

BALLANTINE
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Editor FREDERIK POHL • Art director RICHARD POWERS

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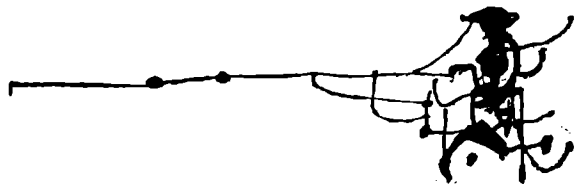
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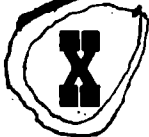




A Novelette

JOHN A. SENTRY

mark



into contractual agreement with DBA CHEMICALS, INC., the nature of this agreement being as set forth below:

LAWRENCE looked over the papers while the DBA man waited, not very patiently. Lawrence took his time.

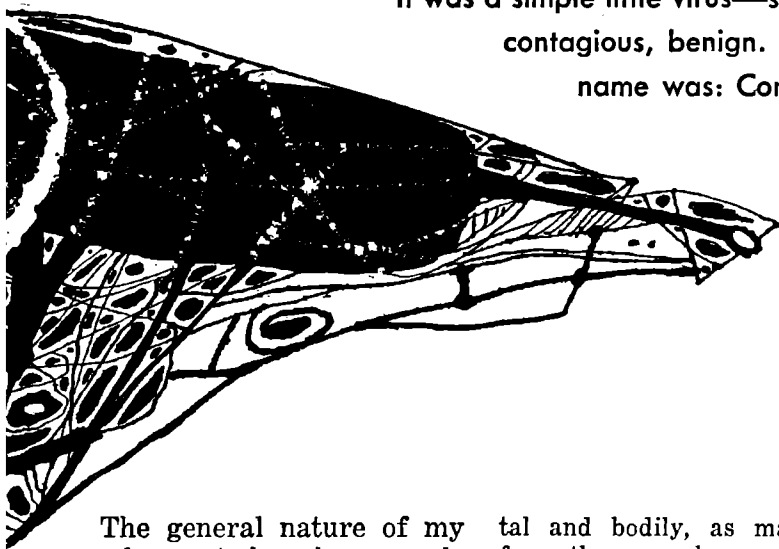
Altogether there were three papers:

AFFIDAVIT OF AGREEMENT:

I, the undersigned Robert S. Lawrence, do hereby affirm and attest that I have this day of my own free choice entered

That, in return for the sum of one dollar and other good and valuable considerations, I shall undertake to participate in such experimental tests and/or programs of tests, as a subject, as DBA CHEMICALS, INC., shall specify as being relevant and proper to the prosecution and conclusion of a consistent and logical program of testing and experimentation.

It was a simple little virus—synthetic,
contagious, benign. Its other
name was: Conscience.



The general nature of my employment has been made known to me, and I have read and understood this affidavit.

Signature

Date March 23, 2160 AD

RELEASE FROM RESPONSIBILITY AND LIABILITY:

I, the undersigned Robert S. Lawrence, having been taken into the employ of DBA CHEMICALS, INC., a firm engaged in chemical research and experimentation, do hereby make the following Release:

It is my clear understanding that the employment which I have voluntarily undertaken with DBA CHEMICALS, INC., is of a hazardous nature. I do hereby absolve DBA CHEMICALS, INC., of all responsibility and liability for such injury or impairment of health, both men-

tal and bodily, as may result from the normal course of such employment. It is my clear understanding that DBA CHEMICALS, INC., being engaged in a program of experimental research, cannot guarantee my safety beyond providing such safeguards and working practices as have proven effective in past experience.

I have read and understood this Form of Release.

Signature

Date March 23, 2160 AD

The third paper was a deposit slip for the Second National Bank of Howard's Falls, Massachusetts, showing a deposit to the account of Robert S. or Dorothy T. Lawrence.

The amount of the deposit was ten thousand dollars.

THE DBA man extended a pen and looked meaningfully at his watch.

Lawrence took the pen firmly, and steadily signed his name.

"Robert S. Lawrence" once, "Robert S. Lawrence" twice, "Robert S. Lawrence" three times. Going . . . going . . . gone.

The sudden vagrant notion annoyed him. He frowned and deliberately let the pen fall point-first to the tabletop. The DBA man glared, but Lawrence ignored it. DBA could buy pens enough to sink a freighter.

Gone? He shrugged it off. He knew what he was doing. He even knew why he'd felt that twinge of uneasiness. His intellect had come to a decision, but his emotions still insisted on weighing the foregone conclusion. But his emotions would come around soon enough.

