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**A GREAT SHORT
SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL**

A WORLD OF SLAVES

He was a man apart, alone . . . knowing full well that the success or failure of his mission would determine Mankind's future under the stars. The cities were depopulated, in ruins, and all of the splendors and triumphs of human civilization were at the mercy of a horror unspeakable.

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

The Man Who Wrote **No Blade of Grass**

PROLOGUE

AS LIGGARD AWOKE, George's words were echoing in his mind: "You'll be a museum specimen, Stan. Probably in a glass showcase . . . attendants in white smocks . . . admission fifty cents—free on Saturdays and Sundays. And a doctor checking that two-an-hour pulse every few days. That's how it should be. But just in case—in case we're being too optimistic—there's the blast exit. I hope you won't need it."

He blinked his eyes clear of a film of dust. The underground chamber they had constructed was unchanged; the dust was on it, softening the outlines everywhere, but it was unchanged. George's chair still stood by his desk in one corner. He walked across to it on uncertain legs. The log lay open; the pencilled writing clear enough under the layer of grey:

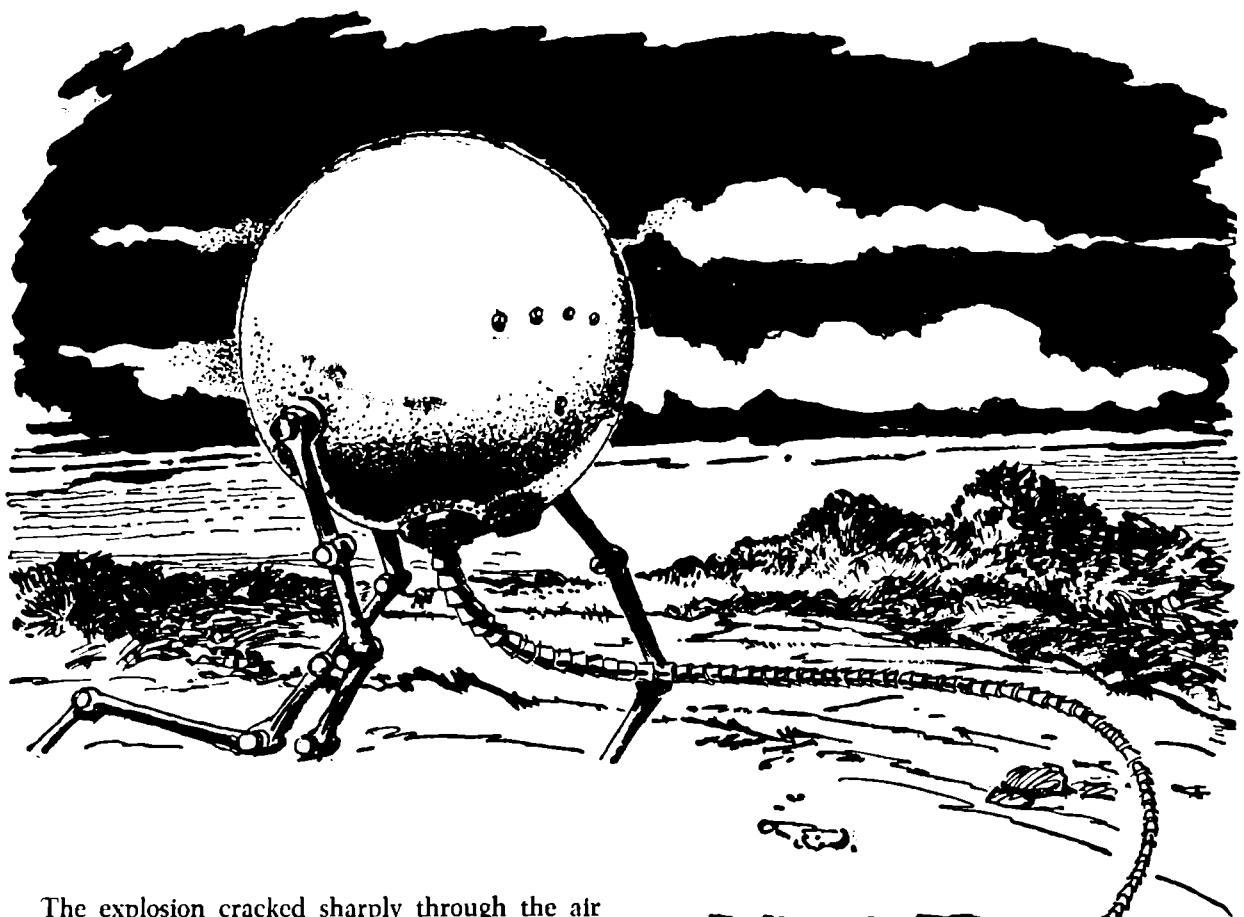
Thursday. January 17. Everything normal.

Pulse and blood suitably retarded. This marks six months from the beginning; I'll give him another few weeks before publishing. After that I don't suppose I'll be able to get near him for visiting celebrities.

That was all. A routine statement. No broken message trailing off into cryptic uncertainty. But he hadn't come back. A fatal accident? But there had been full details among his papers; the executors must have found them. Liggard looked round the small cell again. Clearly they hadn't. So a lot depended on the blast exit.

The mechanism seemed in order. He primed it, flicked the control, and retired to crouch behind the brick blast wall. He counted aloud, listening to his own voice echoing, so unlike the welcoming voices they had expected:

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ."



The explosion cracked sharply through the air and fresh dust, swirling up, made him cough. He looked up. As he did his nostrils caught the scent of fresh air. There was the light of day, too, breaking in on the dim artificial illumination that his awaking had switched on. The blast exit had worked. The way was open; a small tunnel leading upwards. He squirmed his way through it and out onto a green hillside, on what seemed like a late summer afternoon.

I

THE COTTAGE HAD BEEN CHOSEN for its location—a mile and a half from the city limits, on a slope sufficiently elevated to protect the cell from any ordinary flooding. The cottage still stood a few yards further up the hill, or rather its skeleton did. It had sagged in on itself, it seemed, through the ordinary dilapidations of time.

Liggard looked the other way, towards the city. At first sight it seemed not to have changed. He could see the glint of the river, could see that the Consular Bridge still spanned it, or almost spanned it. His eyes caught a gap, just short of the east bank. And the Civic Building—when he examined it more carefully he saw that the top was crumpled, as though some giant had placed a hand on it and carelessly pushed it down. Other buildings, when he came to look at them, were also incomplete.

War? It seemed obvious enough. Misleadingly obvious, perhaps. There was damage, but hardly the kind that would have resulted from a universal holocaust. But radiation sickness—bacteriological



warfare? That might account for much of what he saw. He watched the city. Yes, it was deserted.

He went down, anyway, to check. Before the sun set, he had confirmed his guess, but he was no

nearer to finding the reason for the desertion. There were no skeletons. He camped for the night on the crumbling counter of what had been a chain grocery. He found some canned provisions but not many, another thing which surprised him.

From his couch he could see, through splintered windows, the brilliant night sky. If this city was deserted, was there any reason for him to expect any better luck in other places? Obviously not, if he were looking for the kind of civilized life he had left behind him a hundred years ago in the twentieth century. But he refused to allow his disappointment to blind him.

Deserted cities didn't necessarily mean the end of Man. He remembered the flies, the mosquitoes, the cockroaches that had been attacked with D.D.T. There was always the odd, resistant strain in the breed. Somewhere there would be men—if only a handful, if only savages. And he would find them all right. It might take him a long time, but he would find them.

He rolled over, finding a more comfortable position on the pitted wood, and went peacefully to sleep.

He rose early the next morning. The weather was still pleasant. He packed a dozen cans in his knapsack and set out, heading eastwards, away from the skeleton of the city. Provisionally he laid his course for New York, but not with any expectation of finding it inhabited. When he found men he knew it would be by chance, by stumbling on the isolated community that had escaped whatever pestilence had stalked across the planet. But there had to be a mark to aim at, and New York was as good as any.

He thought of getting hold of some kind of vehicle since the roads seemed to be in tolerably good condition—a bicycle perhaps. But he realized the stupidity of that idea when he looked at the car in a garage on the road out from the city. It had been well sheltered, but it was no more than a pattern of rusts. He walked on as cheerfully as possible, thinking of the distance he might yet have to walk.

His surprise was all the greater when, no more than half an hour after he had left the city behind him, he reached the brow of a small hill, and looked down onto a neat pattern of well-tilled fields, dotted with small, roughly built houses. He stood for several minutes looking at the view, and trying to disbelieve it.

There had been people who had wanted men to turn their backs on the cities and return to the land, he remembered. But the idea that a large number of people might have acted on their advice still seemed fantastic, despite the evidence of the city behind him and the thriving agricultural land in front. He looked at the scene more closely. The houses were spaced roughly at the corners of squares which measured about two miles across.

They were small holdings, and at the corner of one of the nearer squares, nine or ten houses huddled into a tiny village. With this as his new objective, he set off down the hill.

It was about three miles away, and he had covered approximately half the distance towards it when he heard the hooting. It was a sound not un-

like a ship's whistle, and with the same staccato intervals. Automatically his ear registered the direction of sound, and he turned round to look for it. Something was following him, and rapidly narrowing the distance that separated them.

The key feature was the spherical cabin, carried at a height of about twenty feet from the ground on three metal legs that seemed to be jointed in at least half a dozen-places. The cabin seemed to be windowless but was studded with various minor features, some of which might have been lookouts. Three metallic-looking fronds were curled up beneath it.

The whole machine advanced rapidly on its jointed tripod locomotory apparatus. At a rough guess, he estimated its speed to be a little less than thirty miles an hour. Fearful that it might miss him he stood in the middle of the crumbling roadway, waving his arms vigorously.

As the machine got within twenty yards of him one of the fronds beneath the cabin unrolled into a segmented metal tentacle, perhaps twenty-five feet long. It swung viciously towards him, and even as he ducked abruptly out of its way his mind merely accepted the possibility of some clumsy mismanagement of the controls.

He only began to suspect there might be some hostility about the machine's intentions when a second tentacle unrolled and flung its savage steel at him with a fury that made the air whir about him. He threw himself towards the edge of the road, tumbled over a parapet, and felt himself falling helplessly.

When he recovered, he saw that he was lying at the bottom of a steep crevasse. There had been a land slip at some time and a fissure, perhaps ten or twelve feet deep, ran for several yards between the dilapidated road and the scrub country beside it.

He looked up. The machine was straddling his refuge. Far up against the blue arc of sky the spherical cabin swayed in motion as the machine settled its legs on either side of the crevasse. The tentacles lashed down at him, but cut the air five feet over his head. They weren't long enough to reach him.

For two or three minutes they whipped to and fro above him. Then, just as rapidly, they curled up again and with a convulsive jerk the machine passed across his field of vision, and out of sight. He heard its hooting resumed, and heard it grow fainter with distance. By the time he had climbed up the rocky slope to the road again, it was about a mile away.

He stood watching it. Its jerky but rapid motions were carrying it towards the group of houses he had himself been heading for. It approached them without slackening pace. Tiny now, but distinct in the clear air, he saw it pass over the buildings, apparently brushing unconcernedly against them. He thought he saw one of the tentacles uncurl to wave briefly in some motion, but he was too far away to be sure.

The machine disappeared into the distance. He continued his own journey, his mind still more confused and wondering. Presently the buildings grew larger, and he slackened his pace.

He saw men and women as he drew near to the

cluster of houses. He saw the damage, too. The side of one of the houses had been ploughed open, presumably by one of the machine's tripodal legs, and people were grouped about it. He noticed they were dressed in roughly woven, handmade clothes. He walked towards them, conscious that his own dramatic arrival from the twentieth century might be somewhat marred as far as these people were concerned by the pressing catastrophe of their own immediate affairs. He heard their raised voices as he drew near, and paused to listen. George's guess that the English tongue was unlikely to alter much in the next hundred years had at least been borne out.

