



Security

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Suddenly Collins snapped the pencil between his fingers and hurled the pieces across the lab, where they clattered, rolled from the bench to the floor, and were still. For a moment he sat leaning against the desk, his hands trembling. He wasn't sure just when the last straw had been added, but he was sure that he had had enough. The restrictions, red tape, security measures of these government laboratories seemed to close in on his mind in boiling, chaotic waves of frustration. What was the good of his work, all this great installation, all the gleaming expensive equipment in the lab around him? He was alone. None of them seemed to share his problem, the unctuous, always correct Gordon, the easy-mannered, unbearable Mason, all of them gave him a feeling of actual physical sickness.

Gardner's "Nucleonics and Nuclear Problems" lay open on the desk before him, but he looked instead beyond through the clear curving glass windows toward the sweep of green hills and darkening sky and the shadows of the lower forests that gave Fair Oaks its name. Beside him unfinished lay the summaries of the day's experiments, and the unorganized, hurriedly jotted notes for tomorrow's work. The old intellectual alertness was gone. Delight in changing theory, in careful experimentation no longer sprang from his work and were a part of it. There was a dull, indefinable aching in his head and a dry, dissatisfied sensation in his mouth.

Along the ordered walks below his laboratory windows workers and technicians streamed toward the gates, checking out for the day through the usual mass of red tape, passes, and Geiger tests. Lights were flicking on in the long East Wing Dormitory across the quadrangle, and the mess hall, where he had recently eaten a tasteless supper, was lighted.

Shortly after restrictions had really begun to tighten up last fall, he had written to a worker who had published making a minor correction in his calculations and adding some suggestions arising from his own research. A week later his letter was returned completely censored, stamped "Security-Violation." It was that evasive Gordon's fault. He knew it, but he couldn't prove it. Collins suspected that the man was not a top-notch researcher and so was in administration. Perhaps Gordon was jealous of his own work.

Even the Journals were drying up. Endless innocuous papers recalculating the values of harmless constants and other such nonsense were all that was being published. They were hardly worth reading. Others were feeling the throttling effects of security measures, and isolated, lone

researchers were slowing down, listless and anemic from the loss of the life blood of science, the free interchange of information.

The present research job he was doing was coming slowly, but what difference did it make? It would never be published. Probably it would be filed with a Department of Defense code number as Research Report DDNE-42 dash-dash-dash. And there it would remain, top-secret, guarded, unread, useless. Somewhere in the desk drawers was the directive worded in the stiff military manner describing the procedures for clearing papers for publication. When he had first come here, he had tried that.

“Well, good, Collins,” Gordon, the Division Administrator, had said, “glad to check it over. Always happy when one of our men has something for publication. Gives the Division a good name. I'll let you know, but we have to be careful. Security you know.”

Somehow he had never heard. The first time he had made a pest of himself with Gordon who was polite, evasive, always plausible. Gordon, Gordon—it was becoming an obsession with him he knew, but the man appeared at every turn. He personified the system.

In the past months his work had seemed to clog up in details and slow down. The early days of broad, rapid outlines and facile sketching in of details were gone. Now the endless indignities, invasion of personal rights and freedom, the hamstringing of his work, the feeling of being cut off from the main currents of his field, filled him with despair, anger, and frustration.

Suddenly he raised his head, slammed the notebook shut and switched off the desk lamp. Not tonight. Tomorrow would be time enough to write out this stuff. He needed a drink.

The hall was dark as he locked the door to his lab except at the far end near the stairway where a patch of yellow light shone through an open doorway. Mason, he thought, Allan Mason, the one guy at Fair Oaks Nuclear Energy Laboratories who was always so damnedly cheerful, who didn't seem to mind the security restrictions, and who was seen so often with Gordon. As he walked rapidly past the open doorway, he caught a flashing impression from the corner of his eye of Mason's tall figure bent over his bench, his long legs wrapped around a lab stool, the perpetual unlit pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth. Then as he swung quickly toward the stairs, he heard Mason's cheerful hail.

“Hi, Milt, hold up a sec.”

Reluctantly he paused at the head of the stairs scowling momentarily, and then slowly turning and retraced his steps.

