

## MX KNOWS BEST

*It is said the trouble with the world is people... they're so prone to hasty, hot-headed judgements. So what could be better than to leave the big decisions to the cool, electronic calculations of a logical machine? Only how can emotional and imperfect beings feed unemotional and perfect data to any machine?*

by GORDON R. DICKSON

THE BARROOM seemed to tilt a little as he walked in. "Let's get drunk, Dugie," said Allen Morg, climbing onto a bar stool.

"This time in the morning?" Dugie peered at him from behind the bar, his smooth, round, young-looking face seeming to bob like a balloon in the dimness. "At ten a.m.? What kind of a bad decision did you get?"

"Give me a drink, Dugie," said Allen. The round face advanced and peered at him.

"You been drinking it up already. Maybe I should punch for a decision on eighty-sixing you."

"Give me a drink," said Allen. And then the whole room swung crazily, the ceiling came down in front of his eyes and there was a blank space for a while.

HE CAME to in one of the private lounges, and Galt Bolver was there.

"Feel better now?" Galt asked.

"Where'd you come from?" asked Allen.

"Dugie called me. He'd have sent you home, but he didn't know where your apartment is. What's all this business about an ax?"

"Ax?" With great effort, Allen raised his head and looked past Galt's long, friendly horse face to the rest of the lounge. There was no ax in sight. He let his head drop back wearily. "I must have lost it, someplace."

"You're lucky. Dugie's been checking. One place you were in last night almost put in a riot call. You said you were going to chop up MX."

"Did I?"

"You did."

Silence descended on the lounge. After a while, Allen said, "Connie took off."

"Oh?" said Galt. He had been sitting still, shaggy and gaunt, just waiting by the side of the couch on which Allen was stretched out.

"We were kidding one night. I said we ought to punch for a decision before getting married. She took me up on it."

"Well?" asked Galt, after a minute.

"Negative. She took off. No forwarding address."

"When was this?" asked Galt.

Allen shrugged, gazing at the ceiling of the lounge with the bitter taste of anti-alcohol in his mouth.

"Yesterday," he said, "...or the night before."

"Your law office says you haven't been down in a week."

"Then it's a week," said Allen, expressionlessly.

Galt considered him.

"Want to do some more drinking?"

"No," said Allen. "I want my ax back."

"The man says it when he's sober."

"That's right," agreed Allen, "the man says it when he's sober."

Galt reached out and gripped his shoulder.

"Hang on a little while, buddy," he said. "I've got something better for you than an ax."

IT TOOK some twenty-eight hours to rebuild Allen Morgs into a fair specimen of a sober human being again. Four o'clock of the following afternoon found him and Galt on Gait's airfoil platform, flying north out of the city to see some people.

"How far is it?" asked Allen, fitting his lean body comfortably into one of the soft chairs of the platform.

"About forty miles," answered Galt, squinting at the horizon with the balance wheel between his big hands. Allen looked at him.

"How come you never told me about these people before?" "Before," said Galt, "you may not have liked MX, and you may have disliked people taking its decisions for gospel—but were you ready to do something about it?"

"No, I guess not," said Allen.

"There you are."

The platform tilted and slid off in a slightly new, more northwesterly direction.

"Who are they, anyway? Can you tell me that now?" asked Allen.

"You know them. It's Jasper Aneurine, his sister Leta ...and someone else."

Allen frowned, his thin rather good-looking face becoming even more intense than usually. He remembered the Aneurines. They had cropped up more than once at parties with Galt, several years back. He had not seen them since. Jasper was a silver-haired, upright man of the sort that seems to become abruptly handsome in late middle age. Leta, who must be a good twenty years or more her brother's junior, had not been unusually good-looking, but rather striking in her own way. Allen had been engaged to some other girl—not Connie—at that time, but he remembered being strangely and almost compulsively attracted to Leta, on the few occasions of their meetings. There was a sort of lonely, destined air about her.

"How long," asked Allen, "have you belonged to this bunch?"

"Oh," said Galt. "Almost ten years."

"I've known you fifteen." Galt nodded. "But it wasn't just my secret."

"No," agreed Allen. "Still, ten years—all the while you've been hacking away as a trial lawyer, just like me at my contracts, and I never took you for a revolutionary."

"I'm not," said Galt.

"Aren't you?" said Allen, and laughed a little bitterly. "Try to take MX from the people who've given up making up their own minds, and see. The dope addict loves his drugs; the drinker loves his booze."

"Say instead," said Galt, "they can't do without them."