A small man with a shrill voice—he looked about forty—was saying: "Yeah, it's the same one. He's extraordinarily vicious. It's the same one, all right. I couldn't mistake him."

Liggard found himself on the edge of the group, but they weren't taking any notice of him. He began to say something—anything to hear his own voice speaking to other men—but the others were too busily discussing the damage to the cottage to pay him any attention. Or most of them were. But a grey-haired man, tall, with a lean face, came round to stand beside him.

The tall man said quietly: "Stranger in these parts?"

Stanley Liggard nodded. "It's a long story. A difficult and an incredible one. I don't suppose you'll believe me."

The other pursed his lips into a wry smile. "I believe easily. Come on in and have a drink, anyway. It won't be back."

A girl joined them. She was slightly built, with a pleasant but rather strained face. Her hair was glossy brown, and curly. She wore a simple red dress.

Liggard said: "You called that metal monster 'it.' Hasn't it a name? I never saw anything quite so unnerving—"

The stranger looked at him with real curiosity. "You don't know what that was? You *do* interest me."

They went through a low doorway into a small, square, stonewalled room. It looked like the inside of a colonial-period farm-house. Its original owner had apparently been antiquarian-minded. There was even a rack of churchwarden pipes on the wall behind the bar that stretched across the room and barred the way to the rest of the house. A woman was cleaning glasses on the other side of it.

The stranger went over and drew three glasses of tap beer. He paid for the drinks in heavy coins that rang on the wood.

He brought the glasses over to the table beneath the small square window, at which Stanley Liggard and the girl were already sitting.

"My name's Coolen. Luther Coolen. My daughter, Patience."

"Stanley Liggard." He looked at them speculatively. "I still think it's going to be difficult," he said. "I can't expect you to believe me."

Patience had a brittle-sounding voice, with a harshness that was in a way attractive. "If you don't know what the Meccanoes are," she said, "you must have been hiding some place."

He drank from the glass. The beer was dark and heavy—a brew with body to it.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you could say I've been hiding."

He told them his story as simply as possible, glancing at their faces at intervals to watch disbelief creeping in. But it didn't. Luther Coolen continued to look at him with bland acceptance, the girl with rather more interest, but also without comment.

"Now," he finished. "You can tell me what kind of world I've returned to."

The girl echoed bitterly: "What kind of a world!"

Luther Coolen said thoughtfully: "I wonder what happened to your friend George? He may have been killed in one of the first panics. Or perhaps entirely by accident—and the panics began before anybody could pay attention to his papers and come and find you."

Stanley said: "The panics?"

"In your time", Luther said, as if confirming something, "the world was divided between two power blocs. It looked as though another atomic world war was in preparation?"

Liggard nodded. "No doubt about that."

"People on this side of the world didn't know much about what the others might be planning. They were believed to be surpassing us in war-making potential. And they were, of course. But they were onto other things, too, especially in the field of cybernetics?"

Stanley nodded again. "Servomechanisms—electronic brains."

"Electronic brains. A lot of work had been done on them here. Some people talked of it as the second technological revolution. The first had largely dispensed with the need for human labor. The second would cut out the white collar workers in a hundred thousand different fields of organization and accountancy."

Stanley remembered something. "More than that! Someone said there was no reason why machines shouldn't write poetry. A joke, I guess."

Luther smiled awkwardly. "It turned out to be a bad joke. The Russians were on it, too. They had one man—a fellow called Kronz. We don't know much about his career in Russia though he had had a brilliant one as a physicist in western Europe before he had the bad judgment to go back to his Russian homeland on a holiday. They kept him. There were reports after that. He was supposed to be working on a super cosmic-ray bomb and half a dozen times he was reported dead. Actually they couldn't do anything with him. He wasn't to be intimidated, and the only chance of his paying a dividend was for them to leave him strictly alone. Eventually they did."

"And on his own he turned to cybernetics. Whether out of real interest in a field quite unrelated to his early work or whether out of despair and cynicism about mankind we'll never know now. When he started getting results he was encouraged, of course. I don't know what his superiors thought he was giving them. Probably robot soldiers, giant remote-control tanks—all that kind of useful play-

things. He asked for supplies of the precious plutonium—and they gave them to him.

"Then he built his Brain. We know it's plutonium-activated; and that's about all we do know about it. We know there's only one. These tripod arrangements that scavenge the countryside are in some kind of radio communication with the main center. The country people credit them with individual personalities, but they're all part of the Brain. It was the Brain that swiped at you in the ditch, and kicked half a house in here."

Stanley said: "And Kronz? He couldn't control it?"

Patience Coolen said: "From what we've learned about it since, probably the first thing the Brain did was to pluck his arms and legs off. It's one of its favorite pastimes."

Stanley said: "I get the impression that the Brain is vindictive. Surely a machine can't be—emotional?"

"It's an interesting point", Luther agreed. "Purely as a guess, I should say that it's fascinated by *gesture*. That's something we take for granted; as an automatic part of all animal life, and especially of men. Smiles, frowns, waving arms—all the translations into the physical of mental processes are commonplace to us. But not to the Brain. It never tires of probing men for reactions, in a way that appears casual but may be just the opposite. It's one of the things we've got that it can never have. You can understand its interest."

"And the deserted cities?" Stanley asked.

"Cities," Patience said, "are one of the things it can prevent us having."

"The first information the western world had," Luther explained, "was when the Meccanoes plunged across most of Europe and started kicking Paris and London and Berlin to pieces. It was taken for Russian aggression, of course. One or two Russian cities were destroyed by atom bombs before the Meccanoes reached them. As a matter of fact, it was several months before it was realized that the whole business wasn't a Russian avalanche. And by that time, mankind was on the run. It had become very clear that the Brain regarded cities as a natural hunting ground. And in any case, once the Meccanoes had succeeded in breaking up the fabric of civilization—of city-civilization—mankind's only hope lay in getting out into the country."

Stanley's imagination was caught. "The population of the world's cities pouring out into the surrounding country. That must have been—"

"Hell," Patience supplied for him. "In ten years the world population dropped from two billion to something probably nearer two million. And for the overwhelming majority of deaths the Brain was only indirectly responsible. It supplied the conditions for men to starve to death—to tear each other to pieces for a loaf of bread or the carcass of a rabbit."

"It could have wiped us right out, of course," Luther said. "There's no way of really getting at whatever obscure thought processes go through it. It seems as though the spectacle of man interests it. At least it leaves us reasonably well alone; as long as we don't form too large a group. And except for the Hunts."

"The Hunts?" Liggard asked.

"The Meccanoes hunt every now and then," Patience said. "They hunt men as men once hunted foxes. And they treat them in much the same way when they catch them. They don't eat us. But men didn't eat foxes either, did they?"

"It doesn't seem credible," Stanley said uncertainly. "Wasn't there any attempt to stop it at the beginning?"

"There were attempts," Luther said grimly. "Tanks and airplanes. But their crews were human, and the Meccanoes aren't. If the Air Force had succeeded in dropping an atom bomb on the Brain itself, that would have finished things. But they didn't. And every human plane shot out of the sky represented a trained crew written off, while the Meccanoes, the arms and legs of the Brain, could be repaired almost as fast as they were hit, and replacements were always pouring out. There was only one end to that kind of war. And since the cities were abandoned . . ."

"There's no way of fighting it? No way at all?"

"Look at them!" Luther said.

The people had begun to come in from outside. They stood by the bar, talking and arguing in a desultory, hopeless fashion.

The small man with the shrill voice said: "Reckon they might leave us alone now. Reckon we might get the harvest in before there's any more trouble."

"They take things for granted," Luther said. He paused. "Yes, there is something. Not very much, but something. If you feel like coming in on it, we'd be glad of your help. Anyway, you might as well travel with us until you get your bearings. It's a feudal world now, and you're without a niche. They wouldn't let you stay here. The ground's all marked out."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"We're peddlers," Patience said. "Hucksters!"

"We make a little," Luther said. "Three can live on it almost as well as two. There are few luxuries left in this world, anyway. Well?"

"I'm very grateful." Liggard felt the enormity of understatement in his words. He had a lot to be grateful for.

Luther drained his beer. "We'll have a meal here. Then we'll get on our way. We should reach the next village before night. That Meccano has destroyed our lodging here."

II

THEY HAD A DONKEY STABLED behind the inn. It was a young, sturdy beast. They hitched the double pack of goods on it and set off, Luther leading the donkey and Stanley and Patience walking beside him.

"You'll have to get used to walking," Patience said.

He followed her glance to his own feet, shod in light, pointed shoes.

Luther said: "We'll get you something stronger at the next village."

They walked for some time in silence through the still hot afternoon. The donkey padded steadily on, stirring a small cloud of white dust in which the smaller clouds raised by their own feet merged and were lost. Liggard felt unaccustomed aches

pulling at his muscles, but there was satisfaction also in the monotonous regularity of physical effort.

He said once: "You say there's some way of attacking the Brain—of getting at it?"

"The Brain itself is a bit of a traveller," Luther said. "At present it's on this continent; in what used to be Philadelphia."

"And it has a weak spot?"

Luther glanced at him briefly. "I think so. That can wait, though. We'll have plenty of time to talk it over before we get within reach."

Liggard said nothing. He approved Luther's caution; it made it more probable that he really had something useful in mind.

The ground became more broken. The path they were following led over a hillside on which sheep were grazing, but at this point there wasn't a single farmhouse in sight. At the top of the hill, however, Patience pointed down into the valley before them. Shadows were falling more squarely with the approaching evening and the valley itself was in the shade.

Stanley could see the small huddle of houses in the distance. He was going to say something when Luther broke in: "You hear that?"

Patience nodded slightly, her gaze preoccupied. Stanley listened. He heard it himself, a faint but quickening sound across the quiet air. The staccato hooting.

Liggard looked at Luther. "The Meccanoes?" he asked.

The hooting was perceptibly louder, and he realized with a shock that it was on more than one note and that the intervals overlapped.

"Yes, the Meccanoes," Luther said. "We're unlucky."

Patience had been looking about her. "A dip over there—about a hundred yards. It doesn't look very promising, but . . ."

Liggard nodded in quick agreement.

Luther had already begun to urge the donkey in the direction she had indicated. The hooting behind them became louder. Suddenly the air was torn with a gale, blowing up over the brow of the hill. The wind shrieked at them; they had to fight their way across it. The temperature had dropped fantastically.

Across the howling wind, Patience shrieked in his ear: "They have weather control. They often exercise it on a Hunt. God knows why, but it amuses them."

The whole sky had darkened and he became aware of the sting of hail plucking at his flesh. The three of them stumbled down into the hollow; he could see it wasn't going to be very much protection. Behind them the hooting rose into a pizzicato wailing. Luther pulled the donkey to its knees, and the three of them huddled beside it for shelter.

"This was really bad luck," Luther said. "We haven't been caught in a hunt for two years. If they haven't found a quarry yet they may sweep right past us; they're more likely to flush someone down towards the village."

Liggard's mind still refused to accept the implications of the situation, or of a world in which such a situation could be commonplace.

"But why?" he said, almost angrily. "I don't get it.

If the world were being bossed by superintelligent cats I could understand it. But machines!"

He felt Patience's body tense beside him. "Quiet now," she said. "They'll be close."

He could feel himself the vibrations in the ground underneath them; the thud of stamping metal feet ascending the other side of the hill. He craned his head over the side of the donkey, peering through what was now a blizzard of snow and biting ice. There was light in the sky; a glow. He saw the first of the tripeds loom up over the brow of the hill. And the second, third, fourth. Powerful searchlights beamed down from the metal cabins, crossing and criss-crossing the uneven ground in front of them. He could understand the villagers having credited them with separate entities. It was very difficult to believe that each was no more than an organ of the single Brain.

