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Editor

Volume I

March, 1951

Number 6

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Cover by Milton Luros, illustrating "The Last Lunacy"

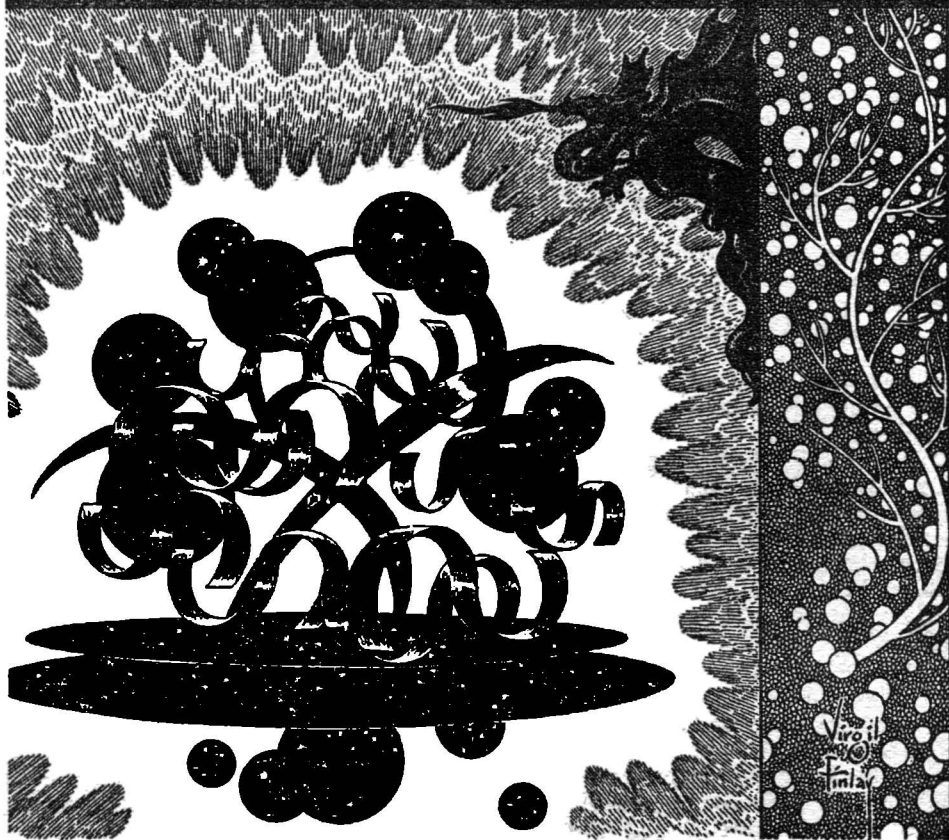
Interior illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence, Poulton, and Luros

FUTURE COMBINED WITH SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyrighted 1950 by Columbia Publications, Inc., 20c per copy; yearly subscription \$1.20. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

INCOMPLETE



SUPERMAN



"Please don't go in, Will," she whispered.

"We want our place in the sun, but it isn't only Man who is holding us back; there's another power as strong as we are."

THE MAN said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kennedy; I know it's unethical, and I wouldn't ever play such a trick on you myself. But it's orders."

"Whose orders?"

"I got them from the sales chief.

Don't ask me where *he* got them." The man leaned forward, so that his face seemed almost to project from the visiscreen. "If you want my private guess, Mr. Kennedy, the government bought those parts. Want them for some top secret project."

FEATURE NOVEL by Poul Anderson

"You don't *know* who got them?"

"No. Nor did my boss, when I asked him. It's just orders from higher up. And who swings that much influence, except the government?"

I could name a few— "What chance is there of our getting them later?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. I gather all of our production of those particular items will be going to this unidentified client."

"You couldn't find out who it is? Maybe we could make a deal with them."

The man looked frightened. "It'd cost me my job if I got nosy."

"Perhaps we could find you a better job with our outfit."

"No!"

"Well—never mind, then. If necessary, we can always make the parts ourselves."

"I'm really very sorry about all this. Murchison Laboratories has been one of our best clients. We hate to disappoint you this way. Hope you won't hold it against us in future purchases—"

"Of course not." *Like hell we won't! We can't make further use of that company—not when it too has come under their control.*

Presently the man ended the conversation and the screen went dark. For a moment the being who called himself Will Kennedy sat alone in his office, thinking.

So Murchison Labs wouldn't get its electronic parts. This had been the last source of supply for such delicate and unusual apparatus—all the others had been taken over, one by one, and on some or other pretext had quit selling anything to Murchison which couldn't be obtained from any ordinary source. Now this one, too—the secret research would be held up indefinitely while Kennedy got his plant organized to manufacture all its own needs.

Except that that wasn't the worst of it. If *they* simply happened to be engaged in some parallel work, had merely beaten out the supermen in the course of normal competition for scarce material, it didn't matter.

They might even have thought that the various projects they nullified were being carried on by humans, and had throttled them as undesirable. The supermen themselves had had occasion to do that to humans.

In either case, the thing to do was to affect a rapprochement, convince them of their incredible error, and join forces.

But more and more the conflict didn't look accidental. There was too much interference, all along the line, for all of it to be due to chance collisions with *their* unknown purposes. If they were so thoroughly aware of what the supermen were doing, how could they be ignorant of the nature of the workers? And if they knew that, they would only remain hidden if they were hostile!

And in that case—

It was high time for another meeting of the Council.

KENNEDY got up, a tall lean dark-haired man with a deep inward bitterness far behind his eyes, and put on his coat. He had to go home to call the others; the special circuit was there, and it was about quitting time anyway.

Old Tom Murchison hailed him as he left the office. "What luck, Will?"

"None," shrugged Kennedy. "Somebody's got in ahead of us and contracted for their entire output. I couldn't find out whom. May be the government, working on something secret." He might as well let the old man think that. "Looks like we'll just have to start making our own stuff."

"That's a mighty big investment, especially in something so long-range as this subelectronic generator—when you're not even sure it'll work!"

"Research is what keeps us ahead, chief," said Kennedy. "You founded these labs to do nothing but research. There's no point in sticking to petty industrial problems. We don't want to be just glorified consultants; this is a chance to get in on the ground floor of something as fundamental and important as atomic energy.