"Easy," said Galt, soothingly. "Easy. It's a big problem, but just a problem. That's all."

"Just a problem? How does that thing go?" demanded Allen.

*"Our fathers' in their time sowed drag'on's teeth..."*

*"...Our children know and suffer armed men." finished Galt.*

THEY FLEW north and a little bit west past Scarborough, Tendale, and Cooper's City. They passed New Berlin and veered west again toward a little suburb called Kingsdale. There they came down on the parking pad of a private living area.

The drapes were pulled back on the living room beside the pad and a tall young woman with brown hair and a slim, intelligent face was waiting for them. The whispering air current of the wall cooled Allen's face for a moment as he stepped through the wall; then he was face to face with Leta Aneurine once more.

"Leta," said Galt. "You remember Allen."

"Very well," she said. She gave him a slim, firm hand and Allen found himself holding on to it for a short second with real thankfulness. After the desert heat and sun of Connie, this was cool water.

"I remember too," he said.

"Then I'm flattered," she answered, and turned to Galt. "Jasper and Frank are in the den."

"I'll go talk to them," said Galt. "You stay here with Leta, will you Allen?" And he stalked off,

disappearing through a wall of screen light in the back of the room.

"And what makes Galt bring you out at last to see us?" asked Leta, turning back to Allen.

"Well..." He hesitated, but her perception was quick.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You're one of our sudden converts and I shouldn't ask. Would you like a drink—even if it's just to balance politely in your hand?"

He smiled, and found his old liking for her coming back.

"Thanks," he said, and trailed her across the room to a dispenser cabinet.

"What'll it be, now?" She opened the cabinet. A concealed rainbow of light played across the interior and a miniature, three-dimensional representation of his host's liquor supply revolved slowly for his inspection. Allen thought of the week just past with something like a shudder.

"Beer," he said, "light and cold."

"And in a stein," she said. She pressed appropriate buttons and handed it to him, taking a small glass of sherry for herself.

"Who's Frank?" he asked.

She led the way back to some easy chairs across the room. "Frank Campanelli. He's our technical expert."

"Technical expert?"

She smiled at him. "Jasper'll tell you. And how's business in court these days?"

"You've got me confused with Galt. I just write contracts—a sort of glorified clerk." He gazed at her curiously. "You know, I never did know what you do."

"I write poetry. Don't laugh," she added gravely, "I make a great deal of money at it. I do graded stories in poetic imagery for the school-age child. How are contracts, then?"

"Fine."

"Then it's woman trouble."

He started. "How do you know?"

"Why, I was born an expert, being female. And received the normal twenty years or so of postgraduate instruction customary for girls." She bit her lip. "Including the instincts and habit of poking my nose into what's probably none of my business. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing." He shrugged. "We punched for a decision on getting married. MX said no ...and she took it to heart."

Leta did not answer for a second. She seemed to be thinking,

"You know," she said, suddenly. "If I were Frank, or Jasper—or Galt, even, I wouldn't trust you."

He was both shocked and wounded. He stared at her in astonishment.

"Why not?" he challenged.

"You might change back, just as suddenly as you changed to." But she looked at him almost appealingly as she said it, as if begging him not to blame her for a judgement she couldn't help.

"What do you mean, suddenly?" he said. "Why, I've felt this way for years."

"But you've never done anything about it until now."

"What's that got to do with it?"

She made a defensive, apologetic gesture with one hand, as if warding off a blow.

"Well, perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps you're just not a leader."

"And you, I see," he said harshly, "are one of those women with a high IQ and nothing else, who justify themselves by taking jabs at every man they come in contact with."

The sudden storm of their antagonism blew itself out into silence. She had turned her head away, and it was not until he got up and went around to face her that he saw there were tears on her cheeks.

"You started it," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It's my fault."

He would have taken the one step that would have brought him to her, but at that moment Galt stuck his head through the light wall.

"Come on," he ordered, briefly; and disappeared again. Allen turned back to Leta and saw her using a handkerchief to repair damages.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll be along in a minute."

A LITTLE reluctantly, Allen turned and went. Stepping through the light wall, he found himself in a narrow hallway that led to a miniature garden and fishpond. Beyond the garden, three men sat about a table in a room.

"Oh, here he is," Galt said as Allen came in. "Allen, you know Jasper. This is Frank Campanelli."

Frank was a dark little rubber ball of a man, about Jasper's age, or possibly younger; Leta's brother did not look his years. Now he nodded his silver hair at Allen. "Hello, Allen."

