lymphatic, sympathetic, peripatetic old men on crutches, and ten revolving heliotropes from the Ipsy-Wipsy Institute!' Great Lord, do you actually mean that you're using this stuff as an excuse for depriving men of their jobs?"

"I warned you that you should have brought a professional psychologist along," Melroy reminded him. "And maybe you ought to get Koffler and Burris to repeat their complaints on a lie-detector, while you're at it. They took the same tests, in the same manner, as any of the others. They just didn't have the mental equipment to cope with them and the others did. And for that reason, I won't run the risk of having them working on this job."

"That's just your word against theirs," Crandall insisted obstinately. "Their complaint is that you framed this whole thing up to get rid of them."

"Why, I didn't even know who either of them were, until yesterday morning."

"That's not the way they tell it," Crandall retorted. "They say you and Keating have been out to get them ever since they were hired. You and your supervisors have been persecuting both of those men systematically. The fact that Burris has had grounds for all these previous complaints proves that."

"It proves that Burris has a persecution complex, and that Koffler's credulous enough to believe him," Melroy replied. "And that tends to confirm the results of the tests they failed to pass."

"Oh, so that's the line you're taking. You persecute a man, and then say he has a persecution complex if he recognizes the fact. Well, you're not going to get away with it, that's all I have to say to you." Crandall

flung the test-sheet he had been holding on to the desk. "That stuff's not worth the paper it's scribbled on!" He turned on his heel in an automatically correct about-face and strode out of the office.

Melroy straightened out the papers and put them away, then sat down at his desk, filling and lighting his pipe. He was still working at 1215 when Ben Puryear called him.

"They walked out on us," he reported. "Harry Crandall was out here talking to them, and at noon the whole gang handed in their wrist-Geigers and dosimeters and cleared out their lockers. They say they aren't coming back till Burris and Koffler come back to work with them."

"Then they aren't coming back, period," Melroy replied. "Crandall was to see me, a couple of hours ago. He tells me that Burris and Koffler told him that we've been persecuting Burris; discriminating against him. You know of anything that really happened that might make them think anything like that?"

"No. Burris is always yelling about not getting enough overtime work, but you know how it is: he's just a roustabout, a common laborer. Any overtime work that has to be done is usually skilled labor on this job. We generally have a few roustabouts to help out, but he's been allowed to make overtime as much as any of the others."

"Will the time-records show that?"

"They ought to. I don't know what he and Koffler told Crandall, but whatever it was, I'll bet they were lying."

"That's all right, then. How's the reactor, now?"

"Hausinger says the count's down to safe limits, and the temperature's down to inactive normal. He and his gang found a big chunk of plutonium, about one-quarter CM, inside. He got it out."

"All right. Tell Dr. Rives to gather up all her completed or partially completed test records and come out to the office. You and the others stay on the job; we may have some men for you by this afternoon; tomorrow morning certainly."

He hung up, then picked up the communicator phone and called his secretary.

"Joan, is Sid Keating out there? Send him in, will you?"

Keating, when he entered, was wearing the lugubriously gratified expression appropriate to the successful prophet of disaster.

"All right, Cassandra," Melroy greeted him. "I'm not going to say you didn't warn me. Look. This strike is illegal. It's a violation of the Federal Labor Act of 1958, being called without due notice of intention,

without preliminary negotiation, and without two weeks' time-allowance."

"They're going to claim that it isn't a strike. They're going to call it a 'spontaneous work-stoppage.'"

"Aah! I hope I can get Crandall on record to that effect; I'll fire every one of those men for leaving their work without permission and absence from duty without leave. How many of our own men, from Pittsburgh, do we have working in these machine shops and in the assembly shop here? About sixty?"

"Sixty-three. Why? You're not going to use them to work on the reactor, are you?"

"I just am. They're all qualified cybernetics technicians; they can do this work better than this gang we've had to hire here. Just to be on the safe side, I'm promoting all of them, as of oh-eight-hundred this morning, to assistant gang-foremen, on salaries. That'll take them outside union jurisdiction."

"But how about our contract with the I.F.A.W.?"

"That's been voided, by Crandall's own act, in interfering with the execution of our contract with the Atomic Power Authority. You know what I think? I think the I.F.A.W. front office is going to have to disavow this. It'll hurt them to do it, but they'll have to. Crandall's put them in the middle on this."