Lawrence felt satisfied with himself. Once a man understood his own inner workings, he could proceed without their hampering him.

Lawrence looked at Dorothy.

She was looking down at the floor, her lips etched around with grim lines. Suddenly her fingers clenched on the DBA check in her hand,

and the slip of green paper crumpled. She jerked her head part-way toward him and started to say something.

Then her shoulders lost their set, and she smoothed the check carefully. Her purse snapped open and the check dropped out of sight. Her purse snapped shut. She rose abruptly, thrust her arms into the sleeves of her shabby coat, and burst out of the room.

Lawrence shrugged and looked at the DBA man with a wry smile.

The DBA man was wiping his glasses with concentration.

Lawrence cleared his throat. The DBA man put his glasses back and raised his eyebrows. "Pardon?"

"Ready," Lawrence said.

The DBA man nodded and opened a door. "Through here."

II

LAURENCE devoted his attention to the corridor they were walking down. It made no real difference whether he did or not, but the mature man was the well-oriented man.

The other people in the hall were of various kinds. Some of them were cut of better cloth than others. He saw two

or three men in business suits, like himself. These were usually in discussions with attendant personnel in splashed smocks—technicians. Lawrence observed that the men in the business suits directed all the conversations.

"This way, please." The DBA man unexpectedly held a door open. Lawrence stopped, and felt someone bump into him from behind. He turned.

It was a girl—a technician. He noticed her coal-gray eyes and dark hair. He smiled warmly. "Please excuse me, miss."

She looked up briefly, and found some sign in his face that marked it as different from the other business suits. "'Sall right," she said perfunctorily. She moved around him with a deprecatory wave of her hand, her eyes returning to the planographed booklet she had been studying.

The smile plunged out of Lawrence's face.

When one was a child, one knew the systematic way of the world. It was in the natural order of things that a man started modestly, gained steadily through the years, and at last arrived at his chosen summit.

*Frank's only a mail clerk?
Well, certainly—but someday*

he'll be President of the company. You wait and see.

Well, of course I'm certain! Why else would he have ever taken the job?

You say Frank's forty-seven already? Are you sure? Odd. Well, he must be an exception. I? I ever be an exception, too?

"This way, please," the DBA man repeated impatiently.

Lawrence took his eyes off the girl's retreating figure and walked quickly through the door. He saw a man leaning against a desk, wearing a laboratory smock over his business suit. Lawrence deduced he must be a supervisory technician of some sort.

"This is Mr. Lawrence," the DBA man said, introducing him to the supervisor, who mashed out his cigarette and gave Lawrence a prolonged inspection.

"I'm Bert Grove," he said.

Lawrence mentally classified him.

Shake, pal—call me Bert!

Here was a man who must have completed at least twelve years of advanced study. He had been working here at DBA or at some comparable firm long enough to acquire a large measure of authority. But: Shake, pal—call me by my nickname, be-

cause, positively, I do not feel myself to be better than you. I assure you.

Lawrence did not, of course, allow this judgment to appear on his features. Nothing appeared on his features. He shook Grove's hand, his face wooden. "How do you do?"

The DBA man walked back to the door. "You've got Mr. Lawrence's file, Dr. Grove?"

Grove nodded and jerked a thumb at his desk. The DBA man opened the door. "Well, then, Mr. Lawrence, I'll leave you with Dr. Grove. I'm sure you'll be happy here at DBA." He closed the door behind him.

Grove looked quizzically at Lawrence. "DBA opens its arms to you," he said dryly. Obviously, this was intended to give the impression he wore no man's collar—to put him and Lawrence on an equal footing. But Lawrence refused him the opening, keeping his face a mask, and after a moment Grove shrugged and indicated a chair. "Seat."

"Thank you." Twitching his trouser legs up at the knee, Lawrence waited until Grove sat down behind his desk.

Grove looked at Lawrence from under his sandy eyebrows. "Do you know what we're doing here?"

Cautiously, Lawrence said, "I read all the proper releases when I signed them."

GROVE gestured impatiently. "Everybody does that." He searched through a lower desk drawer. "They shove that check under their noses," he muttered, "and they forget what they've read." He tossed a pad of printed forms onto the desk. He ignored Lawrence's indignation. "And everybody signs. What else?" Grove demanded.

"I don't understand your meaning," Lawrence said frigidly.

"What else do you know?" Grove reiterated. "Nothing? I thought so." Grove cursed with his face. "Easy money, eh? You know what we're going to do to you? 'Course not. Look—DBA has a government contract to develop the next model of the standard anti-interrogation device. What does that mean to you? If interrogative techniques have evolved to where they're the most important branch of practical psychology, what do you think testing an anti-interrogation device entails? What did you think all those 'mental health' clauses were for?"

