

*Frederik Pohl is one of the collaboration'est men even in this field in which multiple authorship is so common. He is best known, of course, for his excellent novels (both science fiction and "straight") with C. M. Kornbluth. He has worked with Jack Williamson on a likable series of teen-age books; and he has further collaborated, in an all but impenetrable haze of pseudonyms, with Isaac Asimov, Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr., Robert W. Lowndes, Dirk Wylie ..*

*This story is, I believe, his first with F&SF's Broadway critic William Morrison. Fittingly it deals with collaboration—if in quite a different sense: the sense which the word acquired, in World War II, of helping the invader to maintain his control over one's own people. This control is, fortunately for the world, not so simple a matter as a galactic Viceroy may think. There is, Messrs. Morrison and Pohl shrewdly point out, a certain inevitable flaw in any collaborationist structure.*

## Stepping Stone by WILLIAM MORRISON and FREDERIK POHL

ARTHUR CHESLEY WAS A CHEMIST, but you mustn't think of him as a scientist. He was nothing of the kind.

He didn't inquire into the secrets of nature—maybe once he had, but then the foundation grants ran out; and since his specialty couldn't be twisted to sound as though it had anything to do with either nuclear energy or cancer cure it was a matter of get a job or starve. So he got a job. He spent eight hours a night, six nights a week, watching a stainless steel kettle with his fingers crossed. "She's getting hot, Mr. Chesley!" one of the lab assistants would yell, and he'd have to run over and tell them what to do. "Pressure's up, Mr. Chesley!" another would cry, and he'd have to do something about that—or anyway, tell the assistants what to do, because the union rules were pretty strong about who did the actual work. It was all a matter of polymerization, which is cooking little short molecules into big long molecules, and what came out of it all was rubber, or maybe plastic wrappers, or the stuff that goes into children's toys, depending on what was needed right then—and also on whether or not the kettle exploded. Well, it was an easy job, except when the pressure suddenly climbed. And it was night work, so Chesley had his days free. He kind of liked it, partly because he got to boss the crew of assistants around. And they didn't mind. They thought the whole thing was pretty funny, partly because they got two-forty an hour against Chesley's dollar-seventy-five.

Chesley's wife didn't think that was funny at all. What she said was:

"Stepping stone! Arthur, you've been in a rut for seven years and I want to tell you that I'm getting tired of stepping stones that don't step anywhere and— Another thing, why can't you work days like anybody else instead of sleeping all the time I'm trying to clean the house? Did you ever stop to think how much trouble that makes for me? Can't you have any consideration for anybody else and— And why can't you make your own lunch to take to the plant? Other men make their own lunches. If you wouldn't sit around the house watching television you'd have time to make your lunch, not to mention doing a few other little— That reminds me, what's keeping you from putting up the screens? The house will be crawling, and I mean crawling, with every bug in the Bronx if you don't get around to it. You hear me? Or is that too menial a job for a real chemist—a real chemist that's got a job that's a stepping stone to a fine career of— Arthur! Arthur, I'm talking to you! You come back here!"

But the job did leave his days free. Chesley escaped from the house and headed down toward the corner bar, where the barkeep drew him a beer with a half-inch collar without waiting to be asked. "You're early," said the bartender, handing Chesley his change. "I thought you'd be watching television."

"That's what I wanted," Chesley said bitterly. "I wanted to see that new program they're talking about."

The barkeep said, "That Viceroy thing?"

"Yeah. The one they cancelled all the other shows for. Harry, what's the matter with you that you

don't have a TV like every other bar in the Bronx?"

"It's my wife," the bartender explained; and maybe that wouldn't have been enough for any other man, but it was enough for Arthur Chesley. The bartender said, "Say, why'n't you go see it in person?"

"You mean at the studio?"

"Nah. No studio. Here." And the bartender picked a card off the top of a stack at the end of the counter. "Fellow left these here this morning."

Chesley read it, sipping his beer. FREE ONE DOLLAR FREE it said at the top, and that was pretty interesting. These nuts, he thought, I wonder how they're going to wiggle out of it in the fine print? Chesley had a wide experience of things marked "free," and they had always, always turned out to be not so very free at all. The small print—not very small, either—said only:

The Viceroy will make an announcement of unparalleled importance to every person in the world  
TODAY At the Yankee Stadium

\* ONE DOLLAR FREE to every person attending

\* FIVE ADDITIONAL DOLLARS FREE to every person who stays to the end of the program.

"Whoever he is," Chesley said, offering to return the card.

"Keep it. It's probably some kind of advertising deal, you know?"

"If it is, it costs plenty of money," said Chesley. "Why, the Stadium must hold more than seventy-five thousand people. If everybody gets six bucks, why—hey, that's nearly half a million dollars!"

"Nah. Nobody's going to spend half a million," said Harry positively.

"Um," said Chesley. He finished his beer and put the card in his pocket. "I don't know," he said, "maybe I'll take a look." And why not? Because after all it was nearly twelve hours until it was time to polymerize some more molecules, and the only other place he could think of was home.

They really did give away a dollar. Somebody had hooked up gadgets to the turnstiles, and when you pushed your way through there was a click and a rattle and a dollar bill popped up through a slot like a paper towel in a restaurant washroom. It looked real, too.

There were seats down in the field, just like at a prize fight, and about where the pitcher's box usually was, there was a platform with microphones and TV cameras. There must have been plenty of people in the Bronx who enjoyed getting a dollar FREE, because the seats filled up rapidly.

Arthur was early—that was his habit; and he got a good seat. He had nothing to do but chat with his neighbors and eat. He bought himself two hot dogs and an ice cream cone. Ordinarily he was careful about his money—that is, his wife was careful about money and he was careful about his wife—but he regarded the dollar as found money, and he had every intention of staying on to the bitter end, regardless, in order to collect the other five.

