

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1960

All Stories New and Complete

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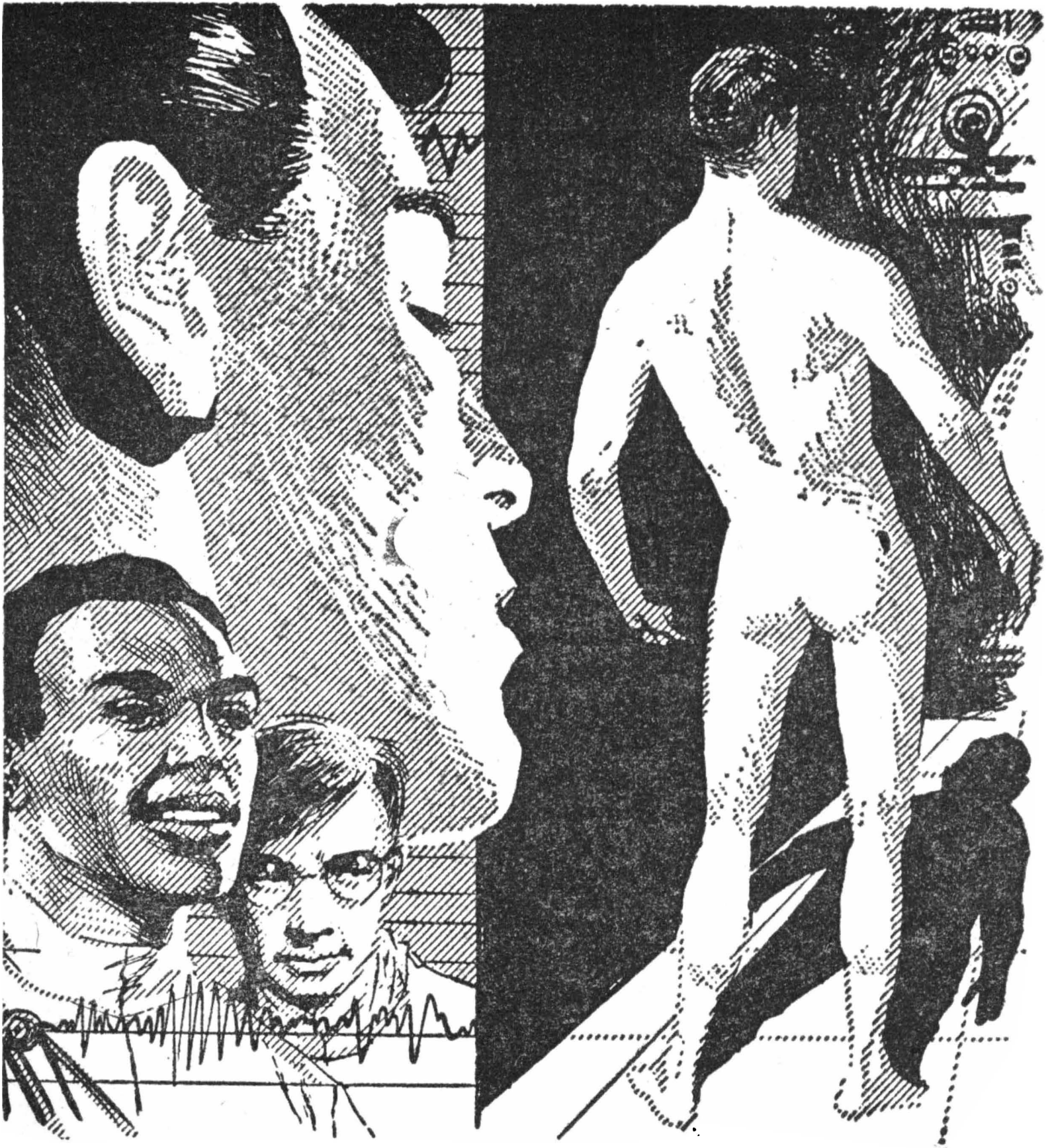
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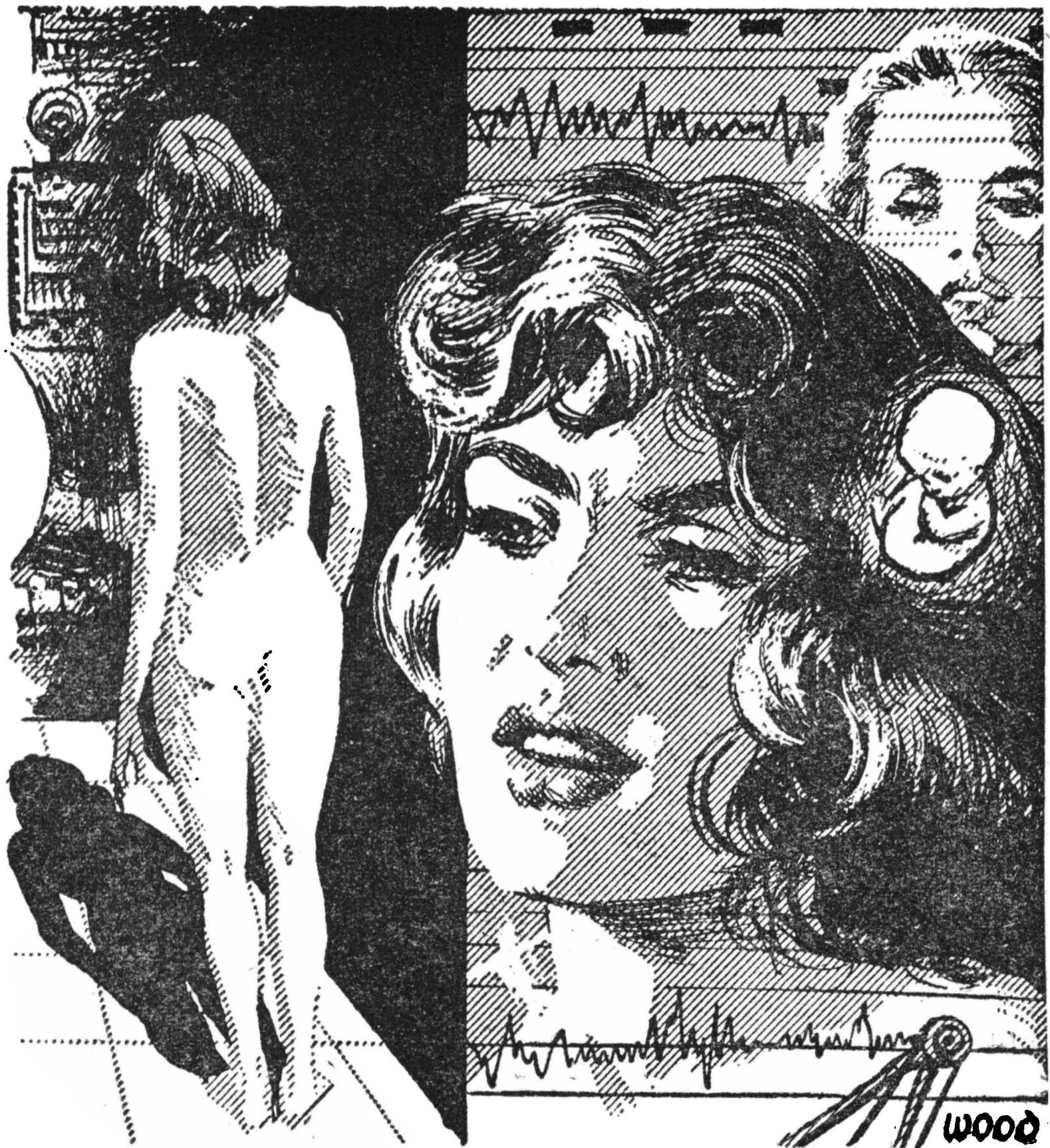
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MATCHMAKER