Lawrence smiled thinly. So, Grove was a bully, as well.

Grove caught the expression. He barked a laugh. "Sorry. Don't know when I'm not wanted. Character flaw, I suppose." He calmed his manner a little.

Lawrence kept silent. Interesting, how a man could recognize his own deficiencies—verbally.

Sorry. I'm afraid I occasionally kick dogs. It's a character flaw, I'll admit. And now that I've made things all right by admitting it, you won't mind if I do it some more, will you?

Before one comes to understand mankind, one assumes that everyone else is like oneself . . . that everyone not only recognizes his own deficiencies but is also desperately interested in eliminating them:

Say, Charlie—I saw a very interesting advertisement in the paper this morning. It was about a new kind of chewing gum that positively knocks out bad breath for hours. Have a piece?

Unconsciously, Lawrence reached up and fingered the bridge of his nose.

" . . . need some more information," Grove was saying.

"Pardon me?"

Grove was holding an uncapped pen. Lawrence observed that it was the same make

and model as the personnel man's had been.

"I read your file," Grove repeated patiently. "It's not enough for our purposes here in the labs. I've got to get some more dope on you."

He ran his pen down the blanks in the form, checking off the spaces he'd already filled. "Name, Robert Service Lawrence . . ." he muttered, "Eyes brown, hair gray-black, age forty-two, height six feet—"

"Five feet, eleven inches," Lawrence amended.

Grove twitched his cheeks, gave Lawrence a disgusted look, and did not make the change. "Weight, one seventy-five . . . How'd you come to take this job?" Grove looked Lawrence full in the eyes and grinned sarcastically.

Lawrence felt himself coloring. "It has a certain adventurous appeal," he said clearly, his voice brittle. "It is, at the same time an opportunity to be of help to Humanity."

"Uh-huh." Grove bent over the form. He scribbled across the long blank space, muttering the words in unison with his pen-strokes. ". . . did not do it for the money . . ."

THE remainder of the day was confined to a physical

examination. Lawrence chafed at it, but Grove dismissed the work of Personnel Department's physician with an obscene gesture when Lawrence stiffly pointed out the medical chart already in his file.

"Get this straight, Lawrence. Out in Personnel, they're optimists. All they want to know is whether you'll hold together long enough to get to me. In here, I'm a realist. I want to know how much longer you'll wear after that. And you can forget about Personnel entirely. I don't care what they told you—and neither do they. I'll treat you as fairly as possible, but from now on I'm the only man you've got any appeal to. You can't go over my head with a complaint, and you can't pick and choose between what you're going to do and what you won't. I'm your boss, and you'll listen to me. I can still pick up a phone and have payment stopped on that check you didn't take this job for."

Grove pulled an instrument contact away from Lawrence's scalp, looked at the reading, and grunted.

"What kind of cure'd you take? Antabuse, A.A., psychotherapy or what?"

Lawrence set his lips. "I

don't know what you're talking about."

Grove looked at him wearily. "You're an ex-alcoholic. I want to know how you went about getting over it. Never bluff a doctor—he doesn't give a damn for any human foible except one; willful resistance to admitting human foibles."

Lawrence glared down at the floor. "Withdrawal," he said, angrily raising his head. "I just stopped drinking. It wasn't a serious case. I was overworked, and the condition occurred before I even noticed it."

Grove put the instrument down, made a final entry on his chart, closed it, and began unbuttoning his smock. "That is all, Lawrence," he sighed. "You can get dressed." He dropped the chart in a drawer and locked it. "We've got a room for you to live in, and your meals will be brought to you. You'll find that we do a fair job of keeping you comfortable."

HE WAITED until Lawrence was dressed, then grunted, "Follow me," unlocked a door into a narrow, empty corridor, and locked it again behind them. Still silent, he led Lawrence a short distance down the hall, un-

locked another door, and stepped into a large, well-furnished room that substituted deep murals for windows.

"You'll live here. You'll find clothes in the bureau. Leave your suit here in the morning. It'll be picked up, cleaned, and stored for you. The bath is through that door. The couch opens into a bed. Try and keep the place neat, because there's no maid service. You'll get your calls to report to me and whatnot over that interphone dingus on the desk. If there are any books you'd care to read, or tapes you want, make a list and just leave it anywhere in the room, face up, in plain sight. Within reason, we'll try to furnish them. And now, Mr. Lawrence, DBA bids you good night."

Grove stalked out of the room without waiting for a reply, and closed the door.

