WORLDS WITHOUT END
Clifford D. Simak

1

SHE DID NOT look like the kind of person who would want to take the Dream. Although, Norman Elaine reflected, one could never tell.

He wrote the name she had given him down on the scratch pad,, instead of putting it on the application blank, he wrote it slowly, deliberately, to give himself tune to think, for there was something here that was puzzling.

Lucinda Silone.

Peculiar name, he thought. Not like a real name. More like a stage name taken to cover up plain Susan Brown, or ordinary Betty Smith, or some other common run of name.

He wrote it slowly so that he could think, but he couldn't think too well. There were too many other things cluttering up his brain: The shakeup rumor that had whispered its way for days back and forth within the Center, his own connection with that rumor, and the advice that had been given him—there was something funny about the job. The advice was: don't trust Farris (as if he needed that advice!)—look it over well if it is offered you. It was all kindly-meant advice, but not very helpful.

And there was the lapel-clinging Buttonholer who had caught him in the parking lot that morning and had clung onto him when he tried to push him off; there was Harriet Marsh, with whom he had a date this very night.

Now, finally, this woman across the desk from him.

Although it was foolish, Elaine told himself—to think a thing like that, to tie her up with all the other, thoughts that were bumping together like driftwood in his brain. For there could be no connection—there simply couldn't be.

She was Lucinda Silone, she'd said. Something about the name and something, as well, about the way she said it—the little lilting tones meant consciously to give it grace and make it sparkle—set tiny alarm bells ringing in his brain.

"You're with Entertainment." He said it casually, very much off-hand; this was a trick question and one that must be rightly put.

"Why, no," she replied, "I'm not."

Listening to the way she said it, Blaine could find nothing wrong. Her voice held a touch of fluttery happiness that betrayed pleasure at his thinking she must be Entertainment. And that was just as it should be. It was exactly the way that most of the others answered—flattered at the implication that they belonged to the fabulous Entertainment guild.

He gave her her money's worth. "I would have guessed you were."

He looked directly at Lucinda Silone, watching the expression on her face, but seeing all the other good points, too. "We get good at judging people here," he said. "We aren't often wrong."

She didn't wince. There was no reaction—no start of guilt, no flutter of confusion.

Her hair was honey color, her eyes were china blue, and her skin so milky white that one looked a second time to make sure that it was real.

We don't get many like this one, thought Blaine. The old and sick and the disappointed. The desperate ones and those who know frustration.

"You're mistaken, Mr. Blaine," she said. "I am Education."

He wrote Education on the scratch pad, and said, "It may have been the name. It's a very good name. Easy to say. Musical. It would go well on the stage."

He looked up from the pad and said, smiling—making himself smile against the inexplicable tension that was rising in him: "Although it was not the name alone; I am sure of that."

She didn't smile and he wondered swiftly if he had been awkward. He snapped the words he'd said in quick review across his mind and decided that he'd not been awkward. When you were director of Fabrication, you were not an awkward man. You knew how to handle people; you had to know how to handle them. And you knew, as well, how to handle yourself—how to make your face say one thing

while your mind might be thinking something else.

No, his words had been a compliment, and not too badly put. She should have smiled. That she had failed to smile might mean something—or it mightn't mean a thing, except that she was clever. Norman Blaine had no doubt that Lucinda Silone was clever, and as cool a customer as he had ever seen.

Although coolness in itself was not too unusual. You got the cool ones, too—the cool and calculating—the ones who had figured it all out well ahead of time and knew what they were doing. And there were others, too, who had cut off all retreat behind them. "You wish a Sleep," he said. She nodded. "And a Dream?" "And a Dream," she said.

"You've thought it out quite thoroughly, I suppose. You wouldn't come, of course, if you had any doubts."

"I've thought it through," she told him, "and I have no doubts."

"You still have time. You'll have time to change your mind up to the final moment. We're most anxious that you get that fact fixed firmly in your mind." "I'll not change my mind," she said. "We still prefer to assume you may. We do not try to change your mind, but we insist upon complete understanding upon your part that a change is possible. You are under no obligation to us. No matter how far we've gone, there still is no obligation. The Dream may have been fabricated and processed; you may have paid your fee; you may already have entered the receptacle—there's still tune to change your mind. The Dream will then be destroyed, your fee will be returned, and the record will be expunged. So far as we are then concerned, we will have never seen you."

"I quite understand," she said.

He nodded quietly. "We'll proceed on that understanding."

He picked up his pencil and wrote her name and classification on the application blank. "Age?"

"Twenty nine."

"Married?"

"No."

"Children?"

"None."

"Nearest of kin?"

"An aunt."

"Name?"

She gave him the name and he wrote it down, with address, age and classification of the aunt.

"Any others?"

"None at all."

"Your parents?"

Her parents had been dead for years, she said; she was an only child. She gave her parents' names, their classifications, their ages at the time of death, their last place of residence, their place of burial.

"You'll check on all of this?" she asked.

"We check on everything."

Here was the place where most of the applicants—even those who had nothing in their life to hide—would show some nervousness, would frantically start checking back along their memories to unearth some possible, long-forgotten incident which might turn up in the course of investigation to embarrass or impede them.

Lucinda Silone was not nervous; she sat there, waiting for the other questions.

Norman Elaine asked them: The number of her guild, her card number, her immediate superior, last medical exam, physical or psychic defects or ailments—all the other trivia which went into the details of daily life.

Finally he was finished and laid the pencil down. "Still no doubts?"

She shook her head.

"I keep harking back to that," said Elaine, "to make absolutely certain we have a willing client; otherwise we have no legal status. But aside from that, there is the matter of ethics..."

"I understand," she said, "that you are very ethical."

It might have been mockery; if so, it was very clever mockery. He tried to decide if it were or not, but he wasn't sure.

He let it drop. "We have to be," he told her. "Here is a setup which, to survive, must be based on the highest code of ethics. You give your body into our hands for our safekeeping over a number of years. What is more, you give your mind over to us, to a lesser extent. We gain much intimate knowledge of your life in the course of our work with you. To continue in the job we're doing, we must enjoy the complete confidence not only of our clients, but of the general public. The slightest breath of scandal ..."

"There has never been a scandal?"

"In the early days, there were a few. They've been forgotten now, or we hope they have. It was those early scandals which made our guild realize how important it was that we keep ourselves free of any professional taint. A scandal hi any of the other guilds is no more than a legal matter which can be adjudicated hi the courts and then forgiven and forgotten. But with us there'd be no forgiving or forgetting; we'd never live it down."

Sitting there, Norman Elaine thought of his pride hi the work he did—a bright and shining pride, a comfortable and contented pride hi a job well done. And this feeling was not confined to he himself alone, but was held by everyone at Center. They might be flippant when they talked among themselves, but the pride was there, hidden deep beneath the flippancy and the workaday approach.

"You almost sound," she said, "like a dedicated people."

Mockery again, he wondered. Or was it flattery to match his own. He smiled a little at it. "Not dedicated," he said. "At least, we never think of ourselves as dedicated."

And that was not quite right, he knew, for there were times when every one of them must have thought of themselves as dedicated. It was not a thing, of course, that one could say aloud—but the thought was there.

It was a strange situation, he thought—the pride of work, the fierce loyalty to the guild itself, and, then, the cutthroat competition, and the vicious Center politics which existed in the midst of that pride and loyalty.

Take Roemer for example. Roemer, who after years of work, was on his way out. That had been the talk for days —the open secret which had been whispered through the Center. Farris had something to do with it, Lew Giesey was invovled in some way, and there were others who were mentioned. Elaine himself, for example, had been mentioned as one of the men who might be chosen to step up into Roemer's position. Thank goodness, he had steered clear of Center politics all these years. There was too much headache in Center politics. Norman Elaine's work had been enough for him.

Although it would be fine, he thought, if he were picked to take over Roemer's job. It was higher up the ladder; the pay was better; and maybe if he got more money he could talk Harriet into giving up her newspaper job and...

He pulled himself back to the job at hand.

"There are certain considerations which you should take into account," he told the woman across the desk. "You should realize all the implications of what your decision means before you go ahead. You must realize that once you go to sleep, you will awaken in a culture different than your own. The planets will not stand still while you sleep; they will advance—or at least we hope they will. Much will be different. Styles will change, in clothing and hi manners. Thought and speech and perspective—all will change. You will awaken an alien in a world that has left you far behind; you will be old fashioned.

There will be public issues of which there now is not the faintest inkling. Governments may have evolved, and customs will be different. What is illegal today may have become quite acceptable; what is acceptable and legal today may have become outrageous or illegal then. Your friends will all be dead ..."

"I have no friends," Lucinda Silone said.

He disregarded her and went on: "What I am trying to impress upon you is that once you wake you cannot step from here straight back into the world, for it will be your world no longer. Your world will have died many years before; you will have to be readjusted, will have to take a course in reorientation. In certain instances, depending upon the awakened person to some extent, to the cultural changes to an even greater extent, this matter of reorientation may take quite some time. For we must give you not only

the facts of the changes which have occurred while you were asleep—we must gain your acceptance of those changes. Until you have readjusted not only your data, but your culture as well, we cannot let you go. To live a normal life in that world in which you wake you must accept it as if you had been born into it—you must become, in fact, part of it. And that must often be a long and painful process." .

"I realize all that," she said; "I'm ready to abide by all the conditions you lay down."

She had not hesitated once. Lucinda Silone had shown no regret or nervousness. She was as cool and calm as when she'd walked into the office.

"Now," Elaine said, "the reason."

"The reason?"

"The reason why you wish to take the Sleep; we must know."

"You'll investigate that, too?"

"We shall; we must be sure, you see. There are many reasons—many more than you'd think there'd be."

He kept on talking, to give her a chance to steel herself and tell him the reason. More often than not this was the hardest thing of all that a client faced. "There are those," he said, "who take the Sleep because they have a disease which at the moment is incurable. They do not contract for a Sleep of any specified length, but only till the day when a cure has been discovered.

"Then there are those who wish to wait out the time against the return of a loved one who is traveling to the stars—waiting out on Earth the subjective time of the faster-than-light flights. And there are those who wish to sleep out an investment which they are sure, given tune, will make them a fortune. Usually we try to talk them out of it; we call in our economists, who try to show them ..."

She interrupted him. "Would ennui be eaough?" she asked. "Just simple ennui?"

He wrote ennui for the reason and shoved the application to one side. "You can sign it later."

"I can sign it now."

"Send them in," he said.

"Are they all right?"

"George and Herb?"

"Who else?"

"Certainly, Irma; it's just the way they work."

"It's a comfort to know that," she said, "I'll shoo them in."

He settled back and watched the two come in. They sprawled themselves in chairs.

George shied a folder at him. "The Jenkins Dream; we got it all worked out."

"He's a jerk who wants to hunt big game," said Herb; we cooked up some dillies for him."

"We made it authentic," George declared with pride; we didn't skip a thing. We put him in the jungle, and we put in mud and insects and the heat; we crammed the place with ravenous nightmares. There's something thirsting for his blood behind every bush."

"It's no hunt," said Herb; "it's a running battle. When he isn't scared, he's jumpy. Damned if I can figure out a guy like that."

"It takes all kinds," said Elaine. "Sure; and we get them all."

"Some day," Elaine told them drily, "you guys will lay it on so thick you'll get booted to Conditioning."

"They can't do that," said Herb. "You got to have a medical degree to get into Conditioning. And George and me, we couldn't bandage a finger the way it should be done."

George shrugged. "We haven't a thing to worry about; Myrt takes care of that. When we go too hog wild, she tames it down."

Elaine laid the folder to one side. "I'll feed it in before I leave tonight." He picked up the pad. "I have something different here. You'll have to slick down your hair and get on good behavior before I turn you loose on it."

"The one who just went out?"

Elaine nodded.

"I could cook up a Dream for her," said Herb.

"She wants peace and dignity," Elaine informed them. "Genteel society. A sort of modern version of

mid-nine- teenth century Old Plantation days. No rough stuff; just magnolia and white columns; horses in the bluegrass."

"Likker," said Herb. "Oceans of likker. Bourbon and mint leaves and ..."

"Cocktails," Elaine told him, "and not too many of them."

"Fried chicken," said George, getting into the act. "Watermelon. Moonlight. River boats. Lemme at it."

"Not so fast; you have the wrong approach. Slow and easy. Tame down. Imagine slow music. A sort of eternal waltz."

"We could put in a war," said Herb; "they fought polite in those days. Sabers and all dressed up in fancy uniforms."

"She doesn't want a war."

"You gotta have some action."

"No action—or very little of it. No worry; no competition. Gentility..."

"And us," lamented George, "all spattered up with jungle mud."

The intercom buzzed. "The b.a. wants to see you," Irma said.

"O.K., tell him..."

"Hs wants to see you now."

