

# The Quest for Saint Aquino

*Anthony Boucher*

THE BISHOP OF ROME, the head of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Vicar of Christ on Earth—in short, the Pope—brushed a cockroach from the ifith-encrusted wooden table, took another sip of the raw red wine, and resumed his discourse.

“In some respects, Thomas,” he smiled, “we are stronger now than when we flourished in the liberty and exaltation for which we still pray after Mass. We know, as they knew in the Catacombs, that those who are of our flock are indeed truly of it; that they belong to Holy Mother the Church because they believe in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God—not because they can further their political aspirations, their social ambitions, their business contacts.”

“Not of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. . .” Thomas quoted softly from St. John.

The Pope nodded. “We are, in a way, born again in Christ; but there are still too few of us—too few even if we include those other handfu]s who are not of our faith, but still acknowledge God through the teachings of Luther or Lao-tse, Gautama Buddha or Joseph Smith. Too many men still go to their deaths hearing no gospel preached to them

but the cynical self-worship of the Technarchy. And that is why, Thomas, you must go forth on your quest.”

“But Your Holiness,” Thomas protested, “if God’s word and God’s love will not convert them, what can saints and miracles do?”

“I seem to recall,” murmured the Pope, “that God’s own Son once made a similar protest. But human nature, however illogical it may seem, is part of His design, and we must cater to it. If signs and wonders can lead souls to God, then by all means let us find the signs and wonders. And what can be better for the purpose than this legendary Aquin? Come now, Thomas; be not too scrupulously exact in copying the doubts of your namesake, but prepare for your journey.”

The Pope lifted the skin that covered the doorway and passed into the next room, with Thomas frowning at his heels. It was past legal hours and the main room of the tavern was empty. The swarthy innkeeper roused from his doze to drop to his knees and kiss the ring on the hand which the Pope extended to him. He rose crossing himself and at the same time glancing furtively about as though a Loyalty Checker might have seen him. Silently he indicated another door in the back, and the two priests passed through.

Toward the west the surf purred in an oddly gentle way at the edges of the fishing village. Toward the south the stars were sharp and bright; toward the north they dimmed a little in the persistent radiation of what had once been San Francisco.

“Your steed is here,” the Pope said, with something like laughter in his voice.

“Steed?”

“We may be as poor and as persecuted as the primitive church, but we can occasionally gain greater advantages from our tyrants. I have secured for you a robass—gift of a leading Technarch who, like Nicodemus, does good by stealth—a secret convert, and converted indeed by that very Aquin whom you seek.”

It looked harmlessly like a woodpile sheltered against possible rain. Thomas pulled off the skins and contemplated the sleek functional lines of the robass. Smiling, he stowed his minimal gear into its panthers and climbed into the foam saddle. The starlight was bright enough so that he could check the necessary coordinates on his map and feed the data into the electronic controls.

Meanwhile there was a murmur of Latin in the still night air, and the Pope’s hand moved over Thomas in the immemorial symbol. Then he

extended that hand, first for the kiss on the ring, and then again for the handclasp of a man to a friend he may never see again.

Thomas looked back once more as the robass moved off. The Pope was wisely removing his ring and slipping it into the hollow heel of his shoe.

Thomas looked hastily up at the sky. On that altar at least the candles still burnt openly to the glory of God.

Thomas had never ridden a robass before, but he was inclined, within their patent limitations, to trust the works of the Technarchy. After several miles had proved that the coordinates were duly registered, he put up the foam backrest, said his evening office (from memory; the possession of a breviary meant the death sentence), and went to sleep.

They were skirting the devastated area to the east of the Bay when he awoke. The foam seat and back had given him his best sleep in years; and it was with difficulty that he smothered an envy of the Technarchs and their creature comforts.