"How about security clearance for our own men?"

"Nothing to that," Melroy said. "Most of them are security-cleared, already, from the work we did installing that counter-rocket control system on the U.S.S. *Alaska*, and the work we did on that symbolic-logic computer for the Philadelphia Project. It may take all day to get the red tape unwound, but I think we can be ready to start by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

By the time Keating had rounded up all the regular Melroy Engineering Corporation employees and Melroy had talked to Colonel Bradshaw about security-clearance, it was 1430. A little later, he was called on the phone by Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man.

"Melroy, what are you trying to do?" the Power Authority man demanded. "Get this whole plant struck shut? The I.F.A.W.'s madder than a shot-stung bobcat. They claim you're going to bring in strike-breakers; they're talking about picketing the whole reactor area."

"News gets around fast, here, doesn't it?" Melroy commented. He told Leighton what he had in mind. The Power Authority man was considerably shaken before he had finished.

"But they'll call a strike on the whole plant! Have you any idea what that would mean?"

"Certainly I have. They'll either call it in legal form, in which case the whole thing will go to mediation and get aired, which is what I want, or they'll pull a Pearl Harbor on you, the way they did on me. And in that

case, the President will have to intervene, and they'll fly in technicians from some of the Armed Forces plants to keep this place running. And in that case, things'll get settled that much quicker. This Crandall thinks these men I fired are martyrs, and he's preaching a crusade. He ought to carry an *advocatus diaboli* on his payroll, to scrutinize the qualifications of his martyrs, before he starts canonizing them."

A little later, Doris Rives came into the office, her hands full of papers and cards.

"I have twelve more tests completed," she reported. "Only one washout."

Melroy laughed. "Doctor, they're all washed out," he told her. "It seems there was an additional test, and they all flunked it. Evinced willingness to follow unwise leadership and allow themselves to be talked into improper courses of action. You go on in to New York, and take all the test-material, including sound records, with you. Stay at the hotel—your pay will go on—till I need you. There'll be a Federal Mediation hearing in a day or so."

He had two more telephone calls. The first, at 1530, was from Leighton. Melroy suspected that the latter had been medicating his morale with a couple of stiff drinks: his voice was almost jaunty.

"Well, the war's on," he announced. "The I.F.A.W.'s walking out on the whole plant, at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

"In violation of the Federal Labor Act, Section Eight, paragraphs four and five," Melroy supplemented. "Crandall really has stuck his neck in the guillotine. What's Washington doing?"

"President Hartley is ordering Navy personnel flown in from Kennebunkport Reaction Lab; they will be here by about oh-three-hundred tomorrow. And a couple of Federal mediators are coming in to La Guardia at seventeen hundred; they're going to hold preliminary hearings at the new Federal Building on Washington Square beginning twenty hundred. A couple of I.F.A.W. negotiators are coming in from the national union headquarters at Oak Ridge: they should be getting in about the same time. You'd better be on hand, and have Dr. Rives there with you. There's a good chance this thing may get cleared up in a day or so."

"I will undoubtedly be there, complete with Dr. Rives," Melroy replied. "It will be a pleasure!"

An hour later, Ben Puryear called from the reactor area, his voice strained with anger.

"Scott, do you know what those—" He gargled obscenities for a moment. "You know what they've done? They've re-packed the Number One Doernberg-Giardano; got a chain-reaction started again."

"Who?"

"Fred Hausinger's gang. Apparently at Harry Crandall's orders. The excuse was that it would be unsafe to leave the reactor in its dismantled condition during a prolonged shutdown—they were assuming, I

suppose, that the strike would be allowed to proceed unopposed—but of course the real reason was that they wanted to get a chain-reaction started to keep our people from working on the reactor."

"Well, didn't Hausinger try to stop them?"

"Not very hard. I asked him what he had that deputy marshal's badge on his shirt and that Luger on his hip for, but he said he had orders not to use force, for fear of prejudicing the mediators."

Melroy swore disgustedly. "All right. Gather up all our private papers, and get Steve and Joe, and come on out. We only work here—when we're able."

Doris Rives was waiting on the street level when Melroy reached the new Federal Building, in what had formerly been the Greenwich Village district of Manhattan, that evening. She had a heavy brief case with her, which he took.

