

# PLANET STORIES



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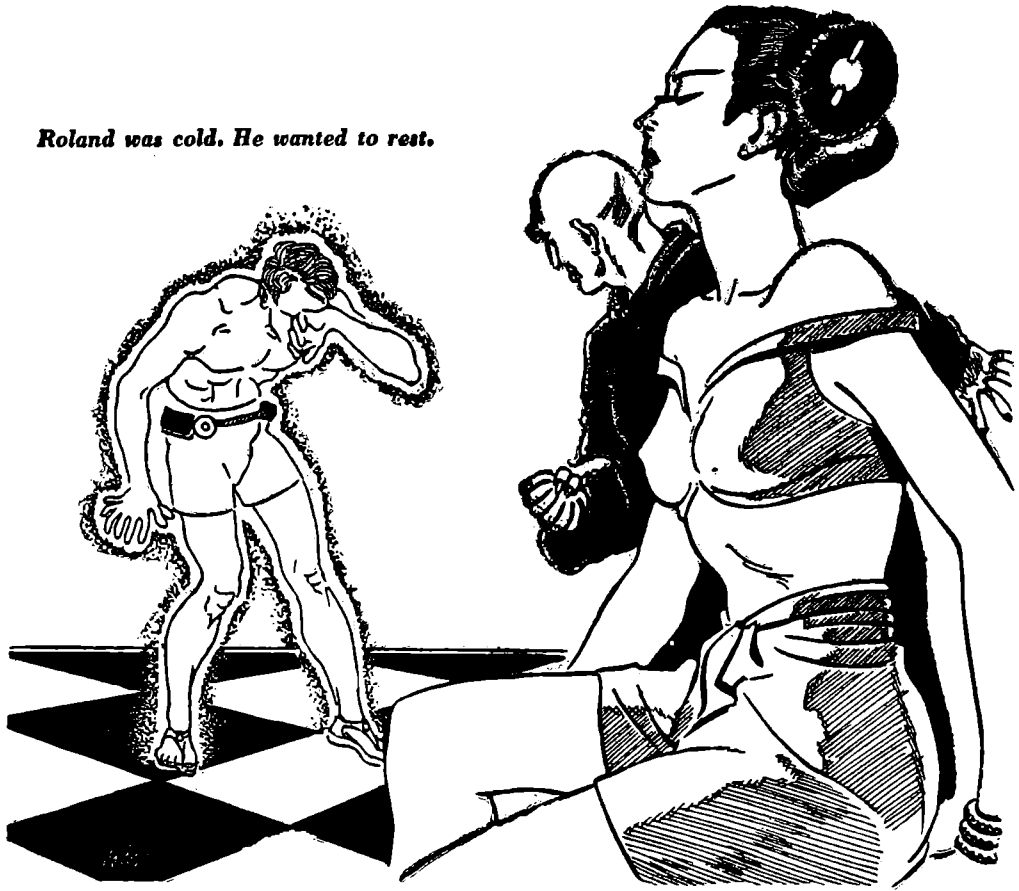


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*Roland was cold. He wanted to rest.*



## Assignment In The Dawn

By **BRYCE WALTON**

**There stood Roland, deep beneath a static, dying civilization, fiercely ready to destroy it—and himself, if need be—for love of Frances. Yet a question nagged him. Who was she—and who was he?**

**H**IS CONSCIOUSNESS FILTERED in slowly. It stirred like roiled water, and the first lucid cycle of cause and effect in associative memory was beginning. There was a kind of awful searching loneliness — but that was broken by the pleasantly soft voice of the woman who asked, “Is he waking?”

A sweet clear voice. It drew him as if it were some part of him that was missing. She could give meaning to that lonely despair. If he could only remember—. A man answered tensely, “He’s waking, all right. Check the spy-circuit again, Fran. Their newly developed rapport-clan is dangerous. They might find out about our new Adam.”

Adam?

He heard light footsteps fade off and return. “Circuit’s clear, Billy Boy.” A pause. “He’s attractive, isn’t he?”

“Uh-huh.”