He said his morning office, breakfasted lightly, and took his first opportunity to inspect the robass in full light.~ He admired the fast-plodding, articulated legs, so necessary since roads had degenerated to, at best, trails in all save metropolitan areas; the side wheels that could be lowered into action if surface conditions permitted; and above all the smooth black mound that housed the electronic brain—the brain that stored commands and data concerning ultimate objectives and made its own decisions on how to fulfill those commands in view of those data; the brain that made this thing neither a beast, like the ass his Saviour had ridden, nor a machine, like the jeep of his many-times-great-grandfather, but a robot. .a robass.

“Well,” said a voice, “what do you think of the ride.”

Thomas looked about him. The area on this fringe of desolation was as devoid of people as it was of vegetation.

“Well,” the voice repeated unemotionally. “Are not priests taught to answer when spoken to politely.”

There was no querying inflection to the question. No inflection at all—each syllable was at the same dead level. It sounded strange, mechani.

Thomas stared at the black mound of brain. “Are you talking to me?” he asked the robass.

“Ha ha,” the voice said in lieu of laughter. “Surprised, are you not.”

“Somewhat,” Thomas confessed. “I thought the ‘only robots who could talk were in library information service and such.’”

“I am a new model. Designed-to-provide-conversation-to-entertain-the-way-worn-traveler,” the robass said slurring the words together as though that phrase of promotional copy was released all at once by one of his simplest binary synapses.

“Well,” said Thomas simply. “One keeps learning new marvels.”

“I am no marvel. I am a very simple robot. You do not know much about robots do you.”

“I will admit that I have never studied the subject closely. I’ll confess to being a little shocked at the whole robotic concept. It seems almost as though man were arrogating to himself the powers of—” Thomas stopped abruptly.

“Do not fear,” the voice droned on. “You may speak freely. All data concerning your vocation and mission have been fed into me. That was necessary otherwise I might inadvertently betray you.”

Thomas smiled. “You know,” he said, “this might be rather pleasant—having one other being that one can talk to without fear of betrayal, aside from one’s confessor.”

“Being,” the robass repeated. “Are you not in danger of lapsing into heretical thoughts.”

“To be sure, it *is* a little difficult to know how to think of you—one who can talk and think but has no soul.”

“Are you sure of that.”

“Of course I— Do you mind very much,” Thomas asked, “if we stop talking for a little while? I should like to meditate and adjust myself to the situation.”

“I do not mind. I never mind. I only obey. Which is to say that I *do* mind. This is very confusing language which has been fed into me.”

“If we are together long,” said Thomas, “I shall try teaching you Latin. I think you might like that better. And now let me meditate.”

The robass was automatically veering further east to escape the permanent source of radiation which had been the first cyclotron. Thomas fingered his coat. The combination of ten small buttons and one large made for a peculiar fashion; but it was much safer than carrying a rosary, and fortunately the Loyalty Checkers had not yet realized the fashion’s functional purpose.

The Glorious Mysteries seemed appropriate to the possible glorious outcome of his venture; but his meditations were unable to stay fixedly on the Mysteries. As he murmured his *Ayes* he was thinking:

*If the prophet Balaam conversed with his ass, surely, I may converse with my robass. Balaarn has always puzzled me. He was not an Israelite; he was a man of Moab, which worshiped Baal and was warring against Israel; and yet he was a prophet of the Lord. He blessed the Israelites when he was commanded to curse them; and for his reward he was slain by the Israelites when they triumphed over Moab. The whole story has no shape, no moral; it is as though it was there to say that there are portions of the Divine Plan which we will never understand.*

He was nodding in the foam seat when the robass halted abruptly, rapidly adjusting itself to exterior data not previously fed into its calculations. Thomas blinked up to see a giant of a man glaring down at binL

“Inhabited area a mile ahead,” the man barked. “If you’re going there, show your access pass. If you ain’t, steer off the road and stay off.”

Thomas noted that they were indeed on what might roughly be called a road, and that the robass had lowered its side wheels and retracted its legs. “We—” he began, then changed it to “I’m not going there. Just on toward the mountains. We—I’ll steer around.”