*Ask a sensible question and you're sure to
get a sensible answer—remembering that
one man's sense may be a machine's poison!*



By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

JASSO laid the bulky report on his superior's desk.

"No one living can solve the problem," he said.

Tern stared at him quizzically and leaned back in the cushioned chair behind his desk.

"That's encouraging," Tern said with a wry smile. "The second generation?"

"The probabilities are high. The most likely father is a man named Lao Protik, a psycho-artist living in New York."

"The mother?"

Jasso grinned, a flashing grin in a dark face. He sank into a chair, pulled out a cigarette pack and offered one to Tern. The older man shook his head, fishing in his pocket for an old-fashioned pipe. Jasso clicked out a cigarette and drew deeply on it.

"That's one of the fascinating angles about dealing with the Calculator," he said. "We combined the fifty most probable fathers, including Lao, with the fifty most probable mothers. Believe it or not, we drew an absolute blank. They just don't jibe at all."

"Not too surprising," said Tern. "It's happened before. But I gather you've already decided to work with this psycho-artist. Why?"

"Lao's so far ahead of the rest, both men and women, it's the only thing to do. And, since life is full of little surprises, we found the probability highest if Lao marries a woman whose own separate probability rating is close to zero." Jasso consulted his notes and added: "She's a language teacher named Grida Mattin, living in Southgate, Tennessee."

"You're pretty sure these results are right?" asked Tern.

"I've checked every angle I could think of," replied Jasso carefully. "Of course, there's always the possibility that two near-zero probabilities would add up better, when combined.

But the probability rating for marriage between these two is very high—you can see for yourself when you check the figures. I think it's the best we'll find."

"It would be so much simpler if we had a high probability among people in this generation," said Tern thoughtfully. "Arranging a marriage between two strangers is a ticklish business."

"It's been done before," said Jasso. "I'll put a team of agents to work on it right away."

THERE were millions of cards—if you could call things the size of a bedsheet "cards." Each punched with holes like a swiss cheese, they filled one of the Calculator's most strategic banks. They represented every man, woman and child in the civilized world.

Through them, the course of history could be guided, the advancement of civilization accelerated. By racing through the backgrounds and capabilities of every person in the United Nations, the Calculator could find the best one to do any job, to solve any problem.