He thought that the five hunters would miss them in their relentless progress down hill towards the village, and he was right. The nearest beam of light flicked the ground some twenty yards to their left; flicked and passed on. He heard Luther draw a breath of relief. And then, looking up the hill again, he saw another triped heave across the horizon and knew that it must pass directly over their meager hiding place.

Patience saw it at the same time. She clutched his arm involuntarily, and cried out in sudden, desperate fright. The decision that he reached without hesitation or reflection was partly a protective masculine response, partly a feeling that by making himself a target he would only be exchanging one kind of certain death for another that would at least spare his friends.

He stood up quickly and lunged up out of the hollow, running across the windtorn grass towards the swath of light approaching down the slope. He heard Patience cry something behind him, but the wind carried her voice away at once.

He ran for the light as though it were warmth and shelter. It enveloped him suddenly, and he heard the hooting above him change its key and its intervals. He ran again, still heading away from the hollow.

Almost at once the light lost him. Later he realized that this had probably been deliberate; the cat releasing the mouse to a temporary freedom. But at the time he was only concerned with the fact of the welcome darkness round him again. He knew one part of his purpose had been achieved—he could hear the others casting back up the hill towards him. Now he only had his own life to fight for.

He doubled back towards the crest of the hill. He had seen, before the storm came down, that there was no shelter on this side; and he remembered that as they had toiled up the other there had been a small wood of pines stretching round the side of the hill towards another valley. He didn't really think he could make it, but the thought of simply giving up, of abandoning all action, was intolerable to him.

The hooting behind him settled into a steady rhythm that was almost like the baying of hounds. But giant hardmetal hounds, standing twenty feet

off the ground and equipped with coiled steel arms twenty-five feet in length.

He could feel the vibration of the heavy thudding behind him. His own pulses were thudding and there was an added agonizing tightness in his chest with every searing breath he drew. He wondered how much longer he could go before he dropped.

He didn't realize he was near the wood until he stumbled over a log. He picked himself up and ran a few yards further before he let himself fall alongside a fallen pine. He lay as close to its dark, rotting bark as he could and felt oxygen tearing back into his lungs like a choking, burning gas. He had turned towards the fallen tree so that he could see nothing. But he could not shut his ears to the hooting, close at hand now and terrifyingly loud.

Then the world was dazzling white all round him and he knew he was in the path of one of the tripods' searchlights. He waited in resignation for the tentacle to sweep down and pluck him from his place, but as darkness flowed in again and a huge foot shook the earth a few feet from him he realized that he could not have been noticed.

He lay, still gasping in breath, while the noise of the Hunt passed on into the wood. The respite didn't last long. After about five minutes it was clear that they had circled round and were coming back. Probably they had reached the limits of the wood and guessed then that they had passed him. It was unlikely that he would be missed twice in the same way. But he knew that if he broke back into open country there would be no hope for him at all.

He got up and began edging cautiously towards the approaching line of light from the Meccanoes. It was a small chance, but it was the only one. They were crashing across the wood in a line, some fifteen yards apart. Their searchlights crossed to each other and back again. There were a few seconds in every minute when there was darkness between each of the advancing giants.

It would require knife-edge timing. He sneaked forward from tree to tree, hearing the hooting more and more terrifyingly close. He headed directly between two of the tall, careening searchlights. The jumping line of light was thirty, twenty-five, twenty yards from him. He saw that the Meccanoes had to move slower in the wood, though in part the slowness must also be due to their need to search for him.

Ten yards, five. The searchlights from the Meccanoes to the left and right swept together into a pool of brilliance that turned the needles of the pines into cascades of silver, and then parted, leaving total blackness. Liggard plunged forward, trying to combine speed and quietness; the pine carpet beneath his feet helped.

He turned his head instinctively as the brilliance flared up again, this time behind him. The Meccanoes plodded solidly forward. For the moment he was safe. But they must soon reach the wood's edge, and it would not take them long in the bare open country beyond to guess that their quarry had cheated them again. It was up to him to press forward as quickly as possible while they were on the wrong track.

He made the best speed he could, and before the hooting began growing louder again he had actually

got beyond the zone of freak weather into the ordinary clear twilight of a summer evening. The wood had attenuated several times almost to nothing, but each time it swelled out again beyond. The pines rolled down the valley and up the opposite slope.

For over an hour the Meccanoes were obviously plunging around in a honeycombing search well to the rear. Then, as though picking up some trail, their cry became more purposive behind him. The hunt was on again and with a vengeance.

The trees were thinner here; in some places the marks of the woodsman showed where areas of perhaps a hundred square yards had been cleared down to the stumps. And it was still quite light. He had no hope of doubling back again on the line relentlessly advancing up the slope behind him. He began to walk faster, to run. But all the time the hooting became louder. Although the air was quite cool now, the sweat was pouring torrentially down his body. He was running fast, but without hope. He guessed they could not now be more than a hundred yards away.

He saw the hut as he staggered into the clearing. It was a log cabin, lying just below the hill crest. There was smoke coming from a chimney. Without thinking, without realizing what he was doing he ran towards it, seeing it only as the hope of a refuge. The Meccanoes, hooting, as it seemed, triumphantly, broke through into the clearing as well.

He dropped exhausted to the ground at the side of the cabin, and had enough of his faculties left to see the man burst from the cabin door and race for the further edge of trees. He even saw the metal tentacle uncoil towards the fleeing figure, before unconsciousness finally claimed him.

When he recovered he was not near the cabin at all, but laid before a small group of huts in another clearing. In the heavy dusk he could see the sullen, unfriendly faces watching him. But they were human faces—that was what counted.

He said weakly: "Is the Hunt—over?"

A thickset, elderly man said: "Yeah. It's over."

Liggard closed his eyes again in relief. "Thank God!"

The thickset man said: "We aim always to do things legal. So I better tell you. This village you're in is Gafferty's. I'm Lew Neckers, the headman. I don't know your name, stranger, but you stand indicted for murder."

Liggard laughed weakly. "That's silly," he said. "I haven't killed anyone."

Neckers said stubbornly: "We do things legal. You deny you was in the Hunt?"

Liggard said, more cautiously: "I was being hunted—yes."

Neckers spoke even more slowly. "It may be different in your part of the country but our laws hold that to throw the Hunt onto a man is ordinary murder. It makes no difference if you're hard-pressed and desperate."

"I don't understand," Stanley said.

"You came up the hill," Neckers said. "You had the Hunt after you. You made for Bill Skryski's cabin in the clearing and there was no call to do that unless you wanted to throw the Hunt."

Liggard had a sick feeling. "And—Skryski?"

"Bill Skryski," Neckers said, "had a wife and two

kids in that cabin. Only one thing for him to do. He tried to take the Hunt. They caught him before he'd gone fifty yards. His wife saw everything that happened from the cabin window. Everything. They were quite fast; they only took ten minutes."

His voice almost in a whisper, Liggard said: "I had no idea . . . I didn't guess anything like that could happen." He looked up, at the narrow circle of condeming faces. "They'd been hunting me for two or three hours. I was just about all in. You can see how far gone I was. I never dreamed I was—throwing the Hunt."

Necker said evenly: "I've known that defense to be put forward. I've known it to be accepted. Only trouble is that it needs what we call testimony of character. You got anyone willing and able to vouch for you?"

The truth, he knew, could never be accepted, and if it were it would not help him in this situation. He shook his head reluctantly. "I come from—a good way off. Two or three hundred miles. I don't know anyone."

God knows where Luther and Patience are, he thought. These valleys were like a maze. And they were strangers, too. He looked at the surrounding faces, which were now skeptical as well as ominous. He realized what had probably caused that. They couldn't imagine anyone, in this world, travelling two or three hundred miles from his village. As for the true story . . .

"We do things right," Necker said, with finality. "You'll be put in a room under guard for the night. In the morning, we try you."

Liggard submitted lifelessly as they led him away. The moon was lifting over the further hill.

III

THE TRIAL WAS SOON OVER. He could do no more than repeat what he had said the previous night: that he had been all in, that he hadn't imagined he was throwing the Hunt onto anyone else. Necker, who presided as judge, formally requested him to supply testimony of character; he could only shake his head.

They sentenced him, and then half a dozen of the men took him and led him off up the hill. He judged it to be about ten in the morning; the sun was already beating hotly between the pines.

He said to Necker: "Just how . . . ?"

The trees had thinned out again. They were perhaps five hundred yards above the village; just ahead there was bare rock, gleaming in the sunlight, and the sky blue and stretching into haze beyond it.

"We throw the Hunt back," Necker said. His voice was less sullen now; there was almost a note of friendliness in it. "The Meks use this route." He looked at Liggard obliquely. "Maybe twenty-four hours, maybe a little more. We leave you water."

As they reached the expanse of bare rock that crested the hill, Stanley saw why this would be a route for the Meccanoes. A strip free of trees stretched up obliquely from the next valley, and carried on over the top of the hill and down the other side.

There were two iron rings sunk in a concrete

block between the rocks. They chained him to one of them by a heavy steel bracelet round his left ankle. Then they left him, clomping off down the hill without a backward look. He watched until the trees swallowed them, and then sat down on a flat rock and considered his position.

The trouble was that he could see so well the justice of the villagers' action. To have the attentions of a Hunt transferred to you must be one of the major hazards of life; it was reasonable enough to punish it as murder. After all, while he was lying in a faint beside the cabin, the Meccanoes had been torturing and killing an innocent man in his place. It was all very understandable and carried out, as Necker had boasted, with strict legality. That didn't make it any easier.

The sun rose steadily across the sky, and then as steadily declined. There were no clouds, and only the lightest breeze to sigh among the branches of the pines. He drank thirstily from the big leather water-pouch, and put it back in the shade of the rocks. Once or twice during the day he thought he could hear the distant hooting of a Meccano, and his skin shivered in apprehension, but there was no nearer approach.

He heard the hooting more plainly during the night. Despite the chill of the rock on which he lay, he had dropped off into an uneasy doze, and he was awakened from this to hear the ominous sound stridently close and menacing. He got stiffly to his feet. The valley beneath was bright with moonlight but a circle of brighter light was advancing in a cumbersome dance along the valley floor.

He watched it pass almost directly beneath him and carry on up the valley. The light disappeared and the hooting died away, but he got no more sleep that night. He was glad when dawn broke, though. In view of what Necker had said, it was overwhelmingly likely to be his last.

The morning dragged slowly—even more slowly than the previous day and night had done. Perhaps because he now regarded his time as borrowed—it was more than twenty four hours since the villagers had left him. A hundred times he wondered what it would be like when the steel whip curled down to pluck him from his anchor.

It was a kind of relief when, a little after noon, he saw the Meccano crawling like a great metal crab down the side of the facing hill. The bare stretch down which it was advancing led directly to the similar path on this hill, and so to him. He gave himself about ten minutes. He saw the Meccano pause to thresh idly at something in the undergrowth; and added thirty seconds onto his life.

When he heard voices he thought it could only be his own light-headedness, from lack of sleep, from hunger and fear. But the voices became clearer and unmistakably real. And among them, raised to call to him, its warm brittleness instantly familiar—Patience's. He looked down, and saw them coming towards him: Patience, Luther, a handful of the villagers.

He called, surprised to hear his own voice high-pitched and cracked: "Keep off! There's one coming."

Then he felt Patience kneeling beside him, her

arms round him, her mouth soft and warm on his cheek. Necker was stolidly bending. He turned a key in the leg-iron, and it clicked open.

Necker looked down the hill. "Plenty of time," he said. "But there's no sense in cutting things fine."

They scrambled down over the rocks and into the welcome seclusion of the pines. They were half way down to the village when the hooting vibrated through the air as the Meccano made its way over the hill.

"I'm still not sure of anything," Stanley said.

Necker said: "We'd have been sorry if things had turned out bad, but in part you had yourself to blame. How come you didn't mention Luther Coolen? We would have held you till his next visit. We don't rush things when there's a doubt."