The old scientist nodded. "You're right, of course—as usual. Okay, I'll see if I can't dig up a spare million dollars or two for you to play with."

"We'll get it back tenfold in five or ten years."

"Maybe. At least—it'll be fun!" The faded blue eyes twinkled.

"Sure. Well, goodnight, chief." Kennedy paused. "I might not be around tomorrow. I'd like to see a chap in Seattle sometime soon; he had some interesting ideas that I think we can use."

"No need to tell me, Will. You know you've got a free hand here. Goodnight."

The superman walked out onto the gravelled driveway. The early winter dusk had fallen, and snow was drifting softly out of a lowering sky. He was alone in a world of white and gray and gathering darkness.

The faint pulse of life tingled in his nerves. He could sense the impulses of men in the building behind him, a little ragged now with weariness at the end of the day. A deeper subliminal current came from the town ahead, smoothed and muted by distance, the life forces of several thousand humans going about their business. A different pattern came briefly near, a dog loping through the snow. He felt the sudden tension as it sensed him. Few dogs liked a superman, they could smell a subtle difference.

He caught the fragment of a thought, some human's unsystematic rambling:—*not time tomorrow and dentist bill and straight up and*—It faded back into the formless swirling of nervous energy.

Telepathy—but maddeningly incomplete, unreliable, brief flashes of clear reception and then darkness again. It was a sense the supermen should have had, but it was rudimentary in those few who possessed it at all. Even as psychosomatic control was imperfect, as the endocrine system still wasn't much better than man's, as—

The incomplete superman. Evolution, he supposed, would in time have produced perfection of all that

of which the present generation had only the beginnings. Only there wasn't going to be any evolution; there wouldn't be any future generations.

The supermen were sterile.

HE FOUND his car and sent it whispering along the street toward his house. Thought filled his brain, the enormous logic of a brain with an I.Q. of 250—not that I.Q. meant much when it got that high—thought only partially translatable into human terms. It was swift, that thought—hard, cold, and rapid as lightning flickering in a summer night; it held to its purpose without wandering; and it integrated more factors than a human brain could ever handle at once.

He knew of the interference with his own work and with some of the projects carried on by others of his species; he had bits of information hinting at trouble in almost every field. But it wasn't coordinated and there wasn't enough of it. More important, no decision had been made as to what should be done about it.

Definitely, the Council would have to meet.

Snow whirled blindly in the beam of his headlights. The rising wind seemed to hoot at him. It had been wandering the earth before man rose up on two feet and took the wind in his face; it would still be wandering when man was in his grave.

Man—and susperman.

Why do we bother? There's no real hope for us. We're doomed, we'll go down into oblivion and be forgotten—unless—

Unless! We may be able to overcome the sterility, somehow. And meanwhile, supermen are being born to human mothers, there's always a new generation of sorts. He had a brief vision of a world controlled by his species, with a few select humans left as slaves and breeding stock. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

The house loomed before him. He slid the car into the garage and got out.

As he entered, the music met him, and he scowled in annoyance. Anna

was composing again. There wasn't time.

But it held him, regardless. This was music for a superman, music such as no human had ever imagined; there were the tones above and below audibility, shivering along his sensitive nerves, raising his hackles with the return of old forgotten instincts, blowing a wind upon him as if he looked into the cold depths of space itself.

It was stark, that music. It was an underground river flowing through lightless caverns with blind fish swimming past ice floes, it was a wind howling over empty moors; it was the mad dance of witches on the Brocken; the cold glass-smooth brain of a creature older than the universe and a wild beast stirring to life and flexing its claws down in the darkness of his subconscious. It laughed and sneered and roared at him; it flickered with little cold flames, it danced and mocked and lured. It was Anna's.

She heard him enter and her long fingers paused over the multiplex. The music snarled into silence, but it took a minute before the effects died within him, before the room seemed real again.

"Like it?" she asked. "*Symphonie Diabolique.*"

"It's good," said Kennedy. "It's appropriate for us, isn't it?" He smiled wryly. "From the human viewpoint, I mean. We are the old Enemy, you know, the unhuman being that walks in darkness and strives for possession of man's world. We even deal in human souls, in a way." He shrugged. "Enough of that. There's more urgent business at hand."

They did not speak to each other in those words. Supermen never did, except in the presence of humans—it wasn't necessary. A phrase, a gesture, even a silence in the right place, could convey enough information for one of those minds instantly to grasp the whole. And that whole was not entirely expressible in human terms, it involved formulations found in no language of *homo sapiens* because no human brain could really comprehend them. An

integrated totality, a trans-sensory visualization, a probability manifold—clumsy words, barely hinting at the immensity events behind them.

How would you explain tensor analysis to a chimpanzee?

But roughly, supermen's thoughts and words could be rendered in human terms. Their intelligence, in the ordinary sense, was not fantastically far above that of *homo sapiens*—a few humans had even gotten that high, been as bright as a mediocre superman. It was the extra components of their minds which made the essential difference, abilities possessed, if at all, only in the most rudimentary and distorted form by humans; and this difference, rather than the greater powers of sheer memory and reason, was what made comparison between the intellects of man and superman meaningless.

ANNA GOT up and came over to him. She was tall and gaunt like himself, like most others of their species, and a human would not consider her beautiful—nor, for that matter, did Kennedy. But there was a fascination in her white skin and slant blue eyes and the aureole of frosty-gold hair about her high-cheeked face. You couldn't hide that tremendous personality; it blazed from both of them with almost a physical force. No matter how inconspicuous a superman tried to be, he remained the sort whom humans automatically obeyed.

Like old Murchison, for instance. The scientist knew nothing about Kennedy except that he was a brilliant young physicist and administrator. Technically, he was no more than the owner's chief assistant, vice president of the firm and director of research. Murchison himself wasn't aware of it, but Kennedy ran the place. Which suited the superman—most of his breed preferred to be the power behind the throne, to have a human figurehead.

Partly it was sheer ability which got a superman into a key position. Partly it was the overwhelming, unstoppable personality. Partly it was semitelepathic control—not complete, for *homo superior* didn't have

the senses or the projective ability except as a weak embryo of something that would never develop fully, but sufficient. A damping of certain impulses, an insertion of certain others—that was enough.

"There's trouble," said Anna. "Someone else has blocked off your supplies again."