Lao Protik, as he strolled into his swank Nuyork apartment building that July evening, was completely unaware that the Calculator had pointed a finger at him. Life flowed smoothly for him. Not a worry darkened the horizon. His an-

nual salary from Consolidated Ads was five hundred thousand dols — a comfortable thirty thousand after taxes—and he maintained three mistresses in separate apartments.

In the lobby, he paused to open his mailbox. Two letters fell out into his hands; he tore the envelopes neatly across the end.

The first was an advertisement for the 2125 model of the Sky Swallow convertible helicopter. He crumpled it and tossed it into a potted palm.

He grunted in surprise as he read the second one.

“Vr. Lao Protik,” he read. “Our firm has been impressed with your accomplishments and growing reputation as a psycho-artist. We are in a position to offer you employment at a salary of one hundred thousand dols annually. Our representative, Vr. Casto Roche, will call on you in a few days to discuss this offer with you.”

The letter bore the illegible scrawl of someone who signed himself as president of Colorvue Publicity, Inc. Lao had never heard of the firm.

Lao’s lips curled and this missive followed the first one into the potted palm. He felt a momentary irritation at the audacity of anyone offering him a mere hundred thousand dols, then let the entire matter slip from his mind.

Softly whistling the refrain

of the latest hit tune, “The Clouds of Venus Can’t Come Between Us,” he caught the elevator and ascended to his last untroubled night for a long time to come.

A TERSE memorandum was waiting for Lao at his office the next morning. It was not the sort of thing any employe of Consolidated Ads could ignore—not even a Class A psycho-artist who was an officer in his union. A worried frown creasing his normally smooth forehead, Lao hurried down the corridor to the plush office of Mavo Caprin, president of the firm.

Caprin was in no amiable mood. He grunted at Lao’s somewhat querulous greeting. He kept his nose buried in papers, puffing ominously on a fat cigar for several minutes before looking up and waving Lao to a seat.

“Perhaps you can explain these, Protik,” said Caprin sharply, waving a thick fistful of letters. Lao leaned over to take them, and glanced through several of them.

The phrases that met his eyes astounded and outraged him.

They were such words as “this insolent effrontery,” “the unwarranted audacity of the man,” “a deliberate scheme to further rip away the fabric of our tottering moral code”—all applied to his own work!

“I can’t explain them be-

cause I don't know what they are talking about, Voter Caprin," said Lao.

"They're talking about these," replied Caprin. With the flourish of a magician taking a rabbit out of a hat, he produced a sheaf of Lao's original paintings from his desk drawer.

Lao riffled through them. At first glance, he saw nothing wrong. Then he looked more closely, and began to compare them with specific complaints in the letters.

His face flushed bright red with anger.

Only one in a hundred readers of the advertisements that carried Lao Protik's artwork would have noticed, but the complaints were justified! The melange which was a competent psycho-artist's painting was carefully confused to achieve a specific psychological objective—in Lao Protik's work, to make people want to buy the products sponsored by Consolidated Ads. But in these paintings the psychological impact had been distorted cleverly. The psycho-art had been turned into effective propaganda for polygamy!

"Somebody has altered my work," said Lao firmly. "I demand a thorough check of every artist on the staff."

Caprin shook his head. "That won't be necessary. I've had these paintings checked by experts, and they all agree this is your original work."

"THAT'S outrageous!" exclaimed Lao. "What 'experts' told you such lies?"

"It doesn't matter," said Caprin, a bit wearily now. "I don't like to do it after such a long association, Lao, but Consolidated Ads has a reputation to maintain. We can't take sides in politics. We have to let you go."

Lao stared at him. Then he hurled paintings and letters in Caprin's face and stalked to the door. Halfway out of the office, he turned and shouted furiously:

"The Psycho-Artists Guild will have something to say about this, Caprin!"

"I don't think so," Caprin retorted mildly, rubbing a bruised cheek.

It wasn't long before Lao realized the significance of that parting remark. His few personal belongings jammed into his briefcase, he emerged on the roof of the huge Consolidated Ads building and looked around for a helicab. The cabstands were empty at the moment. Waiting under an awning, he dropped a dime into a newspaper vending machine. It clucked and ejected the noon edition of the *Star* into his hands.

A good-sized headline on Page One proclaimed: "Art Union Ejects Protik." His eyes bulging slightly, Lao read swiftly:

In a specially called meeting of its executive com-

mittee, the Psycho-Artists Guild this morning revoked the membership of its second vice-president, Lao Protik, chief psycho-artist for Consolidated Ads.

Officers of the union refused to make public the reason for Protik's ejection, but there were reports that some connection with the notorious Polygamy League was involved. Protik could not be reached for comment immediately, and the switchboard operator at Consolidated Ads said she had instructions not to ring his office.

UNSHAVEN and bleary-eyed, Lao argued plaintively over the telephone with his old friend, Majo Hobel, personnel chief at Autovance Advertising. Hobel had tried several times in the past to woo Lao from Consolidated Ads.

"It's no good, Lao," said Hobel. "You've been black-balled."

"But it's all a pack of lies, Majo!" cried Lao. "You know the inside of the field. How about the foreign firms?" Anything outside of Nuyork was "foreign."