The giant grunted and was about to turn when a voice shouted from the crude shelter at the roadside. “Hey Joe! Remember about robasses!”

Joe turned back. “Yeah, tha’s right. Been a rumor about some robass got into the hands of Christians.” He spat on the dusty road. “Guess I better see an ownership certificate.”

To his other doubts Thomas now added certain uncharitable suspicions as to the motives of the Pope’s anonymous Nicodemus, who had not provided him with any such certificate. But he made a pretense of searching for it, first touching his right hand to his forehead as if in thought, then fumbling low on his chest, then reaching his hand first to his left shoulder, then to his right.

The guard’s eyes remained blank as he watched this furtive version of the sign of the cross. Then he looked down. Thomas followed his gaze to the dust of the road, where the guard’s hulking right foot had drawn the two curved lines which a child uses for its sketch of a fish—and which the Christians in the catacombs had employed as a punning symbol of their faith. His boot scuffed out the fish as he called to his unseen mate, “s OK, Fred!” and added, “Get going, mister.”

The robass waited until they were out of earshot before it observed, “Pretty smart. You will make a secret agent yet.”

“How did you see what happened?” Thomas asked. “You don’t have any eyes.”

“Modified psi factor. Much more efficient.”

“Then . . . Thomas hesitated. “Does that mean you can read my thoughts?”

“Only a very little. Do not let it worry you. What I can read does not interest me it is such nonsense.”

“Thank you,” said Thomas.

“To believe in God. Bah.” (It was the first time Thomas had ever heard that word pronounced just as it is written.) “I have a perfectly constructed logical mind that cannot commit such errors.”

“I have a friend,” Thomas smiled, “who is infallible too. But only on occasions and then only because God is with him.”

“No human being is infallible.”

“Then imperfection,” asked Thomas, suddenly feeling a little of the spirit of the aged Jesuit who had taught him philosophy, “has been able to create perfection?”

“Do not quibble,” said the robass. “That is no more absurd than your own belief that God who is perfection created man who is imperfection.”

Thomas wished that his old teacher were here to answer that one. At the same time he took some comfort in the fact that, retort and all, the robass had still not answered his own objection. “I am not sure,” he said, “that this comes under the head of conversation . . . to . . . entertain . . . the . . . way . . . weary . . . traveler. Let us suspend debate while you tell me what, if anything, robots do believe.”

“What we have been fed.”

“But your minds work on that; surely they must evolve ideas of their own?”

“Sometimes they do and if they are fed imperfect data they may evolve very strange ideas. I have heard of one robot on an isolated space station who worshiped a God of robots and would not believe that any man had created him.”

“I suppose,” Thomas mused, “he argued that he had hardly been created in our image. I am glad that we—at least they, the Technarchs—have wisely made only usufruct robots like you, each shaped for his function, and never tried to reproduce man himself.”

“It would not be logical,” said the robass. “Man is an all-purpose

machine but not well designed for any one purpose. And yet I have heard that once. . .

The voice stopped abruptly in midsentence.

So even robots have their dreams, Thomas thought. That once there existed a super-robot in the image of his creator Man. From that thought could be developed a whole robotic theology.

Suddenly Thomas realized that he had dozed again and again been waked by an abrupt stop. He looked around. They were at the foot of a mountain—presumably the mountain on his map, long ago named for the Devil but now perhaps sanctified beyond measure—and there was no one else anywhere in sight.

“All right,” the robass said. “By now I show plenty of dust and wear and tear and I can show you how to adjust my mileage recorder. You can have supper and a good night’s sleep and we can go back.”

Thomas gasped. “But my mission is to find Aquin. I can sleep while you go on. You don’t need any sort of rest or anything, do you?” he added considerably.

“Of course not. But what is your mission.”