"Hello," answered Allen. He shook hands with Frank Campanelli, who had risen from his seat and extended a hand as stubby and firm as the rest of his body.

"Sit down," said Jasper. "Allen, Galt knows you well and of course I've met you a number of times. But you're a complete stranger to Frank. Mind if he asks a few questions?"

"Charge ahead," said Allen.

"What're you after?" asked Frank.

The question was so abrupt as to be discourteous, and the short man made no attempt to soften it, either by manner or phrasing. Allen took his time about lighting a cigaret.

"I'd like to put MX out of business," he said.

"How long do you think you'll feel that way?"

"Until MX is out of business," said Allen. "Look here—"

"Why do you think it ought to be put out of business?"

"Because ninety percent of the human race has lost the guts to make up their own minds for themselves," said Allen. "Why do *you* think it ought to be put out of business?"

"Well get to me later," said Frank. "How do you think we ought to go about doing it?"

"Well," said Allen, "I was hoping to try it with an ax. Maybe you've got a better idea. Have you?"

Frank didn't answer him. He turned to Jasper.

"I don't like it," he said. "I don't like anything about it. People who heat up fast can cool off fast."

"Frank," replied Jasper, calmly; "Galt tells us Allen here's been ten years coming to this."

"Why didn't he come sooner?"

"You can't have it both ways, Frank," said Jasper. "Either Allen's too fast to anger, or too slow, but not both. For my part"—he gave Allen a friendly smile—"I think he's just about right in matter of speed."

"Why," asked Allen, "all the fuss?"

"Because," snapped Frank, turning on him, "this is no game. This is serious business—"

"OH, THERE you are, Leta," interrupted Jasper. "Come in and sit down with us. You remember Allen Morg, don't you?"

"I've just been talking to him," she said, taking one of the chairs at the table. "And I see Frank's been talking *at* him."

"Seriously, though," went on Jasper, quickly, before Frank could open his mouth again. "Frank is quite right. Most people have no idea what's been done to MX and what it's done to people."

"I can see what it's done to people," said Allen, unable to keep his eyes from straying to Leta. She sat with her eyes on her brother, a little abstracted, as if listening partially to her own inner thought, and did not glance at Allen.

"But do you realize the degree of it?" asked Jasper, leaning a little forward across the table. "Do you realize how it's become something that strikes at the very heart of the concept of individual freedom? The very thing that makes an individual in our society is his ability and preference for making his own decisions."

The silver-haired man's tone of voice was demanding in its claim upon Allen's attention. Reluctantly, he withdrew his eyes from Leta and looked at her brother.

"I know that," he said. "Doesn't everybody? It's obvious."

"Obvious, but how many people take it for granted just because of that? You know, the theory behind MX was a fine one. Remember reading about it in school? A master device, a joining of the

census records with the economic integration computer and the new—they were new then—psychologic computation methods. All in one machine. A public service. Code your name and what other personal information MX requested and ask your question. 'Should I buy myself a new living area now, or next year?' MX integrated the problem and came up with an answer to the best of its ability."

"To the best of its ability!" echoed Allen, a little bitterly.

"Exactly—to the best of its ability." Jasper's eyes gleamed darkly in his face under the silver hair. "That was the theory; ninety percent correct, ninety percent of the time, for ninety percent of the cases concerned. There, you see, was the illusion of freedom. No one, of course, would commit his life to the decisions of a machine which was only ninety percent accurate. Or so they thought. They forgot the perniciousness of habit—of the habit of having decisions made for you."

"The point is," said Galt, "people have been comforting themselves with a sense of freedom from MX that doesn't actually exist. As a practical matter, Allen, not ninety, but almost a hundred percent of the people use and obey MX a hundred percent of the time."

"Is it really that much?" asked Allen.

"That much."

"But the bad decisions—"

"They're explained away," said Jasper. "What does a man say when a decision turns out bad—say MX decides in favor of a man buying a platform now, instead of later? And the next day, with the new platform, he has an accident."

Allen nodded.

"I know," he said. "He says that maybe the computation figured a more serious accident if the machine was gotten later, or some such excuse."

"That's it!" The eyes in Galt's long face seemed to pounce like a hawk. "*Maybe MX knows best!*"

There was a little silence. "A new god," said Allen, thoughtfully.

"A new god," said Galt. "And a jealous god."

Leta got up from her chair. Outside, in the garden, the light was fading.