He heard the man muttering close to his ear. He felt some kind of pressure withdrawn from about his head. There was a sharp, clenching pain, and a flash of agonizing brilliance.

“Well, that’s it, Fran,” the man breathed heavily.

He felt her warm soft hand moist on his forehead. Why did she remove it? But he heard her say, “All right, Superman. Open your eyes and see the light.”

Adam? Superman?

He blinked blindly in the newness of the light until the small naked cubicle and the two people in it clarified. He looked at her first, beauty and warmth. She smiled brightly and winked, a small delicate but full-bodied figure in shorts, bra and sandals, and a lot of olive skin. But their eight-fingered hands! He looked at his own hands. Eight fingers. What—?

He studied the man. He was gaunt and bald, very sad and cynical with his lower lip stuck out. He put out a thin white hand and said sardonically, "I'm Berti. This is Frances. And I suppose you'd like to know who *you* are?"

He shrugged as he turned his eyes back to the woman and openly appreciated her. She blushed, and he was pleased. Finally he answered the man. "That depends on who I am. An amnesiac is supposed to have good reasons for not remembering."

The man frowned. "You've never had a name. And you're not an amnesiac—not exactly. We've stored your brain with plenty of information. And it will soon become properly integrated as you apply it. But what would you prefer as a label?"

He had never had a name. Somehow, he figured that he should have had one. He shrugged again. "If I've never had a name, it must not be very important."

"Peculiar personality," muttered Berti. "Not uninteresting."

"That's wonderful," giggled Frances. "Now I can pick something that will make an adorable nickname. How about Roland? Then I can call you Rolly."

He nodded and sat up while she giggled eagerly. He looked at his body. He seemed to know all about his body, yet he had never been conscious of it before, somehow. Translucent shorts and sandals fitted well to a tall, muscled form that he was proud to display to Frances. Did she like his body? That was the important thing.

His eyes shifted back and forth from the woman to the man. Finally he said quietly, "We've got to come to it. What do you want me to do?"

Berti's sharply-ridged face puckered. "Rolly, you have a highly selective education, administered by us. But is it worth while? Science-progress is a maze, a labyrinth. And when you reach the end of the quest, the Minotaur always waits."

Fran's voice interrupted seriously, black

eyes shining. "We've given you most of the necessary information, but have omitted details. This the end of the Era of World Brain. It must be the end. It's a ten-acre expanse of electronic brain which is the unescapable dictator of Worldcity. Absolute mechanical dictator. And there are a thousand plastico-mechanical creations which act positronically under World Brain to carry out its functions."

Berti looked sharply at him. "Roland! Doesn't that seem terribly unjust to you. Monstrously inhuman?"

"If it's mechanical, obviously it's inhuman," said Roland.

Berti said, "Human? Organic? What is life? Only chemistry and that's all any machine is. No, by human I mean one's emotional, thalamic reactions. Do you react negatively to a dictatorial machine that destroys all human characteristics?"

"I'll even hate it," said Roland. He looked at Frances. "If you do."

SHE smiled very pleasantly at him and he asked, "But why did humans create this mechanical dictator?"

"We didn't feed your brain much history. A waste of time," she said. "Anyway, World Brain was a reaction to—the Atomic War. That almost finished Earth life. And remaining humanity decided it couldn't afford another. Human governmental agency is too unreliable. Even human dictatorship was, of course, variable. So all the greatest scientific minds pooled their brain cells and created World Brain. Now, human culture is fixed and static. For a human, that's death. Nothing can change unless World Brain changes, and that's impossible."

"Well," said Roland. "Isn't that what was wanted?"

"It didn't work out, Rolly. A billion people turned into stagnant automatons. When organisms stop moving and changing, they're better off completely dead. Don't you agree, Rolly?"

"Yes," said Roland. "So why not destroy World Brain?"

"We're going to," interrupted Berti. "And it's got to be done right now. Civilization—I use that word liberally—has simply stopped. And as long as the entire working culture is mechanically fixed, it's absolutely hopeless." Berti's narrow shoul-

ders drooped. "Not that everything isn't, in its cosmic sense. But even the cosmos doesn't make sense; does it, Fran?"