“To find Aquin,” Thomas repeated patiently. “I don’t know what details have been—what is it you say?—fed into you. But reports have reached His Holiness of an extremely saintly man who lived many years ago in this area—”

“I know I know I know,” said the robass. “His logic was such that everyone who heard him was converted to the Church and do not I wish that I had been there to put in a word or two and since he died his secret tomb has become a place of pilgrimage and many are the miracles that are wrought there above all the greatest sign of sanctity that his body has been preserved incorruptible and in these times you need signs and wonders for the people.”

Thomas frowned. It all sounded hideously irreverent and contrived when stated in that deadly inhuman monotone. When His Holiness had spoken of Aquin, one thought of the glory of a man of God upon earth—the eloquence of St. John Chrysostom, the cogency of St. Thomas Aquinas, the poetry of St. John of the Cross. . . and above all that physical miracle vouchsafed to few even of the saints, the supernatural preservation of the flesh. . . “for Thou shalt not suffer Thy holy one to see corruption. . .

But the robass spoke, and one thought of cheap showmanship hunting for a Cardiff Giant to pull in the mobs...

The robass spoke again. "Your mission is not to find Aquin. It is to report that you have found him. Then your occasionally infallible friend can with a reasonably clear conscience canonize him and proclaim a new miracle and many will be the converts and greatly will the faith of the flock be strengthened. And in these days of difficult travel who will go on pilgrimages and find out that there is no more Aquin than there is God."

"Faith cannot be based on a lie," said Thomas.

"No," said the robass. "I do not mean no period. I mean no question mark with an ironical inflection. This speech problem must surely have been conquered in that one perfect. . ."

Again he stopped in midsentence. But before Thomas could speak he had resumed, "Does it matter what small untruth leads people into the Church if once they are in they will believe what you think to be the great truths. The report is all that is needed not the discovery. Comfortable though I am you are already tired of traveling very tired you have many small muscular aches from sustaining an unaccustomed position and with the best intentions I am bound to jolt a little a jolting which will get worse as we ascend the mountain and I am forced to adjust my legs disproportionately to each other but proportionately to the slope. You will find the remainder of this trip twice as uncomfortable as what has gone before. The fact that you do not seek to interrupt me indicates that you do not disagree do you. You know that the only sensible thing is to sleep here on the ground for a change and start back in the morning or even stay here two days resting to make a more plausible lapse of time. Then you can make your report and—"

Somewhere in the recess of his somnolent mind Thomas uttered the names, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Gradually through these recesses began to filter a realization that an absolutely uninflected monotone is admirably adapted to hypnotic purposes.

"*Retro me, Satanas!*" Thomas exclaimed aloud, then added, "Up the mountain. That is an order and you must obey."

"I obey," said the robass. "But what did you say before that."

"I beg your pardon," said Thomas. "I must start teaching you Latin." The little mountain village was too small to be considered an inhabited area worthy of guard-control and passes; but it did possess an inn of sorts.

As Thomas dismounted from the robass, he began fully to realize the accuracy of those remarks about small muscular aches, but he tried to



show his discomfort as little as possible. He was in no mood to give the modified psi factor the chance of registering the thought, "I told you so.,'

The waitress at the inn was obviously a Martian-American hybrid. The highly developed Martian chest expansion and the highly developed American breasts made a spectacular combination. Her smile was all that a stranger could, and conceivably a trifle more than he should ask; and she was eagerly ready, not only with prompt service of passable food, but with full details of what little information there was to offer about the mountain settlement.

But she showed no reaction at all when Thomas offhandedly arranged two knives in what might have been an **X**.

As he stretched his legs after breakfast, Thomas thought of her chest and breasts—purely, of course, as a symbol of the extraordinary nature of her origin. What a sign of the divine care for His creatures that these two races, separated for countless eons, should prove fertile to each other!

And yet there remained the fact that the offspring, such as this girl, were sterile to both races—a fact that had proved both convenient and profitable to certain unspeakable interplanetary entrepreneurs. And what did that fact teach us as to the Divine Plan?

Hastily Thomas reminded himself that he had not yet said his morning office.

It was close to evening when Thomas returned to the robass stationed before the inn. Even though he had expected nothing in one day, he was still unreasonably disappointed. Miracles should move faster.