"It's the same in Kahgo and all over. Sorry, Lao."

Cursing, Lao slammed down the receiver and dialed the number of Tinna, his favorite mistress. A voice he recognized as Tinna's answered.

"Tinna," he began, "this is Lao . . ."

"She isn't here," said Tinna frigidly. The telephone clicked in his ear.

Lao's shoulders drooped. He put the phone in its cradle and, without much hope, prepared to dial Phreda, another mistress. It buzzed at him before he could begin.

He answered it.

"Voter Protik, there's a gentleman in the lobby to see you," said the apartment house operator.

"I don't want to see any more reporters!" shouted Lao angrily.

"This isn't a reporter, sir. He says he's a representative of Colorvue Publicity."

"Never heard of it," growled Lao. "But send him up."

He had no time to shave, but he washed his face and tried to make himself a little more presentable before the apartment buzzer sounded. He admitted an elderly man with a gray mustache, who had the well-fed air of a corporation executive.

"Voter Protik, I am Roche of Colorvue Publicity," his visitor introduced himself. "You recieved our letter several days ago?"

Lao searched his memory. Vaguely he recalled such a letter and his hopes began to rise. Wasn't it something about offering him a job?

He asked Roche.

"That's correct, sir," replied

Roche. "A hundred thousand dols a year, one-quarter payable in advance."

"You may not want me now," said Lao gloomily. He had no scruples about putting over a sharp business deal, but any contract he might draw would be invalid if he withheld information.

"We are aware of your recent difficulties," said Roche sympathetically. "I wish to assure you we do not believe the charges that you are associated with the Polygamy League. Also you may wish to know that my firm, while a small one, is a reputable one. A check of the Business Practices Agency will prove that to you."

"I'm not a member of the Psycho-Artists Guild any more," Lao reminded him bitterly, "to say nothing of having been blackballed by all major firms and abandoned by my three mistresses."

"We have no union contract, and your personal life is your own," answered Roche with a slight smile. "Your known ability is sufficient for us. There is one thing, however. Your work will not be in Nuyork, but in Southgate, a small town in Tennessee. If you see fit to accept our offer, we will arrange in advance for your quarters there. There will be no cost to you."

"I hate to leave Nuyork," said Lao slowly. "And I'm frank to say that I hate to come down from half a million

dols to a hundred thousand. But your offer comes as a life-saver to me, Voter Roche. I'm inclined to accept it."

"Good," said Roche. "Think on it, if you like. I'll put a signed contract in the next mail for you. When you return it with your signature, your ticket and instructions will be waiting for you at Lagwad Airport."

They shook hands on it, and Roche walked out of Lao's life—for a while.

HIS hands in his pockets, Lao strolled into the kitchen, where his landlady, Grida Mattin, was melodiously preparing lunch. Grida wore an apron over her old-fashioned opaque clothing and her head, beginning to show a few gray streaks, was bent over the gleaming stove.

"Grida, do you mind if I use the telephone for a long-distance call to Nuyork?" he asked.

"Certainly not, Lao," she answered, turning to smile at him. Her face was not exceptionally attractive, but she had beautiful teeth. "Nothing wrong, I hope."

"I don't know," he said. "My salary check is three weeks overdue."

He placed the call to Colorvue Publicity on the kitchen extension, and stood by the stove, watching Grida stir and season.

"Cooking is almost a lost

art, Grida, and you're a good cook," he said. "I'm surprised you've never married."

Grida flushed at the compliment.

"It may sound boastful, but I've never courted a man, Lao," she said. "As you may have noticed, I have conservative habits. I'm afraid I'm a little out of place in the modern world. I don't approve of the frivolous attitude people have toward marriage now."

Lao looked at her, not without some affection. Of course he had made advances, as most men did to all unmarried women with whom they associated.

But Grida was a history teacher, and she lived by the outmoded morals of the distant past. She had made it known at once that marriage was her price for intimacy, and she gave no hint she was interested in marriage.

"There's nothing frivolous about it from the man's viewpoint, when only a woman can apply for a divorce," replied Lao. "That's why it's hard for women to catch husbands. With ten women to every man, most men have no trouble finding mistresses."

"I don't approve of that, either," said Grida, compressing her lips firmly.

The telephone interrupted, and Lao went into the library to talk.

"On your call, sir," came the thin voice of the Nuyork oper-

ator, "there is no Colorvue Publicity listed."

"What!" he exclaimed. "There must be! Check again."

He waited a long, anxious moment.

"I'm sorry, sir," came the operator's voice again. "I have checked our directory, and there is no Colorvue Publicity listed."

Lao swore fervently.

"Wait a minute," he cried. "Nuyork? Hold it just a minute, will you?"

He raced up the ramp to his second floor bedroom, fumbled through his dresser drawer until he found his contract and ran back downstairs with it. He had the operator check the name of every Colorvue Publicity official who had signed the contract. None was listed.

"I know there's a Colorvue Publicity!" he shouted desperately. "Get me the Business Practices Agency."

"Just a moment, sir."

A man's voice answered at the Business Practices Agency. It took him several minutes to check the files in compliance with Lao's request for information.