At about the time all the seats were filled he discovered that he really was going to stay on, regardless. Because as soon as the Stadium was full the gates were closed; and Chesley could see that they were being locked, and that guards were standing firmly in front of them, turning people away.

There wasn't any way out.

And then the field lights flickered and spots came on, beaming down at the platform. And a man appeared.

He appeared. He didn't walk quickly up the stairs, or come out from behind a curtain. He appeared. The only part of that statement that is questionable is that he was "a man." Chesley thought that, taking everything into account, he looked like a man.

But he was ten feet tall; and he had a halo that glowed all around him.

He said good evening, and his voice was heard all over the park. Maybe it was the microphones, but Chesley didn't think the sound came from the microphones; it seemed to come from the speaker himself; and the voice was odd. Not metallic. Not foreign. Not any of the words that people use to describe the voices of people. It sounded non-peoplish; it sounded strange.

Out of the corner of his eye Chesley saw commotion, and realized that some people were fainting. But not him. He did choke a little on the last of his ice cream cone, but he managed to get it down. Still and all, he did have a sick feeling in his stomach. It wasn't from the hot dogs.

The man said: "I am not a man."

A muffled moan from eighty thousand voices. Chesley only nodded.

"I take the form of a man in order to permit you to see me," boomed the voice. "I am your Viceroy."

A couple of hundred people, near the exits, had had all they could take. No mere five dollars was enough to make them stay. But the Viceroy was. The desperate ones jumped up from their seats, ran shouting toward the guards; and maybe the guards couldn't have stopped them, but the Viceroy could; he pointed his finger. They stopped. In fact, they were frozen. Most of them toppled over, rigid.

Arthur Chesley thought that this was very interesting.

Living with his wife had done things to his temperament; he was so unused to strong emotion that he didn't recognize it when it came. He was scared to death. His heart was beating wildly; he had violent cramps in his stomach. But since he had never been terribly afraid before, he didn't realize it.

He even tried to order a bottle of soda pop. But apparently the vendor knew more about his emotions than Chesley did; because he had disappeared.

The Viceroy went on: "I have been sent by my people to prepare this planet for their habitation."

Moans again, and another nod from Chesley. That figured, he thought; it would have to be something like that. He began to shake, and wondered why.

"I have been sent alone," boomed the voice, "because I need no aid. I myself can cope with any force your puny Earth can send against me. Singlehanded I can destroy every Army."

The audience had stopped moaning; it was stunned, or most of it was. Then the first shock began to wear off and Chesley began to hear voices. "Fake!" cried someone, and "Who're you kidding?" screamed someone else. And there were uglier noises than that, too.

"I can do some things that you do not even suspect!" cried the Viceroy in a terrible voice. "Watch, Earthlings! Watch me and see!"

He began to grow.

The eighty thousand throats rasped in unison as every person present caught his breath. The Viceroy lengthened, like a stretched string. Ten feet tall? He became fifteen feet tall—twenty feet—thirty. Not an inch broader, but he towered as high as the top of the stands themselves before he was through. "See!" he bellowed, and the giant organ voice, nowhere near the microphones now, made the concrete walls of the Stadium shudder. "Watch now!" he commanded; and he began to broaden. Now he was a giant, not a string man; still thirty feet tall, but nearly ten feet across the shoulders, too. And then he began to shrink—only downwards, until he was a squashed butter-man, pressed down to a height that was less than his thickness, an oblate spheroid with a gross flat head at the top and gross chunky legs underneath. And then he shrank his width, until he was the same size and shape as at first.

The halo flashed orange sparks. Mirrors? Chesley wondered. Probably it was mirrors. All the same, it was a good thing that he hadn't been able to buy that soda pop, because it would have gone down his windpipe.

The Viceroy thundered in a far-more-than-human voice: "I shall inform certain of you of what their duties will be. The rest of you may continue with your piddling little human lives—for the time being."

The halo flared violet. "Meanwhile," rumbled the enormous voice, "do not think of resistance. It cannot succeed. I shall prove to you that I am invulnerable. Absolutely invulnerable! To weapons—"

A barrage of machine-gun fire from a battery at the side of the speaker's stand. Bright yellowish tracers ricocheted up and out over the cringing audience.

"To poison gas—"

A man in a blue uniform climbed onto the stand and directed a flexible hose at the Viceroy. Chesley shrugged; what difference did it make? The machine-gun bullets had been all the evidence anyone really needed. But there was more:

"To fire—"

A flame-thrower squirted a flaring blob of napalm; it clung to the Viceroy's halo; flickered; went out.

"To atomic energy"—Chesley half rose—"but I shall not demonstrate that at this time, as too many of you would be casualties. Now you may go. My peace be with you."

And the halo flared white, and he was gone.

Chesley slowly joined the fleeing crowd.

Such things, Chesley realized, could be faked. But they impressed him none the less. And they impressed a lot of other people—for example, the man who went through the exit turnstile ahead of Chesley, who was in such a sweat that he raced through without stopping to pick up his five-dollar-bill, leaving it for Chesley—along with Chesley's own.

He came home with ten dollars and change and his wife, for the first time in some years, was immensely pleased.

So were a very few other persons throughout the world—nearly one half of whom had seen the Viceroy in person or on television, or had heard his voice on the radio. But even they didn't stay pleased, not for very long.