Lawrence smiled thinly. Obviously, Grove was angered at his persistent refusal to be overawed by the doctor's bullying tactics. Obviously, too, Grove was a brusque bully because he felt, for reasons that might or might not be well-founded in the ordinary case, that whatever he did to his subjects should not be demanded of humans.

Lawrence shrugged. Probably, Grove had never before worked with a man capable of truly maintaining a calm and organized mental attitude. Whatever kind of experimentation Grove might engage in while developing his "anti-interrogation device"—whatever that might be—Lawrence felt quite sure of his ability to emerge with his mind unscathed. His mind was by far the stronger of his two parts.

That there might be a definite risk of some bodily damage, Lawrence was quite ready to admit. "Hazardous experimentation" quite naturally called up an impression of laboratory work, with its usual danger of explosions, acid spatters, and the like. But Lawrence had evaluated that risk from the first. Medical science, after all, could practically rebuild an entire man from a few scraps of tissue. Painlessly.

He sat and read calmly, from the library already in the room, until supper arrived from a compartment in one wall. It was quite a good meal, and he ate most of it before he replaced the dishes and utensils in the compartment.

After supper, he read for a little while longer, but found

himself growing sleepy while it was still two hours short of his usual midnight bedtime. He undressed, being careful to remove his personal effects from his suit, and went into the bathroom to wash.

There he discovered that the same sanatorium equipment with which he was familiar had been installed. The mirror was metal, and buried in the wall. There were no projecting overhead lights or piping, and such things as the tub and washbasin were a firm but slightly yielding plastic. The tub, he knew, would regulate the level of its water from his displacement, and would drain immediately if his head should slip under water.

He returned to the other room. Examining the furnishings, he found that their design was much more subtle, and more effective, than even the best sanatorium furniture in not offering projections or sharp edges to injure him.

He tried to conceive of a kind of accident the room might nevertheless permit, and couldn't.

Accidents, of course, were not the only possibility. With a kind of deliberation, he opened the bureau and examined his new clothes, which consisted of no more than

several sets of white shorts and blouses, and a pair of foam slippers.

No, not shorts. What he had mistaken for them were simple sarong-like skirts. And the blouses proved to be loose sleeveless singlets which dropped over the head.

Odd. But as he handled the fabric, he saw why the clothes had to have as few wear-points as possible. They were extremely friable, with very little tensile strength. They would never form a rope from which a man could hang himself.

Nevertheless, except for a brief flash which he quickly dismissed, he felt no disquiet.

III

THE lights had gone out as soon as he lay down on the sheetless thermal bed, but he was not yet quite asleep. He missed Dorothy, and that in itself was enough to intrigue him. It was not one of the feelings he had foreseen for himself. Dorothy was incapable of arousing the deeper emotions, and he had assumed that his sense of duty and obligation to her dependence on him would be satisfied by her present financial security.

The fact of darkness might have something to do with it,

he ruminated. In the sanatorium, when he was being dried out, she had quite often come to see whether he was sleeping well, or to bring him one of his regulated medicinal drinks when it was obvious that he was not.

Quite possibly, a part of his unconscious mind was reacting to the stimuli of darkness and this return to a sanatorium atmosphere.

Dorothy, he reflected, was such an unlikely source of the companionship and comfort he now missed. She had been of that "dedicated" breed of nurse, well past thirty, plain-faced and wan, that seeks to atone for its inwardly-felt shortcomings as a human being by making a crusade of healing and service. He had no idea of what deficiencies Dorothy found in herself, but whatever they were, she had ended in marrying one of her patients—doubtless in a mixture of loneliness, fear of approaching age, and a desire to make something of him.

Lawrence shrugged. He could hardly feel obligated to cater to Dorothy's quirks of motivation. Anyway, he had, after all, finally made a financial success of sorts.

GROVE said without preamble the next morning:

"You're entitled to know just what's being done to you. Briefly, it's this: we're developing a new modification on the standard method of preventing the unauthorized verbal passage of data—I suppose just so much gibberish to you."

Lawrence remained non-committal, sitting in his chair in Grove's laboratory and looking steadily at the doctor.

"Uh-huh. Well, the current standard armed services device is the Mark Nine AID, the initials standing for 'Anti-Interrogation Device.' It's not a mechanism or a system of training. It's a semi-intelligent virus that sets up housekeeping in a man's brain. Scare you? Well, Mark IX shouldn't. It's a very docile symbiote. It has a simple memory of its own, which functions only to keep it organized. It has a correspondingly simple organization. One part cuts into the brain centers that control the autonomic nervous system, and just sits there. Another part borrows some of your memory cells. And a third part rides herd on your conscience; your ethics, your morals—whatever you call it. That part of you also has a discrete portion of your brain for its residence, and the AID knows where it is. That's all."