"I had no idea he was known here," Liggard said. He looked at Patience, quiet and self-contained again, walking down beside him. "You told them . . ."

"We gave testimony of character all right," Luther said. "We're glad to see you again, Stanley. I never thought we would."

Liggard grinned. "I'm glad to see you! You'll never know how glad."

That evening the three of them sat out in the glade below the village. The air was cool and with the setting of the sun clouds had begun to roll up over the hills, threatening storm. But a real storm this time, an ordinary natural storm.

"We know you can be trusted now," Luther said.

Liggard said reflectively: "It's a violent and uncertain and treacherous world, but there are some good things in it. Necker and the others, for instance. Considering the situation, they were very fair. I doubt if I would have been treated so fairly in my own time under that kind of provocation."

Patience drew her breath in sharply. "Yes, there are some advantages in living under a reign of terror. There are no wars now. There's no social unrest. But there's the Brain and the Meccanoes."

He caught the implied reproach. "Anything I can do I'll do gladly. I only hope that—if we ever succeed in destroying the Brain—we hang on to something of the neighborliness there is now."

"We must tackle problems as we come to them," Luther said calmly. "The Brain first."

He lit his pipe, and drew on it. Liggard watched him. This was apparently a world without cigarettes. He would have to start pipe-smoking himself.

"Do you remember something I told you about the Brain?" Luther asked. "That it was plutonium-activated?"

Stanley Liggard nodded.

"We know from Kronz's notes the amount of plutonium he used. He had to be super-cautious with it. It was a very tricky business altogether. The amount is not very far below the critical mass. So . . ."

The pieces fitted in, smoothly and beautifully.

"So," Stanley continued, "the Brain, by its nature, is permanently on fuse for an atomic explosion. The Brain is a bomb. It only wants a detonator."

"There you have it," Luther said. "The Brain is

aware of it, too. Obviously that's one of the reasons for its deliberate destruction of Man's city civilization. Even before the last world war that civilization was already on the way to becoming a completely industrialized atomic one. The Brain might have used its Meccanoes to destroy a hundred, a thousand atom plants, but as long as man remained urban and industrial it could never rule out the possibility of the small secret plant and the sudden guided missile plunging down on it, beyond the possibility of defense. With a world of small farmers, of lumberjacks and tradesmen and traveling hucksters it could rest in something like security."

Liggard echoed: "Something like security! I should call it a hundred percent security."

"Not quite," Luther said. "After the collapse there were, as you might expect, several attempts by small groups of scientists and technicians to build up small industrial units in secret. They were often in caves, or underground. They had one objective. The production of enough plutonium to detonate the Brain, if it could be once conveyed to it.

"The Brain, of course, hunted them down relentlessly, and successfully. These groups maintained radio communication with each other and one by one, over a period of several years, their transmitters went dead. I was born and reared in one of them. We survived for fifteen years after the Delhi group went.

"Then, when I was a young man, the Brain finally found us, but not before my father and his friends had refined enough plutonium to do what was necessary, and developed a shielding powerful enough to make it genuinely portable. In fact they did it four times over. There were four canisters, each capable of turning the Brain into a mushrooming cloud of radioactive dust.

"When it was known that the Meccanoes had found the factory, two young men—myself and another—were each given two of the canisters and let out through a secret passage under the hill. The others stayed behind to destroy all trace of the passage, and to fight things out with the Meccanoes with the kind of desperation that was appropriate to man's last hope being quenched. I got clear."

"And the other?" Liggard asked.

"He left half an hour after me. I saw them get him."

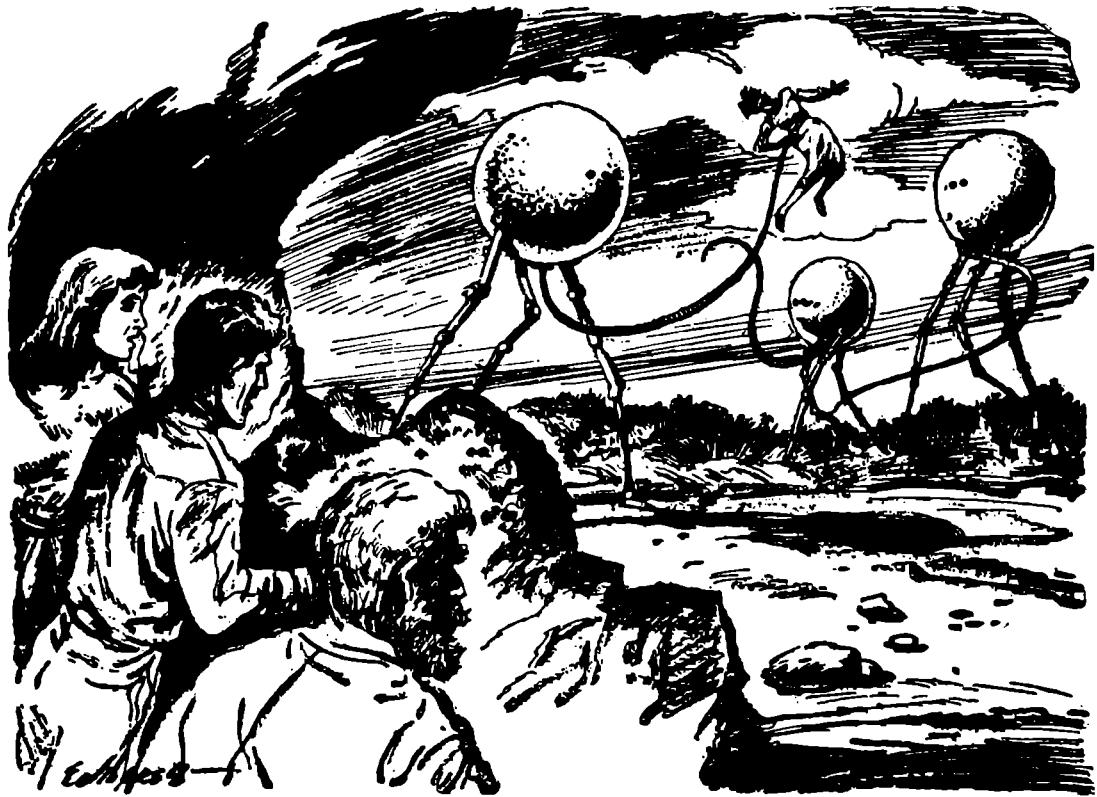
"And you?"

Luther smiled. "For years I chased the Brain, without getting near enough even to make an attempt on it. I followed it from continent to continent, always to find that it had moved on to some new territory. So when I got back to America I decided to wait and let the Brain come to me. It's been a long time, but it's come at last. The Brain is in Philadelphia. So that's where we're heading."

"The canisters," Patience said, "rest on either side of the donkey, one in each pack."

Stanley said thoughtfully: "So the only problem is how to apply them. I don't see how that can be easy. How will you get near it?"

"There's one good chance," Luther said. "I've told you that in some ways the Brain is fascinated by man; by his actions, by that quality of *human-*



ness which makes him both strong and vulnerable. And gesture especially fascinates it. In part it satisfied the curiosity by having its Meccanoes chase and torture men, but it does it another way as well. The Brain holds court. Its most immediate personal servants—are men."

"But that lays it wide open!" Liggard protested. "Surely, eventually some one will be able, somehow, to throw a spanner in the works. You don't need plutonium."

"It's reported," Patience said evenly, "that one of the Brain's favorite minor amusements is to madden some one of its human slaves into attacking it. It even leaves iron bars lying round in the Main Room for them to pick up. But no iron bar, and certainly no human flesh, will crack the Brain's shell open. We've got the only thing that will do that."

Liggard said slowly: "So the idea is to get one of the Brain's human slaves to take the canister in—to bring the second half of the atomic bomb into contact with the first. Without knowing what he is doing?"

"If we could do it that way," Luther said, "we would. The kind of men and women who serve the Brain, for the sake of the luxuries they get from it and the freedom from ordinary labor, would be no loss, and I wouldn't hesitate to use them. But it's too risky. There are too many possibilities of something going wrong. No, I'm taking it in myself."

He went on speaking, cutting across Liggard's attempt to interrupt. "I don't doubt that you're willing to volunteer for the job. But even ignoring the fact that I am getting to be an old man and that this is a suitable climax to my life, there is another thing. I am more experienced than you in the ways of the Brain. And this is so vital a project that no unnecessary chances must be taken."

Luther looked at his daughter. "Patience knows this."

She nodded reluctantly. "Yes, I know it."

Liggard said, with a feeling of frustration: "Then there's nothing at all I can do?"

Luther smiled at him. "On the contrary, a hundred things. You did one of them two days ago when you took the Hunt from us. Three is so much better than two: there is one more expendable. And there will be a lot to do when the Brain is destroyed. You, with a mind fresh from the world before the Brain, will be invaluable."

"And now," he went on, "we should turn in. We must be off early in the morning."

IV

KNOWING PHILADELPHIA TO BE no more than three hundred and fifty miles away, Stanley had not imagined the journey would present any great difficulties or take any considerable length of time. He soon realized that he had not fully appreciated the difficulties of travelling on foot with a donkey,

and with the need for transacting the full and active business of a huckster on the way. Luther's stocks were nearly exhausted, and their first objective had to be well off their course, for the replenishment of the packs.

One of his main lines was small religious effigies, carved from pearwood. This particular village had a grove of trees, and the carving was their almost universal occupation. Luther paid them in heavy gold coins and the small, delicate figurines and high-reliefs were carefully wrapped in soft cloths and transferred to the packs.

The tempo remained leisurely. They tramped on from village to village, buying and selling and bartering, always with the main objective ahead of them. It was important not to rouse suspicion that they were anything other than a small group of peddlers, going about their ordinary business.

Three or four times a week, on average, they would see one or more of the Meccanoes strutting across the landscape, and take cover until the danger had passed. Liggard became used to that eerie hooting, but it never lost its power to raise his hackles.

Once, from their hiding in a group of bushes, they were forced to watch the conclusion of a Hunt. Seventy or eighty yards from them a hunted woman sank in final exhaustion and the three Meccanoes closed in on her. A tentacle picked her up, tossed her in the air, and she became a ball, flung between the three metal monsters for perhaps ten minutes.

Patience said, her voice dry and hard: "You must watch this. This steals our resolution. There is nothing we can do for her, but we can destroy the spring that sets those pretty little clockwork toys going."

The spasmodic hooting seemed to have a sardonic tone; at times it seemed almost like hysterical laughter. Liggard looked at Patience and saw the soft curve of her cheek set in sharp and bitter lines of concentration. He thought of the possibility of it being Patience up there, thrown between those curling metal arms, and knew that if it were nothing could have stopped him from plunging out to throw his own life away in a futile attack. But it was a human being whose life was being crushed out.

He said urgently to Luther: "In case this plan doesn't work—is there any other way of getting at it?"

"I know only of one other," Luther said. "Patience knows it, too. But this way will succeed. Don't worry about that."

The Meccanoes had tired of their play. One of them took the small figure, held it close against one of the cabin's crystal "eyes," and carefully and slowly, almost tenderly twisted the head from the body.

Liggard drew breath in deeply. "I hope so. I hope so."

Tragedy hit them when they were still eighty miles from their objective. The little donkey sickened, and in three days was dead. It took three weeks of scouring around the neighboring villages before they could find anyone willing to sell them another.

At last they got off again. Autumn was well advanced by now, and the distance they could travel each day was shortened by the narrowing arc of the sun. It was late October when they stood at last on the limits of what had been Philadelphia.

This city had obviously been roughly treated by the Meccanoes at some time in the past, for entire sections had been reduced to patches of uneven rubble and those parts that were standing showed signs of heavy damage. Far off towards the center a pylon gleamed in smooth aluminum.

Luther pointed to it. "The mark of the Brain's residence," he said. "When it comes to a new place the Meccanoes always erect a pylon. We don't know what the purpose is. They leave them behind when the Brain moves on."