The lab was brightly lighted, and Mason stretched and smiled pleasantly.

"Come in, old man, I'm about ready to knock off for the evening. How goes it?"

Collins mumbled an O.K. trying to keep the irritation out of his voice, and Mason went on.

"Just finishing up some loose ends so I can get off to the Society meeting on Monday. You going?"

Shaking his head Collins felt his dislike for this man growing. The annual meeting of the North American Society of Theoretical Physicists. He didn't even give it any thought any more. Maybe he could go, but it didn't seem worth the effort. In the past he had tried to go to the meetings, but somehow work, rush work, some change of emphasis had come up on the project, and he had had to cancel his plans. He'd finally given up, but with Mason these things seemed to come easily, and he wondered why—

"That's too bad"—his voice droned pleasantly on, and Collins' eye caught several botany texts in the book rack above Mason's desk. So, he had time to read stuff outside of his field. His work was going well. He had time for meetings and was allowed to go to them—the anger rose slowly like a swelling bubble from the hard core of his stomach. Then he realized that Mason had stopped talking and was looking at him.

"Milt, you look glum tonight. Is there— Why not have supper with me, and we'll take in the movie in the lounge?"

"I've eaten already." Collins was on his feet. He forced a, "Thanks anyway. See you tomorrow. I'm—" and he was gone.

As he strode angrily across the quadrangle Mason's words and cheerful attitude rankled in his mind. The gravel of the walk spurted from under his shoes, and the night air was clear and cool. It was good at least to feel something other than despair again, even anger.

But once in his study with its attached bedroom and bath that made up his living quarters, he sank to the couch near his desk, all of the fight gone. He needed a drink. Today all the irritations, tensions, and suspicions of the past months seemed to close in on him. His work was going badly. Perhaps seeing Mason had brought it to a head. The fifth of bourbon in the bottom desk drawer was partly gone from the party last

month. He took a swallow neat, and the fire of the liquid burned and clawed its way down his throat and spread with blossoming warmth in his stomach.

Kicking off his shoes and loosening his tie he leaned back with the bottle on the floor beside him.

Later in the evening when the early clarity of thought had left him and his mind moved disjointedly in and out of seemingly brilliant, emotional solutions to his problem, he knew he must have a showdown. Lying back on the couch he drifted into sleep determined to have it out with Gordon in the morning—resign if necessary.

The momentary pause of lighting his cigarette gave Collins a chance to decide where to start, as he sat across from Gordon. The Division Administrator was older with a heavy-jowled, close shaven face, and he waited patiently for Collins to speak.

“Dr. Gordon, I am having a great deal of difficulty in making an adjustment both in my work and in my personal relations here at Fair Oaks, and last night I realized that I would have to talk to you about it.”

Gordon's face changed slightly, his eyebrows rising almost imperceptibly.

“So, what ... how do you mean, Milt?”

Use of the first name—the familiar approach thought Collins—administrative technique number blank blank dash blank.

“Dr. Gordon, these security measures we are under, the difficulty of publishing, of getting to scientific meetings, the problem of getting furloughs, lack of knowledge of what is going on in my own field, it's just a little too much. It's personally irritating, but it greatly hampers my work as well. Frankly, I'm against the entire security program as it now stands. If it isn't stopped research will ... well, simply be impossible. Free interchange of information is essential to—” His fingers were gripping the arms of his chair.

“Yes, of course, Milt, but corny as it sounds there is a war on you know. Oh, not a war with military weapons—yet, but a cold war of science and engineering, a struggle for supremacy in many fields of knowledge. If information of our work leaks out, gets to the enemy, we might as well not do that work. We can't be too careful.”

“I agree, but it goes too far.” He leaned forward. “My private mail is read, and on my last furlough I am certain I was watched from the time I

left the gates out there until I returned, and I don't like it. I can't prove it, but— That's getting to the point that life's not worth while.”

“Come now, Milt, don't you think you're taking this a little too seriously? You're getting stale, overwrought. You need a fresh point of view. Lots of our people feel as you do at one time or another, but most of us learn to live with these necessary regulations, and do our work in spite of them. Let me make a suggestion, relax, take a little time off, develop a hobby. Why not do some reading in a field of science other than your own. It's good for you. Several of the people here are doing it. I do it, Carter, even Mason for instance—”

Collins could feel the anger rising in him again.