## II

By the time that most of the world's population was very displeased indeed, Chesley's wife was saying—or screeching:

"Stepping stone! Now you've done it, Arthur, you've stepped your stepping stone right out of a job entirely! How are we going to face my mother, Arthur? How? I ask you, how can I go to see her in her new thirty-five-thousand dollar house and tell her the man I married over her objections is fired? And what about these taxes? We can't pay them, you know that! If you were half a man you'd go to work in the V.G. like Elsie Morgenstern's husband down the block. They don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from and— And what about those people that were blown up yesterday? They were out of a job. The Viceroy just killed them all, killed them, and I'd like to know what would happen to me if— Arthur! Now, come back here!"

Harry swabbed a damp cloth over the bar and looked up morosely. "What'll it be, Arthur? Reeky-Cola, lemon fizz, a shot of ginger ale?"

"I'll take milk," said Chesley, sliding onto a stool. It wasn't the same, of course. Taking one consideration with another, Chesley thought judiciously, the Viceroy hadn't done a bad job of reorganizing the Earth in five weeks, even if his most recent step was to abolish the production of certain synthetic rubber articles which, in turn, abolished Chesley's job. But he shouldn't have prohibited beer.

Harry poured the milk glumly and leaned on the bar, watching Chesley sip it. "You know Flaherty?" he asked. "Well, he was one of them that got it yesterday."

"Flaherty? Ronald Flaherty?" Chesley was shocked. "You mean he was in that bunch of out-of-work people that the Viceroy ki—"

"They was misled by corrupt agitators," Harry interrupted.

"Oh, no, Harry. I mean, Flaherty wasn't—"

"They was misled by corrupt agitators," Harry repeated with great emphasis, and he nodded his head toward the back of the bar. Where stacks of bottles once had been, now there was a floral display around a placard that read:

Loyalty to the Viceroy is every Earthling's first duty.

-THE VICEROY

And under the placard, a microphone.

"I see what you mean," Chesley said quickly. "Yeah, they certainly were misled by corrupt agitators."

He tasted his milk, and the milk wasn't sour—no, no milk was sour, not after the Viceroy had made a few examples of persons dealing in spoiled foodstuffs. But Chesley's thoughts were. Those fifty persons had been picketing the Viceregal Deputy Zone Commander's Headquarters, asking for jobs. And, bam, a violet flare; and they were all dead.

It didn't pay to be unemployed, that was the first conclusion he reached.

But what could he do about it? Dr. Pebrick, Chief Managing Chemist of the synthetic rubber works, had made it very clear that he was lucky to hang onto his job, and there was no possibility whatever that Chesley would be rehired.

He would have to get a job somewhere else. That was the second conclusion.

Chesley sighed and finished his milk. "Say, Harry," he called. "Got a New York Times?"

"Yeah." The barkeep pulled a folded paper out of the otherwise empty bar-tools rack under the counter. "Here."

"Thanks," said Chesley, opening it to the Help Wanted section. "And let me have a be—"

"You mean," interrupted Harry, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the placard and the mike, "you would like another glass of delicious, invigorating, one-hundred-per-cent pure milk, which the Viceroy recommends above all other beverages for human consumption?"

"Yes," sighed Chesley. "Another milk."

The agency was crowded, but since it was the only one in the paper that had listed in its ad, Man, chmcl trng, admstv pos, sal open, he had no choice but to wait out the line. It took nearly half a day, which Chesley passed, as best he could, by conversation with the others in line—guarded at first, then more and more open, until the man ahead of him happened to glance up at the picture of the Viceroy that hung on the wall over his head. He turned white; sweat broke out on his forehead; he slumped, caught himself, started to speak, and then burst out of his place in line and raced back through the long hall to the elevators.

There was a microphone under the picture.

Chesley shook his head ruefully and kept silent for the rest of the time. It didn't pay to talk too much. The Viceroy wasn't everywhere—though, being far from human, he was in an astonishing number of places at astonishing times. But his Guard, the V.G., was in even more places all the time. Chesley had passed one just outside the door—a man in a blinding blue uniform, who parked blatantly near a fire hydrant and strolled away. In a matter of seconds a traffic cop caught sight of the car and charged toward it, fire in his eye and one hand dragging his summons pad out of his pocket. But then the cop caught sight of the magic letters V.G. on the place where the license plate would have been—if the Viceregal Guard bothered with license plates—and he turned pale and staggered away as though he had had a narrow escape.

Which he had.

Chesley shook his head again. It was hard to reconcile the idea of old Iry Morgenstern down-the-block with the total and awful powers of a member of the V.G. But there were too many things these days that couldn't be reconciled, he wasn't going to bother his head about them. The Viceregal Guard served a function, he supposed. That is, if the Viceroy served a function, well, then the Guard was pretty necessary. The Viceroy could reach down and strike any human, anywhere; but apparently he couldn't find the human who was thwarting his efforts without a little on-the-spot help from the V.G. He was perfectly capable of wiping out a whole city if it angered him—witness Omaha, in the second week of his reign—but it happened that Omaha was not the site of any of his own special projects. Most every other city in the world did have a high-priority Viceroy's Project going—increasing the rate of births, building up human health, building cryptic objects for unknown purposes—oh, there was no limit to the things the Viceroy wanted Earth to do in preparation for the landing of his own extra-solar race. And it was the Viceregal Guard that was charged with seeing that they were done. From the moment he arrived he had been recruiting, and paying well. It was his first human helpers who had turned up at the offices of the radio and television networks with fabulous bundles of cash in their pockets, who had rented Yankee Stadium for a fantastic price; and those human helpers were now the colonels and generals and marshals and generalissimos of the V.G.

The V.G. seldom killed anybody, but they had power of life and death all the same.

