

WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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A Game of Marbles by Mel Hunter

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BY BRYCE WALTON



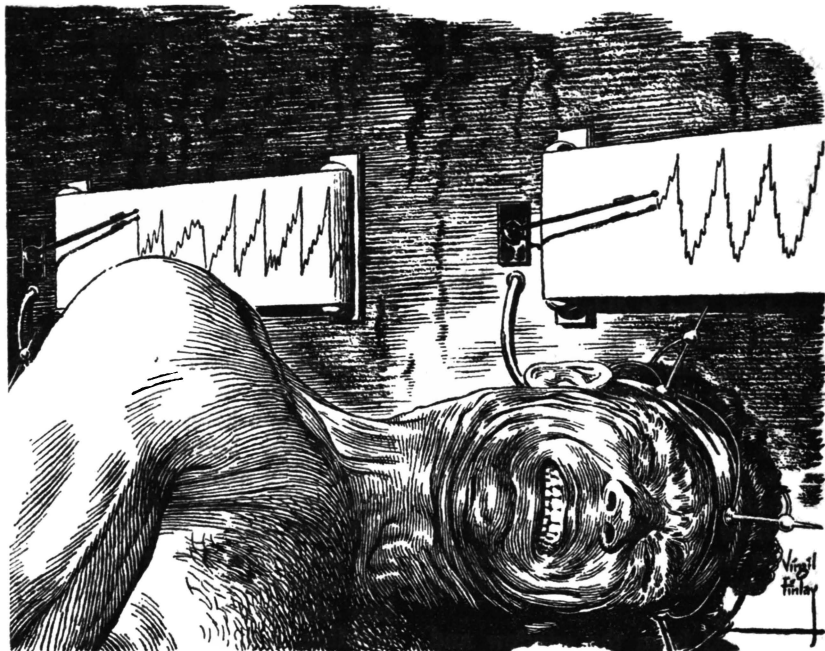
Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

D A R K

Sooner or later it would happen, and after that he wouldn't

ever have to worry again. He'd be dead, or worse,

one of the silent living dead.



W I N D O W S

I WAS SUDDENLY wide awake and listening. A gray light the color of wet charcoal lay over the chilled room. There it was again. Plain and sharp through the thin wall separating my room from that of old man Donnicker, the shoe-maker.

Maybe he was sick. No, that wasn't it. Another muted cry of

pain, then a choking sound, and the unmistakable thud of a falling body. An odd whirring sound clicked off. Then a voice said, "Grab the verminous legs of this subversive, Marty. Let's get him in the wagon."

"You gave him too much bip. He looks deader than Einstein."
"I said grab his legs."

A door shut. I went to the window. I was shivering in the morning chill. A black car moved away down the broken pavement. It swerved to miss a large mudhole in the middle of the street and an old woman with burlap wrapped around her feet didn't move fast enough. She flew across the sidewalk like a ragged dummy and lay in a heap.

Goodbye, Donnicker. I had seen the black car before. Donnicker was dead. But it didn't bother me. I never had anything to do with neighbors, anybody I didn't know had a top clearance. I was clear and intended to stay that way.

You just never knew. Donnicker had seemed like a true patriot. My carefully distant and casual observations of him had led me to believe he was as happily stupid as I was. But he had been hiding something.

I turned from the window and started the day's routine that had been the same for as long as I could remember. I warmed up some mush on the gas burner. At seven, as always, the Tevee warmed up, and Miss Info with the lacquered lips smiled at me. ". . . and so don't worry, citizens. The past is dead. The future is assured, and tomorrow will only be another today. And today we are safe and care-free."

Amen. She said it every morning, but it was nice hearing it again. Then the news came on. There was a pile of junked tractors, trucks and harvesting machines, smashed and rusting. Then a line of farmers working with hoes and hand-

guided ploughs drawn by horses.

"Machines took away sacred routine work from citizens. Eggheads built the machines to disrupt and spread the disease of reason. We are now replacing machines at the rate of a million a week. Soon, all of us will again be united in the happy harmonious brotherhood of labor. And when you see a rusting machine, what you are seeing is another captured Egghead, frothing and fuming in its cage . . ."

At a quarter to eight I walked ten blocks to work. There were the usual hectic early morning traffic jams. Wagon-loads of produce and half-starved horses blocking the streets. The same man was beating a nag with a board. A wagon piled with fruit and vegetables was stuck in a pot hole in the pavement. Two men were carrying a spinning wheel into the front of an apartment building. A peddler was selling oil lanterns, wicks and kerosene out of a barrel. The same women and boys in dirty sheepskin jackets were hauling rickshaws.

I really didn't see anyone or speak to anyone. I didn't know anyone. I knew I was safe and had nothing to worry about. Once a week I used up my GI liquor chit at a bar with a Security seal on the window. Twice a week, I slept over at a GI brothel, where every girl had a Security clearance number tattooed on her thigh.

I had nothing to worry about.

I was passed through three gates by guards and went to my little cage inside Pentagon Circle, local headquarters of the Department of

Internal Security.

Until that Tuesday morning I couldn't remember ever having done anything but sort colored cards. My chief qualification for my job: I wasn't color blind. When a green card with figures on it meaning nothing to me came out of a slot in the wall, I pushed it into a green slot that led somewhere into a filing department. When a red card came out, I pushed it into a red slot, and so forth. There were cards of fifteen colors.

Another qualification: my unconscious efficiency. I never had even a hint of an abstract thought. I never remembered yesterday, let alone the day before. And until that Tuesday morning I never made even a tiny mistake.

I had no idea what I was doing. Nor was I at all curious. Curiosity was highly suspect. Curiosity was dangerous in the best of all possible worlds. It was ridiculous in a state where people had never had it so good.

Cards sped from my hands always into correct slots. Care-free hours slipped painlessly by into the dead past. I was sure I was safe and not thinking at all. I was a blessed blank. And then all at once—

"The eyes are the windows of the soul."