Kennedy nodded. "The same parties, no doubt, who've been balking me for the past three years. It begins to look very much as if someone doesn't want us to do work in subelectronics. And that's a matter for the Council."

He went over to the house visiphone. Ostensibly it was an ordinary instrument, but he had built subelectronic circuits into it. No human would ever detect his calls to the Councillors.

No human.

Anna turned back to her multiplex, but didn't play it while he called. Her eyes grew dreamy; she was composing in her head now, a silent immensity of tones sliding through her brain and singing deep in her nerves.

Artists were as much in demand as scientists and administrators among the supermen. They were starved for expression suitable to themselves. Human works were all trivial, and not entirely comprehensible to a race with radically different emotional patterns. *The Symphonie Diabolique* would be—appreciated. She smiled, a slow secret curving of chiseled lips.

Kennedy's set sputtered and whined with interference. He didn't know enough about the huge new field of subelectronics to eliminate it, or even be very sure of its cause. Perhaps the motion of the planets themselves, varying gravitational fields through the Solar System, had something to do with it. The processes involved were perhaps the most fundamental of the physical universe.

He got a dozen of the twenty-odd present members of the Council. The rest could be contacted soon enough. They shifted into the artificial language they had developed, but Kennedy didn't trust it any more. If

the unknowns were listening in—well, even such a code could be broken.

"I think we should meet physically, at Rendezvous Number Ten," he said. "That way we'll be safe from spies."

"They might possibly trace us and find out where we are," objected Li Wang from Canton.

"Quite so. But it won't do them much good; they won't be able to listen in on us."

"Very well." The agreement went around the world, a few muttered syllables on the whispering beam. "Midnight tomorrow, then; ten's local time."

KENNEDY turned off his set and looked back to Anna. "So much for that," he said. "I'll start tomorrow and follow an evasive path, just in case someone is trying to shadow us."

"We will," she corrected.

"But—don't be a fool! Someone has to stay here. Leaving the house unguarded would be an invitation for them to come in and see what—"

"Let them. If they know enough to search this place, they won't learn anything else by spying here. All you have lying about are some notes on subelectronics, and you said yourself you think they know as much about that as you do—or maybe more."

Kennedy scowled. "Even so—"

"I'm going. I haven't seen anyone of the species except you for months now. You can bury yourself in the lab—I have to be polite to the humans that call and chatter—I've had about enough of it!" Anna's eyes flashed, cold and arrogant.

Kennedy shrugged. It wasn't much use arguing with her, and he didn't want her to leave him just yet.

Since there was no chance of propagating, most males and females of *homo superior* remained without ties. He thought wistfully that human love must be a wonderful thing, but it wasn't for his race. Respect, friendship, affection of a sort, yes—but they couldn't lose themselves in the wonder of another, no one else could become all the world to them.

Whether it was a basic trait of the highly intellectualized breed, love simply man's version of an animal passion that superman had left behind him, or whether it was related to their sterility, he didn't know.

The male and female *homo superior* usually had a succession of human mistresses or lovers—they were easy to deceive and dominate; they were convenient housekeepers or breadwinners and fronts in human society, leaving the superbeing free for other things. But he liked to have Anna around. He could talk to her.

"Very well," he said.

And it might be just as well, he reflected. She had an uncanny faculty for intuitive grasping at realities; she might be able to make valuable suggestions. And they'd need all the help they could get.

Snow whirled against the windows. He felt a sudden immense loneliness. The supermen were so few, so few, in a world of two-legged beasts. And somewhere out in that night lay their unknown enemy.



KENNEDY'S plane looked like an ordinary human vehicle, but he had installed modifications. As soon as he was well out of sight from the town he sealed the cabin, went up into the stratosphere, and headed for the meeting place at a thousand miles an hour.

Earth slipped away far below him, green wonderful Earth, the only world in the Solar System where any of her children could really be at home. Unless they developed the faster-than-light spaceship for which some of them hoped, the supermen would have to stay here and slowly wring a place on the planet from man. Even if they did find means of going out among the stars, he wondered if they would care to abandon their birthplace.

Even supposing they did that, they would still have to keep con-

trol on Earth, make provision for the new supermen who would be born to human parents, see that the human race didn't have a chance to interfere.

A world of our own—Briefly, he wondered what it was like to be a man, to think oneself belonging on Earth, to walk freely beneath the sky and look up to the far planets and think, *This is ours*.

But man had hope, as a race, and superman did not. A world of *homo superior* would never know the laughter of children; there would only be age and death and oblivion. Unless—

But still we must control. The greater cannot remain subservient to the lesser, the very thought is intolerable. We need man, but we cannot bow to him. We don't want to enslave, but we must control, or all our purposes, which they cannot comprehend, will fall into dust.

Anna sat quietly, looking out into the stratospheric dusk with unseeing eyes. He wondered what chords and harmonies were streaming through her head.

Rendezvous Ten was simply an apartment building in Rio de Janeiro, owned by a Brazilian superman and inhabited by others of the race. Kennedy set his plane down on whispering jets into the fragrance of a roof garden. In the darkness around him, he saw the parked vehicles of the other Councillors, with more arriving. Below him, the lights of the city winked and blazed an answer to the swarming stars.

They went inside, to the room where the meeting was to be. The Councillors sat informally, conversing or lost in their own thoughts. To the outward eye, they were simply human beings, men and women of various races with little to distinguish them save the brilliant eyes and high sharp features. But inwardly—

Any superman who wished could sit in on such a meeting, and not few of the tenants had chosen to do so. But generally they were glad enough to delegate their mutual problems to the Council and be free to carry on their private affairs.

Kennedy nodded greetings, found a seat and a drink, and waited for the rest to arrive. It didn't take long. As the one who had called the meeting, he presided.

IT WAS A strange conference. They sat so quietly, all of them, and spoke only short phrases in their special language. A gesture, a nuance of expression, a few words here and there with a subtle shift in tone—but it was enough. Precise and tremendous, the meanings stood forth.

Kennedy described his frustrations through the latest one. He finished with what could be rendered into English as: "This merely clinches my conviction that someone is opposing the project. I would like to hear any other information any of you may have which bears on the subject."