For—annoyingly—people kept trying to take advantage of the Viceroy. They knew it meant death to be discovered, but there were persons who complained because they couldn't afford the taxes and because they were thrown out of jobs they'd held for decades and because their homes were ripped down to make room for Viceroy's Projects. Some of the Projects didn't make all the sense in the world, Chesley thought—for example, did the Viceroy really need the four-acre swimming pool he was putting up on the lots that Rockefeller Center had once inhabited? But there was no questioning them; those who questioned were punished. Others sold impure foods—the Viceroy was vehement about human health, apparently because his people were going to want plenty of good, strong servants. Others insanely sold

inferior or incorrect materials to the Projects themselves. Others did forbidden research—there was a long, long list of prohibited topics. And the Viceregal Guards tracked them down, and then, as soon as the busy Viceroy could get it onto his schedule, somewhere on the Earth's face there was a bam and a violet flare, and another sinner had met his fate. All it took was one word from a member of the V.G., and . . . bam.

So it didn't pay to tangle with the V.G., because—

Chesley stopped in mid-thought, disconcerted. "What?" Somebody was saying impatiently, "You, there! Come on, you're holding up the whole line. Next!"

"Sorry," mumbled Chesley. He had been waiting so long that it was a shock to realize he had finally gained the threshold of one of the employment agency's interviewers. He stumbled in, laid his hat on the desk, hastily picked it up again, put it on his lap and said: "I'm here about that ad in this morning's N. Y. Times—"

"So," sighed the red-headed, weary-eyed girl behind the desk, "are six hundred others. But wait a minute—you're a chemist? Oh. Well—"

Chesley listened in growing consternation. Chemical training, the ad had said, administrative position. He had thought, naturally, that it would be checking over some manufacturing company's crude materials supply orders, or maybe, at the most daring, a little routine analysis. It turned out to be anything but those. It was, in fact, so different from what he had expected that it terrified him.

He stammered, "I'm s-sorry, sir—I mean, ma'am, but I don't th-think I'm qualified."

"We're the best judges of that," the interviewer told him sternly. She paused significantly. "Of course," she added, "we're not forcing the work on you. You're free to take the job or leave it, as you choose. However, if you leave it—"

She stopped there.

Chesley thought about what would happen if he refused: the loyalty investigation, the arrest, the disgrace, the report to the Viceroy, the violet flare and the bam.

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he said timidly. "You're right, ma'am. I'll take it, of course."

It seemed that there was a uniform that went with the work—a blinding blue uniform, and on every bright chromium button were stamped the letters: V.G.

### III

For a very short time Chesley's wife was impressed. She said the uniform looked nice on him, so trim and neat, and it broadened his shoulders and made him look like a soldier. And Chesley himself, when he stopped being afraid of himself, found that it scared the pants off practically everybody who saw it except other members of the V.G. For the first time in his life he felt the surge of personal power through his previously calm veins.

"But why on earth should they hire you?" his wife demanded. "You're not a policeman."

"They don't need policemen. They need people with chemical training, for instance. I'm a Research Investigator."

"But you're not a researcher!" Chesley said loftily, "You don't understand. I don't do research, I investigate people who do research. Remember? Some kinds of research are forbidden. I check up on them, see? For instance, one of the first things I'm going to do is drop in on the rubber works. I want to talk to Dr. Pebrick."

"Your boss? About time!" his wife exclaimed. "I never thought I'd live to see it, Arthur, you getting up enough nerve to tell that fat—"

"It isn't a question of nerve, dear," he explained. "When I worked for him it was different. Now I'm a member of the V.G. and not a private, either! No, sir." He patted his stripes proudly. "See, dear? I'm a corporal!"

"Corporal?"

He nodded triumphantly.

She asked, with a dangerous note in her voice, "Is corporal higher than major?"

Chesley was shocked. "Oh, no, dear. Major is much higher. There's sergeant, top sergeant, lieutenant, captain—"

"Major is higher?" Mrs. Chesley stamped her plump foot. "You mean," she demanded, "that you're going to have to take orders from Elsie Morgenstern's husband? Arthur, I swear, I don't think you ever take into consideration the fact that I'm entitled to some respect in this neighborhood! Oh, I can't face Elsie Morgenstern after this! She'll put on that cat-eats-the-canary look and—Arthur, what's my mother going to say? My sister Caroline's husband's a lieutenant, and he's three years younger than you, and I always thought he was the biggest— Arthur, I never should have listened to you! Stepping stones! I go through seven years of misery and scrimping on your stepping stones, and then when you finally get a chance to make a man out of yourself with a half-way decent job in the V.G., you take the first offer they make, showing no guts, no strength, and — Arthur! Arthur, I'm warning you, don't you dare leave this house!"

Still, Chesley's first official act was to visit his old employer, and that made up for a lot. There is no need to go into details about it. Chesley was not yet used to throwing his weight around, but he knew the principles of throwing a scare into the lesser breeds, having been subjected to the technique many times, and it is of record that fifteen minutes after he had left the laboratory where he had formerly slaved, Dr. Pebrick called up his lawyer and made the will he had been putting off for ten years.

After that Chesley began to see the world.

He was amazed to see what sort of a world it was.

There are people who take seriously the pronouncements of politicians and government leaders, who realize the connection between a change of policy on bimetallism and the fact that today or tomorrow the price of eggs will go up or bombs will fall on Nova Scotia. Chesley was not one of them. He had heard everything the Viceroy had had to say, but it simply had not registered.

For example, there was the Viceroy's long and famous General Orders Number One, which prescribed exactly what the human race was required to do in order to make their miserable little pebble of a planet fit to be occupied by the Viceroy's race. The celebrated Para. iv (c) of those orders read:

It is contemplated that 50% of the human race will be required for maintenance duties under the occupation. Since the other 50% will not be adequate to the task of feeding the maintainers, it will be necessary to increase the adult, healthy human population as quickly as possible.