The thought meant nothing to me, except it was wrong, it didn't belong in the routine. The routine flew to pieces. My efficiency blew up. I felt like a shiny bottle in a row of bottles with a sudden crack running down the middle. Red cards hit blue slots. Green cards

hit yellow slots. Cards piled up, spilled over the floor. The more I tried to return to my efficiency, the worse everything was.

My suit was wet with sweat. I thought of Mr. Donnicker. If a man's routine broke, it could only be because some inner guilt was disrupting his harmony. A happy person is an efficient person. Inefficiency is the symptom of a guilty conscience.

"Mr. Fredricks," a voice whispered. "You're replaced here."

A cold paralysis gripped me.

"Get up, Fred."

I jumped out of my chair. A thin, stooped little man in a cheap gray suit and dull eyes took my place. In no time at all he had straightened out my mess. Cards were blurs moving into the right slots.

A wide, fattish man in a wrinkled dark suit was watching me out of curiously shining eyes. He carried a black briefcase. I had seen the black briefcases before. Special Police Agent.

He opened the door of my cage and motioned for me to go out ahead of him. "Say goodbye to all this, Fred."

I felt the smile on my wet face as I nodded and tried to feel grateful while at the same time trying to suppress the flood of fear coming up through me and turning to sickness in my throat.

I simply couldn't be afraid. I had nothing to hide. And if I was hiding something inside me I didn't know about, I should feel glad to have it detected and get it all cleaned out.

"My name is John Mesner," he said as we walked down the corridor. I couldn't say anything. I felt like a string someone was beginning to saw on with a rusty knife.

Mesner's office somewhere upstairs was a dingy room with a dusty desk and a couple of chairs. The walls were made of cracked concrete lined with dusty filing cabinets. The window was so soiled I could barely see the shadows of bars through the panes.

Mesner sat down, put his feet on the desk. He took an apple out of his desk drawer and started peeling it slowly with a small penknife.

"You scared, Fred?"

"Of course not."

He smiled, held out a long ribbon of apple peel and dropped it on the floor. "You're scared, Fred."

I put my Personology Card on his desk right in front of him. "I just had a quarterly brain-check a week ago. There it is."

I stopped myself somehow from yelling out wildly as he stabbed the card with his penknife, then tore it in little pieces and dropped them on the floor.

"You've got nothing to be afraid of, Fred. But it'll probably take you a while to realize it." He went on peeling the apple. He had thick hands, stubby fingers, and the nails were dirty. He had a round pale face, a receding chin, thinning hair, and an absurd little red cupid bow mouth.

I tried not to hear the moaning sound that seemed to come from the other side of a door to Mesner's right. He got up, went to the door,

opened it. "Shut that guy up," he said. He shut the door and sat down again. He sliced off a bite of apple and pushed it into his mouth.

"To make it short, Fred. I've investigated you thoroughly. And I can use you here in SPA. You're being transferred."

My throat was constricted. I leaned against the desk. "I don't understand, sir. I don't know anything about Police Work. I'm only a clerk, a card-sorter. I don't have any qualifications. And you can see —my card."

"A couple of field-trips with me, Fred, and you'll be a veteran."

"But why me?"

"You're already in the Security Department for one thing. That makes it convenient. Also, your Intelligence Quotient."

"It's a low eighty," I said. "That's the average. I'm well below normal, and this brain-check showed I was lower this time than the last. So how could my IQ make any difference?"

"Curiosity killed the cat, Fred."

I managed to sit down before I fell down. It was impossible that I should really become an agent in the SP, the most powerful and feared organization in the state. What then was Mesner really up to? One work error shouldn't have snagged me. I'd never been guilty of thinking above a rudimentary and socially acceptable level. My IQ was unquestionably low. I was little more than a moron. So why was I frightened. Why did I feel guilty? Why was Mesner interested?

Mesner stood up and dropped the apple core on the floor.

"We're going on a field-trip now, Fred. Your indoctrination as an SPA man is beginning."

Mesner piloted the heliocar. Mesner said the only heliocars left in operation belonged to SPA. He dropped it on a plot of dried grass on the side of a forested hill in the Tennessee Mountains. Until we got out of the heliocar, I didn't know Mesner had a gun. I couldn't remember having heard of a gun or seen one before, but Mesner told me all about guns. He slid the rifle out of a canvas case, checked it, called it his favorite little field piece. Then he handed me his black briefcase.

He led the way down a narrow path. It was a quiet sunny day. Squirrels ran between the trees. Birds hopped and sang up in the leaves.

In front of a gray, dilapidated shack was a rickety wagon. Two men were lifting a sack out of the rear of the wagon. They wore ragged overalls and no shirts and they were both barefoot.

Mesner yelled. "You. Dirksons! This is a security check."

The shorter one started to run. Mesner shot him in the back of the head. The tall man grabbed up a piece of iron with a hooked end and started yelling as he ran toward us.

"Open the briefcase," Mesner said calmly.

I opened it. Mesner leaned the rifle against a tree. He knelt down, brought a metal disc out of the briefcase attached to a wire. He turned a dial on a bank of controls

inside the case. I heard a whirring hum. The tall hillbilly screamed. He stretched up on his toes, strained his arms and neck at the sky, then fell twitching on his face.

Mesner walked toward the hillbilly and I stumbled after him. I was going to be sick, very sick. The sun worked like pins in my eyeballs.

Mesner drew a round metal cap which he called a stroboscope from the case, fitted it on the hillbilly's head. The metal strip had a disc hanging down in front of the hillbilly's eyes and about two inches away.

Mesner worked the dials and the flicker began blinking off and on, faster and faster, then slower, then faster again as the hillbilly's eyes stared into it unblinkingly. His muscles began to twitch. He beat the ground with his flat hands. Grasshoppers jumped across his face.

Mesner pointed out to me that I was watching an on-the-spot brain-probe. The brain-prober, or bipper, as Mesner called it, was so effective he hardly ever had to use the other items in the case such as the psychopharmaceuticals, drugs, brain shock gadgets, extractors, nerve stretchers and the like.