"We have no such firm listed in our records," he said at last.

"**D**AMMIT, I know you do!" exclaimed Lao. "You told me Colorvue Publicity had a Double-A2 rating when I checked with you, not four months ago."

"Was the request for a rating by letter or by telephone, sir?"

"By telephone. It didn't take the girl three minutes to find it."

"There'd be no record of your request if it was made by telephone. There must have been some mistake, sir. If there were a firm named Col-orvue Publicity in any city in the world having a population of more than 100,000, it would be in our records."

Lao cursed him and hung up. Grida came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"I couldn't help overhearing, Lao," she said. "There must be something wrong. That company sent me a check for your first three months' room and board. It cleared the bank all right."

"So did my salary check for the first quarter," he said. "But the Business Practices Agency is supposed to keep records of a firm for a year after its dissolution. I can't understand anybody paying out twenty-five thousand dols and then just disappearing!"

"If you need any help to tide you over, Lao . . ." she said hesitantly. "My salary isn't much—fifteen thousand dols a year. But I have something saved."

"Thanks, Grida, but I'll be all right," he said, turning away.

Lao left the house and strode

down the quiet streets of Southgate, fuming. This had all the earmarks of a conspiracy. First the sabotage at Consolidated Ads, now the utter disappearance of Colorvue Publicity. But he could think of no enemies who would have reason to conspire against him. The field of psycho-art was a highly specialized one, without bitter competition.

Back in his room at Grida Mattin's house were half a dozen canvases that reflected all his co-ordinated skill. Done on the instructions he found at Lagwad Airport the night he left Nuyork, they depicted all the advantages of marriage in a small Southern town. His now-vanished employers had never sent him instructions for their disposal. Now the work was wasted, unless he could sell them free-lance.

The brown autumn leaves were drifting down on the crumbling sidewalks of Southgate, stripping the trees that lined the streets. Blue smoke drifted from chimneys of a few of the old houses, dissipating into the gray sky. It was an atmosphere that fitted his mood of despair.

The most pressing problem that faced him was financial. Lao was a lavish man with his money. His balance at the bank now wouldn't cover his income tax for the year. It was something he'd never had to worry about before, because good psycho-artists were well-

paid and always in demand. Now, marooned in the Tennessee hills, blackballed by every big firm in the nation, his prospects looked bleak.

Something Grida had said stuck in his mind. Fifteen thousand a year—plus savings. It wasn't a great deal, after taxes, but it was a living. And he could pay his own taxes next March.

He shook his head and turned his steps back toward the house. Marriage was the very last resort for Lao. He'd try free-lancing the Colorvue paintings first.

ROCHE looked unhappy. "While he was working on the paintings he didn't have time to get around town, such as it is," he said. "He and Grida were together a lot. They seemed to get along. Now he's sold the paintings and he's spending the money on a mistress."

"Well, Jasso, this is your baby," said Tern. "What now?"

"A mistress can be scared off pretty easily," said Jasso. "We've got agents pulling strings all over the place right now to stave off a worse problem than that. Grida's sister, Alina, visits her every year and our secondary checks with the Calculator show such a visit would be fatal to any chances of a Lao-Grida marriage. Alina's a doctor in Frisco. We've managed to get the

hospital authorities to postpone her vacation, but we've got to get Lao and Grida married pretty quick. They can't stall Alina off forever."

"It strikes me that you're just as far away from the marriage as you were at the beginning," commented Tern.

"How do you make two people want to marry each other?" countered Jasso. "It's not enough the Calculator has to pick out a woman 20 years older than he is. Checking them against each other, they are basically incompatible."

"Can you tell them? Maybe if they knew how important their marriage is to the world . . ."

"I've checked that," said Jasso. "We can't. The probability would drop to almost nothing."

"Excuse me, sir," interposed Roche. "All the pertinent information on the basic personalities of Lao and Grida is filed in their Calculator cards. It seems to me that all you'd have to do would be to ask the Calculator how to make them want to marry each other."

"Dealing with the Calculator isn't quite that simple, Roche," replied Jasso with a smile. "It's a machine. It has no language that would permit it to tell us *how* things are done, even though we might say it knows, because it has all the necessary information.

"If we ask for information

recorded in the Calculator, it can refer us to the place in the file to find it—if we phrase the question properly. If we ask a true-or-false question, it will answer 'yes' or 'no,' if it has the answer. If we ask for correlation of information, the Calculator can give us the probability of attaining an objective.

"That's why it takes such long training to become a Calculator operator. The Calculator can correlate the emotional factors of Lao and Grida for us, but we have to draw our own conclusions for action from them—and then ask the Calculator for probabilities. That's all."

Tern had listened gravely, without interrupting, his hands folded across the bulge of his stomach.

"You evidently haven't been asking the right questions, Jasso," he remarked sardonically. "It's hard for me to realize that this is the Jasso who stopped the Brazilo-Panamanian War and solved the economic crisis that threatened Pakistan."

"I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve, Chief," retorted Jasso. "The only way to make a pair want to marry is to throw them together and then exploit their psychological weakness. Make them *need* each other. I've got a psychology team checking Lao and Grida with a fine-tooth comb, and we'll check their recom-

mendations with the Calculator."