Therefore no beer; therefore no drugs; therefore no time wasted on amusements; therefore children, children, children. It was the Viceroy's orders. And the penalty for failure to comply was a violet flare and bam.

It had never occurred to Chesley that the flare might some day consume him. It simply didn't seem to matter. If it had been guaranteed that he would get it at a specific time, why, then, he might have paid some attention. But the danger was so indefinite that it seemed foolish to waste time on it.

Others were not so placid.

The old life was disintegrating. The mores of the world were changing every day—at least on paper; for what was permitted was compulsory, and nearly everything that was not compulsory was verboten. Artists were giving up their art ("non-essential") and musicians their music ("manpower-wasting") in order to go to work on a Viceroy's Project. It was like a great war effort. And yet there was none of the self-sacrifice, none of the shared resources that mark a people fighting a war. Everywhere there was springing up a shoddy second growth of new companies, new plants, that would somehow cash in on the great Projects. With the Viceroy creating money as he pleased, while governments stood by helpless, there was a fantastic spiral of inflation. The governments themselves were falling apart; no one would work for them. It paid off much better to be an agent of the Viceroy than to serve some possessor of minute authority like the American Government, the Russian, even the UN.

And there was one universal solvent—money.

On the first day of Chesley's employment in the V.G. he was offered a bribe. Berkeley Project Six Four Three had ordered a thousand bags of Portland cement; it was nearly half sand; the salesman grasped Chesley's hand anxiously and said, half pleading, half in contempt: "What's the difference, pal? A little sand isn't gonna hurt —saves putting the sand in later, right? Everybody's doing it." And when he

took his hand away there was a thousand-dollar bill, wadded damply tight, left in Chesley's.

Chesley walked out of there and made a little note in his book; that was the first rule of the V.G.; anyone offering a bribe was to be reported for punishment.

But, somehow, that didn't seem to stop it. By the end of the second day he had been offered money to suppress a report on inferior steel alloy in fourteen thousand tons of I-beams; to help throw a contract to a firm that lacked plant, raw materials and employees; to change the wording of a bid specification so that a speculator could unload water-damaged organic chemicals, utterly worthless for any purpose. He was even bribed on general principles—because he was a member of the V.G., as a sort of general prophylaxis against any future illegal activities.

Chesley took his notebook in hand and reported to the District Sub-Office.

It was in a Project building—a spidery tripod a mile and a half high. Steel skeleton and blue-plastic frame, it rose on three thin legs, one planted firmly on lower Manhattan, one rooted in Staten Island, one plunging into the river off the Jersey piers. Chesley stepped into a glassy capsule at the base of the Manhattan leg and was blown by pneumatic force straight up the leg. It was a whirling, dizzying experience, but he could catch sight of the other Project buildings scattered across the land and sea—the giant bubbly dome over Astoria, Queens, with its revolving ruby lights; the pale, square monstrosity that floated in the ocean just off Coney Island; the sun glinting from the twenty enormous swimming pools the Viceroy had commanded all over New York and New Jersey.

Some day the Projects, all of them, would be used by the Viceroy's people, for purposes that were far outside of human understanding. But for now they belonged to the V.G., six-foot humans occupying rooms scaled for a race of no fixed size or shape, where some doors were so tiny a man had to crawl through on his belly, some ceilings so high that the lights had to be swung at the end of twenty-foot cables. Chesley slid through a narrow elliptical door marked AREA COMMANDER, saluted the first man he saw and said: "Sir, I wish to speak to Captain Carsten."

"Sit down, bud." The wind screamed and the overhead lights swung at the end of their long cables. Chesley took a seat on a curiously shallow bench at one end of the triangular room. It was full of members of the V.G., male and female, all in the blinding blue uniforms. They seemed to pay no attention to him—and even less attention to the TV repeaters that were scattered all over every room in the Project buildings, where every minute of every day the face of the Viceroy was in the screen ordering, exhorting, commanding his followers. Perhaps it was a recording, Chesley thought; although it seemed live, for at every twentieth word or so the Viceroy had to pause in what he was saying to glance at a memorandum handed him by a sweating human aide, or to stop, and close his eyes, and seem to concentrate for a second, while the faint halo flared around him. It was:

"—no human who dares interfere with the occupation of"—pause, while he glanced at a slip—"this miserable little planet by"—pause, while he closed his eyes and the halo glowed bright—"the invincible race I represent will escape. No, not one! And if any"—pause for another slip from another messenger—"human is presumptuous enough"—pause, while the halo flared—"to attempt to thwart my plan for"—pause again; and words and pauses and words and ...

Chesley stopped a girl in the blue uniform. "What's he doing?" he asked.

She stared at him. "Oh, a rookie. That's how he blasts 'em, boy," she said, and bustled on. Chesley was very impressed. Imagine seeing the Viceroy in the actual act of execution! It didn't seem to be very difficult for him—and yet, Chesley thought, if you assume that one person out of a thousand needs execution every year, and that there are three billion persons alive on the Earth, those three million annual executions must occur at an average rate of—of—of, he finally computed, one every ten seconds or so, night, day, weekends and Sundays included. No wonder the Viceroy was harried!

"You!" barked a plump old V.G. with a lieutenant's shoulder bars. "You want to see the Captain? Come on in."

Chesley marched into an office with a soft and slanting floor and, keeping his balance with some difficulty, saluted, reported, and turned over his list of persons who had offered him bribes.

Captain Carsten stared at him in frank incredulity. "They tried to bribe you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."