Mesner sat on his haunches, worked the flicker and lit a cigarette. "These brain-wave flickers correspond to any desired brain-wave rhythm. You play around and you'll get the one you want. They talk. What they don't say comes out later from the recorder. With this bipper you can get anything out of anyone, almost. If you don't

get the info you want it's only because they don't have it. It burns them out considerably in the process, but that's all to the good. They're erased, and won't do any meddling thinking again."

The hillbilly wasn't moving now as the flicker worked on his eyes and activated desired mental responses.

"Dirkson," Mesner said. "What happened to your sister, Elsa?"

"Don't know. She runned away."

"She was blind wasn't she? Wasn't she born blind?"

I felt an icy twist in my stomach.

"That's right. Borned blind as a bat."

"What happened to her?"

"Runned away with some river rat."

"You've hidden her somewhere, Dirkson. Where?"

"I ain't hid her nowhere."

Mesner turned a dial. The hillbilly screamed. His body bent upward. Blood ran out of his mouth. He was chewing his tongue. Mesner stood up and frowned. "Guess he didn't know. If he knew he'd have told us. He's no disguised Egghead. Just a damn collaborating, bottle-headed jerk."

I went over behind some brush and was sick. The hillbilly would never answer any more questions, I knew that much. Now he was laughing and babbling and crawling around on his hands and knees.

"It's rough at first, Fred. No matter how patriotic you are, and how much you hate Eggheads, it's always rough at first. But you should get used to it."

"What—I mean why—?"

"The Dirksons didn't show for their quarterly brain-check. You assume they're hiding something. It turns out they're not, then you haven't lost anything. Of course you have to burn them out a little to question them. But better to burn one innocent bottlehead than let one double-dome slip away." Mesner turned and looked at me. "Isn't that right, Fred?"

"Of course it's right," I said quickly. Mesner smiled at me.

ON THE WAY back to Washington, Mesner piloted the heliocar casually. He leaned back, smoking cigarettes, the ashes streaming down the front of his soiled lapels.

"I think you'll work out fine in SPA, Fred."

I was still sick. I had a throbbing ache in my head and sweat kept stinging in my eyes. I nodded numbed agreement with Mesner.

"I appreciate your trying to make an SPA man out of me," I finally managed to say. "But could you have made some mistake? Gotten the wrong file or something?"

"No. Your IQ is a nice low eighty, Fred. But you're just not aware that you have what is technically known as a quiescent IQ."

"What's that?"

"You're a true patriot, Fred. We both know that. So don't be scared. You know the sick and evil danger of a high IQ and so you've put an unconscious damper on your own intelligence. You're not really so dumb, Fred."

"But I am," I said quickly.

"No, Fred. You think you are, and you look and act normally stupid and believe me, Fred, I admire your patriotic suppression of your intelligence, even from yourself. But a fact is a fact, and you're not so dumb."

"I'm not pretending. I'm not a a subversive—"

"Easy now," Mesner said. "You're not a subversive, that's right. A real subversive knows he's smart, is proud of it and consciously tries to hide it from others. But you loathe your own inherent mental ability, and you've been able to freeze its operation, conceal it even from yourself. Now realize this, Fred. The only place we can allow intelligence to operate is inside the Government. The Government must have a slightly superior thinking capacity in order to run things—for the present anyway."

"But any IQ above eighty is subversive. It says in the—"

"That's an ideal, a goal for the future, Fred. When the transition's been made, when the last Egghead is captured and put away, then all of us will be normal. We'll get ourselves bipped, and burn our excessive intelligence down to the eighty mark. But until that time, Fred, some of us—especially the SPA—have to keep our wits about us. An unfortunate necessity that we pray will soon be ended."

I gazed numbly out through the plastic canopy at the white clouds streaming past. He was trying to get some admission out of me, I thought. That was the only explanation. Working some subtle game with me. But that was absurd

on its face, because I was way below normal.

"My IQ's no good for you then," I said. "I just don't see—"

Mesner interrupted with an impatient laugh. "You're a hell of a lot brighter than you let yourself admit that you are, Fred. That's all I'm saying. You know it's a terrible thing to be smart, so you keep it under wraps. But now you know there's nothing to be afraid of. You know it's legal for a while longer to be smart as long as you're in SPA. Now you can start opening up, releasing your mental capacity. Believe me, Fred, it's for the good of the state. I know it sounds like a paradox, but that's how it is."

"How can it be good when it's such an evil thing?"

"Because right now it's a necessary evil. SPA has problems, Fred. There are still a lot of Eggheads running loose, causing trouble. And the doubledomes still loose are the toughest ones to catch, and that's our job. We've got to track down the old maniac physicists, chemists, engineers, professors, psyche-boys and the like who are still working underground. Until they're all caught Fred, we've got to live with our own filthy brains. Because you see it takes brains to catch brains."

"But I have hardly any brains at all," I insisted.

"You'll see, Fred. You'll see."

Before I left his office that evening he gave me an SPA identity card. My name and face were on it. Suddenly it seemed impossibly official. All at once, I was one of

the most feared and powerful men in the State. Only I knew that the only one I really feared was me.

That card supposedly gave me a free hand. It could take me anywhere, even into top-secret departments in Security. With it, I was immune to curfew laws, to all social restrictions and regulations. But when I went for a walk that evening, I knew I was being followed. Wherever I went, eyes watched me constantly. Shadows moved in and out of gray doorways and dissolved around corners.

After nine, after the curfew sirens howled down the emptied streets, I walked fast toward the ancient rooming house in which I thought I had always lived. Hundreds of silent gray women and children came out onto the streets and began cleaning them with brooms. One by one, the gas lights along the rubbled streets went out. I started to run through shadows, and footsteps moved behind me.

A drunken man came out of an alley and staggered down the broken pavement where weeds grew. A black car whisked him away. But no black car stopped for me. I saw no one with a black briefcase either. I saw only shadows, and felt unseen eyes watching me.

The old woman who had been run down by a black car still lay there on the sidewalk. No one dared approach that corpse to get it off the streets. No one knew who it was, or why it was dead. No one would take any chances. One was just as suspect from associating with a guilty corpse as a living neighbor named Donnicker.