"Oh, oh," said George.

"I always liked you, Norm," said Herb.

"All right," said Elaine. "Tell him I'll be right up."

"After all these years," Herb said, sadly. "Cutting throats and stabbing backs to get ahead and now it comes to this."

George drew his forefinger across his throat and made a hissing sound, like a blade slashing into flesh.

They were very funny.

2

Lew Giesey was the business agent of the Dream guild. For years he had run it with an iron fist and disarming smile. He was loyal and he demanded loyalty; he dealt out sharp, decisive discipline as quickly as he rewarded praise.

He worked in an ornate office, but behind a battered desk to which he clung stubbornly, despite all efforts to provide him with a better one. To him, the desk must have been a symbol—or a reminder—of the bitter struggle to attain his station. He had started with that desk in the early days; it had followed him from office to office as he fought his bare-knuckled way ahead, up the table of organization to the very top. The desk was scarred and battered, unlike the man himself. It was almost as if the desk, in the course of years, might have intervened itself to take the blows aimed at the man behind it.

But there had been one blow which it could not take for him. For Lou Giesey sat in his chair behind the desk and he was quite dead. His head had fallen forward on his chest and his forearms still rested on the chair's arms and his hands still clutched the wood.

The room was at utter peace and so, it seemed as well, the man behind the desk. There was a quietness in the room, as if respite had come from all the years of struggle and of planning. It rested now with a sense of urgency, as if it might have known that the respite could not last for long. In a little while, another man would come and sit behind the desk—perhaps a different one, for no other man would want Giesey's battered desk—and the struggle and the turmoil would start up again.

Norman Elaine stopped when he was halfway between the door and desk; it was the quietness of the room, as well as the head sunk upon the chest, that told him what had happened.

He stopped and listened to the soft whirring of the clock upon the wall, a sound usually lost until this moment in this place. He heard the almost-inaudible flutter of a typewriter from across the hall, the far-off, muffled rumble of wheels rushing along the highway that ran past the Center.

He thought, with one edge of his mind: Death and peace and quiet, the three of them together, companions hand in hand. Then his mind recoiled upon itself and built up into a tight coil spring of horror.

Elaine took a slow step forward, then another one, walking across the carpeting that allowed no footfall sound. He had not as yet realized the full impact of what had happened there—that moments before the

business agent had asked to speak to him; that he was the one to find Giesey dead; that his presence in the office might lead to suspicion of him.

He reached the desk and the phone was there in front of him, on one corner of the desk. He lifted the receiver and when the switchboard voice came, he said: "Protection, please."

He heard the clicking as the signal was set up. "Protection."

"Farris, please."

Elaine started to shake, then—the muscles in his forearm jumping, others twitching in his face. He felt breath-lessness rising in him, his chest constricting, a choking in his throat, and his mouth suddenly dry and sticky. He gritted his teeth and stopped the jumping muscles.

"Farris speaking."

"Elaine. Fabrication."

"Oh, yes, Elaine. What can I do for you?"

"Giesey called me up to see him; when I got here he was dead."

There was a pause—not too long a pause. Then: "You're sure he's dead."

"I haven't touched him. He's sitting in his chair; he looks dead to me."

"Anyone else know?"

"No one. Darrell is out in the reception room, but..."

"You didn't yell out that he was dead."

"Not a word; I picked up the phone and called you."

"Good boy! That's using your head. Stay right there; don't tell anyone, don't let anyone in; don't touch anything. We're on our way."

The connection clicked and Norman Elaine put the receiver back into the cradle.

The room was still at rest, squeezing out of the next few moments all the rest it could. Soon the fury would take up again; Paul Farris and his goons would come bursting in.

Elaine stood by the corner of the desk, uncertainly— waiting, too. And now that he had the time to think, now that the shock had partially worn away and the acceptance of the fact began to seep into his mind, new ideas came creeping in to plague him.

He had found Giesey dead, but would they believe that Elaine had found him dead? Would they ask Elaine how he could prove that he had found liew Giesey dead?

What did he want to see you for? they'd ask. How often had Giesey called you in before? Do you have any idea why he called you in this tune?

Praise? Reprimand? Caution? Discussion of new techniques? Trouble in your department, maybe? Some deviation hi your work. How's your private life? Some indiscretion that you had committed?

He sweated, thinking of the questions.

For Farris was thorough. You had to be thorough and unrelenting—and tough—to head up Protection. You were hated from the start, and fear was a necessary factor to counteract the hatred.

Protection was necessary. The guild was an unwieldy organization for all its tight efficiency, and it must be kept hi line. Intrigue must be rooted out. Deviationism—dickering with other unions—must be run down and have an end put to it. There must be no wavering hi the loyalty of any members; and to effect all this, there was need of an iron hand.

Blame reached out to clutch at the desk, then remembered that Farris had told him not to touch a thing.

He pulled his hand back, let it hang by his side, and that seemed awkward and unnatural. He put it hi his pocket, and that seemed awkward, too. He put both his hands behind his back and clasped them, then teetered back and forth.

He fidgeted.

He swung around to look at Giesey, wondering if the head still rested on the chest, if the hands still gripped the chair arms. For a moment, Norman Elaine built up in his mind the little speculative fiction that Lew Giesey would not be dead at all, but would have raised his head and be looking at him. And if that were so, Elaine wondered how he would explain.

He needn't have wondered; Giesey still was dead.

And now, for the first time, Norman Elaine began to see the man in relation to the room—not as a

single point of interest, but as a man who sat in a chair, with the chair resting on the carpeting and the carpeting covering the floor.

Giesey's uncapped pen lay upon the desk in front of him, resting where it had stopped after rolling off a sheaf of papers. Giesey's spectacles lay beside the pen; off to one side was a glass with a little water left hi the bottom of it; beside it stood the stopper of the carafe from which Giesey must recently have poured himself a drink.

And on the floor, beside Lew Giesey's feet, was a single sheet of paper.

Elaine stood there, staring at the paper, wondering what it was. It was a form of some sort, he could see, and there was writing on it. He edged around the desk to get a better look at it, egged on by an illogical curiosity.

He bent low to read the writing, and a name came up and struck him hi the face. Norman Elaine!

He bent swiftly and scooped the paper off the carpet. It was an appointment form, dated the day before yesterday and it appointed Norman Elaine as Administrator of Records, Dream Department, effective as of midnight of this day. It was duly signed and stamped as having been recorded.

John Roemer's job, Elaine thought, the job that they had whispered about for weeks throughout the Center.

He had a fleeting moment of triumph. They'd picked ' him. He had been the man for the job! But there was more than triumph. He .not only had the job, but he had the answers to the questions they would ask.

Why were you called in? they'd ask. Now he could answer them. With this paper hi his pocket, he would have the answer.

But he didn't have much time.

He laid the paper on the desk and folded it one third over, forcing himself to take the time to do it neatly. Then, just as neatly, he folded the other one third over and thrust it hi his pocket. Then he turned again to face the door and waited.

The next moment, Paul Farris and a hah! dozen of his goons came stamping in.

3

Farris was a smooth operator. He was a top-notch policeman and had the advantage of looking like a college instructor. He was not a big man; he wore his hair slicked down, and his eyes were weak and wavery back of the spectacles.

He settled himself comfortably in the chair behind his desk and laced his hands over his belly. "I'll have to ask you some questions," he told Elaine. "Just for the record, naturally. The death is an open-and-shut one of suicide. Poison. We won't know what kind until Doc gets the test run through."

"I understand," said Elaine.

And thought: / understand, all right. I know just how you work. Lull a man to sleep, then belt him in the guts.

"You and I have worked together for a long time," said Farris. "Not together, exactly, but under the same roof and for the same purpose. We've got along fine; I know that we will continue in exactly the same way."

"Why, certainly," said Elaine.

"This appointment form," said Farris; "you say you got it in an inter-office envelope."

Elaine nodded. "It was hi my basket this morning, I suppose. I didn't get around to going through the stuff until rather late."

Which was true enough, he hadn't gone through the basket until 10 o'clock or so. And another thing—there was no record of inter-office mail.

And still another thing: Maintenance came around and emptied the waste baskets at precisely 11:30; it was now a quarter of one, and anything that had been hi his basket had long since been burned.

"And you just put the form in your pocket and forgot about it?"

"I didn't forget about it; I had an applicant about that time. Then, when the applicant left, two of the fabricators came in. I was going over a point or two with them when Giesey called and asked me to

come up."

Farris nodded. "You think he wanted to talk with you about your new position?"

"That was what I thought."

"Had he talked about it before? Did you know that it was coming?"

Norman Elaine shook his head. "It was a complete surprise."

"A happy one, of course?"

"Naturally. It's a better job. Better pay. A man wants to get ahead."

Farris looked thoughtful.

"Didn't it strike you as a rather strange procedure to get an appointment—particularly to a key position—in an inter-office envelope?"

"Of course it did; I wondered about it at the time."

"But you did nothing about it?"

"I have told you," Elaine said, "I was busy. And what would you suggest that I should have done?"

"Nothing," Farris told him.

"That is what I thought," said Elaine. He thought: Make something out of it, if you can.

He felt a brief elation and fought it down. It was too soon, he knew.

At the moment there wasn't a thing that Farris could do—not a single thing. The appointment was hi order, properly signed and executed. As of the coming midnight he, Norman Elaine, would be administrator of records, taking over from Roemer. Only the delivery of the appointment was not in order, but there was no way in the world that Farris could prove that Elaine had not received it in the inter-office mail.

He wondered, briefly, what might have happened if Giesey had not died. Would the appointment have come through, or would it have been quashed somewhere along the line? Would some pressure have been brought to bear to give the position to someone else?

Farris was saying, "I knew the change was going to be made. Roemer was getting—well, just a little difficult. It had come to my attention, and I spoke to Giesey about it. So had several others. We talked about it some; he mentioned you as among several men who could be trusted, but that was all he said."

"You didn't know he had decided?"

Farris shook his head. "No, but I'm glad he picked you for the post. You're the kind of man I like to work with, realistic. We'll get along. We'd better talk about it."

"Any tune," said Elaine.

"If you have the tune, how about dropping in on me tonight? Any time at all, I'll be home all evening. You know where I live?"

Blaine nodded and got to his feet.

"Don't worry about this business," Farris said. "Lew Giesey was a good man, but there are other good men. We all thought a lot of him. I know it must have been a shock, walking in on him that way."

He hesitated for a moment, then: "And don't worry about any change in your appointment. I'll speak to whomever replaces Giesey."

"Any idea who it'll be?"

Farris' eyelids nicked just once, then his eyes were hard and steady, wavery no longer. "No idea," he said, brusquely. "The executive board will name the man. I have no idea who they'll put the finger on."

The hell you don't, thought Blaine.

"You're sure about it being suicide?"

"Certain," Farris said. "Giesey had a heart history, he was worried."

He rose and reached for his cap, put it on. "I like a man who thinks fast on his feet. Keep thinking on your feet, Blaine. We'll get along."

"I'm sure we will."

"Don't forget about tonight."

"I'll be seeing you," Blaine told him.

The Buttonholer had seized upon Norman Elaine that morning, after he had parked his car, j«st when he was leaving the lot. How the man had gotten in, Elaine could not imagine, but there he was, waiting for a victim. "Just a second, sir," he said.

Elaine swung around toward him. The man took a quick step forward, put out both his hands and clasped Elaine's lapels firmly. Blaine backed away, but the man's fingers held their grip and halted him,

"Let me go," Blame said, but the man told him, "Not until I've had a word with you. You work at the Center and you're just the man I want to talk with. Because if I can make you understand—why, then, sir, I know that there is hope.

"Hope," he said, a fine spray of saliva flying from between his lips—"hope that we can make the people understand the viciousness of Dreams. Because they are vicious, sir, they undermine the moral fiber of the people. They hold the opportunity for quick escape from the troubles and the problems which develop character. With the Dreams, there is no need for a man to face his troubles— he can run away from them, he can seek a forgetfuhiess in Dreams. I tell you, sir, it is the damnation of our culture."

Remembering it now, Norman Blaine still felt the cold, quiet whiteness of the anger that had enveloped him.

"Let loose of me," he'd said. There must have been something in his tone which warned the Buttonholer, for the man let loose his grip and backed away. And Blaine, lifting his arm to wipe his face upon his coat sleeve, watched him back away then finally turn and run.

It had been the first time he'd ever been seized upon by a Buttonholer, although he had heard of them often and had laughed them off.

Now, thinking back upon it, he was surprised at the impact of his encounter with a Buttonholer—his horror that here, finally, he had physical evidence that there were persons in the world who doubted the sincerity and the purpose of the Dreams.