"From what you've told me, I'd say Lao's biggest weakness is a love of luxurious living," suggested Tern. "That takes money, you know."

"Economic pressure alone doesn't go deep enough to drive him to marriage. Not with so many available women around. Don't worry; we're using economic pressure to keep him off balance. But the psychologists tell us the final motivation must be an emotional frustration. It doesn't have to be a big one, but it must be basic."

LAO had had the letter for two days, and still didn't know what to do about it. It had cost him two sleepless nights.

In the old days in Nuyork he would have aired his troubles to friends at the Psycho-Artists Club and probably acted on a dozen varying bits of advice at the same time. Here there was no one to whom he could turn.

He glared morosely at the unfinished painting. The canvas gleamed with iridescent whorls and lines, from which the face and form of Grida Mattin were beginning to emerge. In the maze of waxing and waning colors could be distinguished, if one looked closely enough, faint countenances of women and babies with expressions of anxiety, of fear,

of hunger for love . . . with occasionally a man.

It would have sold well, he thought. Free-lancing had been a promising idea.

He dragged himself downstairs to breakfast. He usually reacted to Grida's singing. It pleased him mildly when he was in an expansive mood, irritated him when his mind was on something else.

This morning he hardly heard it.

"Alina will be here in three weeks," Grida imparted over the toast and coffee.

"Alina?" he asked, without much interest.

"My sister. Haven't I mentioned her to you before?"

"No, I don't think so. Where is she?"

"She's a doctor in Frisco. She visits me every year, but she's already more than a month late this year."

A doctor. Jasso raised a mental image of Alina as sort of a duplicate of Grida, a plain, elderly woman with graying hair swept back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Right now, however, he had more important matters on his mind.

"Grida, do you know a good lawyer?" he blurted.

"Why, yes. Tello Distane is the best in town," she said. "Is there anything the matter, Lao?"

Silently, he pulled the crumpled letter from his pocket and handed it to her. It was from a

prominent Nuyork legal firm. It said:

On behalf of our clients, Colorvue Publicity, Inc., we are instituting suit against you for one million dols in damages, for having disposed of psycho-paintings you contracted to accomplish for them.

"But isn't that the company you couldn't find any report of?" gasped Grida.

"It disappeared right off the map," said Lao grimly. "Now it's appeared again. I can't understand this at all!"

"I'd take it to Tello," said Grida firmly. "He can tell you what you should do."

HE took his letter to Distane that afternoon. Small towns change little, and the attorney's office was upstairs over a department store, as his great-grandfather's probably had been.

Distane, a white-haired man with a leonine cast to his jaw, listened with fingertips together for a few moments, until the details of Lao's troubles began to unfold.

"Just a moment, Voter," he said. "What did you say your name is?"

"Lao Protik," answered Lao, somewhat nettled.

Moistening his index finger, Distane shuffled through some papers on his desk, peering at

them with intense concentration. At last his face lit.

"Ah, Voter Protik," he said, settling back in his chair. "We have a new partner in our firm . . . an experienced attorney, you understand, but new to our firm. I think Voter Attok is the man who should handle your case."

Getting to his feet with a grunt, Distane led Lao into an adjoining room which gave evidence of having been newly furnished not long before. An urbane-looking man of middle age sat behind the desk, twiddling a letter opener idly.

"This," said Distane heavily, "is Lao Protik, Voter Attok."

Distane left, shutting the door behind him. Lao stared at Attok. Attok raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Excuse me," apologized Lao hurriedly. "I was just trying to remember if we had met before, Voter Attok. Your face seems very familiar to me."

"I don't believe so," said Attok in a well-modulated voice. "I gather from Voter Distane that you have a legal problem on your mind, Voter Protik. Won't you sit down?"

Settling himself in a chair, Lao handed the letter to Attok. Prompted occasionally by questions from the attorney, he outlined the events leading to its receipt.

"Well, I don't think you have anything to worry about, Voter Protik," said Attok

when he had finished. "If they were delinquent in payment of your salary before you sold the psycho-paintings and you tried unsuccessfully to contact them through the Business Practices Agency, they have no lawsuit. Just leave this letter with me for a few days and I'll get in touch with you when I've completed the investigation necessary to document our case."

Lao left, feeling better but racking his brain for an elusive memory. He was sure he had seen Attok before.

THREE days later, Attok called Lao back to his office. The atmosphere was not nearly as hospitable.

"I thought you understood, Voter Protik, that a man must be absolutely honest with his attorney," said Attok severely. "I can't handle your case properly when you withhold facts from me."

"I haven't withheld any facts," said Lao, surprised.

"You did tell me that the Business Practices Agency had told you there was no such firm as Colorvue Publicity, didn't you? The BPA tells me they have no record of your getting in touch with them about the matter. They say Colorvue Publicity has been recorded in their files for several years. It is a small but reputable firm."

"It was a telephone check," said Lao desperately. "I don't

know who the man was I talked to, but I'll swear he said there was no Colorvue Publicity!"

"Mmm." Attok stared keenly at him. "As I recall, you told me also that you had not received your salary from Colorvue?"