Lawrence shrugged.

Grove twitched, but went on. "It has three triggers. One of them is set off when you tell somebody something you shouldn't, do something you shouldn't, or in some other way make your conscience twinge. And don't kid yourself—nobody's sophisticated enough a traitor so that his childhood respect for the things he learned then won't kick up when he blabs what he shouldn't. Something winces. The AID feels it. The AID feels it even before he is able to translate intention into action—and so he never performs the action. The AID shoots a restimulation into his conscience, and all of a sudden he's not a traitor any more. His ethics intensify.

"Similarly, if he's not a traitor but he's reached his physical or psychological breaking point, the AID knows it. It spots his intention of stopping the torture by giving in, and it stops him, it knocks him out and paralyzes him. If it feels him being drugged or hypnotized, it does the same. *It* can't be drugged or hypnotized.

"Finally, if everything else fails, it kills him.

"That doesn't happen very often—it's common knowledge that AIDs will do it, and

pushing a man to that point is now accepted as murder. Besides, it's useless. And, though this is not common knowledge, worse than useless. By the time a man has reached the point where he has to die in order to safeguard the data he holds, that data has become the most important thing in the universe to him. He's been practically shouting it aloud inside his head, over and over. The AID's had a chance to memorize it. It holds on until it has to kill the man, and then leaves his body. It doesn't like death—it gets out. And looks for a new host. AIDs're a virus. Virii're contagious. The nearest individual catches it, like a cold. And the AID, if its host is now an enemy, doesn't like what it finds. It's memorized one conscience pattern, and it can't quite adjust to the new one.

"So the AID tries to adjust the pattern. It doesn't do very well. But then, it doesn't have to. All it has to do is change one or two settings on the scale of relative ethical values. It's a statistical fact that every AID ever issued has been accounted for. Every AID belonging to a captured man has functioned perfectly within its limitations. Almost every AID which found a new

host in an enemy of our armed services has brought that enemy home to us with the information he was trying to extract.

"It's an additional sidelight that over ninety-nine percent of those defecting enemies remained loyal to their original ideals—but the AID had somehow convinced them that they were serving those ideals best by coming to us. You don't care, do you, Lawrence?"

"I'm listening."

"So do pet mice."

"Dr. Grove——"

"The Mark IX AID, however," Grove went on, overriding Lawrence, "has severe limitations which were revealed at what was, fortunately, very near the end of the recent Eglin war. These were:" Grove held up three fingers,

"ONE: A lack of duration-sense. We recently received an item of information from an AID riding an enemy host it captured near the middle of the Eglin war, some fifteen years ago.

"Heading (A) under that: a concomitant inability to utilize a duration-sense if it had one. That message would have shortened the war if the AID had known communica-

tions code and forced its host to use a beam transmitter.

"Two: If its host were captured, kept in a sealed room, and kept alive, the AID would not function so long as the host was also not questioned. The Eglins used that trick to isolate information that had been passed on to Eglin hosts. Sometimes it made no difference, but sometimes it kept us from getting something we could have used. Granted, the Eglins wasted a lot of time and effort on people of theirs who had simply decided to desert. But there were several things we should have found out, and didn't.

"Three: General uncertainty. The Mark IX AID, in the extremely vital function of moving from one host to another, operates in a very catch - as - catch - can fashion. Sometimes it picks somebody too stupid to desert successfully. We don't like that. We want something we can bet on. But we can't get it with the present functional equivalent of a high-grade moron.

"And, in Heading (A) under *that*, you can append the confusion that results when dozens of AIDs, with their hosts dead in battle, try to cram into the survivors. It works, but it drains the hosts' metabolism to have to support

a number of symbiotes. Moreover, in most of those cases, nothing but a duplication of effort results. We need an AID that will know when to move on and when to recognize that it's unnecessary. We need, in short, an AID that's as intelligent as a genius-grade man."

LAURENCE looked coldly at Grove. He wondered if the man had finally stopped trying to impress him with this parade of biochemical esoterics, or whether there was going to be more before the doctor decided he'd killed enough time.

Lawrence had to admit a certain apprehension. It was nothing beyond his control, but it was natural that the day the program actually began would find him somewhat nervous, despite his intellectual preparedness for anything Grove and DBA might be planning for him. He only wished Grove would begin.

Grove saw his look, and smiled with some kind of inner amusement that was both sad and savage.