He jerked himself away from his reverie; there were other more important things with which to concern him- self. Giesey's death and the sheet of paper he had found upon the floor—the strange conduct of Farris. Almost, he thought, as if there were a conspiracy between the two of us—as if he and I had been involved in some gigantic plot, now coming to fruition.

He sat quietly behind his desk and tried to think it out.

Given a moment to consider, he was certain that he would not have snatched the paper off the floor; given another moment for consideration, even after having seen what it was, he was certain that he would have dropped it back on the floor again. But there had been no time at all. Farris and his goons were already on their way and Elaine had stood defenseless in the office with a dead man, without an adequate explanation of why he should be there, without an adequate answer to any of the questions that they were sure to ask him.

The paper had given him a reason for being hi the office, had given him the answer to the questions, had forestalled many other questions that would have been asked if he -had not had the answer to the first ones.

Farris had said suicide.

Would it have been suicide or murder, Elaine wondered, if he had not had the paper in his pocket? If he had remained defenseless, would his luckless position have been used to explain Giesey's death?

Farris had said he liked a man who could think standing on his feet. And there was no doubt he did. For Farris himself was a man who could think standing on his feet, who could improvise and trim his course with each passing situation.

And he was not a man to trust.

Elaine wondered if the appointment still would have come through if he'd not been there to pick it off the carpet. Certainly he was not the sort of man Paul Farris would have picked to take over Roemer's job. Would Farris, finding the appointment on the floor, have destroyed it and forged another, appointing someone more to his liking to the post?

And, another question: What was the importance of the job? Why did it matter, or seem to matter so much, who was appointed to it? No one had said, of course, that it was important; but Farris had been interested and Paul Farris never was interested in unimportant things.

Could the appointment, in some way, have been linked with Lew Giesey's death? Elaine shook his head. There was no way that one could answer.

The important thing was that he had the appointment— that Giesey's death had not prevented its delivery, that for the moment at least Farris was willing to let the situation ride.

But, Norman Elaine warned himself, he could not afford to take ,Farris at face value. As steward of the guild, Paul Farris was a police official with a loyal corps of men, with wide discretion hi carrying out his functions, politically-minded and unscrupulous, busily carving out a niche large enough to fit full-scale ambition.

More than likely Giesey's death fitted in with this ambition. It was not beyond reason that Farris might, hi some small and hidden way, have contributed—if, in. fact, he had not engineered it.

Suicide, he had said. Poison. Worried. Heart history. Easy words to say. Watch your step, Blame told himself. Take it easy. Make no sudden moves. And be ready to duck. Especially—be ready to duck.

He sat quietly, letting the turmoil of speculation run out of his mind. No use thinking of it, he told himself. No use at all right now. Later, when and if he had some facts to go on—then would be the time to think.

He glanced at the clock and it was three fifteen. Too early to go home.

And there was work to do. Tomorrow he'd be moving up to another office, but today there still was work to do.

He picked up the Jenkins folder and looked at it. A big game hunt, the two zany fabricators had said. We gave him the works, they'd said, or words to that effect.

He flipped the folder open and ran through the first few pages, shuddering just a little.

No accounting for tastes, he thought.

He remembered Jenkins—a great, massive brute of a man who had bellowed out a flow of language that had made the office quake.

Well, maybe he can take it, Elaine thought. Anyhow, it is what he asked for.

He tucked the folder under his arm and went out into the reception room.

Irma said, "We just heard the word."

"About Giesey, you mean."

"No, we heard that earlier. We all felt badly; I guess everybody liked him. But I mean the word about you. It's all over now. Why didn't you tell us right away? We think it's wonderful."

"Why, thank you, Irma."

"We'll miss you, though."

"That is good of you."

"Why did you keep it secret? Why didn't you let us know?"

"I didn't know myself until this morning; I guess I got too busy. Then Giesey called."

"There were goons ah1 over the place, going through the waste baskets. I think they even went through your desk. What was the matter with them?"

"Just curious." Elaine went out into the hall and the chill of fear crept up his spine with every step he took.

He had known it before, of course, with Farris' crack about thinking on one's feet, but this put the clincher on it. This left no doubt at all that Farris knew he'd lied.

Maybe there was some merit in it, after all, though. His lie and bluff put him, momentarily, into Farris' class— made Elaine the kind of man the goon leader was able to understand, the kind of man he could do business with.

But could he keep up the bluff? Could he be tough enough?

Keep cool, Elaine, he told himself. No sudden moves. Ready to duck, although you can't let them know you are. Poker face, he told himself—the kind of face you use when you face an applicant.

He tramped on and the coldness wore away.

Going down the stairs into Myrt's room, the old magic gripped him once again.

There she sat—the great machine of dreams, the ultimate in the fabrication of the imaginative details of man's wildest fantasies.

He stood in the silence of the place and felt the majesty and peace, the almost-tenderness, that he always felt— as if Myrt were some sort of protective mother-goddess to which one might flee for understanding and unquestioning refuge.

He tucked the folder more tightly under his arm and walked softly across the floor, fearing to break the hush of the place with an awkward, or a heavy footfall.

He mounted the stairs that led to the great keyboard, and sat down in the traveling seat which would move at the slightest touch to any part of the coding panels. He clamped the open folder on a clipboard in front of him and reached out to the query lever. He pressed it, and an indicator winked a flashing green. The machine was clear, he could feed in his data.

He punched in the identification and then he sat in silence—as he often sat hi silence there.

This he would miss, Elaine knew, when he moved up to that other job. Here he was like a priest, a sort of communicant with a force that he reverenced, but could not understand—not in its entirety. For no man could know the structure of the dream machine in its entirety. It was too vast and complicated a mechanism to be fixed in any mind.

It was a computer with magic built into it, and freed from the utter, straight-line logic of other, less fabulous computers. It dealt in fantasy rather than in fact—it was a gigantic plot machine that wove out of punched-in symbols and equations the strange stories of many different lives. It took in code and equations and it dished out dreams!

Elaine started to punch hi the data from the folder sheets, moving swiftly about the face of the coding panel in the traveling chair. The panel began to twinkle with many little lights and from tide dream machine came the first faint sounds of tripping relays, the hum of power stirring through the mechanisms, the click of control counters, the fault, far-off chattering of memory files being probed, and the purr of narrative sequence channels getting down to work.

He worked on in a tense, closed-in world of concentration, setting up the co-ordinates from sheet after sheet. Time came to an end and there was no other world than the panel with its myriad keys, and trips and buttons, and its many flashing lights.

Finally he was done, the last sheet fluttered down to the floor from the empty clipboard. Time took up again and the room came into being. Norman Elaine sat limply, shirt soaked with perspiration, hair damp against his forehead, hands resting in his lap.

The machine was thundering now. Lights flashed by the thousands, some of them winking steadily, others running bright little sequences like lazy lightning flashes. The sound of power surged within the room, filling it to bursting, and yet beneath the hum of power could be heard the busy thumps and clicks and the erratic insane chattering of racing mechanisms.

Wearily Elaine got out of the chair and picked up the fallen sheets, bundling them together, helter-skelter, without regard to numbering, back into the folder.

He walked to the far end of the machine and stood staring for a moment at the glass-protected cabinet where tape was spinning on a reel. He watched the spinning tape, fascinated, as always, by the thought that upon the tape was impressed the seeming life of a dream that might last a century or a thousand years—a dream built with such sheer story-telling skill that it would never pall, but would be fresh and real until the very last.

He turned away and walked to the stairway, went halfway up, then turned and looked back.

It was his last dream, he knew, the last he'd ever punch; tomorrow he'd be on another job. He raised his arm in half salute.

"So long, Myrt," he said.

Myrt thundered back at him.

5

Irma had left for the day and the office was empty, but there was a letter, addressed to Elaine, propped against the ash tray on his desk. The envelope was bulky and distorted when he picked it up, it jangled.

Norman Elaine ripped it open and a ring, crowded full of keys, fell out of it and clattered on the desk. A sheet of paper slipped halfway out and stuck.

He pushed the keys to one side, took out the sheet of paper and unfolded it. There was no salutation. The note began abruptly: / called to turn over the keys, but you were out and your secretary didn't know when you would be back. There seemed no point in staying. If you should want to see me later, I am at your service. Roemer.

He let the note fall out of his hand and flutter to the desk. He picked up the keys and tossed them up and down, listening to them jangle, catching them in his palm.

What would happen to John Roemer now, he wondered. Had a place been made for him, or hadn't Giesey gotten around to appointing him to some other post? Or had Giesey intended that man be out entirely? That seemed unlikely, for the guild took care of its own; it did not, except under extreme provocation, throw a man out on his own.

And, for that matter, who would take over the direction of Fabrication? Had Lew Giesey died before he could make an appointment? George or Herb—either one of them—would be in line, but they hadn't said a word. They would have said something, Blame was sure, if they had been notified.

He picked up the sheet of paper and read the note again. It was noncommittal, completely deadpan; there was nothing to be learned from it.

He wondered how Roemer might feel about being summarily replaced, but there was no way of knowing; the note certainly gave no clue. And why had he been replaced? There had been rumors, ah1 sorts of rumors, about a shakeup in the Center, but the rumors had stopped short of the reasons for the shakeup.

It seemed a little strange—this leaving of the keys, the transfer of authority symbolized by the leaving of the keys. It was as if Roemer had thrown them on Elaine's desk, said: "There they are, boy; they're all yours," and then had left without another word.

Just a little burned up, perhaps. Just a little hurt.

But the man had come in person. Why? Under ordinary circumstances, Elaine knew, Roemer would have stayed to break in the man who was to succeed him, then would have gone up to Records. But Roemer would have stayed on until his successor knew the ropes.

These were not ordinary circumstances. Come to think of it, they seemed to be turning out to be most extraordinary.

It was a fouled-up mess, Norman Elaine told himself. Going through regular channels, it would have been all right—a normal operation, the shifts made without disruption. But the appointment had not gone through channels; and had Elaine not been the one to find Lew Giesey dead, had he not seen the paper on the floor, the appointment might not have gone through at all.

But the job was his—he'd stuck out his neck to get it and it was his. It was not something he had sought, but now that he had it, he'd keep it. It was a step up the ladder; it was advancement. It paid better, had more prestige, and put him closer to the top—third from the top, hi fact, for the chain of command ran: business agent, Protection, and then Records.

He'd tell Harriet tonight—but, no, he kept forgetting; he'd not see Harriet tonight.

He put the keys in his pocket and picked up the note again. // you should want to see me later, I am at your service.

Protocol? he wondered. Or was there something that he might need to know? Something that needed telling?

Could it be that Roemer had come to tell him something and then had lost his nerve?

Elaine crumpled the note and hurled it to the floor. He wanted to get out, get away from Center, get out where he could try to think it out, plan what he was to do. He should clean out his desk, he knew, but it was late—far past quitting tune. And there was his date with Harriet—no, damn it, he kept forgetting. Harriet had called and said she couldn't make it.

There'd be time tomorrow to clean out his desk. He took his hat and coat and went out to the parking lot.

An armed guard had replaced the regular attendant at the entrance to the lot. Elaine showed his identification.

"All right, sir," said the guard. "Keep an eye peeled, though. A suspendee got away."

"Got away?"

"Sure; just woke a week or two ago."

"He can't get far," said Elaine. "Things change; he'll give himself away. How long was he in Sleep?"

"Five hundred years, I think."

"Things change a lot in five hundred years. He hasn't got a chance."

The guard shook his head. "I feel sorry for him. Must be tough, waking up like that."

"It's tough, all right. We try to tell them, but they never listen."

"Say," said the guard, "you're the one who found Giesey."

Blaine nodded.

"Was it the way they tell it? Was he dead when you got there?"

"He was dead."

"Murdered?"

"I don't know."

"It does beat hell. You get up to the top, then poof ..."

"It does beat hell," agreed Blaine.

"You never know."

"No, you never do." Blaine hurried off.

He drove out of the lot and swung onto the highway. Dusk was just beginning and the road was almost deserted.

Norman Blame drove slowly, watching the autumn countryside slide past. The first lamps glimmered from the windows of the villas set upon the hills; there was the smell of burning leaves and of the slow, sad dying of the year.

Thoughts flitted at him, like the skimming birds hurrying to a night-time tree, but he batted them away—the Buttonholer who had grabbed him—what Farris might suspect or know and what he might intend to do—why John Roemer had called personally to deliver the keys, and then had decided not to wait—why a suspendee should escape.

And that last one was a funny deal; it was downright crazy, when you thought about it. What could possibly be gained by such an escape, such a fleeing out into an alien world for which one was not prepared? It would be like going to an alien planet all alone without adequate briefing. It would be like walking onto a job with which one had no acquaintance and trying to bluff one's way.

/ wonder why, he thought. 1 wonder why he did it.

He brushed the thought away; there was too much to think of. He'd have to get it straightened out before he could think it through. He could not allow himself to get the thoughts all cluttered up.