"I was afraid I'd keep you waiting," she said. "I came down from the hotel by cab, and there was a frightful jam at Fortieth Street, and another one just below Madison Square."

"Yes, it gets worse every year. Pardon my obsession, but nine times out of ten—ninety-nine out of a hundred—it's the fault of some fool doing something stupid. Speaking about doing stupid things, though—I did one. Forgot to take that gun out of my overcoat pocket, and didn't notice that I had it till I was on the subway, coming in. Have a big flashlight in the other pocket, but that doesn't matter. What I'm worried about is that somebody'll find out I have a gun and raise a howl about my coming armed to a mediation hearing."

The hearing was to be held in one of the big conference rooms on the forty-second floor. Melroy was careful to remove his overcoat and lay it on a table in the corner, and then help Doris off with hers and lay it on top of his own. There were three men in the room when they arrived: Kenneth Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man, fiftyish, acquiring a waistline bulge and losing his hair: a Mr. Lyons, tall and slender, with white hair; and a Mr. Quillen, considerably younger, with plastic-rimmed glasses. The latter two were the Federal mediators. All three had been lounging in arm-chairs, talking about the new plays on Broadway. They all rose when Melroy and Doris Rives came over to join them.

"We mustn't discuss business until the others get here," Leighton warned. "It's bad enough that all three of us got here ahead of them; they'll be sure to think we're trying to take an unfair advantage of them. I suppose neither of you have had time to see any of the new plays."

Fortunately, Doris and Melroy had gone to the theater after dinner, the evening-before-last; they were able to join the conversation. Young Mr. Quillen wanted Doris Rives' opinion, as a psychologist, of the mental processes of the heroine of the play they had seen; as nearly as she could determine, Doris replied, the heroine in question had exhibited nothing even loosely describable as mental processes of any sort. They were still on the subject when the two labor negotiators, Mr. Cronnin and Mr. Fields, arrived. Cronnin was in his sixties, with the nearsighted squint and compressed look of concentration of an

old-time precision machinist; Fields was much younger, and sported a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Lyons, who seemed to be the senior mediator, thereupon called the meeting to order and they took their places at the table.

"Now, gentlemen—and Dr. Rives—this will be simply an informal discussion, so that everybody can see what everybody else's position in the matter is. We won't bother to make a sound recording. Then, if we have managed to reach some common understanding of the question this evening, we can start the regular hearing say at thirteen hundred tomorrow. Is that agreeable?"

It was. The younger mediator, Quillen, cleared his throat.

"It seems, from our information, that this entire dispute arises from the discharge, by Mr. Melroy, of two of his employees, named Koffler and Burris. Is that correct?"

"Well, there's also the question of the Melroy Engineering Corporation's attempting to use strike-breakers, and the Long Island Atomic Power Authority's having condoned this unfair employment practice," Cronnin said, acidly.

"And there's also the question of the I.F.A.W.'s calling a Pearl Harbor strike on my company," Melroy added.

"We resent that characterization!" Cronnin retorted.

"It's a term in common usage; it denotes a strike called without warning or declaration of intention, which this was," Melroy told him.

"And there's also the question of the I.F.A.W. calling a general strike, in illegal manner, at the Long Island Reaction Plant," Leighton spoke up. "On sixteen hours' notice."

"Well, that wasn't the fault of the I.F.A.W. as an organization," Fields argued. "Mr. Cronnin and I are agreed that the walk-out date should be postponed for two weeks, in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Labor Act."

"Well, how about my company?" Melroy wanted to know. "Your I.F.A.W. members walked out on me, without any notice whatever, at twelve hundred today. Am I to consider that an act of your union, or will you disavow it so that I can fire all of them for quitting without permission?"

"And how about the action of members of your union, acting on instructions from Harry Crandall, in re-packing the Number One Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactor at our plant, after the plutonium and the U-238 and the neutron-source containers had been removed, in order to re-initiate a chain reaction to prevent Mr. Melroy's employees from working on the reactor?" Leighton demanded. "Am I to understand that the union sustains that action, too?"

"I hadn't known about that," Fields said, somewhat startled.

"Neither had I," Cronnin added. "When did it happen?"

"About sixteen hundred today," Melroy told him.