"Question," said an African. "I've been in the Congo a long time, gotten out of touch with things, and also I'm not a scientist. Why is this subelectronic work of such practical importance to anyone? The humans already have some small knowledge of the phenomena, so it's not a monopoly of ours by any means. You'd expect them to work on it too."

"They do," said Kennedy. "But as yet they find it only an interesting theoretical problem. I've carried the mathematics farther than any human has—or ever can, with their present techniques—and I can assure you that the field is basic. It seems to underlie all physical processes and integrate them in some fashion. For instance, my work gives the best explanation to date of gyromagnetism. I think it will provide a basis for many developments, including the complete and controlled disintegration of matter and the building of a spaceship which can circumvent the light-speed barrier.

"Now obviously we can't allow humans to have that information, yet; I and certain of my associates are taking care of that. We'll see to it that we become the recognized authorities on subelectronics. The devices which I shall allow my osten-

sible employer to have, for instance, will apparently exhaust the possibilities of one branch of the field, though actually we will be getting certain much more powerful mechanisms which I can have made without anyone's realizing their true purpose. Thus most humans will listen to us when we tell them that further work in the field will be fruitless; and we have the usual means for discouraging any who persist in being curious. Very much the same means that are being used against me right now!

"The point is this: 'No humans can be the opponents because none of them know about this work—at least, enough for them to have any conceivable reason, including simple competition for supplies, to hinder it. Even if that were the case, we would soon be able to track down the offenders and evade them. Humans simply can't hide their activities from us. But here all investigation has come to a dead end. It is always someone else who is responsible, who is putting on pressure here and there. I can't get a certain tube element because it's all being bought by another company, which wants it for someone else whose directors have decided on a line of research requiring that part because a bottleneck in production of something else makes them look for a substitute; and the bottleneck is due to a similar complex of interlocking causes...and so on as far as we can trace it.

"Sheer chance cannot account for it. I have been frustrated too many times, too thoroughly, and always with the same power and efficiency. Too many others of our race whom I know about have been having similar troubles. *Someone is out to stop us!*"

THEY TOOK that quietly, but the room seethed and crackled with nervous tension. Li Wang said slowly: "I have been having similar difficulties. As you know, we've been infiltrating the Chinese government for the past ten years. And bit by bit, as our men got higher and higher, there have been trou-

bles. Their orders are countermanded; underlings prove obstreperous; the execution of policies fail because of unforeseen and improbable factors. And certain other policies which we vigorously oppose are pushed through in spite of all our efforts. For instance, we wanted no action taken to develop the Yunnanese uranium strike. Humans have too much uranium to play with right now; moreover, it should be saved for *our* use later. Nevertheless, that uranium is being mined. I have not been able to find out where all of it is going. Somebody wants that uranium *now*."

They began to tell what they knew then, report after report of difficulty, failure, an opposition hidden by the sheer complexity of its organization. It would have seemed fantastic to a human. A few supermen could control a nation by holding the key posts—or better yet, by being the indispensable advisors of the men who held those jobs. A human mind could not grasp the totality of the gigantic fluid web which was society; to him, its sheer complexity dissolved into a chaos. A superman could; he would know precisely what button to push somewhere to effect, through an inexorable chain of events, a desired happening somewhere else.

So they could appreciate the fact that someone was following their own methods—and doing it more efficiently.

Even in the minds of men—Pierre Charmant said to them: "As most of you know, I am trying to produce a general trend in music which will influence human minds toward certain desired ends. You may not all be aware of the extent to which the mathematical theory of *homo sapiens* psychology has been worked out, but I assure you that our understanding is very precise. A different type of mentality enjoys, say, classical music from one that favors the latest cacophony; but conversely, the pervasive influence of one type of music will tend to mold a mind into the correspond-

ing pattern." He smiled at Anna. "Not for humans are your fiendish and beautiful compositions, my dear. We want them to have music that will make them soothed, amenable, easy-going. It won't do that all by itself, of course, but among many other influences it will help. In the course of a century or two—"

"And you've been having trouble," flashed Anna.

"Exactly. Other schools are rising. Valdurian's style is especially bad for our purposes. I've investigated his background. He is clear enough himself, but he seems to have been under strange influences in his past. We appeal to snobbery through the critics, we give concerts, buy radio time—but someone else is doing the same. *Someone* is very interested in promoting Valdurian."

"I've found writings here and there," said Professor Gunnarsson. "Obscure works for the most part, but bearing marks of not having been written by humans. And the philosophers and scientists and political theorists whom we sponsor are meeting unexpectedly vigorous opposition from certain quarters whose background I cannot exactly trace."

"I think that's enough," said Kennedy. "It's plain that there is some organization parallel to ours, apparently better set up and more thoroughly entrenched. They, too, want to manipulate and control man for their own purposes—which apparently conflict at important points with ours. They seem to have some awareness of us; just how much I do not know. They may suspect our true nature, or they may crack down on general principles. If, for instance, they don't want anyone not under their direct control to do subelectronic research, they'd try to stop me whether they knew I was a superman or not.

"The trouble is, we know nothing about them. They remain shadows; we encounter only their puppets."

THE PAUSE that followed was long by superman standards, while they turned the information

over in their minds, but it lasted only a second or two by chronological time. Then Hallmyer said thoughtfully: "The most obvious answer is that they are of our race but have built up a parallel organization without knowing about us. After all, we only began to realize our true nature and to band together about fifty years ago. We could easily have missed many of the race—we must have done so. If some of these went through a similar development, the two groups could be quite unaware of each other's existence—especially when each is trying to be as secretive as possible."

"By now they must begin to suspect the same about us that we think about them," said Charmant. "Why aren't they trying to contact us? There is no earthly reason for conflict within the race."

"Isn't there?" asked Gunnarsson. "I can imagine any number of possible reasons for a clash, including the hypothesis that these unknowns represent some sort of variant of the mutation and therefore do not belong to the race at all. Suppose they have some radically different purpose. We want simply to gain control of mankind's world. They may want something entirely different; they may want the control for themselves alone."

"If they're friendly, we needn't worry," said Kennedy. "Sooner or later, contact will be made from one side or the other and agreement reached. But in view of the facts, and of our own precarious position on Earth, we'll have to assume they're somehow hostile. Then it becomes a problem of finding them, spying them out—and destroying their power."