She shook her head at him. "He doesn't believe in anything. But we don't care, do we?"

"No," said Roland. He wanted her to keep on talking to him, personally.

"We want to get rid of World Brain," said Berti. "But there are difficulties. There are the Conditioners; they're directly tied in with World Brain. From birth, everyone is conditioned to unquestionable, unbreakable bondage to World Brain. These matrixed minds can't be altered. We've tried. The only alternative is to throw a lot of great big heavy air atoms and molecules among World Brain's overheated electrons. But there are always difficulties."

Roland was mad because Berti was talking instead of Frances. He kept looking steadily at her. He asked, "Then how have we three escaped these Conditioners?" She answered this time, and Roland soaked up her sweet musical voice sensually.

"We're members of a secret Underground organization that began when World Brain began, to escape its static death system. Having gone underground, we escaped the original conditioning and have since lived completely free of the Brain's dictates. But even though unconditioned, we've been helpless against the rigid system."

"Then how can you expect to destroy World Brain now?" asked Roland. "There must be a great deal I don't know."

"Possible also that you know too much," said Berti irritably. "But then who doesn't?"

Fran laughed freely. Then her voice became suddenly grave. "We have to act now. There isn't much time. We have bogey men, too. Martians."

Roland started violently, stared. "Martians! You mean — from Mars! The planet?"

"Yeah," growled Berti. And Frances smiled. "Do you find a Martian menace credible, Rolly?"

"He should," snapped Berti. "We certainly endowed him with enough credulity. An organ that believes in its own existence will believe anything."

"I believe you," Roland said. He was looking at Frances. "And the Martians?"

Frances said, "You see, the Martians are trying to preserve World Brain. And, to do that, they've been trying for a long time to destroy the Underground."

"Why?" asked Roland. Roland was hating Berti because he talked so much.

"That should be obvious. The Martians know that, if we cancel World Brain, we'll have a variable, anarchistic government again. And, naturally, that means the return of the Atomic War threat. And, along with atomic power and subsequent space flight, that also means, according to the Martian's logic, that we'll wage an atomic war against them. And that," concluded Berti, "is good logic."

"All right," said Roland. "The Martians are fighting you so you've got to hurry and get World Brain before the Martians finish the Underground. Right?"

"Right, Rolly," beamed Frances.

"How can you accomplish that now, if you couldn't before?"

Frances came very close. Roland smelled the intoxicating aroma of a very effeminate, very suggestive, scent. She bounced up beside him on the table. He was afraid to look at her for a moment. Afraid she would go away. "You see, Rolly, you're the agent. You're going to destroy World Brain."

**R**OLAND tried to clarify scattered thoughts. Here in a hidden cell, he seemed so far from any reality. Alone with two people who seemed so strange—so apart from hopeless, defeated humanity. He was suddenly aware of feeling cold. Cold, yet the room was warm. Something was lacking between these two members of the Underground and himself, something vitally important. There was an isolated sensation. He noticed the utter silence. A dead, despairing silence. Abruptly he wanted to be a part of movement and noise. He wanted to get out of this small buried cube somewhere on Earth. And, if it wasn't for Frances, he would have gotten out. Right then. But he didn't.

She held him there. A human, conditioned scientifically, could only react as he was reacting now. He felt no irritation. That was the way the human organism functioned. He wanted to do it for Frances. He loved her, of course—that was it. He had known that when he first heard

her voice, before he had opened his eyes.

He heard himself saying, "When, where and how do I start?"

"Bravo!" said Berti sardonically. "A man of virtue!"

Only an objective realization of the need for unity prevailed Roland from attacking the man. He was jealous, too, and he was ashamed of that. Somehow, these people had taken him from the Birth Center when he was born, and had kept him hidden and had taught him to be a true, pre-World Brain human. He should be grateful, very grateful. And he determined to be.

Berti was crossing the room toward a panel. "Well, Prometheus, we start right now, right here. And here's how—"

He tensed, eyes narrowing.

The form was only a faint mist at first. Roland hardly knew it was materializing until he saw its wavering, translucent shadow in the middle of the room. A flash of panic and fear jerked him to his feet and sent him backing toward the further wall. He saw Frances and Berti standing stiffly, perspiration oozing visibly from their bronzed skin.