"And you—you're reporting them to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see." Carsten shook his head slowly, as though it were impossible to believe. And, in fact, he was baffled. He tried to clear up the confusion in his own mind. "You mean to say," he began, "that these people all offered you bribes, that you accepted the money, that you have brought the money to me here as evidence, and that you are turning their names in for punishment?"

"That's absolutely right, sir," Chesley said gratefully. He was very relieved; at first he had almost thought the captain didn't understand.

"I see," said the captain again. He picked up the pile of bills and the list of would-be bribe-givers. "There's quite a respectable sum here, Chesley," he said warmly. "And it requires a great deal of fortitude to resist keeping it. I must commend you."

"Thank you very much, sir!" Chesley felt the stirrings of pleasure in his tranquil little heart. "Shall I keep them under observation?"

"Eh? Keep who?"

"The people on the list, sir."

"Oh." The captain pursed his lips. "No," he said, "that won't be necessary. I'll take over, Chesley. I see that you have much more uncommon abilities than I had suspected, so that I think perhaps you should be transferred to—to a more advanced position." He nodded briskly, wadded up the money and put it in his pocket. "I'll keep the, uh, evidence. Pending the proper time, of course. Now, Chesley, dismissed!"

Chesley marched out, feeling quite good—until a couple of days later, when he made another routine check and came across the Portland cement salesman. "You?" Chesley said, astonished. "But I thought—"

"You thought what, pal?" the salesman snarled.

"I thought—" Chesley had been going to say that he'd thought the salesman would long since have passed on, accompanied by a violet flare and a bam. But obviously that hadn't happened, and he floundered.

"Ah," snarled the salesman, "you give me a pain. A thousand bucks wasn't enough for you, huh? You had to pass me on to Carsten, huh? What do you think I was bothering with you for? Just because I couldn't afford his prices—and now he's got me down for a weekly payoff, and, believe me, it isn't any measly grand. Get out of here, you! I don't have to bother with you small-timers any more—now that I'm paying for real protection, I'm going to get it!"

Truly, thought Chesley in his analytical way, the V.G. was a strange and educational organization.

But time went on, and Chesley's ears slowly dried, and it was only a matter of months before he had his own list, and more than five hundred lesser V.G.s under him to help in the collections. For the mortality rate among the human population itself was high, but among that segment of the race that had joined the V.G., it was fabulous. Nearly one execution out of ten, Chesley discovered with interest, was of a V.G.—V.G. caught conspiring to defraud, V.G. caught suborning forbidden research, V.G. under the influence of alcohol, V.G.—more often than any of these—the victim of a de sire for advancement on the part of one of his subordinates.

For if mortality was rapid, so was advancement. It was Major Chesley now, and the old apartment up the block from Mrs. Morgenstern was only a memory; the Chesleys lived in a penthouse over a pagoda-shaped Project of orange crystal.

The Viceroy could have blotted out his enemies en masse only at the cost of blotting out the human race, and forfeiting the work he wanted done. For his own sake, he had to ferret out hostile groups and individuals and destroy them without destroying too many of the others at the same time. Hence, he needed his international army, the V.G.

But the army was shot through with corruption. Men who spied on their fellow men for the sake of an inhuman ruler had little of ordinary human feelings. They robbed and reported for annihilation with relative impunity—at least until they aroused the opposition of other V.G. men. Then they themselves were robbed and reported. And another violet flare and bam.

Captain Carsten—now Colonel Carsten—got it one fine day. Major Morgenstern—now General Morgenstern—found out he was on a marshal's list, and hanged himself in panic. Major Chesley watched and profited; he made it a point never, never to interfere with an other V.G. man, at least one of superior rank.

And so, when the Viceroy at last was impelled to act in enormous wholesale fashion, Major Chesley ceased being even a major; there was a renewed loyalty check and a doubling of the hidden microphones; Major Chesley became Generalissimo Chesley.

The long procession of stepping stones, it seemed, had finally led to a goal.

#### IV

Chesley's wife cooed:

"Arthur, you look so handsome! Just think, my Arthur's a generalissimo! Oh, if only Elsie Morgenstern's husband down the block could see you now!"

"I have to go," Chesley said.

"Oh, don't go yet, Arthur. Let me look at you. My, blue is your color. And those comets on your shoulder—Arthur, you're handsomer than you were when we were married." She giggled.

Chesley said uneasily, "Dear, I must go. The Viceroy himself has sent for me."

"The Viceroy?" His wife's mouth went wide with surprise—yes, and with fright. "Arthur! You mean—"

"I only know that he sent for me," Chesley said.

"But that's what happened with Elsie Morgenstern's husband, Arthur! The Viceroy sent for him, and Elsie said the poor man knew it was—And he just couldn't bear the suspense, knowing that he was on somebody's list, so he— Arthur, please don't go. Stay here, Arthur! Oh, Arthur, I knew all this would end up with some kind of terrible thing. How can I tell my mother if you— And think of the disgrace! My own husband blasted by the Viceroy for disloyalty! I won't be able to hold up my head. Just when the other ladies were—Arthur, come back here!"

But it wasn't his death sentence that was being passed after all. Chesley had been pretty sure it wasn't that—though there were uneasy moments, waiting in the purplish gloom of the Viceroy's own outer office, when he would have given his blue V.G. uniform and his generalissimo's comets cheerfully for the privilege of once again being an ordinary common citizen in an ordinary world.

But it wasn't bad news; it was good; how good, Chesley would never have dared to guess.

The Viceroy's personal aide-de-camp, white-faced, sweating, let Chesley in. Chesley walked past the man and thought objectively how terrible it must be to be exposed continually to the ultimate wrath of the Viceroy—and how short the life expectancy of a personal aide had come to be, with the average duration in the post running to not much over a week.