"Time for dinner," she said. "I'll go see about it." She looked across the table into Allen's eyes. "You'll be staying for the evening."

"Thank you," said Allen, and watched her leave the room.

AFTER DINNER, he managed to corner her on a little balcony overlooking that same garden with the fishpond. He felt a strange necessity to talk to her further, to understand her. It was as if an entirely new sort of curiosity had laid hold of him, and grew with the mounting intimacy of their talk.

"Tell me one thing," he asked, after a while. "Are you in this because of your brother, or because you feel strongly about MX, yourself?"

She looked up at his face in the dim light of the shadowed balcony.

"Because I feel strongly about MX," she said.

"I see," he answered. He was oddly disappointed and she sensed it.

"You don't like fanatic females, is that it?" The tone was light, but it quavered betrayingly on the last word. He looked down at her, and all at once her helplessness, reached through to him; here, he felt flooded with tenderness toward her.

"You're not a fanatic female," he said.

Suddenly, like someone who at last surrenders completely, she leaned against him. He put his arms around her. She murmured against him and he felt the warmth of her breath through his shirt.

"I don't know...I don't know..." she whispered. "I know this is right, but I want to live a normal life, too."

He put his head down to kiss her, but she avoided him.

"No. Please don't," she murmured. "Please."

"Why not?"

"It's just that it's too soon yet. I couldn't help thinking of you as on the rebound."

"You don't trust me," he said, bitterly.

She didn't answer. He put a finger under her chin and forced it upward so that she had to look at him.

"You don't trust me," he repeated.

Her face showed the pain in her.

"Oh, Allen!" she said, miserably. Brutally, he let her go and stepped away.

"Wait, Allen!" she cried behind him. "I don't care about me. It's Jasper and the others."

"Why," he demanded, turning back, "what do you think I'd do to them? Snitch to MX on them?"

She did not answer. With a sudden sense of fury and shock, he stared at her.

"You *do* think that!"

"Oh, Allen! Allen, darling" —she reached out to him, but he stepped back from her—"it's just that you aren't settled, you aren't stable..."

But he was burning with anger and determined to punish her.

"Thanks for letting me know about it," he said, and left her.

HE MANAGED to cool down as he returned through the several rooms and hallways that separated him from the sitting room where the others were having their after-dinner coffee. But it seemed he came in on an argument here, too; the voices of Galt and Frank ceased abruptly as he entered; and all three men looked up at him from their chairs with the afterwash of strained emotion on their faces.

"What's up?" he asked, taking a cup of coffee from the dispenser and sitting down in a chair that *was* grouped with theirs.

"Nothing," said Galt, tightly. "Frank thinks we're going a little too fast with you, that's all."

Allen met the other man's dark, hard eyes.

"That's his privilege," he said, lightly.

"Perhaps," said Galt, his tone smoothing out. "At any rate, it's beside the point, because Jasper and I outvoted him. Now, Allen I want you to listen with an open mind to what Jasper and Frank have to tell you, because it's the result of years of work."

Allen looked at him a little curiously, but Galt's long face was heavy with seriousness.

"Go ahead," said Allen, nodding.

Jasper cleared his throat, and Allen turned to look at him. The tension, the very feverishness that had been in the silver-haired man was gone. He spoke with the easiness of an experienced professor addressing his seminar.

"I'm the social expert in this business, Allen," he said. "It's been my job to study and understand all the change and effect which MX has caused in our human society during the last fifty years." He put his coffee cup down on the arm of his chair and leaned forward.

"You know," he tapped with one slim finger on the arm of the chair, "after the last shouting and drum-playing was over that celebrated the uniting of this world into a single social unit, the problems really came along. Personal problems, Allen. People were unsure of how they were supposed to act and react in this new world they suddenly had. And that's what MX grew out of—a sort of super-advisory service that was set up at that time."

Allen frowned.

"It's a fact." Jasper nodded emphatically. "There actually was a bureau with branches in every community to answer questions; you can look it up for yourself in the history books if you want to. Anyway, of course it got more and more mechanized, or automationized, if you like that word better, until they finally conceived of MX as a final answer to the problem. You know the rest of it—how people became more and more dependent on it. But what most people don't realize is the logical basis for the development."

"Logic?" echoed Allen "I don't see any logic in it at all. It's just plain mental laziness."

"No, no," said Jasper, quite earnestly. "There's the habit angle, to be sure, but there had to be something beneath and before that. There's a strong, original, logical reason for a man trusting MX's decisions instead of his own. It's this same business of percentages. MX, a man knows, is right ninety percent of the time, on the average. And he asks himself if he can do as well on his own. Usually, he

believes he can't."