“Look, Gordon, I'm not going to mince words. I'm sick and tired of this mess, and you might as well know it. You can have all your damn relaxations and hobbies, or what have you. I want to do my work, and if I can't do it here, I'm going somewhere where I can do it. In plain English unless we can have an understanding right now—I resign.”

It had come out, and Collins was breathing hard, but Gordon's expression hardly changed as he looked over the tips of his joined fingers, while the younger man stopped and crushed out his cigarette viciously in the ash disposer on the arm of his chair. Gordon doodled on a small pad for a moment, his eyes not meeting Collins'. Then he spoke slowly.

“I'm sorry you feel that way, Milt. I ... I'm afraid I cannot accept your resignation. You see,” he said softly, “none of us can leave Fair Oaks—now.”

Collins looked up, amazement and incredulity written on his face.

“What do you mean—can't leave? I can leave any time—”

Gordon slowly shook his head almost sadly. “No, only assistants, technicians, maintenance people, and they are carefully watched or restricted to this area. People like yourself, like me, we have information, knowledge which cannot be let out of government hands at this time. We're here probably for the ‘duration’; maybe longer.”

“But—this is barbarous. I—” the words clogged, jumbled as he tried to get them out. His emotions ran from anger, to amazement, to indignation, followed by a trickle of fear, and as he stared at Gordon, the fear grew. He could scarcely hear Gordon's words—

“Take my advice—relax—and forget your fears—accept the restrictions and go ahead—read in some other field—come in again when you've thought it out.” He was scarcely aware when Gordon slipped a

bound journal volume into his hands and walked with him to the door—and closed it behind him.

Collins left Gordon's office in Administration moving slowly, one arm hanging loosely by his side, the other clutching the book. The corridor stretched ahead into B Wing with its laboratories flooded with the glow of mid-morning sunshine, bright and unreal. His mind was dazed, his thinking processes stopped in a kind of stunned unbelief. He could not even quit now. An undercurrent of fear ran close to the surface of his confused mind. It was the end of science, the end of all his work. All of the stifling, strangling restrictions of security on his work, on his private life, came whirling back as a monstrous, formless threat, something unspeakably big and powerful and unbeatable against which he could not fight.

To his right as he moved slowly down the hall the double doors of the main library reading room were open with the stacks and study cubicles beyond, silent and restful. He paused and then entered crossing into the maze of the stacks through a grilled iron doorway. The important thing now was not to meet anyone, not to have to speak or smile or think. It was very important now to be alone and quiet.

He walked until he found an empty cubicle, the endless walls of books, repositories of knowledge, silent and reproachful around him. Knowledge and books such as these would soon be added to no longer. He slumped into the chair and gazed at the tiny reading desk with its softly glowing lamp and the small stack of volumes on the rack left by previous users. Absently he stared for a long time at the volume Gordon had given him as if seeing it for the first time. Then with a deliberate effort he opened it and thumbed through slowly only half seeing its pages. *The Journal of Botanical Research.*

The pages in the *Journal* were like a look through an open window. Outside of classified projects in "harmless" fields of research the work of science went on, papers were published, reputations were made, freedom still existed. He remembered Gordon's sleek smile and advice to relax and read in other fields. This stupid useless advice still rankled. Of course, he probably was stale, but to read junk like this!

Silently and in his mind, he cursed the day he had studied physics, better archeology or zoology, anything. Suddenly he stopped riffling the pages and leaned forward, rapidly turning back to something that had caught his eye. It was a three and one-half page paper on "The Statistical

Probability of Chromosome Crossover" written in neat sections with several charts and references. It was by M. Mason.

Something clicked in Collins' mind—read the journals—Mason's unconcern with security, the botany books on his desk the night before. It didn't make sense, but it added up to something. Mason knew something and so did Gordon. He half rose. He had to get to the bottom of it. Clutching the bound *Journal* Collins turned and weaved through the stacks and out of the library waving the protesting librarian aside and strode down the corridor toward the laboratories.

The door to Mason's lab was partially open, and he looked up quizzically from taking an instrument reading as Collins burst in.