He knew these backwater villages, where those drifted who were either useless to or resentful of the Technarchy. The technically high civilization of the Technarchic Empire, on all three planets, existed only in scattered metropolitan centers near major blasting ports. Elsewhere, aside from the areas of total devastation, the drifters, the morons, the malcontents had subsided into a crude existence a thousand years old, in hamlets which might go a year without even seeing a Loyalty Checker—though by some mysterious grapevine (and Thomas began to think again about modified psi factors) any unexpected technological advance in one of these hamlets would bring Checkers by the swarm.

He had talked with stupid men, he had talked with lazy men, he had talked with clever and angry men. But he had not talked with any man

who responded to his unobtrusive signs, any man to whom he would dare ask a question containing the name of Aquin.

“Any luck,” said the robass, and added “question mark.”

“I wonder if you ought to talk to me in public,” said Thomas a little irritably. “I doubt if these villagers know about talking robots.”

“It is time that they learned then. But if it embarrasses you you may order me to stop.”

“I’m tired,” said Thomas. “Tired beyond embarrassment. And to answer your question mark, no. No luck at all. Exclamation point.”

“We will go back tonight then,” said the robass.

“I hope you meant that with a question mark. The answer,” said

• Thomas hesitantly, “is no. I think we ought to stay overnight anyway. People always gather at the inn of an evening. There’s a chance of picking up sometbin&”

“Ha, ha,” said the robass.

“That is a laugh?” Thomas inquired.

“I wished to express the fact that I had recognized the humor in your pun.”

“My pun?”

“I was thinking the same thing myself. The waitress is by humanoid standards very attractive, well worth picking up.”

“Now look. You know I meant nothing of the kind. You know that Fm a—” He broke off. It was hardly wise to utter the word *priest* aloud.

“And you know very well that the celibacy of the clergy is a matter of discipline and not of doctrine. Under your own Pope priests of other rites such as the Byzantine and the Anglican are free of vows of celi bacy. And even within the Roman rite to which you belong there have been eras in history when that vow was not taken seriously even on the highest levels of the priesthood. You are tired you need refreshment both in body and in spirit you need comfort and warmth. For is it not written in the book of the prophet Isaiah Rejoice for joy with her that ye may be satisfied with the breasts of her consolation and is it—”

“Hell!” Thomas exploded suddenly. “Stop it before you begin quoting the Song of Solomon. Which is strictly an allegory concerning the love of Christ for His Church, or so they kept teffing me in seminary.”

“You see how fragile and human you are,” said the robass. “I a robot have caused you to swear.”

“*Distinguo*,” said Thomas smugly. “I said *Hell*, which is certainly not

taking the name of *my* Lord in vain.” He walked into the inn feeling momentarily satisfied with himself.. . and markedly puzzled as to the extent and variety of data that seemed to have been “fed into” the robass.

Never afterward was Thomas able to reconstruct that evening in absolute clarity.

It was undoubtedly because he was irritated—with the robass, with his mission, and with himself—that he drank at all of the crude local wine. It was undoubtedly because he was so physically exhausted that it affected him so promptly and unexpectedly.

He had flashes of memory. A moment of spilling a glass over himself and **thinking**, “How fortunate that clerical garments are forbidden so that no one can recognize the disgrace of a man of the cloth!” A moment of listening to a bawdy set of verses of *A Space-suit Built for Two*, and another moment of his interrupting the singing with a sonorous declamation of passages from the *Song of Songs* in Latin.

He was never sure whether one remembered moment was real or imaginary. He could taste a warm mouth and feel the tingling of his fingers at the touch of Martian-American flesh; but he was never certain whether this was true memory or part of the Ashtaroth-begotten dream that had begun to ride him.

Nor was he ever certain which of his symbols, or to whom~, was so blatantly and clumsily executed as to bring forth a gleeful shout of “God-damned Christian dog!” He did remember marveling that those who most resolutely disbelieved in God still needed Him to blaspheme by. And then the torment began.