He reached out to the dash and turned on the radio.

A commentator was saying: ".. .who know their political history can recognize the crisis points that now are becoming more clearly denned. For more than five hundred years, the government, in actuality, has been in the hands of the Central Labor Union. Which is to say that the government is ruled by committee, with each of the guilds and unions represented on the central group. That such a group should be able to continue in control for five full centuries—for the last 60 years in openly admitted control—is not so much to be attributed to wisdom, forebearance or patience, as to a fine balance of power which has obtained within the body at all times. Mutual distrust and fear have at no time allowed any one union or guild or any combination to become dominant. As soon as one group threatened to become so, the personal ambitions of other groups operated to undermine the ascendant group.

"But this, as everyone must recognize, is a situation which has lasted longer than could normally have been expected. For years the stronger unions have been building up their strength—and not trying to use it. You may be sure that none of them will attempt to use their strength until they're absolutely sure of themselves. Just where any of them stand, strength-wise, is impossible to say, for it is not good strategy that any union should let its strength be known. The day cannot be too far distant when there must be a matching of this strength. The situation, as it stands, must seem intolerable to some of the stronger unions with ambitious leaders ..."

Elaine turned off the radio and was astonished at the solemn peace of the autumn evening. It was all old

stuff, anyway. So long as he could remember, there had been commentators talking thus. There were eternal rumors which at one time would name Transportation as the union that would take over, and at another time would hint at Communications, and at still another time would insist—just as authoritatively—that Food was the one to watch.

Dreams, he told himself smugly, were beyond that kind of politics. The guild—his guild—stood for public service. It was represented on Central, as was its right and duty, but it had never played at politics.

It was Communications that was always stirring up a fuss with articles in the papers and blatting commentators. If he didn't miss his guess, Elaine told himself, Communications was the worst of all—in there every minute waiting for its chance. Education, too; Education was always fouling up the detail, and what a bunch of creeps!

He shook his head, thinking of how lucky he was to be with Dreams—not to have to feel a sense of guilt when the rumors came around. You could be sure that Dreams never would be mentioned; of all the unions, Dreams was the only one that could stand up straight and tall.

He'd argued with Harriet about Communications, and at times she had gotten angry with him; she seemed to have the stubborn notion that Communications was the union which had the best public service record and the cleanest slate.

It was natural, of course, Elaine admitted, that one should think his own particular union was all right. Unions were the only loyalty to which a man could cling. Once, long ago, there had been nations and the love of one's own nation was known as patriotism. But now the unions had taken their place.

He drove into the valley that wound among the hills, and finally turned off the highway and followed the winding road that climbed into the hills.

Dinner would be waiting and Ansel would be cross (he was a cranky robot at the best). Philo would be waiting for him at the gate and they'd ride hi together.

He passed Harriet's house and stared briefly at it, set well back among the trees, but there were no lights. Harriet wasn't home. An assignment, she had said; an interview with someone.

He turned hi at hk own gate and Philo was there, barking out his heart. Norman Blaine slowed the car and the dog jumped in, reached up to nuzzle his master's cheek just once, then settled sedately in the seat while they wheeled around the drive to stop before the house. Philo leaped out quickly and Elaine got out more slowly. It had been a tiring day, he told himself. Now that he was home, he suddenly was tired.

He stood for a moment, looking at the house. It was a good house, he thought; a good place for a family—if he ever could persuade Harriet to give up her news career.

A voice said: "All right. You can turn around now. And take it easy; don't try any funny stuff."

Slowly Elaine turned. A man stood beside the car in the gathering dusk. He held a glinting object in his hand and he said, "There's nothing to be afraid of; I don't intend you any harm. Just don't get gay about it."

The man's clothes were wrong; they seemed to be some sort of uniform. And his words were wrong. The inflection was a bit off color, concise and crisp, lacking the slurring of one word into another which marked the language. And the phrases—funny stuff; don't get gay. "This is a gun I have. No monkey business, please." Monkey business.

"You are the man who escaped," said Elaine. "That I am." "But how .. ."

"I rode all the way with you. Hung underneath the car; those dumb cops didn't think to look."

The man shrugged. "I regretted it once or twice. You drove further than I hoped. I almost let go a tune or two."

"But me? Why did you ..."

"Not you, mister; anyone at all. It was a way to hide— a means to get away."

"I don't read you," Blaine told him. "You could have made a clean break; you could have let go at the gate. The car was going slow then. You could have sneaked away right now. I'd never noticed you."

"And been picked up as soon as I showed myself. The clothes are a giveaway. So is my speech. Then there's my eating habits, and maybe even the way I walk. I would stick out like a bandaged thumb."

"I see," said Blaine. "All right, then; put up the gun. You must be hungry. We'll go in and eat."

The man put away the gun. He patted his pocket. "I still have it, and I can get it fast. Don't try any

swifties."

"O.K.," said Blaine. "No swifties." Thinking: Picturesque. Swifties. Never heard the word. But it had a meaning; there could be no doubt of that.

"By the way, how did you get that gun?"

"That's something," said the man, "I'm not telling you."

6

His name, the fugitive said, was Spencer Collins. He'd been in suspension for five hundred years; he'd come out of it just a month before. Physically, he said, he was as good a man as ever—fifty-five, and well preserved. He'd paid attention to himself all his life—had eaten right, hadn't gone without sleep, had exercised both mind and body, knew something about psychosomatics.

"I'll say this for your outfit," he told Elaine, "you know how to take care of a sleeper's body. I was a little gaunt when I came out; a little weak; but there'd been no deterioration."

Norman Blaine chuckled. "We're at work at it constantly. I don't know anything about it, of course, but the biology boys are at it all the time—it's a continuing problem with them. A practical problem. During your five hundred years you probably were shifted a dozen times or more—to a better receptacle each time, with improvements in the operation. You got the benefit of the new improvements as soon as we worked them out."

Collins had been a professor of sociology, he said, and he'd evolved a theory. "You'll excuse me if I don't go into what it was."

"Why certainly," said Blaine.

"It's not of too much interest except to the academic mind. I presume you're not an academic mind."

"I suppose I'm not."

"It involved long-term social development," Collins told him. "I figured that five hundred years should show some indication of whether I had been right or wrong. I was curious. It's rough to figure out a thing, then up and die without ever knowing if it comes true or not." "I can understand."

"If you doubt me in any detail you can check the record."

"I don't doubt a word of it," said Elaine. "You are used to screwball cases." "Screwball?" "Loopy. Crazy."

"I see many screwball cases," Blaine assured him. But nothing quite so screwball as this, he thought. Nothing quite so crazy as sitting on the patio beneath the autumn stars, on his own home acres, talking to a man five centuries out of time. If he were in Readjustment, of course, he'd be accustomed to it, would not think it strange at all; Readjustment worked continually with cases just like this.

Collins was fascinating. His inflection betrayed the change in the spoken language, and there were those slang words always cropping up—idioms of the past that had somehow missed fire and found no place within the living language, although many others had survived.

At dinner there had been dishes the man had tackled with distrust, others that he'd eaten with disgust showing on his face, yet too polite to refuse them outright—determined, perhaps, to do his best to fit into the culture in which he found himself.

There were certain little mannerisms and affections that seemed pointless now; performed too often, they could become distinctly irritating. These were actions like stroking his chin when he was thinking, or popping joints by pulling at his fingers. That last one, Blaine told himself, was unnerving and indecent. Perhaps hi the past it had not been ill-bred to fiddle with one's body. He'd have to look that one up, he told himself, or maybe ask someone. The boys hi Readjustment would know—they'd know a lot of things.

"I wonder if you'd tell me," Blaine asked,—"this the- ory of yours. Did it work out the way you thought it would?"

"I don't know. You'll agree, perhaps, that I've scarcely been hi a position to find out."

"I suppose that's true. But I thought you might have asked."

"I didn't ask," said Collins.

They sat in the evening silence, looking out across the valley.

"You've come a long way in the last five hundred years," Collins finally said. "When I went to sleep, we were speculating on the stars and everyone was saying that the light speed limit had us licked on that. But today ..."

"I know," said Blaine. "Another five hundred years ..."

"You could go on forever and forever—"sleep a thousand years and see what had happened. Then another ..."

"It wouldn't be worth it."

"You're telling me," said Collins.

A nighthawk skimmed above the trees and planed into the sky hi jerky, fluttering motions, busy catching bisects. "That doesn't change," said Collins. "I can remember nighthawks ..."

He paused, then asked, "What are you going to do with me?"

"You're my guest."

"Until the keepers come."

"We'll talk about it later; you are safe tonight."

"There is one thing you've been wondering about; I've watched it gnawing at you."

"Why you ran away."

"That is it," said Collins.

"Well?"

"I chose a dream," said Collins, "such as you might expect. I asked a professorial retreat—a sort of idealized monastery where I could spend my time hi study, where I could live with other men who could talk my language. I wanted peace—a walk along a quiet river, a good sunset, simple food, time for reading and for thinking ..."

Blame nodded appreciatively. "A good choice, Collins; there should be more like it."

"I thought so, too," said Collins. "It was what I wanted."

"It proved enjoyable?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't know?"

"I never got it."

"But the Dream was fabricated..."

"I got a different dream."

"There was some mistake."

"No mistake," said Collins; "I am sure there wasn't."

"When you ask a certain dream," Elaine began, speaking stiffly, but Collins cut him short. "There was no mistake, I tell you. The dream was substituted."

"How could you know that?"

"Because the dream they gave me wasn't one that anyone would ask for. Not even one that ever would be thought of. It was one that was deliberately tailored for some reason I can't figure out. It was a different world."

"An alien world!"

"Not alien; it was Earth, all right—but a different culture. I lived five hundred years in that world, every minute of five hundred years. The dream pattern was not shortened as I understand they often are, telescoping a thousand years of Sleep into a normal lifetime. I got the works, the full five hundred years. I know what the score is when I tell you that it was a deliberately fashioned dream—no mistake at all—but fashioned for a purpose."

"Now let's not rush ahead so fast," protested Blaine. "Let us take it easy. The world had a different culture?"

"It was a world," said Collins, "in which the profit motive had been eliminated, in which the concept of profit never had been thought of. It was the same world that we have, but lacking in all the factors and forces which in our world stem from the profit motive. To me, of course, it was utterly fantastic, but to the natives of the place—if you can call them that—it seemed the normal thing."

He watched Blaine closely. "I think you'll agree," he said, "that no one would want to live in a world

like that. No one would ask a Dream like that." "Some economist, perhaps ..."

"An economist would know better. And, aside from that, there was a terribly consistent pattern to the dream that no one without prior knowledge could ever figure out to put into a dream."

"Our machine ..."

"Your machine would have no more prior knowledge than you yourself. No more, at least, than your best economist. And another thing—that machine is illogical; that's the beauty of it. It needn't think in logic. It shouldn't, because that would spoil the Dream. A Dream should not be logical."

"And yours was logical?"

"Very logical," said Collins. "You can figure out the factors hell to breakfast and you can't tell what will happen until you see a thing in action. That is logic for you."

He rose and walked across the patio, then walked back again, stood facing Blaine. "That's why I ran away. There's something dirty going on; I can't trust that gang of yours."

"I don't know," said Blaine. "I simply do not know."

"I can clear out if you want me to; no need to get yourself messed up in a deal like this. You took me in and fed me, gave me clothes, and you listened to me. I don't know how far I can get, but..."

^'No," said Blaine, "you're staying here. This is something that needs investigation, and I may need you later on. Keep out of sight. Don't mind the robots. We can trust them; they won't talk."

"If they smell me out," said Collins, "I'll manage to get off your land before they nab me. Caught, I'll keep my mouth shut."

Norman Blaine rose slowly and held out his hand. Collins took it in a swift, sure grip. "It's a deal"

"It's a deal," echoed Blaine.

7

At night, the Center was a place of ghosts, its deserted corridors ringing with their emptiness. Men worked throughout the building, Blaine knew—the Readjustment force; the Conditioners; the Tank Room gang, but there was no sign of them.

A robot guard stepped out of his embrasure. "Who goes there?"

"Blaine. Norman Elaine."

The robot stood for a second, whirring gently, searching through its memory banks to find the name of Blaine. "Identification," it said.

Blaine held up his identification disk. "Pass, Blaine," the robot said, then tried an amenity. "Working late?"

"Something I forgot," Blaine told it.

He went along the corridor and took the elevator, got out at the sixth.

Another robot stopped him. He identified himself.

"You're on the wrong floor, Blaine."

"New appointment." He showed the robot the form.

"All right, Blaine," it said.

Blaine went along the corridor and found the door to Records. He tried six keys before he hit the right one and the door swung open.

He closed the door behind him and waited until he could see a little before he found the light switch.