But then he was in the presence of the Viceroy, and he had no time to think of things concerning mere humans.

And yet—the Viceroy himself, even, had an aura of humanity that was new and strange.

It wasn't that he looked human. His features were twice the size of a man's, and utterly blank, carved out of heartless granite, as though it weren't worth the trouble to him of assuming an expression. It wasn't as though he sounded human—his voice had a curious mechanical harshness, more so than ever before, as though he had not bothered to dress it up with earthly intonations and overtones.

But the Viceroy was . . . upset.

That was the only word to express it. He had blazed with angry power during the reorganization of the V.G. that brought Chesley his comets, and the blaze was still smoldering. There was worry and hatred in his bearing—hatred at the stupid illogic of this mindless human race that was incapable of resisting him, and yet ran the highest risks of annihilation for the sake of making a few filthy dollars. There was passion surrounding the Viceroy; and Chesley was very nearly afraid.

He saw death pervading the very air in front of him, death and annihilation. And yet it was not directed at Chesley, for what the Viceroy said, when he took time at last from reading memos and

pausing to make the effort of will that, somewhere on the face of the earth, blasted another enemy with a violet flare, was:

"You once refused a bribe."

Chesley had to think back—it was that hard to remember. Then he recalled the scene in Captain Carsten's office, and realized that even there the Viceroy had had his hidden microphones or his spies. He said, "That's true."

The Viceroy went on in a harsh and somber voice: "You no longer refuse them."

"That's true too," admitted Chesley.

"Yes," said the Viceroy, and was silent for a moment while he read a memo and squelched another enemy. Then he said: "You need not refuse bribes. But do not fail to be logical. From this moment, you are chief of all my Guard."

And that was the end of the interview.

A human dictator might have appealed for personal loyalty. What the Viceroy wanted, Chesley realized, was clarity of view—the realization that Chesley's own selfish interests were best served by doing whatever he could for his master, the Viceroy.

Chesley left, understanding the Viceroy's difficulty.

The Viceroy had no time.

He had to be all over the world, punishing and searching out offenders. And for all his superior power, he was baffled and enraged when human beings risked his anger for—to him—stupid reasons.

Chesley didn't know much about fear from personal experience, since his mind had never worked that way. But he had learned to recognize its objective symptoms in others: Baffled rage, extending outward; puzzlement; inability to comprehend the nature of a danger.

In other words—what the Viceroy himself was now demonstrating.

Chesley, being no coward, was also no hero. He had never thought of himself as courageous, and yet, the very next week, he did a courageous thing.

A report came to his desk:

Captain-General Gorminster, aide-de-camp to the Viceroy, has accepted a bribe for destroying a memorandum relating to the disloyalty of five members of the San Diego Area Command.

Chesley's job was to initial it, return it for filing, and inform the Viceroy of its contents—directly, since the man accused was the Viceroy's own aide-de-camp. It was Gorminster's death sentence.

Chesley did nothing of the kind. He initialed it, thought it over, and tucked it in a pocket.

And two days later, he found the Viceroy's aide-de-camp dragging himself, shaking, up the long humped ramp that led toward the purplish recesses of the headquarters. Chesley stopped him.

"General Gorminster," he said, "take a look at this, will you?"

Gorminster glanced at it impatiently, then snatched it from Chesley's hands, read it and reread it, stared for a horrified moment at Chesley, and seemed about to faint.

"I haven't turned it in," said Chesley.

Gorminster only stared. He was a pitiable sight, no courage left to him and no strength.

"And I am not going to," Chesley went on. "I think it is an unjust accusation."

"Oh, thank you," gasped Gorminster.

"I only want you to remember," said Chesley, "that I have helped you. I may need help myself sometime."

"I understand," said Gorminster after a moment, and then he smiled. It was a workable arrangement—the supreme commander of the V.G. and the Viceroy's personal aide, working hand-in-glove; they could protect each other indefinitely.

Chesley returned to his work feeling more comfortable than he had for some time.

That was the sole act of disloyalty of which he was guilty. He made up for it by intensifying his investigation of the rest of the Viceregal Guard. Half the members of the V.G. were always busy investigating the other half, and each half was likewise split into quarters that investigated each other. Only rarely did Chesley report directly that any individual or group was disloyal, for he had seen enough to know that the most dangerous thing a man in his uncertainly powerful position could do was to make

enemies.

But he saw to it that the right members of the warring factions discovered the right damning evidence on their opponents. And then it was only a matter of piously transmitting the initialed reports; and the Viceroy himself blasted the offenders, and Chesley could wash his hands like any Pilate.

He worked hard.

Under the new regime, feeling for others was a luxury and only selfishness was a virtue. But selfishness precluded any genuine loyalty to a ruler who ruled by fear alone. Thus greed arose to combat fear and to nullify it; and disloyalty was inevitable.

The task of investigating and reporting was endless and exhausting. Chesley began to feel it draining him after the first few days in his mighty new office. And yet, he wondered, what must it be for the Viceroy? He spent more and more time with that inhuman tyrant, and saw that humanity—that is, worry and doubt—were burgeoning in him like toadstools after a spring rain. Chesley could trust no one fully. The Viceroy could trust no one at all.

The Viceroy spent all his time doing what Chesley did—but more quickly, more efficiently, without human limitations on his ability to think and act. And without rest.

Chesley began to sense that something might happen—something that the Viceroy feared.

But it would not happen, he knew, of itself.

He thought, and remembered, and was careful. It must be made to happen—and he must arrange it.

He continued with his work.