Allen frowned again. "But it's a gamble," he said. "Anyone knows that. You might believe that and still happen to fall into the ten percent bad answer section regularly."

Jasper nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But still, that's the logic we're up against. And on its own ground it's unbeatable, because it presupposes infallibility on MX's part. In other words, that ninety percent is something everybody thinks they can count on. But if we can destroy that faith, and replace it with a healthy attitude of doubt, we'll have people regaining their emotional integrity and their emotional balance."

"Clear enough," Allen looked across at him. "How do we go about it?"

JASPER smiled calmly.

"We're going to gimmick MX," he said. "We're going to cheat most outrageously in a good cause to remind people that a machine—even a machine like MX—can be taken advantage of by a human being. People are going to start getting some surprising answers to their questions, answers that will turn out to be dead wrong. And sometime after that our gimmicks will be discovered."

Allen was slightly puzzled. "Sorry," he said, "but I don't see—"

"Why," said Galt, "a man who has been awakened to the possibility that MX can be gimmicked, will have a job on his hands recovering his blind faith in it. He'll say to himself, sure, they found *that* gimmick, but suppose there's others they haven't found? Suppose somebody's rigged it somehow, someplace else, for his own advantage?"

"Ah," said Allen, slowly. "I see."

"Yes," Jasper nodded at him. "Simple, crude, and *effective*."

"How's it to be done?"

Jasper did not answer. He turned his head to look at the short man, his friend. "Frank..." he said.

Frank looked back at him stonily.

"He could be the death of all of us," Frank said.

"We settled that," said Galt, a little sharply.

Allen felt anger stir in him.

"Just what do you mean?" he demanded. "I could be the death of all of you?"

"Allen, no offense meant." Jasper spoke quickly, soothingly. "You just don't know MX as well as *we* do."

"What's MX got to do with my giving you away?"

"I'll tell you!" Frank broke in with sudden savagery. "MX has the necessary parts to kill us off if it finds out about us!"

Allen stared at him.

"What kind of a bogeyman tale is this?"

"Bogeyman!" said Frank, and all but turned his back on them in disgust.

"No, Allen, it's true," said Galt. "Tell him, Frank."

"Listen," said Frank, turning back, "this is my field; I know. What the men who set up MX wanted in the first place was a device to reckon the probability of one human action succeeding over another. Just that. They couldn't build an actual predicting machine for two reasons. One, nothing human hands could build and human mind conceive, could possibly take *all* the factors into account. Two, there was always the possibility that some of the factors supplied to their device would be false, or falsely stated."

"All, right" Allen was determined he would not back down an inch. He faced the shorter man. "What of it?"

"What of it? That's what MX was—just a probability computer. But then the human factor came into it. The more people leaned on MX decisions in their daily life, the more they wanted it to be more accurate, more omnipotent, more godlike. And then the changes began."

"What changes?"

"There've been a lot of them," growled Frank. "But there's only two that did real damage. Twenty-three years ago, what was called a *balance factor* got added. And nine years ago something

called an *implementation circuit*."

He glared at Allen.

"The balance factor was an element added that allowed MX to compensate for the psychological profile of the person asking the question. It could compensate in the direction of what it assessed to be the *real* desire and good of the questioner. The implementation circuit—I suppose even you know that most of our transportation devices, large production units and automatic machinery are directed by MX?"

"I knew some were..." said Allen.

"Almost all. All right, this implementation circuit allows MX to make use of the mechanical facilities it controls to implement its own decisions. And finally, in order to make this addition workable, it was necessary to add one thing that should never have been built into MX."

"What?"

"A desire circuit." Frank looked at him with grim triumph. "MX was furnished with the need to try and make its decisions work out."

FOR SOME reason this statement was apparently expected to be a bombshell. Allen was merely puzzled.

"I don't get it," he said.

"You shout d," replied Frank. "It means we're all living under the thumb of a machine whose prime purpose is to have the world run in accordance with its own decisions."

Allen stared.

"What it means for us," added Galt, leaning forward, "is that MX will fight back at any attempts to damage it, or its prestige."

Allen sat back. Slowly he relaxed, and smiled a little, in spite of himself.

"Oh, now I—" he began. "It's the truth," interrupted Galt.

"A machine can't be inimical." Allen looked at Galt. "It can't deliberately try to hurt you."