"I don't think they are of the race at all," said Anna suddenly.

They looked at her in some surprise. Her strange eyes went beyond them, out to the darkness beyond the window, and her few voiced words were very quiet. "I've seen some of those writings Gunnarsson talks about," she whispered. "I've heard some of the music, seen paintings

and poems and sculpture. And there's the whole way in which they've gone about all this.

"It doesn't *feel* right."

There was a longer silence now. They could sense the tension in her nerves, catch a fragment of thought more on the subconscious than the conscious level. It was weirdly convincing, the more so since all of them had bits and pieces of undeveloped abilities—and intuition or precognition or whatever it was might well be one of them.

A stocky, space-burned male spoke from a corner. "Sophoulis," he introduced himself. "I came along when Kyrenberg told me there was to be a meeting. I've got a hunch of my own about these beings."

THEY TURNED to him, and the enormous truth was in their minds even before he spoke. He nodded grimly.

Kennedy lifted his eyebrows. The gesture could have been rendered as, "What evidence have you?"

"I've been exploring on Mars lately. Geological survey. I got off by myself in the Syrtis Minor, a long ways from anyone else or any usual visitors. And I saw a spaceship.

"It came low over the sand—a huge thing, at least a thousand feet long. It was of some shining coppery metal I couldn't identify, and its design was different from anything I'd ever seen or imagined before. For one thing, it had no vision ports that I could see. For another thing, it had no jets. It just seemed to glide along with no motive power at all—and fast!

"I hunched low in the sand and tried to hide, but as soon as it was over the horizon I got out my instruments. There were some pretty sensitive detectors there. I could have spotted any ship in the Solar System by the radiations from its atomic and electronic equipment, shielded or not. But this thing didn't make the needles flicker even once. On the other hand, it was emitting quite a lot of subelectronic stuff.

"When I got back to Sandy Land-

ing, I tried to organize an expedition into the Syrtis country. I meant to find their base. I would have gone alone if I could have gotten a Mars-tractor and the rest of the things I needed. But it was the same old story you've been telling. So sorry, all the tractors are spoken for. No, I'm afraid we can't get any from Aresport or Schiaparelli either. When I tried to buy one from a private party at an outrageous price, something tied up the communications to Earth, I couldn't get funds from my bank. And so on. I had to give up finally. And that's all I know—but I think it's enough!"

They looked at each other, the supermen, and finally Kennedy laughed, a harsh bark in the explosive silence. "It's not conclusive," he said, "but it's certainly indicative. If there are beings from the stars who want to control Earth for their own purposes, it would explain a lot of things.

"And in that case, we have to find them. And overcome them. Because they surely aren't going to let us go through with our own plans."

"It might be done," said Anna softly. "I think perhaps they could be found." Decision firmed her mouth. "You'll take a vacation from the lab, Will. Then our first job will be to disappear so that they can't possibly know where we are. Then we have to start looking for them—without ever revealing ourselves. And then we have to communicate the information, preferably without their knowing it."

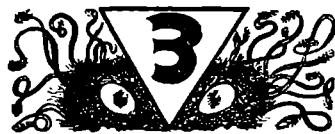
Her eyes swept the room. "And the rest of you will have to organize an attack. I don't know yet what kind it will be. I rather think physical force would be useless against these creatures, whatever they are—men or supermen or nonhumans from the stars. But we have to be ready for anything. We'll need all the supermen of Earth ready to strike in any fashion that may be necessary."

They nodded, bleakly.

When Kennedy and Anna emerged onto the roof, only an hour or so had passed. He was vaguely surprised to

find it still near the middle of the night.

He looked up to the grandly glittering stars and a shiver ran down his spine. The darkness seemed suddenly cold.



KENNEDY had set up a small supersonic vibrator to sound-proof the room. Now they were as alone in it as they could be on Earth.

Alone, alone—it was dark outside; the early night had fallen and a heavy spring rain washed out of the lowering sky and rivered along the empty street. The dim yellow lamps gleamed on the wet pavement. A dull glow of city lights flimmered behind the looming buildings, and he could feel the rumble of traffic and sense the pulsing nervous flow of millions of lives. But in this district the ways were deserted, the hotel was quiet, they were alone.

Anna was playing her violin. The music rose and fell, wailing an eerie desolation through him, swirling in the air like dead leaves hurrying before a gale. He sat at the window, staring into the rain. It ran down the glass, a slow dark stream, he seemed to be looking out at a drowned world.

The music filled the cheap, dreary room with a song that was wild and desolate, calling to the nighted sky and mumbling over a barren ground. There was darkness in the music, night and wind and a quenchless bitter longing; it hunted up and down the scale with hunger in its heart. Anna was lost in it; her eyes were unseeing and her silvery-gold head was bent over the violin as if it whispered something to her.

Kennedy sat half listening, half thinking his own thoughts. The long months of work were done, and now the climax was on him. Unless—un-

less this, too, were a blind alley; unless he should go into the building and find only emptiness. He wondered. More and more, his opponents seemed shadows, ghostly hands moving a piece on a chessboard and then retreating into darkness. He wondered if he would ever really find them.

But the trail seemed clear. It had taken a long time of slow patient investigation, feeling their way along the tangled net of the enemy organization, and the need for secrecy had hampered them still further and tautened their nerves to the breaking point. But—it could be done.

One could find out that a certain company was controlled by unknowns in another city, who in turn were puppets of someone else—not that they knew it, but economic and social strings were pulled, they reacted accordingly, and so the will of the hidden masters was done. These threads were themselves manipulated from some other place, and of course there was a reaction such that the organizations they controlled had influence on them—the sheer immensity of the web put it beyond even Kennedy's full understanding; but it worked, it worked, and with a minimum of direct supervision.