"Mason, I—" he planked the bound volume of the *Botanical Journal* on the lab bench beside the instrument ignoring Mason's wince as the instrument needle quivered with the jar. "Did you write this?" His finger jabbed at the open page.

Mason glanced at Collins, removed a pair of glasses from his white lab coat pocket, and putting them on leaned forward and studied the page for a moment.

"Yes. Not bad either though I shouldn't say it. I didn't know you were interested in Botany." His voice was casual with a slight questioning note.

Collins suddenly felt ridiculous. What was he accusing the man of? Mason had a right to publish on anything he wanted to, still a muddled series of half facts, incidents and suspicions chased through his mind.

Mason walked over to his desk and filling his pipe sat down thoughtfully and leaned back motioning Collins into a nearby chair.

"I think I know what is on your mind, Milt. Maybe I can straighten this out. Gordon told me a little while ago that you wanted to resign."

Collins stiffened. So, these two were working together.

"Milt, did you ever stop to think how lucky we are? Where can you get better equipment, help, coöperation in the country than here?" Collins leaned forward to speak, but Mason went on. "Oh, I know all the problems of security and how it strangles work." He paused for a moment as though trying to grasp the right words.

"Look, Milt, what's the basic problem? Why do security measures strangle research? Isn't it a matter basically of a breakdown in the

interchange of ideas? Sure, and it has come about because there has been no method of communication which would not get to and be used by our enemies. So, like yourself, I'm forbidden to publish the results of my work here in the journals. Why? Because those results are in my field of study, chain reactions.

"I'm frustrated just as you have been and science suffers. What do I do? I write articles in a field that isn't restricted, botany. It's a new field of interest to me, a hobby if you like. The stuff is published and gets wide distribution. Every decent library in the country gets it. Every scientist all over the country can read the papers if he cares to. Then the word gets around, by the scientific grapevine, with a little judicious ear-bending. I get a reputation—in Botany.

"Now the botanists know that I am not a botanist. They understand what I am doing. The word spreads, and they leave my stuff alone. The physicists in my specialty know my name, and they get the word, and pretty soon they are glancing over certain botany journals apparently for relaxation. They read my papers. It's slow, but it works." Mason leaned forward and struck a large stick match under the lab bench top. Drawing several puffs through his pipe his eyes were on Collins' confused face. Then he laid the pipe down.

"The enemy botanists may read the botany journals, sure, but the enemy physicists don't. Their totalitarian training has made them inflexible in their thinking, besides they have their hands full trying to keep up in their own fields. The curse of specialization is a blessing to us. When the enemy botanists read it, it makes sense, but it doesn't help them much in their work—more or less innocuous." He waved toward the botany texts on his desk. "It took me six months to learn enough about it to do the job." As he spoke Mason untangled his legs and brought the open journal over to his desk.

"All right, notice in my article I am writing on chromosomes—chains of genes, and my field is—?"

"Chain reactions," Collins finished softly, "but—"

"The article itself is well disguised, but it's a parable. It's botany on the surface, but it gets over enough chain-reaction theory to be good physics, if you read it right. You see botany is what you might call my code field."

The bright light of noon shimmered on the white buildings and green lawns beyond the lab windows. Collins was silent and thoughtful.

“Well, that's about all. Gordon knows. He's in with us, but the Government doesn't suspect—yet. Oh, they may catch on to us. Information may leak out to the enemy. There's some chance, but when we're caught we'll think of something else. Most of us believe it's worth the chance. There's a risk in anything.”

Suddenly all the pieces fell into place, and Collins' anger and confusion melted away. In its place was a sense of relief and hope, hope for the future. It wasn't the final answer, but it was a way to keep going. He was not alone any longer. He had friends who understood, who had been through what he had been through. It was a good feeling. He heard Mason's voice again.

“Milt, why don't you do some library work? Botany's my code field. I don't know what yours is, but you've got some catching up to do. There may be some interesting stuff published already in your code field.”

Collins did, and he developed his new interest enthusiastically. Gordon had been right. He had been getting stale. Besides, astronomy was a fascinating field, and suns with their revolving planets in some respects are very like atomic systems, if you look at it that way.

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