Upstairs, I saw a splotch of blood on the hall floor. This time I knew it was Donnicker's. It reminded me of the Dirksens now. And of who could say how many others?

I lay down and took all three of tomorrow's tranquilizers. We were allotted a month's supply of tranquilizers at a time, and we were all compelled by law to take three a day. They knocked out worry and anxiety usually. But now they didn't seem to do me much good. I couldn't seem to go to sleep. This had never happened to me before.

Maybe Mesner was right. Maybe I did have a high IQ but wasn't consciously aware of it. This being true, then I *had* to be in SPA. SPA was the only place a high IQ could be tolerated.

What really bothered me the most, of course, was why I should be worried about anything. If my IQ was useful, I ought to be glad of it. A true patriot should be glad also to have unconscious subversive elements detected. A true patriot would be grateful for whatever treatment could cleanse him. What was the matter with me? Didn't I want to be purified, cleansed? Didn't I want to be bipped a little?

I didn't trust Mesner. I didn't believe he really wanted me to help him track down Eggheads. But so what? If he was trying to find out something about me, I ought to be glad to cooperate.

Only I wasn't.

I had bad dreams. I dreamed of Dirksen babbling and crawling and smiling at me with his bloody mouth. He kept smiling and whispering to me: "I never did know

nothing, and now I'm just all burned out."

I dreamed of old man Donnicker being dragged down the stairs.

Then I dreamed that Mesner came in and looked down at me sleeping. A light bulb came down from the ceiling. It turned bright, then dull, then bright, then dull.

Mesner smiled as he lit a cigarette. "That really bothered you didn't it, Fred. Bipping the Dirkson boy."

"It made me sick."

I wanted to wake up. I tried my best to wake up because I felt that if I didn't wake up now, I never would. I would die in my sleep.

"Let's talk about it, Fred. I'm uneasy about it myself sometimes. I've bipped so many of them, maybe my conscience bothers me. You think it might bother a man's conscience, Fred?"

"What do you mean, conscience?"

"Maybe you think there's something immoral about bipping a man."

"If the State does it, it's right," I said. "If it helps bring about the Era of Normalcy and absolute and permanent stability, then any method is right."

Was that the correct answer? I was beginning to feel confused. Thoughts, words all jumbling up. There was an orthodox thought and an orthodox answer for everything. I'd learned them all. But had I answered this one correctly?

"That's right, Fred. But the old crackpot Egghead moralists used to say that the end doesn't necessarily justify the means. They would

claim that bipping a man was wrong, and that no good results could ever come from it. They would say that a destructive means would always create a destructive end. Violence, they said, could only create more violence. What do you think of that, Fred?"

"That's wrong," I said. "That's confusing, double-dome stuff."

"I know. But we've got to identify with Egghead thinking if we can. No matter how repulsive it is, we've got to understand how they think if we're going to track them down and put them away. Now think hard, Fred. Have you ever heard a man say, 'Better that the whole world should die than that one man's brain should be invaded against his will.'"

"No, no, that's subversive," I screamed.

There was more dream, more questions, more and more confused answers. I woke up in a cold sweat. I found several electronic spyeyes concealed about the room. Just outside my door I saw one of Mesner's cigarette butts. It was yellowed with spittle, twisted and pinched in the way his always were.

I didn't know if all of that night, or only part of it had been a dream. I didn't know if Mesner had actually been questioning me in my sleep or not. The spy-eyes could do that. But I knew Mesner had been outside my door. Probably he had been questioning my dreams.

THAT DAY was worse than the night. Mesner had said to wait until I heard from him, but there

was no word from him that day. I tried more tranquilizers. The hell with tomorrow's supply. They didn't help me. A blinding headache hit me at regular intervals.

What was Mesner using me for? What did he want from me? What was I supposed to know?

The Educational Tevee came on also at regular intervals.

“. . . so if you might think, Citizens, that a machine could do your simple work better, just remember what a terrible thing the machines did to us during the cataclysmic age of reason. As you know, the machines were invented to replace human labor by Eggheads who have always tried to destroy normal, comfortable and simple ways of life. The disease of free-thought was only possible after the machines replaced human beings, gave us the time to develop excessive and self-destructive thinking . . .”

I watched the light outside my window turn a duller gray then black, and after that an edge of white moon slid partly across the pane.

Why should I care what Mesner was trying to get out of me? If it was subversive then I should be glad to get rid of it. If I was clear and clean, then I had nothing to worry about. Why wasn't I simply bipped like Donnicker and Dirkson had been? Why should a true patriot care?

I shivered and stared into the darkness. Something horrible had happened to me. For the first time I realized I was entertaining unpatriotic thoughts. I didn't want to

be bipped. And I knew that when Mesner finished with me, I would be bipped. When he found out whatever I was supposed to know, I'd join Dirkson and the rest of them. It had been all right, going along with the routines, as long as I actually hadn't seen what happened to a man if he didn't.

I didn't want to be erased. Whatever I was, I suddenly wanted to stay me, guilty or not. Maybe this attitude was all that Mesner wanted to be sure of. But I doubted it. Because a simple bipping would have determined that.

I didn't think I could stomach any more of Mesner's field-trips. On the other hand I had to go along. It all seemed to boil down to whether I wanted to get bipped now or later.

“Bipping isn't bad at all,” Mesner had said yesterday. “After you're bipped, you can do routine work like everyone else, never worry again about worrying. That guy who replaced you, for example. He was bipped. He's never made a mistake for 20 years. He never will.”

I closed my eyes. I thought of all the happy bottleheads walking the streets, out on the farms, doing their routine work, happy and care-free as long as they didn't worry. Human vegetables, the erased ones, and the terrified ones who didn't know they were even scared. Cities full of dull-eyed ciphers, and now that I was outside it a little, I could see them with an awful clarity.

And I thought—how many are as dumb as they appear to be?

How many were just too frightened and numbed to think? How many would stay frightened and numb so long that they would never be able to think even if they sometime decided to try?

It was easy enough to assume that too much intelligence was an evil, a virus to be burned out. Was it better to have too little and become like the hillbilly?