"How about an aerial torpedo with a seeker circuit that hunts down its target?"

"But the initial impulse had to come from a human decision—"

"So," broke in Frank, "did the implementation factor, with its desire circuit. That was MX's original impulse."

"Believe us, Allen," said Galt. "This is fact."

"How do you know it all?" demanded Allen. There was a little silence.

At last, Frank said harshly, "I designed the implementation circuit."

Allen looked at him. But the short man's face was a mask of anger that blocked off any urge to sympathy. Allen sighed.

"All right," he said. "I believe you. Now what? How do you keep safe from it?"

"A mechanical device," said Jasper, "has its limitations. It may be able to respond to an actual threat, but it can't respond to a threat that's unexpressed."

"And the sense organs of MX are the coder panels," said Galt. "Unless information reaches it through that—about us, or example—it hasn't any way of knowing we're dangerous to it."

"Then it's simple," said Allen. "Don't use the panels."

"Exactly," said Jasper. "I haven't used them for fourteen years, Frank for just about as long, and Galt for eleven. And you mustn't either, Allen."

"I?" Allen smiled. "MX doesn't know I know you, or anything about this."

Jasper shook his head.

"Have you any idea how many factors it's possible for MX to take into account in making a decision?" he asked.

"No idea," replied Allen, cheerfully.

"Well, it's something over half a million. All the years we've been keeping scrupulously away from the coder panels, we've still had to report on the census, pay our taxes, make purchases in the food and shopping centers, and maintain bank accounts. MX has years of information on us, lying like unfused



dynamite in the code punches on our cards and waiting for the one pertinent fact that will show us up for the threat we are to its own existence."

"But what could it tell from me?" asked Allen.

"We don't know," said Galt. "But the chance is too risky to take. Leave the panels alone, Allen. You don't need them, anyway."

"No," Allen sighed. "That's, true." He brightened up. "Well, how about the rest of this? How about the gimmick?"

The other two men turned to Frank, who looked at them for a second, his dark eyes unmoving.

"No!" he said.

The word dropped like a stone into the pool of waiting silence, sending little rings of emotion rippling through the others.

"No!" echoed Jasper.

"Why not?"

"Because it's too soon," said Frank. "I just met this man today. Let him wait for the details."

"I told you," said Galt, in the patient tones of a man who is repeating what he had already repeated many times before, "that I know him. That I trust him. That I vouch for him. Also, we need him—not in a few days, but right now. Things are almost finished."

"No," repeated Frank. "Frank—Jasper's voice brought the short man's head around—"you're wrong. You're usually right to be cautious, but this time you're wrong. If you won't tell him, I will."

"Then I wash my hands of it." Frank stood up abruptly and, turning his back, strode across the room to rip back the drape hanging in front of the far wall. Beyond, the night sky and a full yellow moon, early and enormous just above the treetops, looked in on them. Frank stood, legs spread a little apart, staring out at it and not moving.

"ALLEN..." said Jasper, gently, and Allen turned his attention back to the silver-haired man, who opened a drawer in the arm of his chair and took out a tiny, dark object, like a miniature condenser, which he handed to Allen. Allen took it curiously, examining the small, black central body from which two short wires sprouted.

"There's only one part of itself where MX wouldn't be aware of someone working on it," said Jasper, "and that's the coder panels themselves. They're easily opened with a repairman's key, and in about forty seconds a trained man can open one, attach that little object you're holding, and re-close the panel. The spot where it attaches and its design make it almost indistinguishable from the ordinary factory assembly of a coder's innards. Even a trained repairman would have to be looking for it, to find it once it was attached.

"That's what you want me for?" asked Allen.

"We're about ready to start adding these things to the coder panels—not just here, but the world over. We've been making them by hand for eight years now, in thousands of little groups like this one. Now, we need every pair of hands we can get."

"What does it do?" asked Alien.

"It distorts the information coded on the panel. MX will receive false information from anyone using the coder; as a result, it will hand out a false decision."

Allen nodded.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, I see." His hand closed tightly over the little object, and slowly, he nodded.

THERE WAS a chance before Galt and Allen left that evening, for Allen to snatch a few free minutes. Once more he went in search of Leta, and discovered her, finally, in her own room. She was dressed for bed and sitting on the railing of a small terrace outside her room, gazing at the same moon that had provided a focus for Frank's attention a short while earlier in the sitting room. Against the moonlight, in the filmy nightdress, she looked like some sad figure out of an old painting, all black and silvery gray. With a rush, all the hard emotions flowed out of Allen, like water from a broken cup, and he

almost groped his way across the room toward her.