There was a front office; off it, a door led into the record stacks. What he sought should be here somewhere, Blaine told himself. Myrt would have finished it hours before—the Jenkins dream of big game hunting in the steaming jungle.

It would not have been filed as yet, might not be filed at all, for Jenkins would be coming in to take the Sleep in just a day or two. Perhaps there was a rack somewhere where the dreams-to-be-called-for were placed against their use.

He walked around a desk and looked about the room. Filing cabinets, more desks, a testing cubicle, a drink and lunch dispenser, and a rack in which were stacked half a dozen reels.

He walked swiftly to the rack and picked up the first reel. He found the Jenkins Dream five reels down and stood with it in his hand, wondering just how insane a man could get.

Collins must be mistaken, or there had been some mistake—or it was all a lie, directed to what purpose he had no idea. It simply couldn't be, Blaine told himself, that a dream would be deliberately substituted.

But he had come this far. Thus far he had a made a fool out of himself...

He shrugged; he might just as well go all the way now that he was here.

Reel in hand, Norman Blame walked into the testing cubicle and closed the door behind him. He inserted the reel and set the time at thirty minutes; then he put the cap upon his head and lay down upon the bed. Reaching out, he turned on the mechanism.

There was a faint whirring of the mechanism. Something puffed into his face and the whirr was gone; the cubicle was gone and Blaine stood in a desert, or what seemed to be a desert.

The landscape was red and yellow; there was a sun, and heat rose up from sand and rocks to strike him in the face. He raised his head to stare out at the horizons and saw that they lay far distant, for the land was flat. A lizard ran, squeaking, from the shade of one rock to the shadow of another. Far in the hot silk-blue of the sky a bird was circling.

He saw that he stood upon a road of sorts; it wound across the desert's face until it was lost in the heat-wavers that rose up from the tortured ground. And far off oil the road a black speck travelled slowly.

He looked around for shade and there was no shade, nothing big enough to cast a shadow for anything bigger than the scuttling, squeaking lizard.

Blaine lifted his hands and looked at them; they were tanned so deeply, that for a moment, he thought that they were black. He wore a pah- of ragged trousers, chewed off between knee and ankle and a tattered shirt, plastered to his back with sweat. He wore no shoes, and wondered about that until he lifted his feet and saw the horn-like callouses that had grown upon them to protect them from the heat and rocks.

Wondering dimly what he might be doing here, what he had been doing a moment before, what he was supposed to do, Norman Blaine stood and stared off across the desert. There was not a thing to see—just the red and yellow and the sand and heat

He shuffled his feet in the sand, digging holes with his toes, then smoothing them out again with the flat of his calloused feet. Then the memory of who he was, and what he had meant to do, came seeping slowly back. It came in snatches and hi driblets, and a great deal of it did not seem to make much sense.

He had left his home village that morning to travel to a city. There was some important reason why he should make the trip, although for the life of him he could not think of the reason. He had come from thataway and he was going thisaway; he wished that he could at least remember the name of his home village. It would be embarrassing if he met someone who asked him where he hailed from, and he could not tell them. He wished, too, that he could remember the name of the city he was going to, but that didn't matter quite so much. After a time, he'd get there and learn the name.

He started down the road, going thisaway, and he seemed to remember that he had a long way to travel yet. Somehow or other, he'd fooled around and lost a lot of time; it behooved him to get a hustle on if he expected to reach the city before nightfall.

He saw the black dot moving on the road and now it seemed much closer.

He was not afraid of the black dot and that was encouraging, he told himself. But when he tried to figure out why it should be so encouraging, Elaine simply couldn't say.

And because he had wasted a lot of time and had a long way yet to go, he broke into a trot. He legged it down the road as fast as he could go, despite the roughness of the trail and the hotness of the sun. As he ran he slapped his pockets and found that in one of them he carried certain objects. He knew immediately that the objects were of more than ordinary value; in a little while, he'd know what the objects were.

The black dot drew nearer; finally, it was close enough so that Elaine could see it was a large cart with wooden wheels. It was drawn by a fly-blown camel; a man sat upon the seat of the cart, beneath a tattered umbrella that, at one time, might have been colorful but now was bleached by the sun to a filthy gray.

He approached the cart, still running, and finally drew abreast of it. The man yelled something at the camel, which stopped.

"You took your time," he said. "Now get up here; get a wiggle on."

"I was detained," said Elaine.

"You were detained," sneered the other man, and thrust the reins at Elaine, jumping off the cart.

Elaine yelled at the camel and slapped him with the reins; he wondered what in hell was going on, and he was back in the cubicle again. His shirt was stuck against his back with perspiration, and he could feel the heat of the desert sun fading from his face.

He lay for a long moment, gathering his wits, reorienting himself. Beside him the reel moved slowly, bunching up the tape against the helmet slot. Blaine reached out a hand and stopped it, slowly spun it backwards to take up the tape.

There the horror of it dawned upon him, and for a moment he was afraid that he might cry out; but the cry died in his throat and he lay there motionless, frozen with the realization of what had happened.

He swung his feet off the cot and jerked the reel from its holder, stripping the tape out of the helmet. He turned the reel on its side and read the number and the name. The name was Jenkins, and the number was the identifying code he'd punched into the dream machine that very afternoon. There could be no mistake about it. The reel held the Jenkins dream. It was the reel that would be sent down in another day or two, when Jenkins came to take the Sleep.

And Jenkins, who had hankered for a big-game hunting trip, who had wanted to spend the next two hundred years on a shooting orgy, would find himself standing in a red and yellow desert on a track that could be called a road only by the utmost courtesy; in the distance he would see a moving dot, that would turn out later to be a camel and a cart.

He'd find himself in a desert with ragged pants and tattered shirt and with something in his pocket of more than ordinary value—but there would be no jungles and no veldt; there'd be no guns and no safari. There's be no hunting trip at all.

How many others? Elaine asked himself. How many others failed to get the dream they wanted? And what was more: Why had they jailed to get the dream they wanted?

Why had the dreams been substituted?

Or had they been substituted? Had Myrt—

He shook his head at that one. The great machine did what it was told. It took hi the symbols and equations and it chattered and it clanked and thundered, and it spun the dream that was asked of it.

Substitution was the only answer, for the dreams were monitored in this very cubicle. No dream went out until someone had checked to see that it was the dream ordered by the Sleeper.

Collins had lived out five hundred years hi a world which lacked the profit concept. And the red and yellow desert—what kind of world was that? Norman Elaine had not been there long enough to know; but there was one thing he did know—that, like Collins' world, the Jenkins world was one no one would ask to live in.

The cart had wooden wheels and had been pulled by camel-power; that might mean that it was a world hi which the idea of mechanized transportation never had been thought of. But it might, as well, be any one of a thousand other lands of cultures.

Elaine open the door of the cubicle and went out. He put the reel back hi the rack and stood for a moment hi the center of the icy room. After a moment, he realized that it was not the room that was icy, but himself.

This afternoon, when he had talked with Lucinda Silone Elaine had thought of himself as a dedicated person, had thought of the Center and the guild as a place of dedication. He had talked unctuously of the fact there must be no taint upon the guild, that it must at all tunes perform its services so as to merit the confidence of anyone who might apply for Sleep.

And where was that dedication now? Where was the public confidence?

How many others had been given substituted dreams?

How long had this been going on? Five hundred years ago, Spencer Collins had been given a dream that was not the dream he wanted. So the tampering had been going on five hundred years, at least.

And how many others in the years to come?

Lucinda Silone—what kind of dream would she get? Would it be the mid-nineteenth century plantation or some other place? How many of the dreams that Elaine had helped in fabricating had been changed?

He thought of the girl who had sat across the desk from him that morning—the honey color hah: and the blue eyes, the milky whiteness of her skin, the way she talked, the things she had said, and the others that she had not said.

She, too, he thought.

And there was an answer to that. He moved swiftly toward the door.

8

He climbed the steps and rang the bell; a voice told Mm to come in.

Lucinda Silone sat hi a chair beside a window. There was only one light—a dim light—hi the far corner of the room, so that she sat hi shadow. "Oh, it's you," she said. "You do the investigating, too."

"Miss Silone ..."

"Coine hi and have a seat. I'm quite willing to answer any questions; you see, I am still convinced ..."

"Miss Silone," said Elaine, "I came to tell you not to take the Sleep. I came to warn you; I have ..."

"You fool," she said. "You utter, silly fool."

"But..."

"Get out of here," she told him.

"But it's ..."

She rose out of her chair and there was scorn in every line of her. "So I can't take a chance. Go ahead; tell me it's dangerous. Go on and tell me it's a trick. You fool—I knew all that before I ever came."

"You know ..."

They stood for a moment in tense silence, each staring at the other. "And now you know." And she said something else he had thought himself not half an hour before: "How about that dedication now?"

"Miss Silone, I came to tell you ..."

"Don't tell anyone," she said. "Go back home and forget you know it; you'll be more comfortable that way. Not dedicated, maybe, but much more comfortable. And you'll live a good deal longer."

"There is no need to threaten ..."

"Not a threat, Elaine; just a tip. If word should get to Farris that you know, you could count your life in hours. And I could see that the tip got round, to Farris. I know just the way to do it."

"But Farris ..."

"He's dedicated, too?"

"Well, no, perhaps not. I don't...!'

The thought was laughable. Paul Farris dedicated!

"When I come back to Center," she said, speaking evenly and calmly, "we'll proceed just as if this had never happened. You'll make it your personal business to see that my Sleep goes through, without a hitch. Because if you don't, word will get to Farris."

"But why is it so important that you take the Sleep, knowing what you do?"

"Maybe I'm Entertainment," she said. "You rule out Entertainment, don't you? You asked me if I was Entertainment and you were very foxy while you were doing it. You fob off Entertainment because you're afraid they'll steal your Dreams for solidiographs. They tried to do it once, and you've been jumpy ever since."

"You're not Entertainment."

"You thought so this morning. Or was that all an act?"

"It was an act," Elaine admitted miserably.

"But this tonight isn't an act," she said coldly, "because you're scared as you've never been before. Well, keep on being scared. You have a right to be."

She stood for a moment, looking at him in disgust. "And now get out."

9

Philo did not meet him at the gate, but ran out of a clump of shrubbery, barking in high welcome, when

he swung the car around the circle drive and stopped before the house. "Down, Philo," Elaine told him. "Down."

He climbed out of the car and Philo moved, quietly now, to stand beside him; in the quietness of the night, he could hear the click of the dog's toenails upon the bluestone walk. The house stood large and dark, although a light burned beside the door. He wondered how it was that houses and trees always seemed larger in the night, as if with the coming of the dark they took on new dimensions.

A stone crunched underneath a foot step and he swung around. Harriet stood on the path. "I was waiting for you," she said. "I thought you'd never come. Philo and I were waiting, and ..."

"You gave me a start," he told her. "I thought that you were working."

She moved swiftly forward and the light from the entrance lamp fell across her face. She was wearing a low-cut dress that sparkled in the light, and a sparkling veil was flung across her head so that it seemed she was surrounded by a thousand twinkling stars. "There was someone here," she told him.

"Someone.. ."

"I drove up the back way. There was a car out front, and Philo was barking. I saw three of them come out the door, dragging a fourth. He was fighting and struggling, but they hurried him along and pushed him in the car. Philo was nipping at them, but they paid him no attention, they were in such a hurry. I thought at first it might be you, but then I saw it wasn't. The three were dressed like goons and I was a little frightened. I sped up and drove past and tore out on the highway, as fast as I could go, and..."

"Now, wait a minute," Elaine cautioned. "You're going too fast; take your time and tell me..."

"Then, later, I drove back, without my lights, and parked the car at my place. I came across the woods and I've been waiting for you."

She paused, breathless with her rush of words.

He reached out, put his fingers underneath her chin, tipped up her face and kissed her.

She brushed his hand away. "At a time like this," she said.

"Any time, at all."

"Norm, are you in trouble? Is someone after you?"

"There may be several who are after me."

"And you stand around and slobber over me."

"I just happened to think," he said, "of what I have to do."

"What do you have to do?"

"Go see Farris. He invited me; I forgot until just now."

"But you forget. I said goons ..."

"They weren't goons. They were dressed to look like goons."

For now, suddenly, Norman Elaine saw it as a single unit with a single purpose—saw at last the network of intrigue and of purpose that he had sought since that morning.

First, there had been the Buttonholer who had collared him; then Lucinda Silone who had wished a dream of dignity and peace; and after that, Lew Giesey, dead behind his battered desk—and finally the man who had spent five hundred years in a culture that had not discovered a profit.

"But Farris ..."

"Paul Farris is a friend of mine."

"He is no one's friend."

"Just like that," said Elaine, thrusting out two fingers, pressed very close together.

"I'd be careful just the same."

"Since this afternoon, Farris and I are conspiratorial pals. We are in a deal together; Giesey died ..."