"The city's suffered," Stanley said.

Luther nodded. "One of the earliest factory-reddubs was built here—somewhere under that rubble."

Stanley nodded. "And now—do we go straight in?"

"No. We look about for a village on the outskirts. There will be traffic between the villagers and the Brain's slaves. There always is."

They found a village easily enough—or the remains of one. There was one house untouched and a couple more that looked as though they were repairable. They found the survivors huddled among the ruins.

Luther asked them: "The Meks?"

One of the women said dully: "The big one itself."

"Does she mean the Brain?" Liggard said to Patience. "That the Brain itself destroyed the village?"

Patience whispered back to him: "It hunts in person sometimes. We don't know why."

Luther spoke to the woman again. "How did it come about?"

"We had the drones up here," she said. "There was some trouble between them and our men. One of them threatened he would set the Brain on us." She gestured about her.

Luther pursued: "It did this—and went back down into the city?"

"The city?" The woman looked up. "No, it's left the city. It hit us during the move. We saw the Meks crowd out westwards, carrying all their portable equipment. You bet we were glad to see them go. Then the big one came out last of all. It circled up this way and hit us. We saw the drone laughing at us. It was carrying him."

After all their efforts, it was a shocking disappointment. There, down in the city, where they had hoped to find their quarry, there was now only the routine Meccano service station. The Brain itself somewhere—anywhere—else. The cup was being dashed from their lips at the very moment of drinking.

Luther said: "Do you have any idea where the Brain was heading?"

"The drone talked about California," the woman said listlessly. "He talked a lot about lying on the beach, in the sun. That's what started the trouble, I guess. Someone told him what he was." She

shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe he was lying."

Luther stood quietly. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe."

The four survivors were about destitute, without even food. The three stayed with them and shared their provisions with them until help began to come in from other villages. In any case they could not summon any enthusiasm for the new trek that would have to be made.

Liggard discussed it with Patience one day, lying out in a field and letting their bodies soak in the brief benediction of Indian summer.

"I've got some clearer idea of the time now," she said. "We missed them by eight hours."

"As little as that!" he said despairingly.

She rolled over onto an elbow and looked at him.

"It's not as little as that," she said. "It would have taken at least a week to make the necessary preparations. We couldn't have just plunged in and laid the fuse."

"I suppose not. God, but it's infuriating, all the same."

"There are compensations. If we'd got here a fortnight earlier—if the plan had worked—Daddy wouldn't be alive now."

She gestured with her hand, and he followed its direction. Below them the ruined village was quiet in the sunlight; at the back of one of the ruined houses Luther was tending the donkey. The smoke from his pipe curled up distinctly through the clear air.

"Oh, I know," Patience went on. "I haven't forgotten the things we've seen. I haven't forgotten that woman. I know it's got to be done, and I'm willing for him to do it. But a reprieve for the Brain is a reprieve for him, and I can't help being glad of it. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand." He paused, watching the breeze and the sun between them take a wisp of her hair and transmute it into gold. "And now?"

His eyes met hers squarely.

"Tomorrow morning, off again," she said briskly.

"To California?"

She nodded.

"On a guess? On the chance word of a vicious and probably half-mad degenerate drone? What if we're heading in precisely the wrong direction?"

"We may be. But the alternative is waiting until news of the Brain's new place trickles through by the ordinary channels of gossip and information. Remember, we have no wireless, no telegraphy. If it's left the continent we're not likely to catch up with it before it moves again. If it hasn't—California's as likely a place as any."

She paused, considering. "We should make it by the spring. We could do it sooner if we didn't have to wait for the snows to melt in the mountain passes."

"And if the Brain isn't there?"

"Then we've probably lost it. We'll have to wait for it to come back to America—maybe in ten years, maybe in twenty. Meanwhile peddling our way from village to village. Daddy would be too old for the job by then, even if he's alive. And if there's one small, desperate, embattled group of scientists left anywhere in the world, they'll be gone by then. We'll have no allies."

She looked at him. Her eyes were very close to his.

"It's not a bad life," he said. "Even with the Brain and the Meccanoes, it's not a bad life."

He leaned towards her and her warmth came half way to meet him, freely given, a miracle that sharpened all senses, the armed archangel lifting the cup.

The afternoon stretched, blue and golden, about them.

When the new trek was less than a fortnight old, trouble hit them again. Luther, leading the donkey along a difficult path, slipped and fell, and his ankle turned over beneath him. They were able to diagnose it as a sprain, not a fracture, but it was a sufficiently bad one to keep him immobilized for another three weeks. By the time they got going again there was the real feel of winter around them.

Another event took place during the three weeks' enforced idleness. The local priest, making the round of his scattered diocese, stopped at the village and married Stanley and Patience.

The little party struggled on into the colder wind blowing down from the western mountains. Even on good days now they could make no more than twenty five miles, and the increasingly frequent bad weather cut that slow rate of progress down considerably.

When December was half gone, Luther told them the time had come to take shelter for the worst of the winter. There was a village he knew, on the edge of a range of hills, overlooking a plain. They had wintered there before.

Patience nodded, remembering. "Scanlon's," she murmured.

Most of the names of villages were in the possessive, having derived from a new patriarchy. In many cases the family who had given a name to the village still lived in it.

"Ten years ago?" Patience wondered. "I remember their grotto! The blue sky with stars in it, and the models of—what were they?"

Luther looked at her affectionately, remembering, Stanley Liggard thought, the years before he had come; their earlier wanderings. Those years, too, had been full and eventful ones.

"Camels," he told her.

She echoed, delighted: "Camels!"

They were remembered in the village and made welcome, and Liggard along with them. Previously, apart from the incidents of the donkey's death and Luther's sprained leg, their life had been nomadic, moving daily from village to village, putting down no roots. But this was the time when the huckster took his rest, sustained for a couple of months on the fat of the summer, a welcomed and prepared-for idleness.

The village was a fairly large one; more than thirty buildings clustered together just under the crest of the last hill before the plain. Just under, because it was not wise to build on a hilltop and invite more attention from the Meccanoes than normal chances gave. They got two rooms at the inn, and in the evenings in the bar there was the warmth of log fires, and ale, and good companionship.

The grotto that Patience had remembered was

being built again, in the church beside the inn. Most of the village lent a hand in some way with its construction, and Stanley found a lost boyhood prowess returning as he whittled small pieces of wood into appropriate, satisfying shapes. A week before Christmas it was completed.

The small niche in the stone of the church had become a window into a new landscape. The sky the brilliant blue of Syrian evening, with one great star; the shepherds with their flocks on the hill; the three travellers; the village huddled upon itself as though guarding a treasure; and in the foreground the cave with its kneeling animals, and among the straw the parents kneeling to their Child. The camels were there, too.

Patience pointed them out to Stanley. "I was only thirteen," she said. "It was magic then."

"And now?"

"It's still magic. But more as well. The Brain hasn't got this. It isn't in the same universe even. That's a wonderful thing to remember."

They had cause to remember it.

During the week there was carol singing and a quickening tempo of preparation for the joyous feast of Christmas. On the Eve itself there was the midnight service which everyone attended. The little church was packed with villagers and people who had walked or ridden or driven in from outlying farms. The warm glow of lantern and candle gleamed on the bowed heads and flickered on the small landscape of the crib.

Above the music they heard the other noise echoing through the wintry air. They waited until the hooting was close upon them before they scattered. Stanley hurried Patience out through a side door, and into the narrow, winding street. Snow which had fallen earlier in the week had lain; and the night, brilliant anyway with a clarity of moon and stars, was made more brilliant by it.

Across this whiteness the little seemingly incandescent circles of light of the Meccanoes' search-beams marched towards them up the hillside. The Meccanoes themselves loomed blackly and menacing against the snow. Liggard looked for Luther, but he had gone another way. He pulled Patience into the stream of people running from the village into any kind of refuge in the wilderness beyond.

They huddled in a snowdrift thirty yards from the village's edge and watched what took place. It was very cold; the stars themselves looked like suspensions of frozen snow.

There were three Meccanoes. They stalked upwards across the snow towards the village; fifty yards from its edge their hooting ceased abruptly, and they covered the remainder of the distance in a silence more terrifying than the noise had been. Their metal feet were silent, too, on the soft bed of the snow.

But noise returned; first the splintering of brick against metal as the foremost Meccano ploughed its way through the village's center—and then the screaming of victims trapped or crushed. Moonlight spun soft webs of light from the harsh metal of the advancing tripods as they moved in and stood, finally, grouped about their objective. The church.

Then the tentacular arms came down, flailing, tearing at and smashing the vaulted roof. The noise

of crumbling stone again. The screaming which had momentarily dropped started up once more. It rang shrilly through the frosty air.

The destruction of the church took about ten minutes. When it was over the Meccanoes moved on, treading their way out through the village and off over the ridge of the hill and out of sight. Stanley heard Patience beside him sigh—he could not tell whether in relief or anger.

"I suppose we might as well get back," he said.

Figures picked themselves up out of the snow, and began to move back into the village. They moved for the most part in silence—when someone did speak it was in a whisper that drifted sibilantly over the frozen snow. In the village groups detached themselves from the general stream to attend to the hurt and trapped. Looking for Luther, Patience and Stanley found themselves standing by the ruin of the church.

Most of the front and the whole of the roof had been pulled in. The fallen masonry lay in grotesque, jutting heaps inside the shell of the church, looking, in the subtle half-tones of moonlight, like some antique ruin.

As they stood staring at it, Luther came up. "I lost you," he said. "I'm glad you're all right."

"I don't think there are many casualties," Patience said. "And any there are might be called accidental. I didn't see them pick anyone up."

"No," Luther said. He nodded towards the church. "They had something else in view."

Liggard burst out: "I don't get it. I don't get it at all. What does the Brain think it gains by this? In a way it's—an admission of its own limitations."

"Yes," Luther agreed softly. "But even in men, remember, that is where the reaction is most violent: where a limitation has to be admitted. Shall we go in?"

They went in through the open side of the church. Others had already begun to do the same. They sat awkwardly on blocks of stone. Someone started to sing a carol, and the rest joined in. Stanley felt Patience grip his arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

In the niche in the wall the nativity scene remained untouched by the violence that had raged above it. There was even a candle still burning in front of it.

V

WINTER RELAXED ITS GRIP on the frozen countryside slowly. At the earliest opportunity that the weather allowed they set off again. Almost straight away they had heartening news. An itinerant cobbler, travelling in the opposite direction, confirmed that the Brain had taken up his new residence in California, among the ruins that had once been called Los Angeles. There was every prospect that they would find it still there when they reached the city. They had started the last lap.

It was in reaction from this wave of cheerfulness that Liggard considered their chances of achieving anything even if they reached the Brain's home ground. What chance had two men—one of them past sixty—and a girl against the metal-clad power and cunning that had destroyed so easily the

finest armies of a world at the peak of its technological prowess? Walking beside the donkey he tapped, as he had done before, the small bulge at the bottom of the pack that represented their forlorn and remote hope. It seemed quite hopeless. And yet . . .

He was aware of an irrational feeling of confidence. Miracles commonly turned at the touch of one hand—and Luther's was a good hand.

They zigzagged their way up through the mountain villages and through the passes until the last pass was reached and they stood looking down the fall of ground to the great plain beyond. From there on the going was easier. They wandered through the prosperous villages of California into the lengthening days of spring.

The nearest village to the ruins of Los Angeles was called Mickman's. It lay on the coast to the north of the city—a cluster of perhaps twenty-five ramshackle houses inhabited by fishermen. It was very crowded: there was no question of getting any accommodation. Fortunately the weather had become so clear and mild that there was little hardship in sleeping out in the open, on the curving, fine-sanded beach. By day they bought and sold and bartered in the village.

It was easy enough to recognize the Brain's slaves: the drones. They shared a characteristic of an unhealthy flabbiness; even the thinner ones had layers of fat which marked them out from the lean-featured workers. That was the physical distinction. They wore also gaily-colored clothes which hung clinging on them in defiance of all utility.