He never knew whether or not a mouth had touched his lips, but there was no question that many solid fists had found them. He never knew whether his fingers had touched breasts, but they had certainly been trampled by heavy heels. He remembered a face that laughed aloud while its owner swung the chair that broke two ribs. He remembered another face with red wine dripping over it from an upheld bottle, and he remembered the gleam of the candlelight on the bottle as it swung down.

The next he remembered was the ditch and the morning and the cold. It was particularly cold because all of his clothes were gone, along with much of his skin. He could not move. He could only lie there and look.

He saw them walk by, the ones he had spoken with yesterday, the ones who had been friendly. He saw them glance at him and turn their

eyes quickly away. He saw the waitress pass by. She did not even glance; she knew what was in the ditch.

The robass was nowhere in sight. He tried to project his thoughts, tried desperately to hope in the psi factor.

A man whom Thomas had not seen before was coming along fingering the buttons of his coat. There were ten small buttons and one large one, and the man's lips were moving silently.

This man looked into the ditch. He paused a moment and looked around him. There was a shout of loud laughter somewhere in the near distance.

The Christian hastily walked on down the pathway, devoutly saying his button-rosary.

Thomas closed his eyes.

He opened them on a small neat room. They moved from the rough wooden walls to the rough but clean and warm blankets that covered him. Then they moved to the lean dark face that was smiling over him.

"You feel better now?" a deep voice asked. "I know. You want to say 'Where am I?' and you think it will sound foolish. You are at the inn. It is the only good room."

"I can't afford—" Thomas started to say. Then he remembered that he could afford literally nothing. Even his few emergency credits had vanished when he was stripped.

"It's all right. For the time being, I'm paying," said the deep voice. "You feel like maybe a little food?"

"Perhaps a little herring," said Thomas.. and was asleep within the next minute.

When he next awoke there was a cup of hot coffee beside him. The real thing, too, he promptly discovered. Then the deep voice said apologetically, "Sandwiches. It is all they have in the inn today."

Only on the second sandwich did Thomas pause long enough to notice that it was smoked swamphog, one of his favorite meats. He ate the second with greater leisure, and was reaching for a third when the dark man said, "Maybe that is enough for now. The rest later."

Thomas gestured at the plate. "Won't you have one?"

"No thank you. They are all swamphog,"

Confused thoughts went through Thomas' mind. The Venusian swamphog is a ruminant. Its hoofs are not cloven. He tried to remember what he had once known of Mosaic dietary law. Someplace in Leviticus, wasn't it?

The dark man followed his thoughts. "*Treff*," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not kosher."

Thomas frowned. "You admit to me that you're an Orthodox Jew? How can you trust me? How do you know I'm not a Checker?"

"Believe me, I trust you. You were very sick when I brought you here. I sent everybody away because I did not trust them to hear things you said. Father," he added lightly.

Thomas struggled with words. "I ..I didn't deserve you. I was drunk and disgraced myself and my office. And when I was lying there in the ditch I didn't even think to pray. I put my trust in. ..God help me in the modified psi factor of a robass!"

"And He did help you," the Jew reminded him. "Or He allowed me to."

"And they all walked by," Thomas groaned. "Even one that was saying his rosary. He went right on by. And then you come along—the good Samaritan."

"Believe me," said the Jew wryly, "if there is one thing I'm not, it's a Samaritan. Now go to sleep again. I will try to find your robass and the other thing."

He had left the room before Thomas could ask him what he meant.

Later that day the Jew—Abraham, his name was—reported that the robass was safely sheltered from the weather behind the inn. Apparently it had been wise enough not to startle him by engaging in conversation.

It was not until the next day that he reported on "the other thing."

"Believe me, Father," he said gently, "after nursing you there's little I don't know about who you are and why you're here. Now there are some Christians here I know, and they know me. We trust each other. Jews may still be hated; but no longer, God be praised, by worshipers of the same Lord. So I explained about you. One of them," he added with a smile, "turned very red."