"That's right, and how they expect me to hold onto the paintings when they don't pay me . . ."

"How about these?"

Attok laid the photostats of three checks on the desk. Each was for twenty-five thousand dols, and made out to Lao Protik from Colorvue Publicity, Inc.

Lao recognized one of them as the check he had received as his first quarter salary advance. The other two were exact duplicates, but dated at three-month intervals. The photostats of the backs of the checks—all of them—bore what appeared to be his endorsement.

"It's forgery!" howled Lao. "I only signed one of those checks! It's a conspiracy to ruin me!"

"Conspiracy or not, Voter Protik, we can't win your case if experts say that's your handwriting. The expert I took it to says it is."

Lao collapsed.

"Who's doing this to me, Voter Attok?" he whimpered. "Why are they doing it?"

"On the face of it, I'd say to get your money," replied

Attok sympathetically. "You were a very successful psycho-artist before your . . . ah . . . misfortune."

"I don't have any money. I have saved nothing."

"You are familiar with the law, aren't you? If they win the suit, they're entitled to half of everything you make above a minimum five thousand dols annually, until the judgment is paid."

"I don't make five thousand dols a year. I don't have a job. What can I do, Voter Attok?"

"Why, as long as you make less than five thousand dols a year, they can't touch you," replied Attok. "But to safeguard your finances in the event you do regain your former financial status, I'd suggest you incorporate yourself, with your wife as the controlling stockholder. Then you can limit your personal salary to five thousand dols a year, and the remainder of the income will be under her control. The law can't touch it."

"But . . . but I'm not married," said Lao.

Attok raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," he said at last. "As long as you make less than five thousand."

The wheels in Lao's brain were clicking as he left Attok's office. He thought he saw through the whole scheme against him. Whoever was behind Colorvue Publicity had

engineered the frauds that got him blackballed and discharged from Consolidated. They had maneuvered him into a position where he would be vulnerable to a million-dollar legal judgment. Now, undoubtedly, the next move was to clear him and restore his reputation, so he'd be financially able to pay off.

It was devilish—and he saw no way out.

LAO moped around the house, his nerves near the breaking point. Daily he dreaded notification that the damage suit had been formally instituted, a move which would cut off his only chance to see his income and his position in the psycho-art field restored.

Marriage? It was on his mind constantly. The idea disturbed him almost as much as the thought of Colorvue taking a big slice of his income for the next decade or so. He might have been inclined to marry one of his three mistresses in Nuyork — before they showed themselves for what they were—but he knew better than to trust his former Southgate mistress with control of his finances. She had abandoned him as soon as the money from the sale of his paintings had run out.

A mailman's visit was an unusual enough phenomenon to create interest, for it meant the delivery of a package. Let-

ter mail was delivered from the post office to each home through a vacuum tube system. Since it was a letter Lao feared, he watched with considerable interest when the mailman approached the front door, and curiosity was uppermost in his mind when Grida called from downstairs to say the package was for him.

He knew no one who would be sending him a package.

Grida, her own curiosity apparent, made no move to leave the room when he took the large, oblong package from her and prepared to open it. A premonition smote him as he noted the return address: "The Nuyork Gallery of Traditional Art."

With trembling fingers he tore away the wrappings. His paintings—all three of them—tumbled to the floor.

He dropped into a chair, limp. The most important thing in his life was lying, broken, before him.

"What is this?" exclaimed Grida. She picked up one of the paintings and examined it. "This isn't psycho-art," she said. "This is real! I like this, Lao."

"It's what I've always wanted to do," he said in a tired voice. "Those three paintings have hung in the Gallery of Traditional Art for nearly ten years."

"There's a letter attached," she said, holding it out to him.

"Go ahead—open it, Gri-

da," he said. "I think I know what it says."

GRIDA tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter.

In accordance with instructions from our board of directors, in special meeting, all the paintings hanging in our gallery have been re-evaluated. We regret to inform you that your paintings were judged to be no longer representative of traditional art. They are being returned to you herewith. We wish to express our appreciation . . .

She stopped reading.

"That's right," said Lao morosely. "They threw my paintings out."

"But, Lao, I didn't know you did this sort of thing," she said, bewildered.

"It's what I've always wanted to do," he repeated. "I never really liked psycho-art. I never believed it's real art. It isn't something the artist feels and thinks, it's something he tries to make other people feel and think.

"But psycho-art is the only kind of art I could make money at. I didn't have the courage to starve in an attic or make a living in some prosaic way and paint as a hobby. I turned my talent into cash and I always spent the cash as fast as I made it—maybe be-

cause I was ashamed that I was a coward."

"But these three?" asked Grida.

"Sometimes," said Lao dreamily, "I've had time to do what I wanted to do. These are the best I've ever done. When I gave them to the gallery, they told me these were among the highest examples of traditional art they had ever seen. I thought they meant it, but I know now it was just because I was a famous, wealthy psycho-artist."

Grida studied the paintings. One was a seascape, the other two mountain scenes. The titles gave some key to Lao's inner feelings: "Peace in the Valley," "The Moving Waters," "The Lonely Peak."