The number of reports he sent in increased. He discovered disloyalty everywhere

It was only a matter of time until someone somehow reported Chesley himself. And one day when Captain-General Gorminster, in a tottering panic, hurried to Chesley's side with a summons from the Viceroy himself—and dared everything to whisper, "It's the Ottawa Area Chief! He's reported you direct—I couldn't stop it!"—Chesley knew that the time had come.

There was the Viceroy, twelve feet tall, shimmering with a golden fire-flecked glow. He was shouting into a television scanner connected with Sydney, Australia; in his hand was a sheaf of denunciations; he paused, spoke, paused again in the moments while Chesley was waiting, and each pause was an execution.

The Viceroy spoke, his face granite: "You are a spy in my Guard."

Chesley felt his stomach knotted into hard lumps and wondered what he had eaten that disagreed with him so; he found that he was sweating and was astonished, for it was not warm. He said: "I have followed your orders. I have acted loyally."

"Loyally!" Chesley felt the seething of inhuman rage that radiated out from the Viceroy. "You obeyed because you knew obedience would harm me!" cried the Viceroy. "Yours is a race of worms! You know no reason and no logic!"

It was true.

The realization hit Chesley and hit him hard: All of his obedience, all of his following orders, had had the effect of damaging the Viceroy's cause. For the Viceroy's orders had been to root out disloyalty and destroy it; and the nature of the Viceregal Guard was that disloyalty had to be its hallmark, treachery its sign.

What other sort of person would join the V.G.?

And so, the more the officers spied and reported, the weaker the organization became. Blue-uniformed turncoats remained turncoats. The task of rooting out corruption from the Guard was impossible—by definition: for corruption was its source and spawning ground.

And knowing that, Chesley knew one more thing: He knew at last that he was afraid.

He said: "You yourself created an illogical situation."

The Viceroy stopped in mid-breath. Death was very near for Chesley, but at least the Viceroy was listening. Was it his imagination, or did the Viceroy seem to be swelling slightly—as though the strain of carrying a planet on his inhuman shoulders was beginning to tell? Chesley said, "You hoped to rule us by fear—but fear destroys you. When we are afraid, we act irrationally; and we are too many for you."

"I shall destroy your filthy race!"

"Oh," said Chesley, calm now, nodding, "yes, you will. You will destroy us, Viceroy. In fact, you are destroying us now. And what then? If you destroy us all, there will be no servants for your people—and then you will be punished."

The giant figure wavered like smoke. It cried wordlessly—or in words that were not human; and then it said: "Stop!"

"Why?" asked Chesley. "You will blast me anyhow—you can only do it once, you know. That's your basic error, Viceroy, you have only one punishment for any crime, so why should a man be content with a small crime? Might as well commit a large one. No, if you had been logical, you might have—"

"Stop!" bawled the vast, inhuman voice, and the purple-lined room shook. "Stop, man!"

He was swelling with anger, Chesley noted with a surgeon's detachment. Ah, what was the difference? He went on, finishing out his thought, confident that it would be the last thought he would have in this life: "And so, by failing to be logical, you have failed in your mission. It is you who are disloyal, Viceroy. You have betrayed your people. You can never prepare the Earth for their coming."

"Disloyal?" boomed the enormous voice.

Chesley nodded and closed his eyes.

There was a pause

And, even through his closed eyes, a violet flare—

And a crash louder than anything Chesley had ever heard. This is dying, he thought; but then he opened his eyes and it was not.

It was the Viceroy who had blasted himself; disloyalty had to be punished; there was only one punishment; logic required that it be administered. The Viceroy's broken body lay sprawled across the floor, shattered from within under the pressure of a storm of uncontrollable energy. It was not destroyed completely, as any human body would have been; and in death it was no longer human at all.

There was plenty of money in the vaults of the Viceregal Guard, and plenty of time to take it and get away, before any other human dared approach the Viceroy's inner headquarters. Quickly home, quickly with his wife to the airport, quickly in a V.G. plane, with a pilot he could trust, flying south high and fast. And his wife was saying:

"But Arthur, if the Viceroy's dead and the V.G. is going to be out of existence as soon as the people find out about it, then what will we do? You'll be out of a job, and— And if the rest of the race will be trying to lynch the V.G., like you say, then how will we be safe? Don't you ever think of me, Arthur? You can grow a mustache and change your name—but what about Mother? How will I ever dare— And why must we take that filthy trunk? I don't know what you've got in it, but I simply cannot abide the smell of it, and— Arthur! You're not paying attention!"

Chesley said wearily, "Don't worry about it, dear. Look."

He opened the briefcase and showed her the stacks of bills it contained. "But—but that's stealing!" she cried.

He said, "It's my own money, honestly grafted. Besides, it won't be good for anything once the governments take over again. But meanwhile it will buy us a place to live, and a stock of food to see us through, and a laboratory."

"A laboratory?" His wife looked as though she had at last realized her husband had gone utterly mad. "You mean—research? That stuff in the trunk?"

He nodded. "Those are the fragments of the Viceroy's body. If I can find out what he was made of, I think I can find out how he was able to blast people—and then we'll be ready for the next Viceroy his race sends down. If they ever send another. We know that the blast works on them as well as on us—he proved that." He smiled, and pointed down to the palm-fringed airfield which they were circling for a landing. "Our new home," he said.

There was much more that he could have said—for example, that when he had learned the secret of the Viceroy's blast he could, if he wished, rule the world as the Viceroy had; or that with a few other little items he had looted from the Viceroy's quarters they could be fabulously wealthy all the years of their lives. But it was not Chesley's way to be communicative, particularly with his wife; and all that he did say was:

"So you see?  
That job was a stepping stone, after all."