Oh, Mesner had set my so-called quiescent IQ going all right. But how far would it go before it had gone far enough for his purpose?

THAT NIGHT I had another bad dream. Only it didn't really seem so bad as it should have been. A blind man was talking to me. Then I dreamed that a blind girl with a seeing-eye dog was looking at me. She was about fifteen, maybe younger, dressed in a plain flowered dress tied in back with a ribbon. She had a soft round face and her eyes were wide and opaque. The girl and dog seemed to come out of a mist and they whispered to me. It was frightening, but important, and I didn't remember what it was.

I woke up shivering. I seemed to smell wet hair, and the window was open. I couldn't remember whether I had shut the window before I went to sleep or not.

Mesner called me early the next morning.

He looked the same in his wrinkled suit with the food stains on the lapels, and peeling an apple.

"Fred, have you ever heard a phrase sounding like ' . . . and the

blind shall lead them?'"

I appeared to be trying to think about it, then said I had never heard anything like that.

"You're positive about that?"

"I don't remember it."

"You mean you might have, but you just can't remember it."

"I didn't say that. I doubt if I ever heard such a phrase."

"What about this one, ' . . . and the blind shall see again.'"

"No, I said.

"You're sure?"

I looked directly at him and he stopped peeling the apple. "If I'm supposed to have such a damn high quiescent IQ, why not let me in on a few things?"

"What few things?"

"These references to the blind. The Dirksons. Some blind girl named Elsa. What are you trying to find out?"

"I thought maybe you remembered something, that's all. I'm pretty much in the dark myself. All I have are a few clues and theories."

"Clues, theories, about what?"

"Eggheads. Sabotage. What the crackpots could build, they can best destroy. They're blowing up factories, manufacturing and power plants, machines, production."

"That's sabotage? I thought the whole idea in bringing about the Era of Normalcy was to do away with all mechanization. Do everything with the hands, like in the good old days."

"That's an ultimate goal, Fred. Drudges don't think. They're happier. But the transition has to be more gradual. The Eggheads want

to take away all mechanization at once, create chaos and anarchy. They figure that will cause the bottleheads to revolt against the Government. We can't catch the saboteurs. The saboteurs inside a blown-up factory, for example, we never know who they are. We bip every worker, not a sign of a saboteur. So whoever does the dirty work is a mindless tool of the Egghead underground, having no memory of having committed sabotage. Who are the couriers, the ones who make vital contact between the Egghead underground and the saboteurs? The dumb saboteur has to get his highly complex directives from the Eggheads. Who are the couriers?"

"Why ask me?"

"I know this much, Fred. Blind people are used as couriers."

My knees felt weak. I couldn't say anything. All I could think about was my dreams.

"I want to show you something, Fred." Mesner led me through the other door. A bleak concrete cubicle, no windows, a damp walled gray cell. Two naked men lay on slabs. Stroboscopes on their heads. Behind them, styluses recorded brain-wave patterns on moving white strips. One of the men, the one on the left, was blind. His eyes staring up into the flicker were opaque.

"Look at those brain-wave recordings, Fred. They're getting the same stimulus. We can give a thousand bottleheads this stimulus with the flicker, and get identical responses. But not the blind boys. We can't successfully bip a blind

boy. The brain-waves are radically different and we've never figured out a way of codifying them. A blind bastard's never *seen* anything. The seeing eyes are trackers, like radar. But a blind boy takes in reality and records it and keeps it in a different way. We can't get at the code easily. But I'm getting it. I've bipped plenty of blind boys and I'm getting it, Fred. The blind are used for couriers. I know that much. For the simple reason that we can't bip meaningful info out of their scrambled think-tanks."

The naked men on the slabs moaned. One of them opened his mouth and a bloody foam spread over his chin.

"What I'm looking for now is a known courier who is also blind. Then I can bip him, and check the info with the code I've worked out."

He unbuttoned his coat and took a black hand-gun out of a holster strapped beneath his arm. "Meanwhile, Fred, these bottleheads have had it. They're burned out."

I heard the two sharp echoing reports as Mesner shot them in the head. One of them beat his heels on the slab. Mesner pointed the smoking revolver. "Even dead, the blind brain records differently. See there?"

I leaned against the wall. Through a crumbled hole down in the corner of damp concrete, I saw two red eyes and heard the rat squealing.

"Let's go, Fred. We've got some important field-trips on today's schedule. And you still have a lot to learn."

We went to Chicago. We set up some hidden electronic spy-eyes in a big apartment building. They were to be checked later for evidence of someone there who was hiding an IQ of over a hundred.

And that afternoon we ran down a renegade bio-chemist hiding in a tenement. He had disguised himself for a number of years as a plumber. Mesner bipped him, and an official Security heliocar came down from Washington to take him away.

When Mesner finished with the old man he was hopping around like a monkey, making grotesque faces, giggling and yelling. Tevee cameramen were on hand. A reporter was commenting on the capture of another, “. . . insane crackpot who has been living here under an assumed name while plotting and planning and building some diabolical machine with which to blow up the city. Our department of Internal Security exercising its eternal vigilance, captured him in time . . .”

Mesner and I took the heliocar back up into a clear blue sky and headed for Sauk City.

“Do you wonder, Fred, why we just don’t kill them after they’re bipped?”

“What could it matter?”

“It doesn’t to them, but to us it matters. Public likes their scapegoats alive. More satisfying to hate live people. Public likes to see their dragons behind bars, humiliated, treated like crackpots. Makes a bottlehead feel good to see an Egghead dancing like a monkey. Also prevents martyrs. Living men are

never martyrs.”

“So why are we going to Sauk City?” I asked. I wanted to change the subject.

Mesner had information that an ex-professor from some long-extinct University had been concealing a high IQ after having supposedly purged himself of it years before. He was supposed to have been caught by a brain-probing spy-eye and was reported to have an IQ of over 160.

Mesner talked of such an IQ as though it was a living time-bomb that might go off any minute and blow Sauk City and the entire State to hell. He shot the heliocar along at 500 miles an hour. He held the T-Bar in one hand and lit cigarettes with the other.