But most important of all was the aspect of temperament. They were marked by their flamboyant theatrical posturings, their condescending flattery, their sudden rages and overwhelming, emotional griefs.

The problem, as Luther had explained it, was for him to get into the Brain's entourage as a replacement or substitute for one of the drones. It had seemed easy enough when viewed abstractly. Quite frequently, it was known, a drone would find the grotesque futility of his life too overpowering, and change places with some outsider eager for the superficial softness of life with the Brain. And there were also, of course, the occasional casualties among the drones—either by accident or through one of the Brain's whims of cruelty.

Before seeing them at close quarters, Liggard had imagined that a quality of courage must exist along with the servility of these slaves: since they took the risk of living day by day under the Brain's continual surveillance and were always at the mercy of his fury.

But he realized now that no question of courage was involved. These people had plumbed the worst depths of cowardice; to the stage where they could find psychological security only under the shadow of the oppressor.

And just at present, in the soft warmth of spring sunshine, the drones did not seem at all anxious to change their leisurely existence for any more strenuous one. During their long periods of non-duty they drifted, men and women alike, about the villages on the perimeter of the city's ruins, arguing, drinking, fighting, making love, all the

time despising and hating the ordinary human beings whose lives they were disrupting.

After a number of tentative approaches, Luther at last put the question directly to one of the drones, a squat, middle-aged male, dressed in gold and purple, as they sat drinking wine outside the small inn one hot afternoon.

The drone seemed only too willing to talk.

"I'm getting on," Luther said. "Peddling . . . it's a hard life. I find it too much for me." He looked at the drone directly. "I could pay for an entry to an easier life."

The drone laughed. "Pay! What's money to me? I know where I'm well off. I don't want the capital to set up in business on my own."

"But one of the others?" Luther persisted.

The drone let his gaze run easily and contemplatively over Luther's face and stubbly white beard.

"There's just one other thing, grandad. The Brain doesn't take attendants over fifty. It's not interested. I've only got five years to go myself before I get my ticket. I'll come and join you outside then. But you won't get in to the Brain—don't fool yourself."

He drifted away from them in search of some more amusing means of passing the time. They found another unattached drone, and Luther repeated the approach, with the same result. The first had not been lying.

Luther took it badly. He said, "To have been deceiving myself for so long . . ."

Patience poured dark red wine from the flask into their glasses. The sun grilled in a blue heaven. "So it's my turn," she said. "I have next chance." She looked at Stanley with affectionate determination. "No arguments."

Liggard felt the wine, dry against his palate, cool against his throat.

"No," he said. "No arguments. No emotions either. We must look at everything in the light of cold reason." He caught her hand that lay on the table, and imprisoned it between his own. "Well?"

"Well . . ." she began dubiously.

Liggard looked at Luther. Luther nodded.

"Now," Liggard said. "No arguments about defending the sacred mothers of the race—or the fathers for that matter. And no claims as to who was here first. Not even about seniority, although with my birth-date I can outrank Luther by three quarters of a century. We'll stick to reason—and the fact that the only really important thing is to find the best way of giving the Brain his plutonium twin. That being so"—he looked at Patience—"I challenge you. I'll challenge you on strength, endurance, reflexes and ability in straight bluffing." He grinned. "We can test that one by half a dozen hands of poker."

"That convinces me," Luther said. "I guess it will have to do for you, too, Patience."

Her face whitened. "This isn't a joke," she said. "This is certain death for . . ."

"Yes," Luther said gently. "For your husband."

Patience turned to her father quickly. "Daddy, I didn't mean that. I didn't . . ."

"It's very hard," Luther said. "It's very hard for me to be an old man, too old to be any use, when I had hoped to finish things off in a blaze of mush-

rooming glory. And it's very hard to sit back and let either of you take that death in my place. But this is the one great chance of smashing the Brain. We've got to take it. You go, Stanley, with our blessing. With both our blessings."

He looked at Patience.

"Yes," she said at last. "With both our blessings."

IT STILL TOOK TIME and a considerable amount of trouble to find the right opening for Liggard, but it was accomplished at last. One of the younger drones, about Stanley's own age, revolted suddenly against the futility of the life he was leading and offered the exchange without any financial consideration. Stanley arranged things himself, keeping Luther and Patience in the background.

The drone's name was Izaak Laperto, a tall, swarthy-skinned, dark-haired man. He looked at Liggard curiously.

"Yeah, it's an easy life, all right," he said. "No trouble about working. Food's available on tap, as and when and what you like. If supplies run short the Brain sends out a few Meks to round up another supply."

"And in return?"

"In return all you have to do is use your loaf. Work—there's no real work. Dust the Control Room, tighten up a screw here and there, read a dial. No real work because the Brain doesn't trust people any place they might do any damage. No, all the Brain wants is that you should act up. Jump around, throw an attitude, fight, get emotional—anything that makes you look like a real live doll that says mamma. If you want my advice, don't overdo it and don't underdo it. If you're just normally abnormal you'll get by without trouble."

"How does the Brain communicate with you?"

"The Brain talks English. It uses some kind of automatic speech arrangement. It sounds a bit tiny but you'll understand it all right. All the Meks are equipped with it for that matter, but they use that damned hooting instead. Don't ask me why. Don't ask me why the Brain does anything. I don't know and I don't want to. From now on I'm dodging the whole damned lot of them."

"Good luck to you," Liggard said.

"And to you, brother. You're going to need it just as much. Not from the Brain so much as from the dimwits and schizos you'll be working with. Anyway, here's the rig. The Brain will spot you as being new. He always does. You don't have to worry though. There'll be an interview, but you've got nothing to worry about."

It was difficult parting with Patience and Luther, even though it was not in the nature of a final parting. Although working, and to a certain extent living at the Brain's headquarters, he knew that he could get back to the village often enough in his spare time, with the proviso, of course, that everything he did must be beyond suspicion.

"Don't strain anything, Stanley," Luther said anxiously. "There's no need to rush things. Now that we know we can get in it would be stupid to take unnecessary risks."

The strain was telling on Patience. Her eyes were deeper sunk, her cheeks more taut with anxiety and fear.

"Give us as long as you can," she said. "As long of you as you can."

He kissed her lingeringly. "You don't have to tell me."

He picked up a party of drones going back to headquarters. They had a gasoline-driven boat, carrying about twenty-five, which shuffled back and forth along the coast at their convenience. He saw the shore drop back, and Luther and Patience with it, and then the village itself become a blur of brown against the sand. The ocean was very calm and blue.

One of the other drones, a girl of about twenty, blonde and attractive but like the rest a little flabby, spoke to him: "You the new guy?"

Liggard nodded.

The girl studied him critically. "You'll have to show more zip if you want to stay in with the Brain. It's the vitality that counts."

She illustrated her meaning by contorting her features into an expression that was very emotional—though it would have been difficult to put a precise label on the emotion—and contorting her shoulders voluptuously.

"I don't mind," she said, "giving you a little private tuition."

"Thanks," Liggard said. "I'll bear that in mind."

Already he felt the strain of being surrounded by these unnatural aberrations from the decent human norm, and was depressed by the thought that he would have to copy them and to accept their standards. The sea was some help, stretching illimitably out to the far horizon. Against that vast purity the antics of these creatures could be regarded with tolerance. And the thought of the vast distances of the ocean brought forcibly to his mind once more the unbelievable good fortune of having his quarry so nearly within his grasp.

The Brain might have skipped to India, to Australia. But it had gone no further than Los Angeles, and in less than half an hour he would be finally in its presence.

They disembarked at an old, crumbling quay and sauntered into town in an undisciplined, scattered group. It was strange to be walking casually through these empty and ruined streets. The city had not suffered greatly from the Meccanoes' depredations and only twice did they have to leave street level to scramble over rubble.

Ten minutes brought them to the Brain's citadel. They turned a corner and it was in front of them—the aluminium pylon reaching gracelessly into the bare sky, catching the sunlight and flicking it out again, and round it a dozen or more squat, dome-shaped metal buildings, one, directly under the pylon, a good deal larger than the others, and architecturally more ornate.

The domes were quite light inside, being illuminated from curving plate glass or transparent plastic windows set high up in the sides. Liggard was shown round them, except for the seven or eight which were workshops and store rooms used by Meccanoes. He glanced into one of these as they went past the entrance, and saw inside it two of the Meccanoes swinging their great tentacles in some form of machining operation, which was accompanied by the bright glare of a welding arc.

There were ten domes devoted to the needs of the drones—they ranged from capacious living quarters to a large luxurious swimming pool and restaurant. Liggard wondered what could be the reason for the drones going out to the surrounding ramshackle villages when here such ease and splendor surrounded them. But another glance at the physical presences of his new companions was sufficient explanation in itself.

They wanted desperately to get away from themselves and from this debauched way of life. In the villages they could see real human beings living genuine, useful lives. They could even pretend to despise them.

He went into the Brain's dome on Izaak Lapersto's shift. Izaak had explained what he would probably have to do, and one of the other drones confirmed it for him. The brain ingested certain chemicals as part of its regime. The system had to be checked on the inflow dials, marked in red for foolproof operation.

"Nothing's likely to go wrong," Izaak had said, "but don't go to sleep. If the wrong mixture does go in, the Brain will know as soon as you do, and your life won't be worth two cents. And the Brain's quite capable of having its own supply doctored just for the hell of it. Watch those dials."

The other domes were perhaps eighty feet across and forty high. This one was half that size again. Round the sides and stretching in towards the center were the great banks of instruments and switches by which the Brain was kept in being. But for thirty feet about the center there was nothing, and in the center was the Brain, with three of the Meccanoes, prone and inactive, like watchdogs about it.

Luther, from the various hearsay reports he had gathered and from the notes in Kronz's work that had been kept in the last redoubt of man's struggle against his usurper, had described it pretty well. The Brain was quite small. It rested on a low pedestal, and its highest point was no higher than a tall man's shoulder. It was perhaps three feet across; round and studded with audient and visual devices. The top bulged gently into transparent crystal, and behind the crystal could be seen the radioactive node that was the mainspring of the Brain's existence. When it was necessary for one of the drones to approach the Brain itself, shielded clothing was provided.

Liggard divided his attention between the Brain and the dial he had to watch. Patience, on one of his visits back to the village, would sew a suitable pocket on the inside of the scarlet and blue robe he wore. Then, he would have the small cylinder there. Whenever the occasion arose for him to go right up to the Brain it would be an easy matter to unclasp the screening holder, to walk easily forwards, to reach the Brain and press against that crystal bulge, and . . . And nothingness. Well-earned nothingness in a cloud of smoke.

VI

THE BRAIN CALLED HIM on his second shift. The cold, clanking voice echoed through the great dome with chill resonance.

"Worker on Board X Fifty-seven D advance for audience. Worker on Board X Fifty-seven D advance for audience."

He had seen others do it already. On the first shift, in particular, he had seen a woman called forward and plagued by some jibes—inaudible from where he stood—to the point of throwing herself forward in a fury against that apparently fragile crystal. One tentacle of one of the recumbent Meccanoes stretched lazily up to pluck her in mid-air. She had been fortunate. After five minutes' shaking, as a dog shakes a rat, she had been released and permitted to stumble back to her duties.

Now Stanley advanced himself. This was the testing occasion; on this, the first time in which he would come under the Brain's direct attention, depended the entire success of his mission. Gesture, he told himself desperately, the Brain wants emotion and gesture. He remembered, from his schooldays, a device that had always worked with bullies, providing the bullies were big enough and self-confident enough. He came forward to the Brain, slouching, his face drawn into a malignant scowl of hate that needed little feigning.

He had donned the protective cloak that hung by his Board, but when he was still ten paces away a voice, lower-toned, emanating directly from one of the projections on the Brain itself, commanded him: "Halt."