Roland had never seen anything so grotesque and alien before. At least he couldn't remember having seen — but then, he couldn't remember.

"Roland!" he heard Berti say tensely. "You're now being treated to the personal appearance of a Martian menace. Take a good look, because it just might be that you won't see another." Berti moved with shocking agility, a blur in the corner of Roland's fixed eyes. He dropped the cap over the fluorobulb. The room was plunged into pitch blackness.

Roland saw a high, narrow column of shimmering phosphorescence dart about the room. He couldn't tell whether the thing was attacking or in flight. Something about its alien contortions suggested panic.

But then he felt a hand grasping at his. It gripped hard and pulled. The voice was a hurried whisper, either that of Berti or Frances. It had to be Frances. "Follow me! Keep running!"

HE followed blindly. The hand was soft and small. Berti? Frances? Frances had to be with him. That was the only thing that really mattered. They plunged through the thick blackness and onto a

levitation platform and down. They paused once, briefly. Roland heard a panel opening. Then they were in a room, smaller even than the first one. A slight glow bathed the room in a soft blue haze. It was light enough for him to see that Frances wasn't with them.

He grabbed Berti's arm, noting how frail and weak he was. "Where is she? *Where is she?*"

But Berti seemed more interested than concerned. "Do you really feel that way about her?"

"Where is she?" He said it louder this time. He shook Berti harshly.

Berti smiled thinly. "The Martian menace got her. They were bound to get her sooner or late. They've gotten us all, one by one."

Roland backed the thin bony outline up against the glowing wall. "Why did we go off and leave her there? Why?"

"To save you. You're more important than any one or all of us. She wanted it this way."

"No!" yelled Roland. "What's more important than Francis? Nothing is—to me."

"Are you sure?" asked Berti. "Remember her faith in you, Prometheus. The destruction of World Brain's more important. Relax."

Roland stepped away, breathing painfully. "No. You haven't told me yet. Why am I so important? *What am I, Berti?*"

"What are—!" Berti's eyes shot wide open, narrowed quickly. "The scientists even prepared for the eventuality that some organism might defy the conditioning processes and try to attack World Brain. It's surrounded by an area of ultrasonic radiation. All around it, under the ground, in the air. No living organism can step into that field without its cellular structure dancing itself madly to death in seconds. A lot of the Underground have tried it. In the last one we—we developed, we'd built up resistance that let him into the field about a hundred meters. That was all. But we've learned. You can make it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"We're not," said Berti laconically. "You might die. Afraid? Frances didn't think you would be. I don't know. We did our best with you."

"I'm not afraid, Berti. But I'm going back after Frances first!"

"You're our only hope, man! Don't hand yourself to those dissectors."

"Dissectors?" choked Roland.

"They analyze us. They're curious; they think humans a low form of mammal because of their insane record of self-destruction. The Martians work out of their observatories and laboratories on the Moon. They want to learn all they can about humans in case they have to destroy humanity."

"Why don't we destroy them? Now." Roland's voice trembled.

"The Underground is the only Earth agency that knows the Martians even exist. And we can't act against them anyway until World Brain is destroyed. Atomic energy is locked behind impenetrable shields as long as World Brain rules. Violence or conflict of any kind is forbidden by the fixed laws of World Brain. The Martians are persistent. Only a few of us left. They know if they can wipe out the Underground, World Brain will keep on its fixed orbit, and then they won't have to destroy Earth because humanity won't be able to use atomic power against them, and eventually humanity will peter out."

"Why don't the Martians destroy Earth, Underground and all, if they're so afraid of World Brain being destroyed and atomic power returning as a threat?"

"Because," said Berti dryly, "their planet's old and exhausted. They want to colonize Earth. But not while the Underground's here."

"I don't care about any of this confusion," yelled Roland. "All I care about is saving Francis. Maybe it isn't right according to the way you've conditioned me. But I've got to!"