“What upset you so much, Fred? I mean that morning when I interrupted you sorting cards?”

I felt a warning click in my head. I remembered it. *The eyes are the windows of the soul.*

Mesner, I thought, couldn’t look into the windows of a blind man. Could I?

It hadn’t been my own thought that had disrupted my idyllic, care-free life sorting cards. Mesner had said it to me.

“Just the unexpected break in the routine,” I said. “You’ve already explained it. My quiescent IQ is just too high to be a successful card-sorter.”

“It wasn’t *what* I said?”

“What did you say? I’ve forgotten.”

“The eyes are the windows of the soul. But I was only quoting, Fred. Some crackpot said that long ago.”

"Why probe me about blind people? I never knew any."

"Ninety percent of a human being's mental activity is underground, like most of an iceberg is under water. How much of your past can you remember, Fred?"

"Very little. The past is dead. Why should I remember it?"

"Because a good intelligence depends on the past. Memory is a part of it. Without a past, you don't have a brain. And we've got to release our brains, Fred, for awhile. Until we can catch saboteurs and Eggheads."

"I guess I've just been a patriot too long," I said.

"Remember attending Drake University ten years ago, Fred?"

"Sure," I said, fast, as though it was unimportant. I was really beginning to sweat. "I can remember if you keep prodding me. Sure, I can. So what? I purged myself. I forgot it. Schools weren't illegal then."

"But we've got to reawaken all those past memories, Fred. Make our brains work better, even if a lot of doubledome stuff comes up. You remember a psyche prof named O'Hara?"

I felt suddenly dizzy, sick. A wavering wheel started turning in my head. I managed to stop it from turning so fast. "I don't remember that at all," I said.

"Then of course you wouldn't remember that he was blind?"

In the darkness behind closed lids I could see patterns of light begin to flicker and threatening whispers dug at a fogging curtain.

"Don't push it, Fred. It'll come.

I'm patient. If I weren't, then by this time I would be bipped myself and safely put away."

He would get it all right, I knew. Sooner or later he would tap it. First I would tap it, then Mesner would tap it. And after that I never would worry again. I'd never worry about remembering or forgetting anything. I wouldn't even be me. A body with a bipped brain would walk around doing routine work, and looking like me. But I'd be dead. I didn't want to die that way. Genuine physical death would be all right. But not that, not that bipping treatment.

Mesner turned quickly and caught me staring at the outline of the handgun under his coat. He smiled. "You want one of these, Fred?"

"Not yet," I said. "I don't remember enough yet. I'm not smart enough yet."

"Tell me when you're ready."

By the time we closed in on the professor in an old deserted house on the outskirts of Sauk City, he had managed to hang himself to a waterpipe in the basement. He wore a pair of ragged pants. He was terribly thin and his hair was white, and his toothless mouth gaped open and his jaws sucked in. I had never seen anyone appear so pitiful and so harmless as that old man hanging there.

We untied the rope and the body fell to the floor. Mesner took a small disc from his case and put it over the dead man's heart, then stood up. "He's too dead. We should have gotten here a few min-

utes earlier.”

He seemed tired as he sat down on a soggy box. His hands were dirty with coal dust and a smudge of it was on his face.

This is it, I thought. Now was as good a time for it as any, because there wasn't any good time for it. He had all the advantage. And the longer it went on, the greater advantage he would have. It was only a question of time anyway, and I couldn't stand waiting.

I lunged at him. I heard the faint whining sound, saw the flash and the glint of the disc coming out of his pocket. A sudden, painless paralysis hit me and I was helpless on my knees looking at Mesner. He just stared at me morosely, tired, irritated a little.

“You should know better, Fred. You're smart.”

“Go to hell,” I said.

He shook his head. “Not now, Fred. Nor you either. It isn't me you want to get, Fred. You just don't want to get bipped. You ought to trust me. I don't want to bip you, now or ever. I mean it. We need brains to catch Eggheads and that's my job. You're valuable. Everybody getting bipped, it isn't easy to get smart people these days.”

“Bip me now then, you bastard. Get it over with.”

“You'd better trust me. I'm being honest. Some of these other orthodox jerks in Security, they wouldn't fool with you. They would bip you sooner than look at you.”

“Why don't you?”

“I've told you, for God's sake. You're a bright guy, and I'm

eager to learn. And I don't want to burn up any important info.”

Then I got it. Then I knew why he was keeping the bipper off me.

I thought about it all the way back to Washington while Mesner fed himself apples. I was supposed to have valuable unconscious info. Mesner wanted it. But the old crackpots were right. The means not only created the ends, but could destroy the ends if the means were bad enough. You probe and pry into a man's brain deep and hard enough and you come up with nothing. Your methods have destroyed the end. You've burned out the truth you're trying to get.

Mesner was trying to get info from me without burning it up.

The bastard was trying to have his bloody cake and eat it. But the insight didn't make my position any easier. He was going to get it some way. His talking and hinting and probing was designed to awaken vital memory in me, get it up into total consciousness where he could get at it with his instruments without the danger of burning it up.

Soon as he got what he wanted he would bip me. I couldn't keep him from getting it because I didn't know what it was. I couldn't keep on suppressing something if I didn't know what it was, and I knew that no one can consciously suppress knowledge in himself in any case.

FOR TWO MORE days I didn't hear from Mesner. I indulged in feverish and ridiculous escape fantasies. There could be no escape

for me. The educational voices from the Tevee drifted in and out.

“ . . . the greatest threat to man’s happy survival is reason. Man was never intended to go above a certain mental level and become thereby a victim of his own imagination and complex fears. This disease of reason has been carried to its final suicidal limit by Eggheads . . . ”

No mention of sabotage. The care-free public must not hear of such disquieting things. All the public heard 24 hours a day was a voice telling them about the evils of reason. The destructiveness of overly-developed brains, and the vicious criminality of Eggheads.

After listening to that long enough, and having all subversive level IQs purged, who could believe otherwise? How many believed otherwise now? Did I? What in hell did Mesner want to dig out of me? Who, what, why was I?

I was still a bottle. But now there were countless cracks appearing in it.