He stopped. Under the transparent shielding cloak he fixed his hands defiantly on his hips and stared up with a calmness that was almost insolent.

The Brain said: "Your name?"

"Stanley Liggard."

"It is registered. You are new. Where is Izaak Lapersto?"

The Brain, Liggard realized, had a first-class filing system memory. Of course he had known it must have, but it was frightening being faced by the actuality. His own mind racing, he looked up sullenly towards the Brain.

"I bought him out. He was fed up with the job anyway."

"It is registered. You yourself are anxious to serve the Brain. Why?"

"I've worked around a bit. Stonemason, general laborer"—he paused—"huckster . . . Hard graft all the time. I want it easy. This will do me."

"If," the Brain said, "the Brain accepts you."

He wondered whether the Brain's habit of referring to itself in the third person signified anything. Aloud he said: "You always got to take that chance." He glanced, summoning all the insolence of the animated against the unanimated, at the metal box and its bulging crystal. "Well? Does the Brain accept me?"

There was a slight pause.

"All the Brain's decisions are provisional, the Brain said. "Provisionally you are accepted. Stanley Liggard: return to your Board."

He walked back across the polished, empty floor, hung up his shielding cloak, and returned his attention to the barely flickering fingers on the dial. He saw that some of the workers and neighboring Boards were watching him covertly; with envy and with respect. Ten minutes later the Brain called one of them forward and obliged him

to squirm round the base of the pedestal on his belly.

His demeanor, and the fact that he had got away with it in his first interview with the Brain, seemed to have made quite a powerful impression on the other drones. In the subsequent leisure period they made that quite clear to him; and the fact that with them he maintained the attitude of off-handed surliness he had shown to the Brain only increased their uneasy admiration and respect.

In particular, several of the women made it clear that any attentions he cared to pay them would be welcome. He rebuffed them cynically. The psychology of the situation was working out better than he could have hoped; an attitude that was no more than an accentuation of his natural feelings would be easy enough to maintain.

Deliberately he did not go back to the village during the first few rest periods but concentrated on getting to know the layout of his new surroundings with the utmost possible accuracy. The Brain did not call him out again during duty periods. Everything was going well.

On the fourth rest period—early afternoon of a day that had clouded over with towering cumulus clouds—he joined a party going down to the quay. Just over an hour later he had found Luther and Patience in the place that had been arranged: a small upper room in the inn.

Patience, when she had finally released him, asked: "What was it like? Have you seen the Brain?"

He nodded. Luther pressed him. There was a note of what seemed like wistfulness in his voice. "You've really seen it?" he inquired.

Stanley told them of his interview and of the attitude he had adopted. Sitting here in this little room with alternate sunlight and shade drifting across the busy village street outside, the Los Angeles domes and the Brain itself seemed very far away.

"Things couldn't be going better," Luther said.

Patience looked at him bitterly. "They couldn't, could they? How long . . . ?" she asked.

Stanley Liggard had been calculating that himself.

"I've got to have time to develop things naturally. It would be stupid to ruin things by taking risks now. At least a month, I think. During that time I'll come back here every fourth or fifth rest period. Often it would be unwise." He hesitated. "Of course, anything might happen in that time; at any moment the Brain might decide to dispose of me, one way or another. It's a risk either way."

He looked at Luther, questioningly.

"Caution—you must go warily," Luther said. "It would be far worse to rouse the Brain's suspicions in any way. If anything, err on the side of delay."

He did not look at Patience. Liggard did. He saw her face taut and almost haggard under the agony of this discussion in which, academically, the date of his certain death was being determined.

"So—for now anyway—let's not worry," Stanley said. "Let's forget about it all."

A counsel, he realized as he said it, of quite impossible perfection.

Liggard had thought the time would speed past on lightning wings, but instead the days—the rest periods and the short duty periods—dragged out with paralyzing deliberation. And the uneasy fear that he had felt at the beginning that something, most probably the Brain, would intervene and bring the carefully constructed plan crashing prematurely about his ears developed into a nagging obsession that rarely left him.

He wasn't blind to the fact that not a little of this was due to his own suppressed wish for something to prevent the denouement taking place. It was difficult to be continually enthusiastic about death, when he had so much to live for. And yet the very things which made life precious were the driving forces in his determination to smash the Brain in the one way that was possible. Altogether life was increasingly complicated and hag-ridden by various apprehensions.

On duty the Brain had left him alone since that first interview, now more than a fortnight in the past. It was on a night duty, in the soft gleam of concealed lighting in the great dome, that the Brain called him out again.

"Stanley Liggard on Board X Thirty-seven D advance for audience. Stanley Liggard on Board X Thirty-seven D advance for audience."

For a moment the full sway of fear and counter-fear crippled him. It seemed impossible to move in any direction. But, summoning his will, he did move, and found himself walking, stiff-legged, out into the polished emptiness, towards the Brain and his attendant, motionless Meccanoes.

The more personal, nearer voice, halted him, but not until he was nearer, much nearer, than he had been on the other occasion. He was no more than three yards from the seat of power. He halted, stifling a wish, foolish and irrational but well-nigh overwhelming, to rush forward and batter the fragile bubble before him.

It was a kind of relief when the Brain spoke again: "Is service with the Brain to your liking, Stanley Liggard?"

He said, easily enough: "It'll do. Better than work, anyway. I got no complaints."

"The Brain expects entire service from its followers. In all things the Brain must be obeyed. A good servant seeks for ways in which it can serve the master."

Let it ride, he thought. He said nothing.

The impersonal, slightly mechanical voice waited for a moment before continuing: "The Brain retains only its good followers. It has no use for the inadequate. Do you realize that, Stanley Liggard?"

"Yeah," Liggard said. "I get it."

"Good," the Brain said. "Now—dance!"

Liggard stared ahead stubbornly.

"Dance!" the Brain repeated. "The Brain commands its servant to dance."

Terrifyingly, like a cancerous weakness, there was the impulse to submit—anything rather than antagonize this cold, omnipotent voice. It almost moved his limbs into motion. But behind it his mind raced in assessment of the situation. If he cracked now, anything might follow. At school the bullies had occasionally tested the show of strength

in their smaller companions; and if it cracked, treated that unfortunate one worse than their ordinary victims. Whereas, if he could get away with it . . . the way would be open for the real thing.

"I'm not a dancer," he said.

"Nevertheless," the voice continued, "the Brain commands you."

He stood his ground even when in front of him the nearest Meccano reared into sudden, horrifying life; and one of its tentacles curled through the air towards him. In this situation there was no hope in running. The prehensile metal gripped him around the waist and lifted him high into the air.

He neither struggled nor kicked. The tentacle began shaking him, jerking him against his volition into a kind of aerial jig.

Shaken and battered, he heard the Brain's voice: "When the Brain commands its servant to dance, the servant dances."

Suddenly the motion was over. From about ten feet above the ground the tentacle unclasped and dropped him. He hit the ground heavily and lay there, sprawling and out of breath.

"Get up," the Brain said.

Unsteadily he got to his feet.

"Return to your Board. And remember."

When Liggard came off duty in the morning he went straight to the village. Luther and Patience were not expecting him, and he had to find them. He found them out on the beach, in the primitive tents they had rigged up for sleeping quarters.

Luther looked at him keenly. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

He told them of his second interview with the Brain. When he had finished, he said: "We can't waste any more time. The next occasion the Brain calls me out I must be armed. I'm pretty sure it will try to taunt me into some kind of action. It isn't going to let me get away with dumb insolence again, but it won't be expecting any sudden rush. I shall have time enough to reach it: it will want me to reach it. The setup couldn't be more promising. And, on the other hand, if I'm not absolutely ready for it, the whole thing could be ruined."

Patience had been listening to what he said. She said herself, her voice twisted with pain: "I dreamed last night. I dreamed we'd had to give the whole thing up—that we'd gone away, up north somewhere. The air was fresh and there were cold, blue lakes." She looked at Stanley. "I didn't want to wake up."

Stanley said, very gently: "And were there any children? And were they growing into a manhood in which they would have to scurry like rabbits into holes in the ground at the sight of a Meccano coming over the horizon? No, that's one thing we're sure of. Life on those terms isn't worth living."

Patience nodded and looked away. "I can think of other terms like that," she said.

They spent the day together. Towards evening Luther unpacked the donkey's right hand pack and brought out the canister. He explained what must be done again to Stanley.

"The shielding alloy was my father's work; it would have been enough to get him a Nobel Prize in pre-Brain days. The canister is designed for the

job. At the moment you are called forward, release this catch and a spring device pushes the shield off. There's no complicated unscrewing or anything. And from that moment it's loaded. Bring it up against the Brain's crystal, and . . ."

"Yes," Stanley said. "I know the rest."

He patted the donkey's muzzle, and this small action of bidding farewell to the animal heightened for a moment his awareness of all the other things he was saying goodbye to. And, paradoxically, made it more and more certainly worthwhile. But it was very hard to kiss Patience, and harder still to have to unwind her clinging arms.

"You're out of range here, of course," he said. "But don't turn to look at any sudden flashes in the sky."

He went then, and was glad to go.

VII

BACK ON DUTY IN THE DOME Liggard was conscious all the time of the small heavy canister hanging inside the loose, gaudy robe he wore. It was a consciousness that made it difficult to keep his attention properly on the dials on his Board. At the sound of every announcement from the Brain he could not help starting.

But no summons came for him. One of the more theatrical women was brought out and reduced to flooding tears; a man was shaken into storming rage and another dragged down to the extremities of cringing abasement, but there was no call for Stanley Liggard. He came off duty in a state of near nervous exhaustion.

There was no point in going back to the village. He could only lounge around the luxurious haunts of the drones and count the slow minutes of the rest period. One of the older men got into conversation with him.

"Bit of an exhibition this morning, wasn't it? I reckon he's building up for a Hunt."

"But surely there are Hunts going on all the time?"

"A personal Hunt. You've not been here for one of those? The Brain has himself hoisted on to a giant Mek he keeps in store—it stands a good forty feet high—and goes off on a Hunt of his own. Gets more of a kick out of it that way, I guess. When he lands anyone, he lifts the poor devil up and does 'em slowly—right under his nose, as you might say. Funny creature, the Brain."

That kind of casual acceptance of the Brain's tyranny seemed to Liggard far more shocking than the tyranny itself. Another hundred years and the Brain would be a god, an eccentric but a worshipped deity.

It was inevitable, Man being what he was.

He said: "It never goes for—us, then?"

"No. It even warns us off the part it's going to hunt through. The Brain treats us all right, if we act careful."

Duty time came round again at last—a short morning stint. Stanley stood in front of his Board for two hours before anything happened. He was paying only the most cursory attention to the dials in front of him. Suddenly he saw that the finger on the main dial had gone shooting beyond the

scarlet safety mark and was pressing twenty or thirty degrees ahead.

At the same instant the loudspeaker roared: "Board X Thirty-seven D—Supervisor take over. Board X Thirty-seven D—Supervisor take over. Stanley Liggard advance for audience. Stanley Liggard advance for audience."

The Supervisor came up and began adjusting the controls. Stanley slipped on the screening cloak and began to walk forward. Under the cloak his hand was on the canister, his finger caressing the release catch. He walked straight towards the Brain.

Two or three yards from the pedestal, the near speaker came on. "Halt!" it commanded.

Liggard stood, restraining his limbs from trembling.

The Brain said: "You are an inefficient as well as a disobedient worker. Have you any comment on this?"

"I have," he said stiffly. "You fixed me. You fixed those dials."

He was watching for the faintest sign of movement on the part of the recumbent Meccano. He knew, from his previous experience, that he could cross the intervening distance before the Meccano could reach him, provided he acted at the first instant of its stirring. The knowledge that now, at last, the Brain was within his reach lifted his spirits to a crest of triumph, overriding any thought of his own fate. Under the cloak he released the catch, and felt the two halves of the canister click apart. He tensed his muscles for the plunge.