"I know. What has that to do with this sudden friendship?"

"Before he died, Giesey put an appointment through. I'm moving up to Records."

"Oh, Norm. I'm so glad!"

"I had hoped you'd be."

"Then what is it all about?" she asked. "Tell me what is going on. Who was that man the goons dragged out of here?"

"I told you—they weren't goons."

"Who was the man. Don't try to duck the question."

"An escapee. A man who ran away from Center."

"And you were helping him."

"Well, no ..."

"Norm, why should anyone want to escape from Center? Have you got folks locked up?"

"This one was an awakened suspendee..."

He knew he'd said too much, but it was too late. He saw the glint in her eyes—the look he'd grown to know. "It's not a story," he said. "If you use this..."

"That's what you think."

"This was in confidence."

"Nothing's in confidence; you can't talk to News in confidence."

"You'd just be guessing."

"You'd better tell me now," she said. "I can find out, anyhow."

"That old gag!"

"You may as well go ahead and tell me. It'll save me a lot of trouble, and you'll know I have it straight."

"Not another word."

"All right, smart guy," she said.

She stood on tiptoe, kissed him swiftly, then ducked away.

"Harriet!" he cried, but she had stepped back into the shadow of the shrubbery and was gone. He took a quick step forward, then halted. There was no use going after her. He could never find or catch her, for she knew the gardens and the woods that stretched between their houses fully as well as he did.

Now he'd let himself in for it. By morning, the story would be In the papers.

He knew that Harriet had meant exactly what she said. Damn the woman. Fanatical, he told himself. Why couldn't she see things in their right perspective? Her loyalty to Communications was utterly fantastic.

And yet it was no more so than Norman Elaine's to Dreams. What had the commentator said when he'd been driving home? The unions were building up their strength, and it was this very fanatic loyalty—his to Dreams, Harriet's to Communications—which was the basis of that growing strength.

He stood in the puddle of light before the door and shivered at the thought of the story with 96-point headlines screaming from Page One.

Not a breath of scandal, he had said that afternoon. For Dreams was built on public confidence; any hint of scandal would bring it tumbling down. And here was scandal—or something that could be made to sound very much like scandal.

There were two things he could do. He could try to stop Harriet—how, he did not know. Or he could unmask this intrigue for what it really was—a plot to eliminate Dreams in the struggle for power, a move in that Central Labor struggle about which the commentator had held forth so pontifically.

Now Elaine was sure that he knew how it all tied up, was sure that he could trace the major plot-lines that ran through these fantastic happenings. But if he meant to prove what he suspected, he didn't have much time. Harriet was already off on a hunt for the facts of which he'd given her a hint. Perhaps she'd not have them for the morning editions, but by evening the story would be broken.

And before that happened, Dreams must have its story to combat the flying rumors.

There was one fact he had to verify. A man should know his history, Blame told himself. It should not be a thing to be looked up in books, but carried in one's head, a ready tool for use.

Lucinda Silone had said she was Education and she would have told the truth. That was something which could be checked, one of the facts that would be checked automatically. Spencer Collins was Education, too. A professor of sociology, he had said, who had evolved a theory.

There was something hi the history of the guilds concerning Dreams and Education, something about a con- nection that had once existed between them—and it might apply.

He went swiftly up the walk and through the hall, trudging down the hall to the study, with Philo following after. He thumbed up the switch and went quickly to the shelves. He ran a finger along a row of books until he found the one he wanted.

At the desk, he turned on the lamp and ran quickly through the pages. He found what he wanted—the fact he'd known was there, read long ago and forgotten, dimmed out by the years of never being needed.

10

Farris' house was surrounded by a great metallic wall, too high to jump, too smooth to climb. A guard was posted at the gate and another at the door.

The first guard frisked Elaine; the second demanded identification. When he was satisfied, he called a robot to take the visitor to Farris.

Paul Farris had been drinking. The bottle on the table beside his chair was better than half empty. "You took your time in coming," he growled.

"I got busy."

"Doing what, my friend?"

Farris pointed at the bottle. "Help yourself. There are glasses in the rack."

Blaine poured out liquor until the glass was almost full. He said casually, "Giesey was murdered, wasn't he?"

The liquor in Farris' glass slopped slightly, but there was no other sign. "The verdict was suicide."

"There was a glass on the desk," said Blaine. "He'd just had a drink out of the carafe; there was poison in the water."

"Why don't you tell me something I don't know?"

"And you're covering up for someone."

"Could be," Farris said. "Could be, too, it's none of your damn business."

"I was just thinking. Education ..."

"What's that!"

"Education has been carrying a knife for us for a long time now. I looked up the history of it. Dreams started as a branch of Education, a technique for learning while you were asleep. But we got too big for them, and we got some new ideas—a thousand years ago. So we broke away, and . . ."

"Now, wait a minute; say that slow, again."

"I have a theory."

"You have a head, too, Elaine. A good imagination. That's what I said this afternoon; you think standing."

Farris lifted his glass and emptied it hi a single gulp. "We'll stick the knife into them," he said, dispassionately. "Clear up to their gizzard."

Still dispassionately, he hurled the glass against the wall. It exploded into dust. "Why the hell couldn't someone have thought of that to start with? It would have made it simple ... Sit down, Elaine. I think we got it made."

Elaine sat down and suddenly was sick—sick at the realization that he had been wrong. It was not Education which had engineered the murder. It had been Paul Farris—Farris and how many others? For no one man—even with the organization the goon leader had at his command—could have worked on a thing like this alone.

"One thing I want to know," said Farris. "How did you get that appointment? You didn't get it the way you said; you weren't meant to get it."

"I found it on the floor; it fell off Giesey's desk."

There was no need of lying any longer, of lying or pretending. There was no further need of anything; the old pride and loyalty were gone. Even as Norman Elaine thought about it, the bitterness sank deeper into his soul; the futility of all the years was a torture that rasped across raw flesh.

Farris chuckled. "You're all right," he said. "You could have kept your mouth shut and made it stick. It takes guts to do a thing like that. We can work together."

"It still is sticking," Elaine told him sharply. "Take it away from me if you think you can."

This was sheer bravado and bitterness, a feeble hitting back, and Elaine wondered why he did it, for the job meant nothing now.

"Take it easy," Farris said. "You're keeping it. I'm glad it worked out as it did. I didn't think you had it

in you, Elaine; I guess that I misjudged you."

He reached for the bottle. "Hand me another glass."

Elaine handed him another glass and Farris filled both. "How much do you know?"

Elaine shook his head. "Not too much. This business of the dream substitution ..."

"You hit it on the head," said Farris; "that's the core of it. We'd had to fill you in before too long, so I might as well fill you in right now."

He settled back comfortably in Ms chair. "It started long ago, and it has been carried on with tight security for more than seven hundred years. It had to be a long-range project, you understand, for few dreams last less than a hundred years and many last much longer. At first, the work was carried on slowly and very cautiously; in those days, the men in charge had to feel their way along. But in the past few hundred years it has been safe to speed it up. We've worked through the greater part of the program first laid out, and are taking care of some of the supplementary angles that have been added since. Less than another hundred years and we'll be ready—we could be ready any time, but we'd like to wait another hundred years. We have worked up techniques from what we've already done that are plain impossible to believe. But they'll work; we have firsthand evidence that they are workable."

Elaine was cold inside, cold with the shock of disillusion. "All the years," he said.

Farris laughed. "You're right. All the years. And all the others thought that we were lily pure. We were at pains to make them think we were; such quiet people. We were quiet from the very start, while the others bunched their muscles, shouted. One by one they learned the lesson we had known from the very first—that you keep your mouth shut, that you do not show your strength. You wait until the proper time."

"The others learned, eventually. They took their lessons hard, but they finally learned the facts of politics— too late. Even before there was a Central Union, Dreams saw what was coming and planned. We sat quietly in the corner and kept our hands neatly folded in our laps; we bowed our heads a little and kept our eyes half closed—a pose of utter meekness. Most of the time, the others didn't even know that we were around. We are so small and quiet, you see. Everyone is watching Communications or Transportation or Food or Fabrication, because they are the big boys. But they should be watching Dreams, for Dreams is the one that has it."

"Just one thing," said Elaine. "Two things, maybe. How do you know the substitute dreams run true? All the genuine ones we make are pure fantasy; they couldn't really happen the way we fabricate them."

"That," Farris told him, "is the one thing that has us on the ropes. When we can explain that one, we'll have everything. Back at the beginning there were experiments. Dreams tried it out on their own personnel—ones who volunteered, for short periods, five years or ten. And the dreams didn't come out the way they were put in.

"When you give a dream a logical basis, instead of wish-fulfillment factors, it follows the lines of logic. When you juggle cultural factors, the patterns run true—well, maybe not true, but different than you thought they would. When you feed in illogic, you get a jumble of illogic; but when you feed in logic, the logic takes over and it shapes the dream. Our study of logic dreams leads us to believe that they follow lines of true development. Unforeseen trends show up, governed by laws and circumstances we could not have guessed—and those trends work out to logical conclusions."

There was fear in the man—a fear that must have lain deep in the minds of many men throughout seven hundred years. "Is it just pretend? Or do those dreams actually exist? Are there such other worlds somewhere? And if they are, do we create them? Or do we merely tap them?"

"How do you know about the dreams?" asked Blaine. "The Sleepers wouldn't tell you; if they did, you couldn't believe ..."

Farris laughed. "That's the easy part. We have a two-way helmet. A feed-in to establish the pattern and to set up the factors, a sort of introduction to set the dream going. It operates for a brief period, then cuts out and the dream is on its own. But we have a feed-back built into the helmet, and the dream is put on tape. We study it as it comes in; we don't have to wait. We have stacks of tape. We have at our fingertips the billions of factors that go into many thousand different cultures. We have a history of the never-was, and of the might-have-been, and perhaps the yet-to-come."

Dreams is the one that has it, he had said. They had stacks of tape from seven hundred years of dreams. They had millions of man-hours experience—first-hand experience—in cultural patterns that had never happened; Some of them could not have happened; others of them might have come within a hair-breadth of happening— and there were many of them, perhaps, that could be made to happen.

From those tapes they had learned lessons outside the curriculum of human experience. Economics, politics, sociology, philosophy, psychology—in all facets of human effort they held all the trumps. They could pull out economic dazzlers to blind the people; they could employ political theory that would be sure to win hands down; they had psychological tricks that would stop all the other unions dead.

They played dumb for years sitting meekly in the corner, hands folded in their lap, being very quiet. And all the time they had been fashioning a weapon for use at its proper time.

And the dedication, Blaine thought, the human dedication. The pride and comfort of a job well done. The •warmth of accomplishment and service—the close human fellowship.

For years the tapes had rolled, recording the feedback, while men and women—who had come in trusting confidence to seek fairylands of their imagination—plodded drearily through of logic dreams that were utterly fantastic.

Farris' voice had gone on and on and now it came back to him.

". .. Giesey was going soft on us. He wanted to replace Roemer with someone who would see it his way.

And he picked you, Elaine—of all men, he picked you."

He laughed again, uproariously. "It does beat hell how mistaken one can be."

"Yes, it does," agreed Elaine.

"So we had to kill him before the appointment could go through; but you beat us to it, Elaine. You're a fast man on your feet. How did you know about it? How did you know what to do?"

"Never mind."

"The timing," said Farris. "The timing was perfect."

"You've got it all doped out."

Farris nodded. "I talked to Andrews. He'll go along; he doesn't like it, of course, but there's nothing he can do."

"You're taking a long chance, Farris, telling me all this."

"Not a chance; you are one of us. You can't get out of it. If you say a word, you wreck the guild—and you won't have a chance to say a word. From this moment, Elaine, there's a gun against your back; there'll be someone watching all the time.

"Don't try to do it, Elaine; I like you. I like the way you operate. That Education angle is pure genius. You play along with us, and it'll be worth your while. There's nothing you can do but play along with us; you're in it, clear up to your chin. As the head of Records, you have custody of all the evidence, and you can't write off that fact... Go on, man; finish up that drink."

"I'd forgotten it," said Elaine.

He flicked the glass and the liquor splashed out, into Farris' face. As if it were the same motion, Elaine's fingers left the glass, let it drop, and reached for the liquor bottle.

Paul Farris came to his feet, blinded, hands clawing at his face. Elaine rose with him, bottle arcing, and his aim was good. The bottle crashed on the goon leader's skull and the man went down upon the carpeting, with snakes of blood oozing through his hair.

For a second Norman Elaine stood there. The room and the man upon the floor suddenly were bright and sharp, each feature of the place and the shape upon the carpeting burning themselves into his consciousness. He lifted his hand and saw that he still grasped the bottle's neck with its jagged, broken edges. He hurled it from him and ran, hunched against the expected bullet, straight toward the window. He leaped and rolled himself into a ball even as he leaped, arms wrapped around his face. He crashed into the glass, heard the faint ping of its explosion, and then was through and falling.