Then Mesner called, said we were going on another field-trip that next afternoon. All right, I said. Someway or other, I knew, I would make this my last trip with Mesner.

He had located a blind man, he said, who he knew had been a courier, a blind man definitely linked up with a recent sabotaging of a motor parts plant somewhere in Illinois.

Mesner looked down on the shanty town from a high bluff above the river. The river rats’ shanties were built half in, half out

of the water, some of them on stilts, some of them actually consisting of dilapidated houseboats.

Mesner said river rats were worse rebs even than hillbillies. They drifted up and down the rivers. You staged a raid and they dissolved away into the river like rodents. Many of them skipped quarterly brain-checks, but no one knew how many. Birth and death records weren’t kept by river rats.

I walked ahead of Mesner down a winding gravel path into rotting reeds by the river, then we followed another muddy path toward the shanties. Frogs and insects hummed. A path of moonlight moved across the water. A ribby hound dog slunk away from me. A ragged kid looking wilder than the hound, ran across the path and slipped soundlessly into the muddy water.

Mesner pointed out the blind man’s shack. Then he looked at me and smiled with that absurd little cupid bow mouth. “This isn’t the time either, Fred. If you think we’re not covered, you’re wrong. You couldn’t run fifty feet before they burned you down.”

We walked nearer the loosely boarded and sagging shack.

“You take the back, Fred. Just remember, better later than now. And be careful. When these river rats get stirred up, they can cause a hell of a row. The entire goon squad would have to move in and there would be a mass bipping spree.”

Mesner crept nearer, then whispered. “No light. You can’t even tell if one of them’s at home after

dark. Why do they need a light? Go on, watch the back door, Fred. And don't let this one slip by."

I heard the front door crash inward. A man wearing only tattered pants ran out. He was thin and ribby like the dog, and I could see the moonlight shining on the opaque whiteness of his eyes.

He ran directly at me. And I knew I wasn't going to try to stop him. But I didn't know why. Then Mesner came out and fired a small gun, smaller than the one under his coat. It wasn't the same. This was a nerve-gun and it curled the synaptic connections between neurons.

The blind man collapsed and lay like a corpse at my feet. I knelt down and felt of him. Mesner whispered for me to drag the old man inside. I hooked my hands under his shoulders and pulled him into the shack. It didn't matter to me now, nor to the blind man, I thought.

He hardly weighed anything. His eyes were fixed in a white silence as Mesner shone a small flashlight into them. Then Mesner shut both doors and pulled a ragged cloth across the single window.

He opened his case. He put the stroboscope on the blind man's head. The bluish light began to flicker over the staring opaque eyes. I saw the nerve-gun lying on the floor beside Mesner's hand.

"You're too late," I said. "He's dead. I wouldn't have dragged him in here if I hadn't known he was dead."

Mesner was breathing thickly. His fat round face was pale and

shiny with sweat. "I know he's dead. He must have gulped a fast-action poison soon as I came in the door. Maybe even the blind boys are deciding things are getting too hot."

Mesner worked the stroboscope. "But he's dead," I said.

"Brain cells are the last to die," Mesner said. "Maybe I can pick up a little info yet."

It burst out of me then as from an abscess. The bottle cracked into a thousand fragments. I lunged at Mesner. He seemed to roll away from me, and then he squatted there in the flickering light. He leveled the gun at me.

"So you're beginning to wake up, Fred!"

Probing a dead man. Questioning the dead. Even a corpse was sacred no longer. The vile and horrible bastards, all of them.

"I don't care what happens to me," I said.

"That's noble of you."

"I'm going to kill you."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Maybe I wouldn't agree, but I'll understand, Fred. I know what you're thinking. What I'm doing now is just too much. Right? The final indignity one human being could inflict on another, right? A human mind should be sacred, even if it's dumb. Even if it's dead. Especially if it's dead. Right, Fred?"

I started around the rickety table toward him.

"Now it's set off, Fred. You're fired up now. That's what I've been waiting for. You were planted to sabotage Security itself, Fred,

and I always knew that. Now we're going to find out all the rest of it. Now it's squeezing out of your unconscious, and we can drain it, empty it all out. They put a lid on your mind, Fred, and I've taken it off. Put on the ethical pressure, put it heavy on your idealistic Egghead morality, steam it up hot, blow the lid off. It's working, Fred."

"Is it?" I said. "I don't remember anything that would do you any good. I just know that it's wrong, the final horrible fraud. It isn't intelligence you guys want to wipe out, Mesner. Not your own, not the big wheels in power. It's only certain kinds of thinking, undesirable thoughts, attitudes you don't like. Those are what you have to purge."

"Right, Fred. Only the wrong kind of Eggheads. Me, hell I'm an Egghead too. Remember the prize pupil in your psych class at Drake University, Fred?" Mesner laughed. "That was me."

"You can kill people," I said. "You can't burn a sense of what's right or wrong out of people. That old dead blind man there has preserved something you can't touch."

"Too bad you won't be around to see how wrong you are, Fred. We can make people whatever we damn well want them to be. Your old ethical pals worked out the methods. We're using it for a different end."

The front door squeaked. I felt a moist draft on my face, and a whisper in my brain. A few words. I don't remember what they were. But they were a key that opened floodgates of self-understanding

and awareness. I remembered a lot then, a lot of things and feelings that warmed me. I had a wonderful sense of wholeness and I was no longer afraid of being bipped, or afraid to die.

There was an expression of complete triumph on Mesner's face, and he knew what had happened to me and he wanted it, all of it, sucked away into his briefcase. Just the same, the whisper from the doorway distracted his attention and I went for him.

In that second of time, I saw the little blind girl who had whispered that triggering phrase for my release, and behind her, the seeing-eye dog. She was utterly unafraid and smiling at me. Courage she was saying. And I could share it with her.

She had scaled her own death in order to make me whole again.

I smashed the flashlight off the table into the wall and my weight drove Mesner onto the floor. I managed to grab his arm and we lay there in the dark straining for the nerve-gun. I began to hear the whirl of heliocars. I twisted Mesner's arm up and around and released the nerve-gun's full charge directly into his face. A stammering scream came out of him. It was the scream of something not human. A full charge of that into the brain, it must have curled up the intricate connections and short circuited his brain into an irreparable hash.