"Leta..." he said.

She rose and clung to him. For a minute, they said nothing, just held on to each other. After a little while, he begged her to come away with him.

"...you don't want this. It isn't *your* life."

She pressed herself tightly against him.

"But it *is*," she said. "You can't live with something for fifteen years like this and not have it be your life."

"That's not true," he answered "It was Jasper's choice, but not yours. You didn't pick this."

"That doesn't make any difference."

"You *want* to come with me, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried. "I don't know!"

"Yes, you do."

She raised her face to look at him.

"Would you run out, Allen?"

"I?" he said, surprised. "But I don't mean that you should run out. All I mean is for you to come away from here to where you can lead your own life. I'm going through with this, of course. I want to."

"But you want me, too," she said.

"Well, why not?" he demanded. "Is there any reason why I can't have both?"

There was a noise from the doorway of the bedroom. They turned. Frank stood just inside the shadow of the aperture, his face in shadow.

"Jasper wants to see you, Leta," he said. His voice was perfectly even.

"Oh—" she gasped. "Excuse me." She turned and went swiftly out the door. Frank stepped aside to let her pass. Then he walked toward Allen.

"You needn't apologize," Allen said grimly.

"I wasn't going to." Frank had emerged into the moonlight on the terrace. He looked upward at Allen's face. "Leave Leta alone," he said.

Allen considered him. "Why?"

"A number of reasons." Frank's moonlight-pale face had no expression. "The best is that I know you by reputation—from Galt and others. You can't be trusted."

Allen felt the familiar stir of anger, boiling like some slow, heavy liquid inside him. "Can't be trusted ...how?" he asked, softly.

"In any way," answered Frank, quite calmly. "That was why I didn't want to tell you about the gimmicks downstairs. You're not the man to belong to an organization, Morg. You're an egoist; and you'll put yourself first. You'd betray any of us—all of us—if the choice was right."

"And you," replied Allen, brutally, "are in love with Leta."

Frank did not stir, or change his unmoving countenance.

"Of course," he said. "But that doesn't come into it."

"I think it does."

"What you think," went on Frank, easily, "is of no importance whatsoever. I've been forced into risking my life and my work on you. I won't risk the lives of the people I love. And if you keep after Leta, the time'll come when you'll put the rest of us on the auction block to buy what you want with her."

Allen grinned with rage. He was seething up inside into boiling fury.

"So what?" he asked.

"So stay away from her," continued Frank. "If you don't, I'll kill you." He reached into his shirt, took his hand out again, and there was a small, snapping sound. The long, thin blade of a knife displayed itself in the moonlight. Allen made an involuntary little sound and took a step backward. "Oh, not with this and not now," said Frank. "I just wanted to show you I meant what I said. I will kill you, one way or another even if it costs me my own life for doing it." He folded the knife and put it back into his shirt.

"Galt's waiting for you at the pad," he said.

He turned and left. Allen stared after his small, blocky figure as it disappeared down the hall. After a

moment, he followed.

Galt *was* waiting for him, at the landing pad.

"Oh, here you are," he said, a little impatiently, as if he had been waiting for some time. "Come on. It's late enough already, and I have to be in court early tomorrow.

He led the way to the platform, and they took off.

IT WAS A quiet ride back to the city. Allen was thinking, and Galt evidently had his mind on the case he was to plead the next day. When they reached the city transportation center and left the platform for separate cabs, Allen, instead of going directly home to his apartment, rode to a little neighborhood bar for a cup of coffee.

He was in an incredibly disturbed state of mind. Great rewards and great penalties juggled themselves in his mind. On the surface, it was fantastic that he should feel this deeply about a situation into which he had rather unwillingly fallen. But there was Leta, who had so strangely and so quickly reached through to him, and for whom he felt what he was convinced was, for the first time, a real and actual love.

The short, thick-bodied Frank Campanelli, on the other hand... The sharp crystals of a genuine hatred were growing in the nutrient solution of Allen's resentment toward the man. The two emotions built on each other, even while Allen cautioned himself to go slowly, go carefully, so as not to be swept away by the swift current of his own turbulent feelings.

In his mind he resolved a cold, analytical appraisal of the situation. Leta was the product of her environment. Fifteen years of devotion to a common purpose had bonded their two lives together. There seemed no way to destroy that bond without destroying at least one of the parties to it, and Allen—he thought to himself with a touch of self-righteousness—unlike Frank, could not seriously consider murdering another man.