"Here at DBA, where nothing gets done on a small scale, we've devoted quite a bit of thought to that, and quite a bit of money. A lot of both has gone under the bridge. So

have a few volunteers. But we've got it worked out, now. Of course, we thought so on the last three failures, too. However, we've now got an AID that moves in and lives in the entire brain and nervous system. It's just as smart as the host, to begin with, and it goes on from there, learning and rearranging. It discards all erroneous data it might find there, removes all blocks to the free flow of information, and ensures itself of an ideally healthy environment. Or, rather, it's supposed to. It's supposed to be completely rational and sane. At critical-level operation, it should be able to think its host's way out of any difficulty mere humans or Eglins or whathaveyou might put up, and at times of no-stress it's supposed to leave the host's individuality unimpaired.

"Of course, sometimes it seems to rearrange a bit too thoroughly. That's what the soft furniture and suicide-proof furnishings are for. And sometimes it doesn't quite get the hang of handling the nervous system. And sometimes it causes complete paralysis. Oh, well, that's what you signed up for." Grove lifted a hypodermic pistol and shot it off into Lawrence's forearm.

"Meet Mark X," he said, and his face twisted. Lawrence had never before seen anyone, even Dorothy, look at him with so much compassion.

IV

LAWRENCE could see his room changing colors and shapes. The yielding mattress under his itching body ran a gamut of textures and temperatures. His bones ached, and the migraine wedged itself into the bones of his skull. The air tasted sweet, salt, and lemony on his tongue as he breathed it in convulsive sighs and shallow sips. His heart seemed to be leaping at his throat, fluttering as it hung there, and subsiding to a stethoscopic whisper as Mark X ranged wildly inside his brain, blundering about.

At intervals he could not time, Grove spoke to him through the interphone, his face set and his voice urgent, though Lawrence's ears selected first the bass ranges and then the treble. He felt that days must have passed, but he knew that could be a delusion.

"Lawrence, do the best you can. Our instruments show you're not in any critical stage, yet. Hang on and fight it out. We're pulling air samples out of your room, and

they're teeming with virus. I can't send you anyone to take care of you."

Lawrence was trembling on the edge of delirium. He felt as he had felt in the long nights at the sanatorium, when the first faint scuttlings began to sound in the corners of the room.

He swooped downward.

"Dorothy!" he gasped, clutching for the night bell. "Dorothy, I can't find. . ."

IN HIS head were doors, and behind the doors were voices. Something threw itself at the rusty hasps, and the frozen hinges scaled off their armor of oxide. The doors shivered in their frames. The voices leaked through in snatches, as the doors bent, and in fragments as they snapped back.

"You say Frank's forty——"

"—usiness suit——"

"Control yourse——"

"—someday, you'll see."

"Gum?"

"—*have to be the best!*"

"Gum?"

"—better cloth——"

"—stigmatu——"

"Planograph."

The voices were all his own; all echoing like the pieces of sound that fall from communicators when the dials

are spun across the band. Bass and treble, old and young, out of his far, far past and out of yesterday.

"The mature man is——"

"—kick dogs——"

"Mind?"

"I overworked and it crept up on me."

He felt the most intolerable agony of his life with each blow against those doors, and with every springing-back into silence he had relief from pain until the next.

"Gum?"

Each door locked off a tight compartment in his mind—a compartment he could enter and leave many, many times each day, simply by giving the magic passwords: "I need comfort" and "I need pain," but which no one could ever enter by battering down the doors so there could be no secret places when he needed them.

Now he saw the battering ram as himself. He saw himself hurtling at a door, his head sunk in his shoulders, cringing from the smash that must come. The door grew with insane speed, and he knew that in the next second. No.

"I'll die!"

And he stopped.

He flopped over on his back, feeling his muscles limp

as yarn, and looked up into Dorothy's shimmering face.

HE TOOK a weak breath. He was still in his room in the DBA building. He ran his hand over his face and found at least a four-day beard. Dorothy, wearing some kind of transparent fabric oversuit and a sealed helmet over her head, was bending over the interphone on the desk. Cylinders of air were strapped to her back. Her voice came mutedly through a diaphragm in the helmet.

"He's conscious and rational, Doctor. He came out of delirium about five minutes ago—it hadn't seemed that long—"and his pulse is weak, but steady. He's breathing evenly. The rictus is gone. Any instructions?"

Looking past her, Lawrence could see it was Grove she was talking to. Grove was red-eyed and haggard, his collar hanging loose from one flap, and his voice was thick.

"No. As long as he's recovering, I don't want any drugs in him to foul up our readings; he can take care of himself. What about you?"

Dorothy looked at a series of dials set into the left wristlet of her suit. "The suit count's up. I don't feel anything in particular yet."