He lit on the gravel path and rolled until thick shrubbery stopped him, then crawled swiftly toward the wall. But the wall was smooth, he remembered—not one to be climbed. Smooth and high and with only one gate. They would hunt him down and kill him. They'd shake him out like a rabbit in a brushpile. He

didn't have a chance.

He didn't have a gun and he'd not been trained to fight. All that he could do was hide and run; even so, he couldn't get away, for there wasn't much to hide in and there wasn't far to run. But I'm glad I did it, he told himself.

It was a blow against the shame of seven hundred years, a re-assertion of the old, dead dedication. The blow should have been struck long ago; it was useless now, except as a symbol that only Norman Elaine would know.

He wondered how much such symbolism might count in this world around him.

Elaine heard them running now, and shouting; he knew it would not be long. He huddled in the bushes and tried to plan what he should do, but everywhere he ran into blank walls and there was nothing he could do.

A voice hissed at him, a whisper from the wall. Elaine started, pressing himself further back into the clump of bushes.

"Psst," said the voice once again.

A trick, he thought, wildly. A trick to lure me out. Then he saw the rope, dangling from the wall, where it was lighted by the broken window.

"Psst," said the voice.

Elaine took the chance. He leaped from the bushes and across the path toward the wall. The rope was real and was anchored. Spurred by desperation, Elaine went up it like a monkey, flung out an arm across the top of the wall and hauled himself upward. A gun cracked angrily; a bullet hit the wall and ricocheted, wailing, out into the night.

Without thinking of the danger, he hurled himself off the wall. He struck hard ground that drove the breath from him and he doubled up with agony, retching, gasping to regain his breath, while stars wheeled with tortuous deliberation in the center of his brain.

He felt hands lifting him and carrying him and heard the slamming of a door, then the flow of speed as a car howled through the night.

11

A face was talking to him and Norman Elaine tried to place it; he knew that he'd seen it once before. But he couldn't recognize it; he shut his eyes, tried to find soft, cool blackness. The blackness was not soft, but harsh and painful; he opened his eyes again.

The face still was talking to him and had shoved itself up close to him. He felt the fine spray of the other's saliva fly against his face. Once before, when a man had talked to Elaine, this had happened. That morning at the parking lot a man had buttonholed him. And here he was again, with his face thrust close and the words pouring out of him.

"Cut it out, Joe," said another voice. "He's still half out. You hit him too hard; he can't understand you."

And Elaine knew that voice too. He put out his hand, pushed the face away, and hauled himself to a sitting position, with a rough wall against his back.

"Hello, Collins," he said to the second voice. "How did you get here?"

"I was brought," said Collins.

"So I heard."

Elaine wondered where he was: An old cellar, apparently—a fit place for conspirators. "Friends of yours?" he asked.

"It turns out that they are."

The face of the Buttonholer popped up once again.

"Keep him away from me," said Elaine.

Another voice told Joe to get away. And he knew that voice, too.

Joe's face left.

Elaine put up his arm and wiped his own face. "Next," he said, "I'll find Farris here."

"Farris is dead," said Collins.

"I didn't think you had the guts," said Lucinda Silone.

He turned his head against the roughness of the wall and he saw them now, standing to one side of him— Collins and Lucinda and Joe and two others that he did not know.

"He won't laugh again," said Elaine. "I smashed the laugh off him."

"Dead men never laugh," said Joe.

"I didn't hit him very hard."

"Hard enough."

"How do you know?"

"We made sure," said Lucinda.

He remembered her from the morning, sitting across the desk from him, and the calmness of her. She still was calm. She was one, Elaine thought, who could make sure—very sure—that a man was dead.

It would not have been too hard to do. Elaine had been seen going over the wall and there would have been a chase. While the guard poured out after him it would have been a fairly simple matter to slip into the house and make entirely certain that Farris was dead.

He reached up a hand and felt the lump on his head, back of the ear. They had made certain of him, too, he thought—certain that he would not wake too soon and that he'd make no trouble. He stumbled to his feet and stood shakily, putting out a hand against the wall to support himself.

He looked at Lucinda. "Education," he said, and he looked at Collins and said, "You too."

And he looked at the rest of them, from one to another. "And you?" he asked. "Every one of you?"

"Education has known It for a long time," Lucinda told him. "For a century or more. We've been working on you; and this time, my friend, we have Dreams nailed down."

"A conspiracy," said Elaine, grim laughter in his throat. "A wonderful combination—Education and conspiracy. And the Buttonholers. Oh, God, don't tell me the Buttonholers!"

She held her chin just a little tilted and her shoulders were straight. "Yes, the Buttonholers, too."

"Now," Blaine told her, "I've heard everything." He flicked a questioning thumb at Collins.

"A man," said the girl, "who took a Dream before we ever knew; who took you at the outward value that you give yourselves. We got to him ..."

"Got to him!"

"Certainly. You don't think that we're without—well, you might call them representatives, at Center."

"Spies."

"All right; call them spies."

"And I—where do 1 work in? Or did I just stumble in the way?"

"You in the way? Never! You were so conscientious, dear. So smug and self-satisfied, so idealistic."

So he'd not been entirely wrong, then. It had been an Education plot—except that the plot had run headlong into a Center intrigue and he'd been caught in the middle. And oh the beauty of it, he thought—the utter, fouled-up beauty of it! You couldn't have worked a tangled mass like this up intentionally if you'd spent a lifetime at it.

"I told you, pal," said Collins, "that there was something wrong. That the dream was made to order for a certain purpose."

Purpose, Blaine thought. The purpose of collecting data from hypothetical civilizations, from imaginary cultures, of having first-hand knowledge as to what would happen under many possible conditions; to collect and co-ordinate that data and pick from it the factors that could be grafted onto the present culture; to go about the construction of a culture in a cold-blooded, scientific manner, as a carpenter might set out to build a hen-coop. And the lumber and the nails used in that hen-coop culture would have been fabricated from the stuff of dreams dreamt by reluctant dreamers.

And the purpose of Education in exposing the plot? Politics, perhaps. For the union which could unmask such duplicity would gain much in the way of public admiration, would thus be strengthened for the coming showdown. Or perhaps the purpose might be more idealistic, honestly motivated by a desire to thwart a scheme which would most surely put one union in unquestioned domination of all the rest of them.

"Now what?" Blaine asked.

"They want me to bring a complaint," said Collins.

"And you are going to do it."

"I suppose I shah1."

"But why you? Why now? There were others with substituted dreams; you were not the first. Education must have sleepers planted by the hundreds."

He looked at the girl. "You applied," he said; "you tried to plant yourself."

"Did I?" she asked.

And had she? Or had her application been aimed at him—for now it was clear that he had been selected as one weak link in Dreams. How many other weak links now and in the past, had Education used? Had her application been a way to contact him, a means of applying some oblique pressure to make him do a thing that Education might want someone like him to do?

"We are using Collins," said Lucinda, "because he is the first independent grade A specimen we have found, who is untainted with brush of Education espionage. We used our own sleepers to build up the evidence, but we could not produce in court evidence collected by admitted spies. But Collins is clean; he took the sleep before we even suspected what was going on."

"He is not the first; there have been others. Why haven't you used them?"

"They were not available."

"Not..."

"Dreams could tell what happened. Perhaps you might know what happened to them, Mr. Blaine."

He shook his head. "But why am I here? You certainly don't expect me to testify. What made you grab me off?"

"We saved your neck," said Collins; "you keep forgetting that."

"You may leave," Lucinda told him, "any time you wish."

"Except," Joe said, "you are a hunted man. The goons are looking for you."

"If I were you," said Collins, "I do believe I'd stay."

They thought they had him. He could see they thought so—had tied and haltered, had him in a corner where he would have to do anything they said. A cold, hard anger grew inside of him—that anyone should think so easily to trap a man of Dreams and bend him to their will.

Norman Elaine took a slow step forward, away from the wall, and stood unsupported in the dim-lit cellar. "Which way out?" he asked.

"Up those steps," said Collins.

"Can you make it?" Lucinda asked.

"I can make it."

He walked unsteadily toward the stairs, but each step seemed to be a little surer and he knew he'd make it, up the stairs and out into the coolness of the night. Suddenly he yearned for the first breath of the cool, night air, to be out of this dank hole that smelled of dark conspiracy.

He turned and faced them, where they stood like big-eyed ghosts against the cellar wall. "Thanks for everything," he said.

He stood there for another instant, looking back at them. "For everything," he repeated. Then he turned and climbed the stairs.

12

The night was dark, though dawn could not be far off. The moon had set, but the stars burned like steady lamps and a furtive dawn-wind had come up to skitter down the street.

He was in a little village, Elaine saw—one of the many shopping centers scattered across the countryside, with its myriad shop fronts and their glowing night lights.

He walked away from the cellar opening, lilting his head so the wind could blow against it. The air was clean and fresh after the dankness of the cellar; he gulped in great breaths of it, and it seemed to clear his head of fog and put new strength into his legs.

The street was empty; he trudged along it, wondering what he should do next. Obviously, he had to do something. The move was up to him. He couldn't be found, come morning, still wandering the streets of this shopping center.

He must find some place to hide from the hunting goons!

But there was no way in which he could hide from them. They'd be relentless in their search for Elaine. He had killed their leader—or had seemed to kill him— and that was a precedent they could not allow to go unpunished.

There'd be no public hue or outcry, for the Farris killing could not be advertised; but that would not mean the search would be carried on with any less ferocity. Even now they would be hunting for him, even now they would have covered all his likely haunts and contacts. He could not go home, or to Harriet's home, or to any of the other places—

Harriet's home!

Harriet was not home; she was off somewhere, tracking down a story that he must somehow stop. There was a greater factor here than his personal safety. There was the honor and the integrity of the Dream guild; if any of its honor and integrity were left.

But there was, Norman Elaine told himself. It still was left in the thousands of workers, and hi the departmental heads who had never heard of substituted dreams. The basic purpose of the guild still remained what it had been for a thousand years, so far as the great majority of its members were concerned. To them the flame of service, tha> pride and comfort of that service, and the dedication to it burned as bright and clear as it ever had.

But not for long; not for many hours. The first headline in a paper, the first breath of whispered scandal, and the bright, clear light of purpose would be a smoky flare, glaring redly in the murk of shame.

There was a way—there had to be a way—to stop it.

There must be a way in which the Dream guild could be saved. And if there were a way, he must be the one to find it; of them all, Blaine was the only one who knew the imminence of dishonor.

The first step was to get hold of Harriet, to talk with her, to make her see the right and wrong.

The goons were hunting for him, but they would be on their own; they could not enlist the help of any other union. It should be safe to phone.

Far up the street, he saw a phone booth sign and he headed there, hurrying along, his footsteps ringing sharply in the morning chill.

He dialed the number of Harriet's office. No, the voice said, she wasn't there. No, he had no idea. Should he have her call back if she happened to come in.

"Never mind," said Blaine. He called another number.

"We're closed," a voice told him, "there's no one here at all."

He called another and there was no answer. Another. "There ain't no one here, mister. We closed up hours ago. It's almost morning now."

She wasn't at her office; she wasn't at her favorite night spots.

Home, perhaps?

He hesitated for a moment, then decided it wasn't safe to call her there. The goons in defiance of all Communications regulations, would have her home line tapped, and his home line as well.

There was that little place out by the lake where they'd gone one afternoon. Just a chance, he told himself. He looked up the number, dialed it. "Sure she's here," said the man who answered. He waited.

"Hello, Norm," she said, and he could sense the panic in her voice the little quick catch in her breath. "I have to talk with you."

"No," she said. "No. What do you mean by calling? You can't talk with me. The goons are hunting you..." "I've got to talk to you; that story ..." "I've got the story, Norm."

"But you have to listen to me. The story's wrong. It's not the way you have it; that's not the way it was at all."

"You better get away, Norm. The goons are everywhere ..."

"Damn the goons," he said.

"Goodbye, Norm," she said; "I hope you get away."

The line was dead.

He sat stunned staring at the phone.

I hope you get away. Goodbye, Norm. I hope you get away.

She had been frightened when he'd called. She wouldn't listen; she was sorry, now, that she had ever known him— a man disgraced, a killer, hunted by the goons.

She had the story she had told him; and that was all that mattered. A story wormed out of the whispered word, out of a gin and tonic or a Scotch and soda. The old, wise story garnered from many confidences, from knowing the right people, from having many pipelines.

"Ugly," he said.

So she had the story and would write it soon and it would be splashed in garish lettering for the world to read.

There must be a way to stop it—there had to be a way to stop it.

There was a way to stop it!