He thought he saw a thin smile on Berti's dour face as he turned and ran back down the black corridor. About the instant that he realized he had no conception of how to get back to the first cubicle, he ran hard into a pair of arms and a thick reeling cloud of that intoxicating scent—

A wave of weakening relief and gladness almost overpowered him as he touched her. "You—it is you, Fran. You're all right?"

"Yes. Yes." Her breath came fast, impatient. "We've got to hurry, Rolly. I got rid of that one. But the new rapport-clan know about you, maybe. We don't have much time. Come on!"

The levitator shaft panel slid shut behind them. The car whined, and Roland felt the sudden suffocating pressure of rapid acceleration.

THEY emerged in the darkened, damp basement of a vacant ruin just outside Worldcity. He saw a pallid, three-eyed lizard, and a huge grey rat with six legs. He followed Berti and Frances into a beautiful lazy summer day, with genuine sunlight. A hawk sailed easily across a pale blue sky. In the distance, rising like a gigantic bubble, the plastic dome shell that covered Worldcity gleamed in the sun.

They walked silently on down the cracked, weed-grown concrete highway.

Berti started talking again. Roland wanted Frances to talk, but she seemed too absorbed in the scenery. "Special excursion monorail systems were set up for trips into the natural areas. Psychological balance, you know. But it was too late. No one cares any more. An almost completely katatonic world is a pretty terrible sight, I suppose. World Brain blocked any action of free thought—the one spontaneous, progressive and unique characteristic of the human."

That broke Frances' reverie. "Yes, Rolly. Block that characteristic and you kill the human. The human is a step above the beast because of his free associative brain. But it also persists in dooming him as a species. The human heart and muscle belong to the jungle—his overdeveloped brain to an environment of his own creation."

She was swinging freely along beside him. Berti said, "Civilization subjected the human body to a vast and critical experiment. But the exaggeration of a part, like the fossil nautili, intended the experiment to fail."

"But man isn't licked yet!" said Roland vehemently. "He's got his highly specialized brain, and complexity and specialization aren't necessarily fatal—simply dangerous."

"You're proud of him," said Berti, cutting off the tops of weeds with quick slicing motions of a green branch. "Even with his brain, he was never much better than the beast. A living anachronism, an unbalanced grotesque, an ape top-heavy with grey matter."

"Quiet!" hissed Frances. Then to Roland. "He isn't that way, really."

The sophistry lapsed. Roland was grateful because it allowed him to concentrate on watching the smooth, graceful movement of Frances' lithe body. There was an almost terrible casualness for people going to save the World.

"Aren't you afraid of the Martians—out here in the open?" he asked.

Berti's green switch sang. A four-legged quail fluttered up and hedge-hopped across a wild, brush-choked hollow, piping excitedly. "We know them. They're—ah" he hesitated—"a kind of instinctual intelligence, somewhere above the survival value of the human intelligence. We've learned to cope with them on their own ground."

"But how?" Roland was curious about how Frances had "gotten rid" of the Martian back in the cubicle. He was swinging his hand close to hers in the fond hope of grasping it sooner or later.

Frances kicked at a small piece of dislodged concrete. "Rolly, you're so inquisitive. That would be awfully hard to explain in the short time we have. They've advanced far above human's mere intelligence. And you learn to deal with that height. Or they get you. They've always had superiority of numbers, so they've been winning. That's why we've got to destroy World Brain quickly before they finish us."

"But, if World Brain is destroyed, and variable unpredictable government returns with human control, atomic energy returns with it, and humanity will try again. And probably destroy itself this time." Roland hit his forehead with his flat hand. "It seems very involved."

"Doesn't it?" agreed Berti tightly. "But we'll control atomic energy all right. If we can't—let the termites have it."

Roland thought of one other thing. "After World Brain's out of commission, what about the Martians, then? First thing they'll do will be to blow up Earth, regardless of their own desire to colonize."

Berti looked narrowly at Frances. He grinned thinly. "I told you we should have taken less time with his logic and reason. He thinks too much."

Frances laughed carelessly. "He'll have to be smart when he goes into the heart of World Brain. You know that."

Berti said, "Uh-huh. But if he's smart enough, he wouldn't even go into World Brain at all."