"Hard to tell, under the fatigue symptoms, I'd say," Grove told her. "If you feel yourself developing anything out of the ordinary, push him out of bed and lie down yourself. Get that suit off and stuff it in the food slot. I'll dilate it when I see you getting ready. Be sure and give yourself plenty of time—if you're wearing that thing and you convulse like he did, you'll be in trouble."

"What's happening?" Lawrence burst out. He pushed himself up in the bed, his head ringing.

Grove's mouth curled into a wan copy of its usual grimace at him.

"DBA wakes you with a smile, Mr. Lawrence. You've now had your bout with the Mark X AID. Unfortunately, your wife is just starting hers. Are you a good nurse, Mr. Lawrence?"

Lawrence ignored his nervous flippancy. "Doctor Grove, what is Dorothy doing here?" he demanded.

Grove looked at him for a moment before he answered. When he did, his voice was bitter, and Lawrence had the impression that his bitterness was as much at himself as at anything else.

"You mentioned her name first, Mr. Lawrence. When we

saw you were in a critically convulsive state, I called for volunteers to go in and nurse you. But everybody around here knew how effective a virus-proof suit is. So I called your wife. She also volunteered, and I find myself forced to believe that she didn't do it for the money, either."

LAWRENCE sat in a chair, watching Dorothy. He'd taken off the suit and put it inside the serving compartment, and Grove had immediately closed off the opening. The apartment was curiously bare. Rubbery panels had slid over the walls at some point in Lawrence's own sickness, and most of the furniture had gone down into the floor. There was only the bed, with Dorothy lying on it, her eyes closed and her breath a trifle loud in her throat, and the chair in which, weak as he still was, he had to sit most of the time.

They hadn't exchanged more than two or three sentences between his waking up and her suddenly un-coördinated fumbling at the suit fasteners. But Lawrence knew that even with much more time, very little more would have passed between them. Dorothy was not of a talka-

tive nature, and neither was he. She had long ago come to know his habits and moods, and she reacted to them by their non-verbal signals. Whether she interpreted them accurately or not was unimportant. Whatever she thought she was observing, her responses were right.

She had known, certainly, without his having to tell her, that he was grateful.

Exactly what kind of gratitude she imagined it was, he did not know—nor did he see that it was necessary for him to know. If she chose to visualize it as a kind of romantic inner glow on his part, then he would do nothing to destroy her impression.

Actually, he *was* somewhat surprised that her dedication had extended itself this far.

But he was much more interested in what the AID virus had done to him. Had it, for example, made him moan like that in his unconsciousness? And if so, what had been going through his mind at the time?

All his sins? What sins, he wondered abstractedly, did Dorothy possess?

But what final effect had there been?

Grove had implied a great deal—a mental rearrangement, if nothing else.

He remembered the doors fantasy, and pursed his lips. Well, had he changed?

He shook his head, and a cold smile touched his face. He'd been correct in his estimate of himself. The doors had not been broken by Grove's experiment. He had fought off the "rearrangement." He was just as sane now as he'd been before he came to DBA.

He leaned forward as Dorothy suddenly arched her back and screamed through her clenched teeth. Had he done that?

He got up slowly, sat down on the bed beside Dorothy, took her stiff hand, and began patting it.

V

TWO days, now.

And Grove, on the interphone screen, looked as though he hadn't yet been to bed. Lawrence was almost positive that his clothes were the same he'd worn the day Lawrence had awakened. But this was hardly important to Lawrence. He wanted to get out of the room, and he knew he could not. He was terrified by what was happening to Dorothy. He held the communicator up in trembling hands so Grove could see the bed more clearly.

"You can stop that," Grove snapped impatiently. "We've got a dozen viewers into that room."

Lawrence set the interphone down shakily, moved his hands without knowing what to do next, and finally retreated to the far corner of the room.

Dorothy was looking better. That was the essence of it—the terrifying essence of it. Though she still thrashed back and forth on the bed, and though she mumbled constantly in a voice too slurred to understand, she was almost visibly getting better. Better than Lawrence had ever known her.

There was color in her lips and cheeks; not the hot flare of fever but the soft, rose glow she might have had as a young girl, once. Though her hair was straggling and knotted, its flat lackluster was gone—it shone with the honey glow that he had never seen. Her epidermis had begun to peel in patches last night. Now most of it had come off, and under that dead, dry layer her skin was soft and unlined. Her face had smoothed—the faint crows' feet were no longer visible at the corners of her eyes.

She was still a plain woman. Her bones were still too

big, and her features too broad. But even in a coma, she had somehow acquired a cleanness and fresh attractiveness.