He shut his eyes and shivered, suddenly cold with the horror. "No, no," he said.

But it was the only answer. Blaine got up, groped his way out of the booth, and stood in the loneliness of the empty sidewalk, with the splashes of light thrown across the concrete from the many shop fronts with the first dawn wind stirring hi the sky above the roofs.

A car came creeping down the street, with its lights off, and he did not see it until it was almost opposite him. The driver stuck out his head. "Ride, mister?"

He jumped, startled by the car and the voice. His muscles bunched but there was no place to go, no place to duck, nowhere to hide. They had him cold, he knew. He wondered why they didn't shoot.

The back door popped open. "Get in here," said

Lucinda Silone. "Don't stand and argue. Get in, you crazy fool."

He moved swiftly, leaped into the car and slammed the door.

"I couldn't leave you out there naked," said the girl. "The way you are, the goons would have you before the 8bn was up."

"I have to go to Center," Blaine told her. "Can you take me there?"

"Of all the places ..."

"I have to go," he said; "if you won't take me..."

"We can take you."

"We can't take him and you know it," said the driver.

"Joe, the man wants to go to Center."

"It's a stupid business," said Joe. "What does he want to go to Center for? We can hide him out. We ..."

"They won't be looking for me there," said Blaine.

"That's the last place in the world they'd expect to find me."

"You can't get in ..."

"I can get him in," Lucinda said.

13

They came around a curve and were confronted by the road block. There was no time to stop, no room to turn around and flee. "Get down!" yelled Joe.

The motor howled in sudden fury at an accelerator jammed tight against the boards. Blaine reached out an arm and pulled Lucinda to him, hurling both of them off the seat and to the floor.

Metal screamed and grated as the car slammed into the block. Out of the corner of his eye, Norman Blaine saw timber go hurtling past the window. Something else smashed into a window and they were sprayed with glass.

The car bucked and slewed, then was through. One tire was flat, thumping and pounding on the pavement.

Blame reached up a hand and grasped the back of the seat. He hauled himself up pulling Lucinda with him.

The hood of the machine, sprung loose, canted upward, blocking out the driver's vision of the road. The metal of the hood was twisted and battered, flapping in the wind. "Can't hold it long," Joe grunted, fighting the wheel.

He turned his head, a swift glance back at them, then swung it back again. Half of Joe's face, Blame saw, was covered with blood from a cut across the temple.

A shell exploded off to one side of them. Flying, jagged metal slammed into the careening car.

Hand mortars—and the next one would be closer!

"Jump!" yelled Joe.

Blaine hesitated, and a swift thought flashed hi his mind. He couldn't jump; he couldn't leave this man alone—this Buttonholer by the name of Joe. He had to stick with him. After all, this was his fight much more than it was Joe's.

Lucinda's fingers bit into his arm. "The door!"

"But Joe..."

"The door!" she screamed at him.

Another shell exploded, hi front of the car and slightly to one side. Blame's hand found the button of the door and pressed. The door snapped open, retracting back into the body. He hurled himself at the opening.

His shoulder slammed into concrete and he skidded along it; then the concrete ended, and he fell into nothingness. He landed in water and thick mud and fought his way up out of it, sputtering and coughing, dripping slime and muck.

His head buzzed madly and there was a dull ache in his neck. One shoulder, where he'd hit and skidded on the concrete, seemed to be on fire. He smelled the acrid odor of the muck, the mustiness of decaying vegetation, and the wind that blew down the roadside ditch was so cold it made him shiver.

Far up the road, another shell exploded, and in the flash of light he saw metallic objects flying out into the dark. Then a column of flame flared up and burned, like a lighted torch.

There went the car, he thought.

And there went Joe as well—the little man who'd waylaid him in the parking lot that morning, a little Buttonholer for whom he'd felt anger and disgust. But a man who'd died, who had been willing to die, for something that was bigger than himself.

Elaine floundered up the ditch, stooping low to keep in the cover of the reeds the grew along its edges.

"Lucinda!"

There was a floundering in the water ahead. He wondered briefly at trie thankfulness of relief that welled up inside of him.

She had made it, then; she was safe, here in the ditch—although to be in the ditch was only temporary safety. They might have been seen by the watching goons. They had to get away, as swiftly as they could. The flare of the burning car was dying down and the ditch was darker now. He floundered ahead, trying to be as quiet as possible.

She was waiting for him, crouched against the bank. "All right?" he whispered and she nodded at him, her face making the quick motion in the darkness.

She lifted an arm and pointed; there, seen through the tightgrowing reeds of the marsh beyond the ditch, was Center, a great building that towered against the first light of morning in the eastern sky. "We're almost there," she told him softly.

She led the way slowly along the ditch and off into the marsh, following a watery runway that ran through the thick cover of sedges and rushes. "You know where you are going?"

"Just follow me," she told him.

He wondered vaguely how many others might have followed this hidden path across the marsh—how many times she herself might have followed it. Although it was hard to think of her as she was now, dirty with muck and slime, wading through the water. Behind them they still could hear the shouts of the squad of goons that had been stationed at the block.

The goons had gone all out, he thought, setting up a block on a public highway. Someone could get into a lot of trouble for a stunt like that.

He'd told Lucinda that the goons would never dream of his going back to Center. But he had been wrong; apparently they had expected he'd try to make it back to Center. And they'd been set and waiting for him. Why?

Lucinda had halted in front of the mouth of a three-foot drain pipe, emerging from the bank just above the waterway. A tiny trickle of water ran out of it and dripped into the swamp. "How are you at crawling?"

"I can do anything," he told her.

"It's a long ways."

He glanced up at the massive Center which, from where he stood, seemed to rise out of the marsh. "All the way?"

"All the way," she said.

She lifted a muddy hand and brushed back a strand of hair, leaving a streak of mud across her face. He grinned at the sight of her—sodden and bedraggled, no longer the cool, unruffled creature who had sat across the desk from him. "If you laugh out loud," she said, "I swear I'll smack you one."

She braced her elbows on the lip of the pipe and hauled herself upward, wriggling into the pipe. She gained the pipe and went forward on hands and knees.

Blaine followed. "You know your way around," he whispered, the pipe catching up the whisper and magnifying it, bouncing it back and forth in an eerie echo.

"We had to, we fought a vicious enemy."

They crawled and crept in silence, then, for what seemed half of eternity. "Here," said Lucinda. "Careful."

She reached back a hand and guided him forward in the darkness. A glow of feeble light came from a break in the side of the pipe, where a chunk of the tile had been broken or had fallen out. "Tight squeeze," she told him.

He watched her wriggle through and drop from sight. Blaine followed cautiously. A broken spear of the tile bit into his back and ripped his shirt, but he forced his body through and dropped.

They stood in a dim-lit corridor. The air smelled foul and old; the stones dripped with dampness. They came to stairs and climbed them, went along another corridor for a ways, then climbed again.

Then, suddenly, there were no dripping stones and dankness, but a familiar hall of marble, with the first- floor murals shining on the walls above the gleaming bronze of elevator doors.

There were robots in the hall; suddenly, the robots all were looking at them and starting to walk toward them.

Lucinda backed against the wall.

Elaine grabbed at her wrist.

"Quick," he said. "Back the way..."

"Elaine," said one of the advancing robots. "Wait a minute, Elaine."

He swung around and waited. All the robots stopped. "We've been waiting for you," said the robot spokesman. "We were sure you'd make it."

Elaine jerked at Lucinda's wrist. "Wait," she whispered. "There's something going on here."

"Roemer said you would come back," the robot said. "He said that you would try."

"Roemer? What has Roemer got to do with it?"

"We are with you," said the robot. "We threw out all the goons. Please allow me, sir."

The doors of the nearest elevator were slowly sliding back.

"Let's go along," Lucinda said. "It sounds all right to me."

They stepped into the elevator, with the robot spokesman following.

The car shot up and stopped. The door opened and they stepped out, between two solid lines of robots, flanking their path from the elevator to the door marked Records.

A man stood in the door, a great foursquare, dark-haired man whom Norman Elaine had seen before on a few occasions. A man who had written: // you should want to see me later, I am at your service.

"I heard about it, Elaine," said Roemer. "I hoped you'd try to make it back; I figured you were that kind of man."

Elaine stared back at him haggardly. "I'm glad you think so, Roemer. Five minutes from now..."

"It had to be someone," said Roemer. "Don't think about it too much. It simply had to come."

Elaine walked on leaden feet between the file of robots, brushed past Roemer at the door.

The phone was on the desk and Norman Elaine lowered himself into the chair before it. Slowly he reached out his hand.

No! No! There must be another way. There must be another, better way to beat them—Harriet with her story; and the goons who were hunting him; and the plot with its roots reaching back through seven hundred years. Now he could make it stick—with Roemer and the robots he could make it stick. When he'd first thought of it, he had not been sure he could. His only thought then, he remembered, had been to get back to Center somehow, to get into this office and try to hold the place long enough, so he could not be stopped from doing what he meant to do.

He had expected to die here, behind some desk or chair, with a goon bullet in his body, and a shattered door through which the goons had finally burst their way.

There had to be another way—but there was no other way. There was only one way—the bitter fruit of seven hundred years of sitting quietly in the corner, with hands folded in one's lap, and poison hi one's brain. He lifted the receiver out of the cradle and held it there, looking across the desk at Roemer.

"How did you do it?" he asked. "These robots? Why did you do it, John?"

"Giesey's dead," said Roemer; "so is Farris. No one has been appointed to their posts. Chain of command, my friend. Business agent, Protection, Records—you're the big boss now; you've been the head of Dreams since the moment Farris died."

"Oh, my God," said Elaine.

"The robots are loyal," Roemer went on. "Not to any man; not to any one department. They are conditioned to be loyal to Dreams. And you, my friend, are Dreams. For how long, I don't know; but at the moment you are Dreams."

They stared at one another for a long moment. "The authority is yours," said Roemer; "go ahead and make your call."

So that was why, Elaine thought, the goons assumed •would return. That was why they'd set up the road block, not on one road only, perhaps, but on all of them—so that he could not get back and take over before someone could be named.

I should have thought of it, he told himself. I knew it. I thought of it this very afternoon, how I was third in line—•

The operator was saying: "Number, please. Number, please. What number do you wish please."

Elaine gave the number and waited.

Lucinda had laughed at him and said: "You are a dedicated man." Perhaps not those words exactly but that had been what she meant. Mocking him with his dedication; prodding him to see what he would do. A dedicated man, she'd said. And now, here finally, was the price of dedication.

"News" said a voice. "This is Central News."

"I have a story for you."

"Who is speaking, please?"

"Norman Elaine. I am Elaine, of Dreams."

"Elaine?" A pause. "You said your name was Elaine?"

"That's right."

"We have a story here," said Central News, "from one of our branches. We've been checking it. We held it up, in fact, to check it. . ."

"Put me on the transcription. I want you to get this right; I don't want to be misquoted."

"You're on transcription sir."

"Then here you are ..."

Then here you are.

Here is the end of it—-

"Go ahead, Elaine."

Elaine said, "Here it is, then. For seven hundred years, the Dreams guild has been carrying out a series of experiments aimed at the study of parallel cultures ..."

"That is what the story we have says, sir; you are sure that that is right?"

"You disbelieve it?"

"No, but. .."

"It's true. We've worked on it for seven hundred years —under strict security because of certain continuing situ- ations which made it seem unwise to say anything about it..."

"The story I have here ..."

"Forget the story that you have!" Elaine shouted. "I don't know what it's all about; I called you up to tell you that we're giving it away. Do you understand that? We're giving it away. Within the next few days, we plan to make all our data available to a commission we'll ask to be set up. Its membership will be chosen from the various unions, to assess the data and decide where use may best be made of it."

"Elaine. Wait a minute, Elaine."

Roemer reached out for the phone. "Let me finish it; you're beat out. Take it easy now. I will handle it."

He lifted the receiver, smiling. "They'll want your authority, and all the rest of it."

He smiled again. "This was what Giesey wanted, Elaine. That's why Farris made him fire me; that's why Farris killed him ..."

Roemer spoke into the phone. "Hello, sir. Blame had to leave; I'll fill in the rest.. ."

The rest? There wasn't any more. Couldn't they understand? He'd make it very simple.

Dreams was giving up its one last chance at greatness. It was all Dreams had, and Norman Elaine had given it away. He had beaten Harriet and Farris and the hunting goons, but it was a bitter, empty victory.

It saved the pride of Dreams; and that was all it saved.

Something—some thought, some impulse, made him lift his head, almost as if someone had called to him from across the room.

Lucinda stood beside the door, looking at him, with a gentle smile upon her mud-streaked face, and her eyes were deep and soft. "Can't you hear them cheering?" she asked. "Can't you hear the whole world cheering you? It's been a long time, Norman Elaine, since the whole world cheered together!"