Frances smiled at Roland. "Well? Are you that smart?"

He looked into wet, promising glowing eyes and he didn't feel logical at all. "If you want me to, Fran, I'll do it. It seems to mean a lot to you. So I guess I'm not really smart—not in the Berti sense, anyway. Am I?"

Berti swirled the green switch in a vicious slash. "Not as smart as Fran is."

LATER, in a secret Underground apartment, Roland sat waiting for his final orders to destroy World Brain. He was proud of his assignment. He knew it was justified. He had seen the people of World-city.

Terrible standardization. Mass production and mass consumption had become possible only because of complete unity of common desires and tastes. Individuals were no more. Beneath the rigid unchange of World Brain there had been a final leveling-off. The whole system was mechanical like its electronic dictator. Frightened by another possible atomic war under unreliable human agency, they had established fool-proof laws, then subjected themselves and the laws to a machine dictator that could never alter them. Suicide.

The Worldcity was beautiful and magnificent, even without the available atomic power. Towering synthetic buildings, their block-square bases pierced by wide tiered boulevards. There were many people packing the boulevards. Dull-eyed, listless, uninterested. Without their free-associative minds, they were not even beasts.

"It's about time," said Frances softly, leaning toward him. "Are you ready? It's a big job."

Roland sat next to her on a deep couch, her shoulder touching his. He wanted the contact to remain as long as possible. She broke the contact several times, but renewed it. He was grateful. She had called him "dear" twice.

"I've already told him he might not come back," said Berti. "It's dangerous. The Martians' new rapport-clan are difficult. And the destruction when World Brain stops will be terrific. The Martians will immediately jump in and try to knock

out Earth as soon as they see World Brain go. If they don't get you first. As soon as we take over the atomic laboratories, our first job will be to blow up the Martian's Moon bases. It's a risky business."

"You'll be safe," Frances said. "You're not afraid, are you, Rolly?"

"Not too much," answered Roland.

"You have three dangers. The Martians. The plastico-mechanical men. And the ultrasonic field. The last you're prepared for. The Martians might get you. The plastic men. . . you might have trouble with them."

"They're one-track, highly specialized," said Berti, studying Roland with a quizzical, unwavering stare. "Anything that blocks their specialized assignments they'll push aside. They have no conception of violence as such. It's just a means to carry through their fixed patterns of behavior."

"If you're waiting for my decision," said Roland, "you know it. I couldn't be any different. I'm human. Humanity means more to me than my own life."

He looked at Frances closely, searching for some deep, full reaction to his bravery. He got a warm soft smile and damp eyes that shone darkly. He leaned a little against her shoulder as he got to his feet. He walked to the exit panel and turned slowly.

"I can recall conditioned directions now pretty well. Any last briefings?"

Frances shook her head, and a healthy cloud of black hair reflected the steady glow of the flueros. "You know about the electronic set up. The originators didn't bother to shield the vital parts of World Brain on the logical premise that if anyone could get that far, it was inevitable, only a matter of time, before they could wreck it anyway. Wreck the grids, Rolly, the pipes of the electrons. Wreck the big vacuum brains in which our little wild electrons play. They've been free too long. Imprison them again in the air. It's exciting, isn't it, Rolly?"

His eyes, his brain were filled only with her image, her vivid loveliness. He hesitated, thinking Frances might get up and come to him. She only smiled, her eyes wet and glistening with pride. Roland turned and left the room. There was promise in those eyes. And he would be back.

He was walking toward the levitation shaft at the end of the corridor when he met the Martian in the hall.

SOMEHOW, he had an idea that unless it wanted it that way, no one could see it there. It seemed less grotesque now, standing there against the wall looking at him. He stood tautly, watching it. And suddenly he knew why it didn't seem so grotesque. Why its formless, limbless, upright length of almost translucent stuff swaying like an underwater plant seemed less a peril now. It was afraid. It was not an attacker or even a pursuer. It was frightened, and, telepathetically, in sharp bursting impressions, it pleaded with Roland. *No! Oh, no! You do not understand. Wait! Wait and you can know of the countless facets of re—*

Something like pain shot through his skull. The Martian trembled, vibrated, and then—disappeared. Roland spun around. Frances stood there. She was smiling, but there had been another expression. He couldn't—

She was close to him now. He felt her animal warmth. "We sensed it out here," she said softly, "and came to your rescue, Rolly. He was a weaker one, and we got him. We must work fast. Go, dear Rolly. This—this is for good luck."