"We were on the plane from Oak Ridge, then," Fields declared. "We know nothing about that."

"Well, are you going to take the responsibility for it, or aren't you?" Leighton insisted.

Lyons, who had been toying with a small metal paperweight, rapped on the table with it.

"Gentlemen," he interrupted. "We're trying to cover too many subjects at once. I suggest that we confine ourselves, at the beginning, to the question of the dismissal of these men, Burris and Koffler. If we find that the I.F.A.W. has a legitimate grievance in what we may call the Burris-Koffler question, we can settle that and then go on to these other questions."

"I'm agreeable to that," Melroy said.

"So are we," Cronnin nodded.

"All right, then. Since the I.F.A.W. is the complaining party in this question, perhaps you gentlemen should state the grounds for your complaints."

Fields and Cronnin exchanged glances: Cronnin nodded to Fields and the latter rose. The two employees in question, he stated, had been the victims of discrimination and persecution because of union activities. Koffler was the union shop-steward for the men employed by the Melroy Engineering Corporation, and Burris had been active in bringing complaints about unfair employment practices. Furthermore, it was the opinion of the I.F.A.W. that the psychological tests imposed on their members had been a fraudulent pretext for dismissing these two men, and, in any case, the practice of compelling workers to submit to such tests was insulting, degrading, and not a customary condition of employment.

With that, he sat down. Melroy was on his feet at once.

"I'll deny those statements, categorically and seriatim," he replied. "They are based entirely upon misrepresentations made by the two men who were disqualified by the tests and dropped from my payroll because of being, in the words of my contract with your union, 'persons of unsound mind, deficient intelligence and/or emotional instability.' What happened is that your local official, Crandall, accepted everything they told him uncritically, and you accepted everything Crandall told you, in the same spirit.

"Before I go on," Melroy continued, turning to Lyons, "have I your permission to let Dr. Rives explain about these tests, herself, and tell how they were given and evaluated?"

Permission granted by Lyons, Doris Rives rose. At some length, she explained the nature and purpose of the tests, and her method of scoring and correlating them.

"Well, did Mr. Melroy suggest to you that any specific employee or employees of his were undesirable and ought to be eliminated?" Fields asked.

"Certainly not!" Doris Rives became angry. "And if he had, I'd have taken the first plane out of here. That suggestion is insulting! And for your information, I never met Mr. Melroy before day-before-yesterday afternoon; I am not dependent upon him for anything; I took this job as an accommodation to Dr. Karl von Heydenreich, who ordinarily does such work for the Melroy company, and I'm losing money by remaining here. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, it does," Fields admitted. He was obviously impressed by mention of the distinguished Austrian psychologist's name. "If I may ask Mr. Melroy a question: I gather that these tests are given to all your employees. Why do you demand such an extraordinary level of intelligence from your employees, even common laborers?"

"Extraordinary?" Melroy echoed. "If the standards established by those tests are extraordinary, then God help this country; we are becoming a race of morons! I'll leave that statement to Dr. Rives for confirmation; she's already pointed out that all that is required to pass those tests is ordinary adult mental capacity.

"My company specializes in cybernetic-control systems," he continued. "In spite of a lot of misleading colloquial jargon about 'thinking machines' and 'giant brains', a cybernetic system doesn't really think. It only does what it's been designed *and built* to do, and if somebody builds a mistake into it, it will automatically and infallibly repeat that mistake in practice."

"He's right," Cronnin said. "The men that build a machine like that have got to be as smart as the machine's supposed to be, or the machine'll be as dumb as they are."

Fields turned on him angrily. "Which side are you supposed to be on, anyhow?" he demanded.

"You're probably a lawyer," Melroy said. "But I'll bet Mr. Cronnin's an old reaction-plant man." Cronnin nodded unthinkingly in confirmation. "All right, then. Ask him what those Doernberg-Giardanos are like. And then let me ask you: Suppose some moron fixed up something that would go wrong, or made the wrong kind of a mistake himself, around one of those reactors?"

It was purely a rhetorical question, but, much later, when he would have time to think about it, Scott Melroy was to wonder if ever in history such a question had been answered so promptly and with such dramatic calamitousness.

Three seconds after he stopped speaking, the lights went out.