And some or other important human, politician or scientist or writer, could be shown to be under the influence of someone else whose antecedents were vague. And the superman's telepathy, maddeningly incomplete and unreliable as it was, revealed evidence of direct mental tampering in those advisors, their encephalic currents weren't quite normal—

There were other traces: a brilliantly written political treatise, a scientific paper, a symphony or painting, which somehow didn't feel right, didn't fit in with the times. One could try to locate the author or artist—and that trail ended in a controlled human or a blank anonymity, but one could still hazard a guess—

There were gaps in the trail, dead ends where no human detective could have gone further. But always Anna's intuition suggested some other

approach, leaping beyond facts to a conclusion she could not justify rationally but which turned out to be right more often than not. "*The author of this paper is an amateur musician...classical mostly...I don't know why, it feels as if he must be...*" And there had been Kennedy's logic, piecing together seemingly unrelated data, slowly evolving a complete picture—

And ultimately one thread led to New York and the Terran Import Company. An unostentatious firm, not openly wealthy or powerful, but doing more business than it should, spreading tentacles into every corner of the Solar System. The management was all human, very respectable, entirely above suspicion. But Kennedy had seen the president and felt the curious impulses superimposed on the normal nervous rhythms which meant that some sort of compulsion had been put on him.

THE ALIENS had to have some kind of front. In the last analysis, they had to have a definite headquarters. More likely they had many, and the Terran Import Company was one.

And if this was the end of the long hunt, then he had to enter their stronghold and find out what they really were and try to get back alive.

"Tonight," he said. "Tonight I'll go in; the building is empty after midnight except for a watchman, I've made certain of that."

He felt the small subelectronic communicator in his pocket. Anna had another tuned to his, and one of their trunks held a larger unit which could reach the Council all over Earth. Given one minute to flash his information to her, he could let all the race know who the enemy was. After that—

Well, he hoped to escape with his life and sanity, but it didn't matter too much. Life under that shadow would not be worth a great deal to a being with his power compulsion.

The supermen had to control Earth, otherwise life became an empty farce and it was better to lie in the ground.

Anna put her violin aside and came

over to him. "Still not a trace," she murmured. "We've run them down, I'm sure of it, but still not a hint what they are. Who are they, to hide that well?"

Kennedy shrugged. "Who knows? They could be from any of the stars."

"Maybe. But still—it doesn't feel that way. They don't really act the way aliens should. There's something—terrestrial—about them, Will. I don't know what it is, but I know it's there."

He smiled crookedly. "But you don't like the theory that they're of our race or a similar mutation," he pointed out.

"No. That doesn't seem right either, somehow." She shuddered and laid a hand on his. The lazy mockery had worn from her in the last months, her cool self-possession had dropped away and she was frightened. "I can't imagine what they are. I just can't imagine anything that fits."

"I still favor the notion that they're from the stars," he said; "another mutation like ours just violates probability."

"We ourselves do that," she replied.

"True. It's still the most baffling scientific mystery I know of." He looked out into the rainy night and his laugh was harsh. "Why are we trying to track down these aliens? What do we care what they're like? We still don't really know what we are."

"Doesn't Lomonosov think our mutation involves some new biological principle?"

"Yes. But he's never been able to work out just what the principle is." Kennedy swung around to face her. "Look, let's go over everything we know about ourselves. Once again, for the millionth time. It may give us a clue. It may hint at what the aliens are."

HE TICKED the points off on his fingers. "Externally, we look human, except that some of us lack wisdom teeth and little toes and all males have a tendency to early baldness. Internally, we're definitely

not human; we're superior to man in many ways. We lack the vermiform appendix, of course; the arch of the foot is stronger; the vertebrae of the lumbar region have fused; the pelvis is different; the sinus drains downward; certain muscles differ, the circulatory system is more efficient; the eyes are keener and stand the strain of close work better—in general, we're mechanically superior to man. We do, though, have less sense of smell—again, about what you'd expect in the next stage of human evolution. There is also a tendency to brachycephaly and a tall, slender build, though that does have exceptions.

"Metabolism is different, more efficient as a rule. We have partial voluntary control of involuntary functions when we want it; for instance, we can set up a nerve bloc to cut off pain impulses from the brain, and a few of us seem able even to control regeneration—it's handy to be able to will the absorption of a tumor! We can handle all this because we have the intelligence and self-control to make proper use of it, which other animals, including most men, couldn't. A primitive human who could will to cease feeling pain would simply ignore those danger signals, and soon die.

"The nervous system is the vital point of difference. Our brains aren't larger than human, but they're better organized. We don't go insane, though we're not all free from neuroses, without therapy. The average I. Q., insofar as it means anything in relation to us, is well over 200, and we are capable of totally different types of thought from human logic. And then we have fragments of still other abilities, telepathy and precognition and perfect intuition and more—but all in the most rudimentary form, as if we were still evolving them.

"And, of course, we're sterile." Bitterness twisted his mouth. "We're sterile."

"And why is that?" she asked softly, though she had heard the answer often enough before.

"It's a matter of chromosome de-

fects. A union of gametes, in our case, just doesn't produce a viable cell. I don't think there's anything that can be done about it. Our best bet would be some form of synthetic reproduction, exogenetic development of artificially created cells." He made a wry face. "I don't like that much better."

The rain poured down, slow and dark and still.

"Now as to our origin," went on Kennedy after a moment, "we're all born of human parents—human mothers, at least. We appear in all races with about the same—low—frequency, and usually don't suspect our nature until one of the Council's investigators finds us, routes us through therapy, then takes us into the organization. Feeling ourselves, then—casting off the armor and fictitious loyalties of most humans, we're glad to join our own species.

"It was only about fifty years ago that a few of us reached the true conclusion as to their nature and began to look for others. Since then we've only found about three thousand, out of the Solar System's four billion. It's no high percentage, but we think the ordinary rate of birth is enough to maintain our numbers.

"A few facts have come out: A large proportion of us are illegitimate children with mysterious fathers who have since disappeared; and there's excellent reason to suspect that even the married women who bore the rest did not have those children by their husbands. Illegitimacy is getting so common these days that we've never been able to track down any of these unknown men. Naturally, it would be wonderful to find a few fertile supermen, but I doubt that there are any. Our fathers, I think, carry some mutation which combined with the normal human inheritance produces one of us, but their phenotype is probably quite human. It's well known that such crosses differ more radically from the norm than either parent; in fact, I think a good many defective births have the same fathers—unsuccessful crosses. At any rate, the hybrid human-semihuman is sterile like many

other hybrids in the biological world.

"Sterile!" The bitterness was suddenly raw in his voice. "By all chaos, sterile! Our kind can reach the stars, but it can't do what the humblest plant can do; it can't maintain itself."

"Why?" she asked.