He leaned against the wall. She was gone. The kiss. . . he had been waiting for that. None of the other things made any difference now. But now she was gone and the wall felt cold. He wanted warmth. He wanted Fran's warmth. He wanted it more than anything. He—

— he was out on an autowalk among the shifting listless crowd. He moved toward the five-acre expanse of World Brain. He was aware of nothing about him, only of Frances. He would soon be back with her. Destroying World Brain was only a means to that end. He noticed then, abruptly, that the people around him had only five fingers on their hands. But he didn't think about it. It had no meaning anyway.

Then, suddenly, he was aware that there were no more people. No more buildings, either. A cool wind blew across his hot face. He stood awed on the long, sweeping rim of an abyss, the edge of a bowl. Its sides curved down and away in gracious gleaming sweeps, down, down and away into a colossal valley. In its center was World Brain. A gigantic, unbroken cylinder, a mile away and a thousand meters down.



He knew he was on the periphery of the ultrasonic field now. He walked along the railed edge of the abyss until he faced the plastic man who was standing before the opening of a levitation shaft that would take him directly into the arteries of World Brain.

He tried to edge past the plastic man. There wasn't room enough; the plastic man wasn't designed to make any room. The creation was very close to a perfect synthesis. There was no other way. Roland charged head down into the waiting figure and hurled him upward over the railing.

Roland watched him spin out end over end, then flatten out on the sweeping curvature and go sliding with fantastic silent slowness, away and down, down the long, seemingly endless curve into the depths of the gigantic plastic bowl. Roland stepped into the shaft. Dwarfed, Roland walked slowly across the gleaming expanse of floor toward the nakedly exposed rows of electronic brain cases. A few blows, a pull or two, and the circuit would be shattered. His sandals rustled softly.

But he hesitated.

There was a guilty feeling and a lost loneliness. Who was he, really? Taken in infancy from some birth center by the Underground. Conditioned precisely as they desired — a completely selective mentality. Had never had a name. But a label someone pulled out of a hat to satisfy a beautiful woman's peculiar liking for nicknames. The amnesiac's isolated fear of what he didn't know and couldn't remember, mustn't remember, but what he must know—

But Frances waited for him back in the secret apartment. Warmth would replace a cold emptiness. Meaning and purpose would fill the lonely places in his heart.

He went forward—

**L**ATER, Roland paused outside their apartment door. He had come back. Frances had brought him back. World Brain was finished. He knew that. He could remember the subtle changes beginning to occur even as he came back through Worldcity. Soon the whole intricate structure would collapse.

The hall was still. He looked at the back of his hand against the wall. It shook a little. And the coldness came back. It crept

into his muscles from his extremities, his hands and feet, and worked inward. He wondered why the loneliness should return here. There was a steady comfort, though, in know that behind that panel, Frances was waiting with her gigglings and her soft shoulders and promising eyes.

The photoelectric banks opened the panel and closed it behind him.

They were standing there together, looking at him. He stumbled back against the flat panel, resting his back against it. Something had happened to them. They made him feel alien and afraid. They—

And then Berti said, "Odd. It has come back. What went wrong with our charts, I wonder?"

Her voice wasn't emotional now. It had never been, he knew that. Her giggling. The smile, the wet eyes. False. "Our calculations couldn't have been off very much. It'll die soon."

Roland edged toward her. "Frances," he said weakly. "Francis, you said—'it'. You mean me? Fran. *Fran?*"

Berti said, "Our conditioning was most effective. Fran, it actually *loves* you. Remarkable."

She didn't smile now. She couldn't. There was no feeling at all, never had been. All false. Nothing now but cold awareness of power.