Allen shoved his coffee cup angrily from him. He was furious at the particularly self-defeating structure of the problem. On the one hand, Leta; on the other, Frank. And over all, the looming greatness of the job of sabotage they were all committed to, to, together.

Like a sharp breaking-in of light on some dark place, the answer dissolved the obscurity of the situation. Of course! Once the sabotage had been committed, once their work had been discovered in millions of coder panels and the general population had begun to wonder how long they had been there, had begun to question and doubt MX, speculating on whether there might still be other, more secret gimmicks concealed in it—then there would be no more work to link Frank and Leta together. Then Allen would face no more problem.

Or would he? The sudden doubt sprang thornily upright in his mind. Fifteen years were a great many years to live and work together. How strong could the habit of association grow, nourished by the winters, springs, and summers of all those years? After the job was done, would the ghost of it still stand in the moonlight, a knife in its hand, barring Allen's way to Leta?

THERE WAS a coder panel in a booth across the room. Allen half-rose before he remembered, and sat down with a curse on his tongue. Of course, he couldn't use it now. But this was exactly the kind of question that MX was set up so beautifully to render a decision on. Disgustedly, Allen reached for his coffee cup, saw what he was about to do, and changed the motion of his hand to punch for a drink.

Yesterday he had thought that he would never be able to look at an alcoholic beverage with enjoyment again. But the Scotch and soda he punched for tasted clean and comforting when it came. And the quick glow, following shortly after it was down, took the unyielding edge off his disappointment.

He ordered another and sipped it. Already his mind was bouncing back from the block of the prohibition he had agreed to. To be sure, only a fool would do what he had almost done—go up, punch out the problem, giving his own name, Leta's and Frank's, and request a decision on the possibility of what he wished. But MX had been set up to handle theoretical problems, too. And what could be dangerous about a theoretical problem posed by an anonymous questioner?

How to phrase it? Allen revolved ideas in his mind, finished his drink and punched another. Then,

with this half-completed, he got up and went over to the booth housing the coder panel.

*Theoretical*, he coded on the simple keyboard all children learned in school nowadays. Then he stated the problem in general terms, giving fictitious names for himself, Leta, and Frank.

MX was slow answering, slower than he ever remembered it being. And then, when the panel above the keyboard did light up, the words upon it were not what he had expected.

*boner to furnish additional boner to furnish additional data on these two additional points.*

*1. What is the nature of the work on which the older man and the girl have been engaged for the fifteen years stated?*

*2. Did the younger man referred to cease relationships recently with another girl or woman not mentioned, as a result of a decision by MX?*

For a few seconds, Allen did not move. Then, very quietly, leaving the questions still on the screen, he stepped back and out of the booth. Quietly, he closed the door, and quietly, he walked out of the bar. Instinctively, his legs took him at a fast pace away down the nighttime street.

So, MX perhaps had been able to guess his identity from the situation in his question. Who would have thought its knowledge and its system to be so fantastically extensive? But that would be the most it could do. There had been no clue to Leta or Frank in what he said. As far as MX could know, they might be any two people, any two people anywhere in the world. Certainly there could be no record of them among the list of people MX would have of those whom he had had dealings with before.

As he went homeward, his spirits started, to rise and after awhile he found himself whistling. What he needed, he told himself firmly, was a good night's sleep. In the morning, things would be different.

BUT MX WAS a tireless creature, and under the desire circuit it was not created to leave a problem unsolved. *Click, click, click*, went MX. In the endless cells and banks of its structure, little lights glowed, little impulses of current shot through. The problem was investigated, a picture built, an answer found.

From a slot in a panel overlooking a desk where a light glowed, five cards shot out to a wire basket. The bottom one glanced off an edge of the basket and all five slid out to lie under the soft glow of the light above.

In a couple of widely separated apartments in the city outside, wiring shorted and slow fires began to smolder behind bedroom walls. And north west of the city, a great automatic freight transport subtly altered its blind, obedient course through the skies, so aiming itself toward a living area in a small suburb called Kingsdale. Its speed when it hit would be upwards of eight hundred miles an hour.

And under the light, the first five cards lay together on the table in a little heap.

*Morg, James Allen. CANCELLED*

*Bolver, Galt Winton Harvey. CANCELLED*

*Aneurine, Jasper Renee. CANCELLED*

*Aneurine, Leta Marie. CANCELLED*

*Campanelli, Frank Thomas.. CANCELLED*

THE END