“WHY? WHO knows? Apart from the simple biology of it, I don't know of any deeper reason. Unless—well, other species have reached a peak and then suddenly declined and become extinct. It may be the same with man. There may be some basic reason why the ultimate development of a race must be sterile—an Indian summer before the long winter comes." He nodded. "Yes, I rather think it's something like that."

"But we aren't the end of evolution, Will. We know we could go higher. All those half-abilities we have—they must mean something."

"Uh-huh. But what? Humankind doesn't seem to have changed appreciably for the last half-million years—maybe million. Why is that? Why should it be static so long, when it had been one of Earth's most rapidly evolving lines before? And then why should we suddenly appear, all in one jump which violates every law of biological probability? I don't know, Anna."

"I don't think we are the first," she said. "I think members of the race have been born for a long time, but they never knew who they were. There have been sterile geniuses in the past—at least, they never had children. Da Vinci, Roger Bacon—I wonder. I wonder how lonely they must have been."

"That sounds more reasonable," he admitted. "But even so, the birth of something so radically different from normal human stock—but no matter. We may find out someday. There's this problem here to solve first."

He got up and paced restlessly. "I thought maybe reviewing the facts would help me somehow with this," he said. "If there were a chance of a similar mutation, a third species of genus homo—but I can't see that. As

you said, the thought just doesn't feel right."

His face was haggard as he looked out at the rain. "We've got to overcome them," he said between his teeth. "We have no choice, Anna. The need to control is in us. We can't fit into human society, it doesn't have goals or a structure suitable for us, so we have to dominate it. Not tyrannically, even though we can rule man better than he can rule himself. But the road humans take must be one which does not block ours. And if these aliens dispute our road—they have to go. For the sake of our sanity, they have to go."

The night brooded enormously over him, the dark was filled with the slow senseless power of rain spilling from the sky, mindless inorganic night of loneliness and despair. He stood waiting for the hours to end, sunk into the pit of the night.

Anna took up her violin and began to play again.



AFTER THE rain, there was fog swirling through the hollow canyons of streets, blurring the lamps and the few shadowy vehicles which slipped by. Kennedy felt glad of the mist, though he knew it wouldn't hide him from the watchers of the enemy.

He stood in an alley across the street from the Terran Import Building, straining his perceptions into the wet gray dark. The building wasn't large as such structures went, but it loomed black and monstrous in the fog; it seemed a crouching beast waiting for him. He fought back the tension that thrummed along every nerve and groped for signs of life.

He had watched the place for several nights running. It seemed to be deserted after twelve or one, and it would be no trick to get inside. Only—was it really empty?

His sense of nervous energy reached out through the fog. He

could feel the vibrations of the watchman, an ordinary untampered human making a sleepy round—no danger there. But what else was it that thrummed and pulsed in the building, just on the limits of his perception?

He strove to identify that deep steady wave, but it eluded him, maddeningly. It wasn't an electric or atomic machine of any sort, it wasn't anything. He couldn't even be sure whether it really existed outside his own strained imagination.

But of course they would have unknown mechanisms operating, something subelectronic perhaps. It might be some sort of barrier, a death trap for the curious—worse yet, something that would seize control of a mind—but that was a chance he had to take.

If he could get in, if he could find *their* central offices and go through whatever files and apparatus there might be—even if no direct evidence of their origin and nature were present, he and Anna should easily be able to deduce enough from whatever they found to serve as a basis of action for the race.

The race, the race—the Councillors crouched over their receivers; the supermen waiting around the planet with their tremendous hidden weapons—the night was full of their tension. Strange struggle, beneath the surface of man's peaceful world! Briefly, Kennedy wondered what powers and intrigues might not make up the whole of reality, what hidden wars might be going on between beings whose existence even the supermen and their opponents did not suspect.

But no time for that, no time. He was going in.

He whispered into the communicator: "All clear, I think."

"Will—" Anna's anxious breath trembled in his ear. "Will—don't go in there."

"I have to, Anna."

"I—it isn't you alone, Will. It's all of us. I have a feeling that we—we won't *like* what we find out tonight—"

He smiled wistfully in the dark and the drifting fog. "I don't like it now," he said. "But this is enough

now. The next time I call, it will be with information of—some kind!" With a sudden tenderness he had never really felt before: "Goodbye, Anna."

Then quickly he walked across the street to the entrance of the building.

THE DOOR was locked, of course. That meant nothing, the tumblers clicked back from his magnetic controller and he stepped through into the lobby. It lay in shadow, only a dim night light burning—empty, empty.

He slipped over to the stairs and went up them at a rapid cat-footed pace. One hand lay in his pocket, the fingers wrapped about one of the supermen's small deadly energy guns. He knew how futile it was likely to be, but the cold metal gave him animal comfort.

The vibrations of the machine were stronger now. It must lie somewhere near the top of the building, which was also the most logical place for the offices of the enemy. Probably no human was allowed up there.

Human! He felt the life-energy of the watchman, coming down the stairs, and flattened himself against the wall. It was best not to be too obtrusive physically, though—

It was easy. His mind seemed abnormally strong; it surged forth and gripped the old man's brain with impalpable fingers. It was just a matter of cutting off optical perception of that area where he stood. The watchman never saw him; he went on downstairs in his slow fashion, unknowing.

Kennedy stood looking after the retreating back. It wasn't often that he could control any portion of a human's brain that directly, but the tension that keyed him now had sharpened and strengthened all his faculties to a terrific pitch. If only he could rely on that ability, could have it all the time—

But he didn't. It was partial, sporadic, not really controllable. The physiologists said it was a new brain center, a mutation of the parapsychological powers possessed in very

slight degree by humans; but superman didn't really have much more than *homo sapiens*.

Why not? Why are we incomplete? Why are we sterile, why has evolution come to a halt in us when there is so much left to do? How is it that we are born at all, who are our fathers, why should they have been mutated either? So many new abilities in one mutation just doesn't make biological sense.

But no time for that now, there's more urgent work at hand.

He went on up the stairs, flight after flight winding up into darkness. The building was silent, empty, but the monstrous nonauditory thrum of the machine filled his being now, shouted within him, raised shuddering echoes in the atoms of the walls.

Upward, upward. Now the top floor lay ahead, and it was closed off by a locked door. Kennedy opened it and stepped through into a corridor.