He felt weak and dizzy. A hazy outline moved toward him. Berti. "I still regret seeing you die. You're interesting. A peculiarly interesting experiment. If I had time—almost fifty years of trial and error to create you, Rolly."

"A good job, too," said the woman. "Though we did take an awful chance, making it so rational. It might have solved the enigma of its own existence."

Berti shook his bald head. "We had to make it human so it would be sympathetic. Emotional. No human was ever able to solve the enigma of himself. We can't either, Fran. Or can we?"

From a far hazy distance, he saw Berti's head turn back, his pouting lip thrust out, his shiny head reflecting the cold light.

"And you never suspected at all that you were a robot, Rolly? Just a lot of electrons and polarizable cells, eh? Remarkable. But then, the last thing a robot would ever realize would be that it was a robot, I suppose."

Roland shut his eyes. He was tired. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to forget about the imaginative creature he had known for a time as Frances, too.

"We gave you a heavy overload of romanticism and sentimentalism. So you would be glad to die for Frances, for humanity. But you needed logic with it, and that was a very delicate balance to establish. All that work to construct a machine that was to function only a few hours. And your allotted time is about up, Rolly.

"We misled you by omission only, Rolly. Our purpose wasn't humanity. We needed you to destroy World Brain, not for humanity. But for us. World Brain restricted our development, kept us from defeating the Martians by shielding atomic power. Rolly, the Underground was a race of mutants that developed after the Atomic War. Humanity never knew about us. Homo-superior. We've developed the same degree above mere human intelligence that the Martians have. We're their equals; that's why we could fight them. They outnumbered us, though, that's why we had to have your help. You have all the human attributes, Rolly. You want to know what qualities the next step above human is, don't you?"

**R**OLAND scarcely heard the man. He was cold. He was tired.

"We've developed the physiological relation between the nervous system and the consciousness. Instinctualism, a high degree of predictability—but then your human brain wouldn't understand."

Roland sank to his knees. He dropped his head in his folded arms.

"Let's go," said the woman. "Leave it here. It'll die soon."

"Just a minute, Fran. Don't you find this interesting? This creation of grids, filaments, plates, vacuums, is probably the last genuine human type we'll see—that's sane. And we made it!"

She sighed resignedly. "It probably wants to know what the fate of its beloved humanity is. We gave it that social consciousness. Tell it."

"Of course it's concerned, but Rolly's dying now, and the important thing to it is that it's dying for humanity." Berti paused. "And the horrible thing for Rolly,

is to know that humanity really died from over-specialization when it launched the final Atomic War."

Roland's head raised slowly and shook back and forth. "No."

Berti smiled. "Human intelligence never had the slightest possibility of survival. Its high cerebral specialization never had any physiological unity with the primitive muscles and nervous system. A slight chemical disturbance of the blood and the human went mad. Take away a little oxygen—his great mind was gone. Decrease the blood's calcium—convulsions, coma, death. Slight reduction in sugar—and his mighty cerebrum blotted out, died. A slight environmental change could destroy man—aside from his obvious willingness to destroy himself. But, Rolly, in one way, perhaps, extinction, the price of evolution, isn't too high. After all, you made us possible."

Roland heard himself say, weakly, "But they still live out there—humans—surely they're not—"

"But we rule," said the woman coldly. "They—what will they do? That will be interesting. Anyway, it's their twilight, like apes and saurians. Our dawning."

"You're almost gone, Rolly, dwindling away like a stream," said Berti. "World Brain was proof against any *organic* enemy, including us. But not against you. A matter of kind against kind. Remember De Morgan's familiar lines? But then you wouldn't, would you? 'Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em; and little fleas have lesser fleas, and so on, ad infinitum; and the great fleas themselves in turn have greater fleas to grow on, while these again have greater still, and greater still, and so on.' We used you, Rolly. A machine to bite a machine. That was the only way it could have been done."

Very far away, dim and wavering, Roland heard the woman saying, "Logically, any species has some overly-specialized characteristic that might defeat it. I wonder what particular little flea will bite us?"

"And that, too, will be interesting," thought Roland grimly, as his electronic brain thinned into meaningless chaos, and he returned into the hazes of unconsciousness from which he had emerged three hours before.