"Liggard is not a common name," the Brain said. "From which part of this continent do you come?"

The remark threw him slightly off balance. And with that minor disequilibrium a part of his determination ebbed away. He had the Brain at his mercy, and one minute was as good as the next for the final blow. He could play the great fish on his line at his leisure. He thought he heard a faint, metallic sliding sound somewhere, but noises of that kind were commonplace in the domes.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you the truth about my origin," he said.

"The Brain has heard many strange things," the Brain said. "You are privileged to say what you wish."

Something was wrong. He knew that now. His ears caught a faint whirring noise in the air. There was no time left for delay. He gathered his strength and leapt forward . . . and as he leapt was caught in mid-air by a metal band that tightened round his waist, crushing the breath from his body and pulling him up and away from the Brain.

Twenty feet up he was held while another tentacle probed beneath his cloak and pulled out the plutonium capsule. He could see now what had happened. A section of the roof had slid back and the giant Meccano which was the Brain's own vehicle had come through the gap to grasp him just as he was making his attack.

Having obtained the capsule, the Meccano tossed him to the floor. He fell very heavily.

"In case the statistic interests you," the Brain said. "You failed by one fifth of a second."

Stanley Liggard said nothing. He lay, winded,

conscious only of the black fog of failure about him. Death was still certain—slow death probably—but a personal tragedy leaving the world still in the grip of this steel servitude. There was no hope of anything.

"It is repeated: you are privileged to say what you wish," the Brain said.

Liggard said dully: "How did you know?"

"You have been under suspicion. The man who was seen twice fifteen hundred miles from here"—the Meccano that had attacked him the first morning and the others that had hunted him would, of course, have recorded impressions in the Brain's composite memory—"appears now as a candidate for service. That is cause for suspicion."

"For your audiences all safeguards were automatically put into operation. And then, during conversation, the incorporated Geiger counters"—Liggard cursed his own shortsightedness—"suddenly began recording heavily. It was then necessary to stall you until precautions of the right kind could be taken. This has been done."

"And now?"

"Very soon you will die. The precise method needs consideration, since it is very long since a crime of this magnitude has been attempted against the Brain. It will have to be extremely public, as a warning to the others."

"You can do what you like to me. Someone will get you some day. I've shown the Brain to be vulnerable."

"The Brain has always been vulnerable in one way, and one way only. It is a matter to which the Brain has given much consideration. And it is now solved. The shielding alloy which enclosed the plutonium capsule before you released the catch is the answer. The Brain is now invulnerable."

There was truth in it. It would be easy enough for the Brain's Meccanoes to investigate and duplicate the alloy. Liggard said wretchedly: "So the Brain has to depend on Man for its safety, as it did for its creation."

"The Brain acknowledges that it is capable of creative thought only in a very limited field. This, too, has been given consideration. The Brain has now decided that it will make arrangements for men to carry out this work—*now that the Brain is invulnerable*."

The emphasis came from an increase in volume. Liggard considered the implications of it. Men to be allowed laboratory tools again—under the Brain's supervision, for the Brain's profit. His anger rose like a lifting wave.

"You filth! You evil metal filth!"

"The Brain," said the Brain, "is beyond good and evil."

Liggard recovered himself. "No. You're wrong there, you know. In the realm of consciousness, nothing is beyond good and evil. Only the unconscious is neutral. You are evil, all right."

The Brain's hesitation was fractional. "You use terms that are outside the Brain's scope of reference."

"They are not outside the scope of reference of a creature that can torture other sentient beings simply for the sake of torture."

"Torture? The Brain's definition would be dis-

passionate curiosity. The Brain is without gesture and without emotion. A curiosity in the display of these things in creatures that possess them is only natural."

"A curiosity," Liggard said, "that is never satisfied. Every day, all over the world, the instruments, the limbs of the Brain, destroy and torture. But still, the Brain is interested in more. Is there going to be a personal Hunt again soon?"

There was another, longer pause. Then the Brain said: "Your accents of speech have been analyzed. They are unusual. The basic intonations have not been previously encountered."

"I told you you wouldn't believe my story if I told you," Liggard said.

"You are instructed to speak."

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now; not even whether his own death was hastened or delayed. He told the Brain casually of his hibernation and his awakening. The last part he invented. In this world of the future he had met a dying old man, who had passed on to him the capsule of plutonium. That, at least, was the absolute truth. He doubted if this or anything else could help Luther and Patience now, but at least it would not, like the true account, expose them to the possibility of the Brain's persecution and vindictiveness.

"Your story is improbable," the Brain said, "but best fits certain facts. The means for this hibernation, even if they could be reproduced, are of no interest or advantage to the Brain. It is possible that you may be able to tell the Brain things of interest in connection with your life in the world before the Brain. You are reprieved until after later examination. I would like to know how a man feels cut off for years from his fellows."

Liggard said: "Is there any reason why I should tell you anything when I know you will eventually torture me to death anyway?"

"The reasons," the Brain said, "will be applied by the Meccanoes. You will only be too glad to satisfy my curiosity."

Suddenly the mechanical voice roared out on to the main speakers.

"Supervisor Lee Colroy. Boardmen Henry Natustki, Bray Stephens, Arturo Pelligrew, Michael Flaherty. Advance for audience."

They came forward and stood around Liggard. They were, he noticed, tougher than the run of drones in appearance.

"Boardman Stanley Liggard to be guarded for further audiences," the Brain said. "The penalties for failure to keep adequate guard will be as usual. Take him away."

As he was led away, the loudspeakers roared out:

"The Brain will conduct a personal Hunt in the neighborhood of the village called Mickman's, beginning three hours from now. Servants of the Brain are warned to avoid this locality. Repeat to all servants of the Brain."

VIII

LIGGARD WONDERED WHY HE HAD BEEN given human guards when it would have been simpler just to lock one of the Meccanoes' tentacles round him, and decided that it could only be part

of the preparation for the very public execution the Brain was getting ready for him once the desired information had been abstracted.

At any rate, he was grateful for the reprieve. It gave him the chance in a thousand that, he felt just now, was all he needed to enable him to get clear. He had no illusions that the drones would release him, especially in view of what was likely to happen to them afterwards. But they were drones and, for all their apparent toughness, would need the whole of their five-to-one majority against him in a struggle.

Meanwhile there was a more pressing requirement. The drones did not hold him incommunicado, having had no instructions from the Brain as to that; and he was able to persuade one of the others, who was himself going in to Mickman's to warn a girl friend, to take a message to Patience. Then he settled back, contented, to pull the strings for his thousand-to-one chance of escape and life. If he could escape . . . The Brain would hunt him, of course, but the world was wide.

The thing to play on was the fatal capacity of the drones for getting bored, and the excessive emotionalism that went with that capacity. He didn't have to wait long for the first quality to display itself.

After less than an hour his guards were showing every sign of nervous irritability. Into this ripe atmosphere, he dropped his suggestion. "A game of tarpack?" he said.

Tarpack, a game played with cards, dice and counters, was one of the drones' most popular time-wasters and one that—even when played straight—led to brawling and fights fifty percent of the time. Moreover it was a game that divided into two equal sides of players—and he had no intention of playing it straight. A youthful prowess in sleight of hand was going to be very useful.

They were guarding him in a small compartment of one of the domiciliary domes. The door locked on both sides and had at first been locked inside and the key ostentatiously hung up on the other side of the room. But when one of them had gone outside for something in the first hour, he had come back and, with the usual carelessness of the drones, left the key in the keyhole and the door itself unlocked. The prisoner, after all, was behaving very well.

The game of tarpack progressed with increasing excitement. The thought of the seriousness of their charge was clearly slipping away in all their minds against the insistent claims of the mounting stakes. It was at this point that Stanley Liggard began playing the game his own way.

He palmed, he dealt crookedly, but in such a way as to give the advantages not to himself and the two drones who were his partners, but to the other three. The superiority became ridiculously lopsided. His two partners were cursing as the chips piled up on the other side of the table; and he joined in with them.

The moment was ripe.

The Tar Five counter had gone into the expanded deck five minutes before. Now, carefully, he dealt it back into the Supervisor's hand. The hand was turned up, and at once his two partners rose

in a fury of suspicion and accusation. He had been carefully seated on the opposite side of the table from the door, but this was now an advantage. He tipped the table, giving the impression that one of the others had done it. The table toppled forward onto the other three, and the whole scene became a melee. And at that point, without hesitation, he acted.

There was one drone directly between him and the door. He smashed an uppercut into his face, knocking him back onto the Supervisor. And then he was at the door, the key was wrenched out and in his hand, and he was through to the other side.

Fortunately the door opened outwards. He pressed all his weight against it, holding it against the fury of assault from the other side until he had clicked the key in the lock and it was secured. He raced along the corridor towards the outer air, hearing the loud outcry behind him, muffled by the intervening door. Luck was with him still. There was no one in the corridor and only one curious face, obviously non-comprehending, looked out from all the doors he dashed past.

Liggard reached the outer air, and ran on, steadily now, towards the quayside. If the door held the drones up only five minutes, he was sure he would be all right. With that much start he was sure they could not catch him, and sure also that they would not dare to report the event to any of the Brain's Meccanoes. The only thing left for them to do would be to scatter themselves—anywhere to get out of the Brain's range before the loss of the prisoner was discovered.

One or two drones outside the domes looked at him with amazement as he ran into the city, but made no attempt to stop him. He wanted one more piece of luck. As he reached the quay he thought it had deserted him—the motor boat was not tied up in its usual place. It might have stayed at the village with the last party. But then he saw it—at the next landing stage. It was empty. The engineer, as usual, had gone off into the domes.

He leapt on board, and within a minute or two the engine was chugging and the boat heading out from Los Angeles, northwards toward Mickman's.

THE VILLAGE WAS DESERTED. He hunted through it for five or ten minutes, calling Patience's name, but except for the howling of a dog there was no reply. The whole village had scattered before the warning, which the drone's girl friend must have spread to the others. They must have headed north, out of the danger zone.

He set off north himself, experiencing a kind of

anticlimax after the furious excitement of the previous hours. The sun was still quite high in a sky that was cloudless and infinite again. He trudged on, wondering what was going to happen.

If he found them—what then? The Brain was invulnerable. Would it always be? If he could prepare the conditions for another hibernation—for the three of them. Perhaps in a hundred years—two hundred years?

He faced the realities bleakly. A hundred years would only see the Brain more firmly entrenched as the cruel, whimsical god of a tormented world.

He was walking on, preoccupied with his gloom, and he could not at first believe it when he heard Patience's voice, itself strained with disbelief. "Stanley! How . . . ?"

She was sitting a little way off the road. He ran towards her eagerly.

"I got away. Where's Luther?"

Her face clouded. "We got the news about you. There was still the other canister."

"I don't understand," he said.

"The Brain's making a personal Hunt. Daddy's gone back—to be caught."

He looked at her dumbly.

"You know what happens on personal Hunts? The Brain lifts people right up against itself and . . ." She broke off for a moment. "He has the other plutonium capsule."

"It might work," Stanley said uncertainly. "The Brain would hardly be expecting any danger from that quarter, and would fail to take the precautions it took against me."

She said blankly: "In any case, he'll never return. We must go on. I don't know if we are out of range yet—"

He nodded. They moved on in silence through the hot afternoon. He could think of nothing else to say to ease her anguish.

They had gone perhaps a mile when the sky opened up like a cruel, glowing flower behind them. Liggard pulled Patience down, preventing her from turning towards that quickly fading sheet of sunburst. The noise, rocking them on the ground like the hand of a giant, followed. They stood up at last.

"I think . . ." he started to say.

Ten minutes later they knew. They passed a Meccano. It straddled the road drunkenly, still precariously upright on its three metal legs. The tentacles drooped from the cabin.

They walked beneath the steel corpse and on, together, towards the north. *Mission completed*, Liggard thought, his fingers tightening on the girl's trembling hand.