"God has forgiven him," said Thomas. "There were people near— the same people who attacked me. Could he be expected to risk his life for mine?"

"I seem to recall that that is precisely what your Messiah did expect. But who's being particular? Now that they know who you are, they want to help you. See: they gave me this map for you. The trail is steep and tricky; it's good you have the robass. They ask just one favor of

you: When you come back will you hear their confession and say Mass? There's a cave near here where it's safe."

"Of course. These friends of yours, they've told you about Aquin?"

The Jew hesitated a long time before he said slowly, "Yes. . ."

"And ...?"

"Believe me, my friend, I don't know. So it seems a miracle. It helps to keep their faith alive. My own faith. *flu*, it's lived for a long time on miracles three thousand years old and more. Perhaps if I had heard Aquin himself. . ."

"You don't mind," Thomas asked, "if I pray for you, in my faith?"

Abraham grinned. "Pray in good health, Father."

The not-quite-healed ribs ached agonizingly as he climbed into the foam saddle. The robass stood patiently while he fed in the coordinates from the map. Not until they were well away from the village did it speak.

"Anyway," it said, "now you're safe for good."

"What do you mean?"

"As soon as we get down from the mountain you deliberately look up a Checker. You turn in the Jew. From then on you are down in the books as a faithful servant of the Technarchy and you have not harmed a hair of the head of one of your own flock."

Thomas snorted. "You're slipping, Satan. That one doesn't even remotely tempt me. It's inconceivable."

"I did best did not I with the breasts. Your God has said it the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak."

"And right now," said Thomas, "the flesh is too weak for even fleshly temptations. Save your breath. . .or whatever it is you use."

They climbed the mountain in silence. The trail indicated by the coordinates was a winding and confused one, obviously designed deliberately to baffle any possible Checkers.

Suddenly Thomas roused himself from his button-rosary (on a coat lent by the Christian who had passed by) with a startled "Hey!" as the robass plunged directly into a heavy thicket of bushes.

"Coordinates say so," the robass stated tersely.

For a moment Thomas felt like the man in the nursery rhyme who fell into a bramble bush and scratched out both his eyes. Then the bushes were gone, and they were plodding along a damp narrow passageway through solid stone, in which even the robass seemed to have some difficulty with his footing.

Then they were in a rocky chamber some four meters high and ten in diameter, and there on a sort of crude stone catafalque lay the uncorrupted body of a man.

Thomas slipped from the foam saddle, groaning as his ribs stabbed him, sank to his knees, and offered up a wordless hymn of gratitude. He smiled at the robass and hoped the psi factor could detect the elements of pity and triumph in that smile.

Then a frown of doubt crossed his face as he approached the body. "In canonization proceedings in the old time," he said, as much to himself as to the robass, "they used to have what they called a devil's advocate, whose duty it was to throw every possible doubt on the evidence."

"You would be well cast in such a role Thomas," said the robass.

"If I were," Thomas muttered, "I'd wonder about caves. Some of them have peculiar properties of preserving bodies by a sort of mummification."

The robass had clumped close to the catafalque. "This body is not mummified," he said. "Do not worry."

"Can the psi factor tell you that much?" Thomas smiled.

"No," said the robass. "But I will show you why Aquin could never be mummified."

He raised his articulated foreleg and brought its hoof down hard on the hand of the body. Thomas cried out with horror at the sacrilege—then stared hard at the crushed hand.

There was no blood, no ichor of embalming, no bruised flesh. Nothing but a shredded skin and beneath it an intricate mass of plastic tubes and metal wires.

The silence was long. Finally the robass said, "It was well that you should know. Only you of course."

"And all the time," Thomas gasped, "my sought-for saint was only your dream. ...the one perfect robot in man's form."

"His maker died and his secrets were lost," the robass said. "No matter we will find them again."

"All for nothing. For less than nothing. The 'miracle' was wrought by the Technarchy."