I took the blind girl's hand and we ran toward the river. The sky was crossed with search beams. And in the deep darkness by the

river I was suddenly as blind as the girl who held my hand. We kept running and stumbling through the reeds. I felt her hand slip from mine. Then something hit me.

It wasn't a localized impact, but something seemed to have hit me all over and moved through me as though my blood suddenly turned to lead.

I tried to find the girl. I tried to crawl to the river, into the river. And near me I heard the girl say softly, "Goodbye now, Mr. Fredricks. Don't worry, because you'll be brave."

"Thanks," I said. "Little girl, what's your name?"

She didn't answer. I tried to call out to her again in the darkness, but I couldn't move my lips. Paralysis gripped me, and after that blackness, with the lights sometime later beginning to flicker against my tearing eyes, and then the horror.

THE INQUISITION ended sooner than I thought it would. After the awful intrusion, there isn't any farther awareness of time. After you are thoroughly invaded, after your private soul, every naked cell of your brain is peeled open, exposed to the raw glaring light, after that you no longer care. What is you has been obliterated the way a shadow is eaten by the burn of cold light.

Your identity is gone. They take it. You are theirs, all of you belongs to them. You feel them pouring out your mind down to the

pitiful dregs as though they are pouring cups of coffee.

The pain is a shredding, ripping, raveling horror. After that there is no feeling at all, and this is worse.

I told them everything I knew. What I couldn't tell, they tapped, tearing chunks out the way you would rip pages and chapters out of a book.

The responsible humanists, scientists, intellectuals had known what was coming. They prepared for it, and set up the plan before the last days of the Egghead purge. They set up the future saboteurs by a long intricate process of psychodynamic conditioning. They did it in the Universities before the schools were purged. Promising students were selected, worked on.

Fredricks, a psychology student, was subjected to repeated hypnotic experiments. A blind Professor named O'Hara did most of it. It was all there finally in Fredrick's head, but then it was all suppressed and finally Fredricks himself forgot that he knew. A delayed hypnotic response pattern, an analogue, is set up. Later it will be triggered off by a phrase, a word, a series of words repeated at conditioned response intervals.

Ten years later he was working inside, inside Security itself. When circumstances were right, a blind courier was to have triggered off Fredrick's suppressed knowledge allowing him to sabotage the entire Department of Records and Scientific Method. So many scientists and intellectuals had already been purged that few remained among the available personnel of Security

who could have repaired a simple gasoline motor without a step-by-step chart taken from the Department of Records.

It would have been a master coup for the underground.

But Mēsner had traced Fredrick's identity back to Drake University, back to O'Hara. He had gotten suspicious, and removed Fredricks from Security.

The blind girl had whispered the key phrase just the same, in order that Fredricks might face the ordeal of the inquisition with as much pride, strength, and courage as possible.

"Only a free man, a man who fully respects himself as an individual and a human being," Fredricks told his inquisitors, "only a man who has learned why he is living, can die like a man."

Then they killed me.

They tried to get more out of me, but what they wanted to know, I knew nothing whatever about. I knew nothing about the underground, or the headquarters of the Eggheads.

But by then I was dead, and what they did was of no importance. I was no longer me. There was no awareness of being me. I had joined Dirkson and the renegade biochemist and all the others.

I was hopping up and down in a cage before the Tevee cameras, and a reporter was talking to millions of smiling, care-free citizens and telling them how another vicious crackpot had been captured just in time to avert some terrible disaster which would have disturbed the status quo.

Then I was taken away.

"Are you awake now, Mr. Fredricks?"

I opened my eyes. I was in a clean white room lying near a barred window. An attractive nurse smiled at me. She was holding a clipboard and making notations on a report pad.

"How do you feel now, Fred?"

Painfully, I turned and saw several ghosts standing and sitting on the other side of the bed. I could see a door behind them, partly opened onto a softly lit corridor.

There was Dr. Malden, a famous anthropologist whom I had last seen in a newspaper headline during the purge. And Dr. Marquand, Nobel Prize winner in electrobiology. And Dr. Martinson, one time head of the UN Research Foundation. Dr. Rothberg, social psychologist. All dead, all purged, bipped and confined years ago. All ghosts.

Only they were there. And they were alive, and they seemed glad to see me. All I knew was that I was alive again. I was aware of being me. And somehow I knew that these forgotten names were also alive again.

Rothberg handed me a cigarette and the nurse lit it for me. I remembered that once I had liked cigarettes.

"So what's happened," I said. My voice was weak. My insides felt as though they were filled with grinding pieces of broken razor blades.

"You're in Zany-Ward No. 104," Dr. Rothberg said.

"I don't believe I quite understand," I said carefully.

"You will," Dr. Rothberg said. "Let's just say for a starter that when a man is bipped and brought here, we try to put him back together again. It's a long painful process. Sometimes he's not quite the same, but we've done pretty good work. We rebuild burned-out circuits. We have to know exactly what you were before you were bipped, and we try to duplicate the pattern. Regeneration is slow and rough. You'll be all right."

They shook hands with me and smiled down at me and went out. The pretty nurse gave me a pill and I lay back and thought about it. It was logical enough, and I started to laugh. During the months after that while the slow process of re-learning and regeneration continued, I learned more about the Zany-Wards. Serious as it was, and

as much as there was yet to be done, it was always amusing.

As Eggheads were apprehended and confined, they were rehabilitated, put back together again, in a way you could say fissioned. The Eggheads are the inmates. They run the Zany-Wards which are used also as bases of operation in a continuing attempt to disrupt the Era of Normalcy. Great scientific labs are concealed underground.

When Security inspection committees appear on the scene, we all put on our acts. We dance, make faces, act like monkeys and giggle.

Doctor Rothberg told me yesterday that if our sabotage work doesn't soon cause people to rebel against the Era of Normalcy, it won't be long before we'll be the only sane people left in the world.

END