For a moment, they were silent and motionless. Then somebody across the table from Melroy began to say, "What the devil—?" Doris Rives, beside him, clutched his arm. At the head of the table, Lyons was fuming impatiently, and Kenneth Leighton snapped a pocket-lighter and held it up.

The Venetian-screened windows across the room faced east. In the flicker of the lighter, Melroy made his way around to them and drew open the slats of one, looking out. Except for the headlights of cars, far down in the street, and the lights of ships in the harbor, the city was completely blacked out. But there was one other, horrible, light far away at the distant tip of Long Island—a huge ball of flame, floating upward at the tip of a column of fiery gas. As he watched, there were twinkles of unbearable brightness at the base of the pillar of fire, spreading into awesome sheet-flashes, and other fireballs soared up. Then the sound and the shock-wave of the first blast reached them.

"The main power-reactors, too," Melroy said to himself, not realizing that he spoke audibly. "Too well shielded for the blast to get them, but the heat melted the fissionables down to critical mass."

Leighton, the lighter still burning, was beside him, now.

"That's not—God, it can't be anything else! Why, the whole plant's gone! There aren't enough other generators in this area to handle a hundredth of the demand."

"And don't blame that on my alleged strike-breakers," Melroy warned. "They hadn't got security-cleared to enter the reactor area when this happened."

"What do you think happened?" Cronnin asked. "One of the Doernberg-Giardanos let go?"

"Yes. Your man Crandall. If he survived that, it's his bad luck," Melroy said grimly. "Last night, while Fred Hausinger was pulling the fissionables and radioactives out of the Number One breeder, he found a big nugget of Pu-239, about one-quarter CM. I don't know what was done with it, but I do know that Crandall had the maintenance gang repack that reactor, to keep my people from working on it. Nobody'll ever find out just what happened, but they were in a hurry; they probably shoved things in any old way. Somehow, that big subcritical nugget must have got back in, and the breeding-cans, which were pretty ripe by that time, must have been shoved in too close to it and to one another. You know how fast those D-G's work. It just took this long to build up CM for a bomb-type reaction. You remember what I was saying before the lights went out? Well, it happened. Some moron—some untested and undetected moron—made the wrong kind of a mistake."

"Too bad about Crandall. He was a good kid, only he didn't stop to think often enough," Cronnin said. "Well, I guess the strike's off, now; that's one thing."

"But all those people, out there!" Womanlike, Doris Rives was thinking particularly rather than generally and of humans rather than abstractions. "It must have killed everybody for miles around."

Sid Keating, Melroy thought. And Joe Ricci, and Ben Puryear, and Steve Chalmers, and all the workmen whom he had brought here from Pittsburgh, to their death. Then he stopped thinking about them. It didn't do any good to think of men who'd been killed; he'd learned that years ago, as a kid second lieutenant in Korea. The people to think about were the millions in Greater New York, and up the Hudson Valley to Albany, and as far south as Trenton, caught without light in the darkness, without heat in the dead of winter, without power in subways and skyscrapers and on railroads and interurban lines.

He turned to the woman beside him.

"Doris, before you could get your Board of Psychiatry and Neurology diploma, you had to qualify as a regular M.D., didn't you?" he asked.

"Why, yes—"

"Then you'd better report to the nearest hospital. Any doctor at all is going to be desperately needed, for

the next day or so. Me, I still have a reserve major's commission in the Army Corps of Engineers. They're probably calling up reserve officers, with any radios that are still working. Until I hear differently, I'm ordering myself on active duty as of now." He looked around. "Anybody know where the nearest Army headquarters is?"

"There's a recruiting station down on the thirty-something floor," Quillen said. "It's probably closed, now, though."

"Ground Defense Command; Midtown City," Leighton said. "They have a medical section of their own; they'll be glad to get Dr. Rives, too."

Melroy helped her on with her coat and handed her her handbag, then shrugged into his own overcoat and belted it about him, the weight of the flashlight and the automatic sagging the pockets. He'd need both, the gun as much as the light—New York had more than its share of vicious criminals, to whom this power-failure would be a perfect devilsend. Handing Doris the light, he let her take his left arm. Together, they left the room and went down the hallway to the stairs and the long walk to the darkened street below, into a city that had suddenly been cut off from its very life-energy. A city that had put all its eggs in one basket, and left the basket in the path of any blundering foot.

THE END

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