And her husband was terrified.

"Not like your case at all," he heard Grove faintly say through the interphone. "There was one brief period when we got a short surge of metabolic readings from you that correspond to hers now, but not in any duration or intensity like this. Something's happening to her, all right. Something that didn't take with you. And she's running through this syndrome a lot faster than you did. You didn't even begin anything like this for another thirty-six hours.

"I'm not sure what it all means, either. None of the previous volunteer tests, with earlier batches of virus, turned up anything like this. I'm pretty close to being just as lost as you are, until she comes out of it."

Dorothy's muttering became louder, but no more intelligible. She seemed to be moving her legs and arms more violently. Lawrence stared at her.

"Hold her down, man! She's going to convulse!" Grove shouted.

Lawrence moved tentatively toward the bed.

"Hurry up! Do you want her to kill herself?"

Lawrence forced himself to move. He held her down uncertainly, feeling the violence coiling in her muscles. The mutter had risen to a slurred shout, and now he could begin to understand what she was saying.

"All," she was repeating over and over. "All — all — all — all ——" She tore herself loose from Lawrence's indecisive grip, her mouth contorted open.

"All — all — all ——"

"Judas! *Look at that synopsis reading!*" somebody shouted faintly from behind Grove.

"All — all — ALL DOWN!"

Dorothy's muscles uncoiled fluidly, stretched smoothly, and relaxed. Her chest heaved in one indrawn sigh, and her eyes opened. She looked up at Lawrence and smiled. "Hello, Robert."

Lawrence stared at her. "Hello. Hello, Dorothy," he managed.

Suddenly her smile faded. Her eyes searched his face, and gradually a deep and ineradicable sadness crept into them.

"You look worn, Robert. It didn't happen to you."

Even in sadness, her face was one of the most beautiful he had ever seen. That sadness, and that beauty, touched him in some place he had never known before.

He shook his head. "No, darling. Whatever it was didn't happen to me."

THEY sat together in the room, neither of them looking at each other. Lawrence stared blankly down at the floor, his fingers knotted together. Dorothy kept her eyes averted as she talked to him. She spoke hesitantly.

"The chances are safely low that nobody's observing us at this hour," she said.

Lawrence grunted. He felt a numbness spreading slowly out toward his fingertips.

He was an exception, too.

"The—the AID does exactly what Grove said it ought to," Dorothy went on. "More exactly, perhaps, than he thought. It demands a healthy, rational environment. It creates one. It gives its host . . . sanity." Her voice grew embarrassed. Lawrence flashed an angry look up to her face, and saw that she was blushing with awkwardness toward him, her eyes downcast. She reached out and put her hands over his own. "It couldn't give it to you. You would

have died, first. It knew that, and withdrew. I can't think of any other explanation, from what you've told me."

"Why don't you ask it—or its brother, or whatever's squatting in your skull?" he demanded bitterly.

"I can't, Robert," she said gently, but with her hands shaking just a trifle. "I can't feel it. Even when I need it, if I ever do, to help me out of some crisis, I won't be able to talk to it, any more than I can talk to my arm. It's a part of me. It's a symbiote, not a parasite."

Lawrence pulled his hands out from under hers and held them safely at his sides.

One knows the systematic way of the world. One begins with small means, but with the course of time—with planning, with application, with rigorous discipline, one forges to the chosen summit.

Except that some men were mail clerks at forty-three.

"Robert?"

"What?"

"I doubt if Grove's thought of this. He's interested in the military applications of the AIDs, and he despises himself for the way he has to work. He tries to concentrate his attention on one narrow aspect, and to think about it as little as possible when there's no

obvious need for it. He won't think of another factor for some time, if ever. By then, we'll be free to leave this room, and DBA, as well. I know I can persuade Grove to give his permission.

"Robert, the AIDs belong to everybody. There's no person in this world, no matter who or what, that doesn't deserve sanity if he can have it.

"I can't give it to them. But you can. You've been exposed to the virus, but you were immune to it. It's in your bloodstream, or in your skin, or your respiratory system—it's there, somewhere, and you can pass it on to people. You're a carrier. Of sanity."

She dropped her voice. "But you can never have it for yourself."

Lawrence smashed his fists together. He felt the bitterness tear deep into him. "Why me? Why is it me, that's trapped this way?"

"I don't know. I wish it had been the other way around."

He turned on her. "It could have been, just as easily. What made you be the one?"

Dorothy looked at him with the sadness he would come to always know, and always live with.

"Maybe," she said, "because I was the one who didn't want to be superhuman."