It lay blank and bare before him, lit by a couple of dull night lights, full of shadows and silence. And the machine.

And the machine! The terrific pulsations shook his being now, quivered in every cell of him. Incredible that humans went blindly on their way, in and out of the building, and never sensed it, never dreamed of its existence or of the monstrous powers that laired in this hall. Fantastic, that the rulers of the world should be here.

No—not here. The floor was empty, there was no life anywhere in its stillness, only he had movement through the twilight. He breathed a shuddering sigh of relief. The enemy was gone. He was safe.

HE WENT down the corridor toward the ordinary glass-fronted door from behind which came the subliminal drone of the machine. His footsteps echoed hollowly between the walls; his shadow followed him, rippling over the bare polished stone. He could not shake off the irrational feeling that it was a fetch, a watchful ghost dogging him down a

road along which there would be no return.

The vibrations of the machine must have affected his nerves. Grasping for sanity, he paused at a window to look over the city. Beyond the darkness of this area, it glowed and flamed with light; it was filled with the life of wakeful millions, the muted hum of traffic came faintly to his preternaturally sharpened hearing.

Mankind, unsuspecting mankind going about its ways while he stood in a tower of darkness, while the night was filled with a hidden struggle for the rule of those witless herds. Man, father to the superman, not knowing his sons for what they were.

But are we his sons? Is such a mutation even possible?

What, after all, was the most logical way for superman to evolve? Not in one fantastic mutation of unknown thousands of genes all working to produce the same result; the very formulation was an insult to the laws of probability. No, *homo superior* should have evolved from *homo sapiens* in the same way that other species had evolved from a parent stock—by isolation of a few not very different mutants, selection and intensification of the new traits, new mutations gradually appearing and being lost if they were unfavorable, being incorporated if they gave some advantage.

Like always tended to mate with like. Even in the earliest times, there must have been a strong tendency for the most intelligent people, or those differing from the norm in any fashion, to get mates similar to themselves. If at an early stage such a kith had withdrawn from the mainstream of humanity—

And then as time went on and the differences became greater; the new stock would perhaps deliberately seek to incorporate such humans as showed similar traits into itself. Particularly if its high intelligence led it to early knowledge of the principles of inheritance. Thus, for a long time, the developing superman stock would be mingling unsuspected with

homo sapiens, seeking out desirable humans for inclusion into the group—until finally the differences became so great that mating was no longer possible. Even then, *homo superior* could control *homo sapiens* whenever necessary, though probably the new species would hold itself aloof most of the time. It would have so little in common with the ancestral stock.

And that would also explain why the human genus, which had hitherto been evolving at one of the highest speeds known to paleontology, should suddenly have become nearly static. There had been no appreciable change in man for the past half-million or even million years. Of course not—*homo superior* had been skimming off the cream of the crop!

it did not explain the fact that *homo superior* had not appeared in that fashion, that he was, instead, born to normal humans with all his alienage given him at one incredible step.

Nor did it say anything about the unknowns, except to suggest that perhaps they were another type of mutation. How unhuman could they be? *We're bad enough!*

But I'm wasting time.

The flashing thought, which had taken perhaps half a second, died within Kennedy. He threw back his shoulders, turned from the window, and walked up to the door.

It was locked with—something new. Something that held it shut but was not material, a binding force. Kennedy would have sworn if he had been human. As it was, he took out his energy gun and cut the door open. Let them realize that he had been here; it would be too late then.

THE ROOM beyond seemed strangely unreal. There was a cold white light streaming from walls and ceiling and floor, filling the very air. He had no way of gauging distances, the room might have been small or it might have reached out beyond the edge of the sky.

His eyes swung to the machine. It crouched low on the floor, a massive thing with angles and curves in its dark metal that did not seem to obey

any sane geometrical laws. Multidimensional—what were the builders?

No time, no time. He looked about for other evidence, a filing cabinet, a desk drawer, anything. Yes, there was a strangely shimmering globe seeming to hang in midair. As he looked, the vague swirl of formlessness within it coalesced into symbols.

No language of Earth, that. He decided that it was somehow responsive to telepathic impulses, throwing the desired information onto a screen at the owner's mental command. He thought at it, *What is the origin and nature of your builders?* and his mind trembled as he did.

The symbols were meaningless, but he photographed them with a tiny microcamera. The superman philologists could, with the help of their electronic semantic analyzers, break down any rational language in short order. He flashed other questions: *What are their powers? What do they want on Earth? What do they know about us?*, and watched the symbols change.

His glee was boundless. Here was all the information that they needed. The supermen would know—and knowing, they could act, and—

And—

He turned at the sudden blaze within his nerves. His gun leaped into his hand. And then his fingers went limp, the weapon clattered to the floor, and he was locked into physical paralysis.

The being that stepped from the machine looked manlike, but his magnificently domed head was bald and the great golden eyes held such a frightful intensity of power that Kennedy could not meet them, he cried out in terror.

The thoughts roared in his skull: —*It was about time you knew. Now*

that you have come this far, you may as well go back to your friends and warn them. They have their place in the—?—plan, but it will be useless for them to oppose us. We can stop all their energies, freeze their minds, and cast them down to ruin. Accept the fact. Accept us as the rulers of Earth.

Grim amusement tinged the thought:—*The servant warned me and I came. But it was hardly necessary. The records would have told you the truth.*

—*Incredible that you did not suspect before. But you dared not realize the truth. It was staring you in the eyes, but your subconscious minds would not accept the conclusion.*

—*You are essentially right about the origin of homo superior... Man and your breed have a place in our scheme, but you will never be able to understand its entirety.*

—*There are not many of us on Earth, and most of those are males. Others are on the great worlds of the Galaxy where proper?—development is possible. Since we can easily disguise ourselves, and we are so made that human women are not repulsively alien, there are occasional hybrids.*

Hybrids, with only part of the powers of their fathers. Like most interspecies hybrids, sterile.

—*I pity you, half-breed. Go back to your kind now. Live your lives. As long as you do not trespass on forbidden ground, we will leave you alone. Goodbye.*

The steel grip on his mind was lifted. Kennedy stumbled, fell to the floor, looked numbly up at the figure that loomed over him against the blaze of energy from the machine.

"Father," he whispered. "Father."