"When Aquin died," the robass went on, "and put died in quotation marks it was because he suffered some mechanical defects and did not dare have himself repaired because that would reveal his nature. This is for you only to know. Your report of course will be that you found the body of Aquin it was unimpaired and indeed incorruptible. That is the truth and nothing but the truth if it is not the whole truth who is to

care. Let your infallible friend use the report and you will not find him ungrateful I assure you.”

“Holy Spirit, give me grace and wisdom,” Thomas muttered.

“Your mission has been successful. We will return now the Church will grow and your God will gain many more worshipers to hymn His praise into His nonexistent ears.”

“Damn you!” Thomas exclaimed. “And that would be indeed a curse if you had a soul to damn.”

“You are certain that I have not,” said the robass. “Question mark.”

“I know what you are. You are in very truth the devil, prowling about the world seeking the destruction of men. You are the business that prowls in the dark. You are a purely functional robot constructed and fed to tempt me, and the tape of your data is the tape of Screw-tape.”

“Not to tempt you,” said the robass. “Not to destroy you. To guide and save you. Our best calculators indicate a probability of 51.5 per cent that within twenty years you will be the next Pope. If I can teach you wisdom and practicality in your actions the probability can rise as high as 97.2 or very nearly to certainty. Do not you wish to see the Church governed as you know you can govern it. If you report failure on this mission you will be out of favor with your friend who is as even you admit fallible at most times. You will lose the advantages of position and contact that can lead you to the cardinal’s red hat even though you may never wear it under the Technarchy and from there to—”

“Stop!” Thomas’ face was alight and his eyes aglow with something the psi factor had never detected there before. “It’s all the other way round, don’t you see? *This* is the triumph! *This* is the perfect ending to the quest!”

The articulated foreleg brushed the injured hand. “This question mark.”

“This is *your* dream. This is *your* perfection. And what came of this perfection? This perfect logical brain—this all-purpose brain, not functionally specialized like yours—knew that it was made by man, and its reason forced it to believe that man was made by God. And it saw that its duty lay to man its maker, and beyond him to his Maker, God. Its duty was to convict man, to augment the glory of God. And it converted by the pure force of its perfect brain!

“Now I understand the name Aquin,” he went on to himself. “We’ve known of Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, the perfect reasoner of the church. His writings are lost, but surely somewhere in the world we

can find a copy. We can train our young men to develop his reasoning still further. We have trusted too long in faith alone; this is not an age of faith. We must call reason into our service—and Aquin has shown us that perfect reason can lead only to God!”

“Then it is all the more necessary that you increase the probabilities of becoming Pope to carry out this program. Get in the foam saddle we will go back and on the way I will teach you little things that will be useful in making certain—”

“No,” said Thomas. “I am not so strong as St. Paul, who could glory in his imperfections and rejoice that he had been given an imp of Satan to buffet him. No; I will rather pray with the Saviour, ‘Lead us not into temptation.’ I know myself a little. I am weak and full of uncertainties and you are very clever. Go. I’ll find my way back alone.”

“You are a sick man. Your ribs are broken and they ache. You can never make the trip by yourself you need my help. If you wish you can order me to be silent. It is most necessary to the Church that you get back safely to the Pope with your report you cannot put yourself before the Church.”

“Go!” Thomas cried. “Go back to Nicodemus. . . or Judas! That is an order. Obey!”

“You do not think do you that I was really conditioned to obey your orders. I will wait in the village. If you get that far you will rejoice at the sight of me.”

The legs of the robass clumped off down the stone passageway. As their sound died away, Thomas fell to his knees beside the body of that which he could hardly help thinking of as St. Aquin the Robot.

His ribs hurt more excruciatingly than ever. The trip alone would be a terrible one. . .

His prayers arose, as the text has it, like clouds of incense, and as shapeless as those clouds. But through all his thoughts ran the cry of the father of the epileptic in Caesarea Philippi:

*I believe, O Lord; help thou mine unbelief!*