"Your trouble is that you grew up a little boy in a big city," said Grida quietly. "You ought to try to forget the sort of things you knew in Nuyork and settle down to a life among simple folk, like the people around here. I think you could find work here, Lao, that would be a living for you. And you'd have plenty of time to relax and paint the way you want to."

Lao looked at her and saw that her eyes were full of sympathy for him. It was the last little push his overwrought emotions needed.

He did not do it at once; but that night, after supper, he proposed marriage to Grida Mattin and she accepted.

TERN was furious. He did not raise his voice, but Jasso could detect his anger in his eyes and the tone of his voice.

"I put this matter entirely in your hands, Jasso, and I expected you to do a thorough job on it," Tern said coldly. "It's inconceivable to me that you should be so negligent in your investigation."

"It was my fault, I'll admit," said the crestfallen Jasso. "But you can't blame the clerk. He was told to check the personal files on the question 'marriage,' not 'ability to reproduce.' You'll have to agree there's a difference."

"I would think the lowest clerk involved in this operation would be instructed that *progeny* from the marriage is the key factor!" said Tern. "The whole purpose of this marriage from the first has been to produce a child that the Calculator said would have a high probability rating for solving the problem."

"Can you tell me how the devil you bright minds on the project expect a marriage to produce a child—when the wife is sterile?"

"That's one thing that makes me wonder if there isn't some maladjustment in the Calculator," said Jasso. "Sterility has been marked on Grida Mattin's card for the last eight years. I don't think you can criticize the clerk, or me, too harshly for not thinking about sterility when the

Calculator approved the marriage. After all, her card was in the Calculator and . . ."

"Don't repeat yourself," interrupted Tern brusquely. "Of course, those circuits must be checked, but I'll give 100 to one odds right now there's nothing wrong with the Calculator. Sterility must have registered as a correctible factor."

"I don't know why it would," objected Jasso very thoughtfully. "The only evidence the Calculator has is that the sterility is a normal result of her age, and that can't be reversed as far as I know. But the only thing we can do is treat it as correctible."

"Try it," said Tern. "But, Jasso, I want you to realize you're not dealing now with the movement of traffic in downtown Nuyork or even the selection of a president. The solution of this problem is vital to mankind. I don't want any more slip-ups."

ALINA MATTIN'S fresh beauty seemed to light the interior of the antique Twenty-First Century house. She resembled Grida, but more as Grida's daughter might have looked than as her younger sister.

Lao sighed. Had he met Alina Mattin first, he did not believe any conceivable emergency could have persuaded him to marry her sister.

"There's some misunderstanding somewhere, but they won't admit it," said Alina, a puzzled frown wrinkling the bridge of her nose. She and Lao were having supper in the breakfast nook; Lao found her quite as competent a cook as Grida.

After more than a year at Southgate and many months of marriage to Grida, his lean features were filling out.

"I don't think there's been a mistake," he said complacently. "The board of education ordered Grida to enter the hospital."

"For a routine physical check-up, eh?" replied Alina. "That isn't what she's getting."

"What are they doing, then?" asked Lao, startled.

"They're examining her to see if anything can be done to restore her fertility," answered Alina flatly. "Lao, did you authorize the hospital to do that?"

"Certainly not! I never thought about her fertility, one way or another. You're sure you're not mistaken?"

"I'm a doctor. I know what they're doing. But the hospital administrator won't tell me a thing. He just says that's on the record of her admission to the hospital."

"They must have gotten her records mixed up with someone else," theorized Lao.

"Maybe. I don't know whether you knew it or not,

but Grida is too old to have a child."

Supper finished, they piled the plastic dishes in the dishwasher and went into the parlor together. Lao turned the lights low. They sat down together on the sofa. They sat very close together, and after a moment Lao put his arm around Alina's shoulders. She laid her head contentedly on his chest.

"Why couldn't you have stayed out of my life?" he asked, half seriously, half teasingly.

"Would you want me to?" she asked softly.

"No," he admitted, running his fingers through her hair. "But this isn't the way I want things. I suppose we should be thankful for these few days while she's in the hospital, but I'm ashamed to be."

"So am I," confessed Alina, "but, darling, I've been so happy here alone with you. Tell me, why did you marry Grida?"

"I'm not sure I know," he answered slowly. "I'd hate to have to try to analyze my motives right now. I like Grida and respect her, but I don't love her. I couldn't. I love you, Alina."

"Let's end this sneaking about behind Grida's back, Lao," she urged earnestly, looking up into his face. "It isn't fair to her. Get a divorce and let's marry each other."

"You know the law doesn't

permit a man to seek a divorce, Alina. And Grida wouldn't release me now. She loves me."

"Grida will divorce you," said Alina positively. "It will hurt her, but she will. Grida is a history teacher, and her moral code is strict—and out of date. It scarcely gets lip service any more from most people."

"You're suggesting I tell her about us? I couldn't, Alina! I can't let her ever find out."

"But she will," said Alina, her eyes shining. "Lao, I'm going to have a baby."

THE man's face looked familiar.

Then he approached Lao and Alina, standing in the corridor outside the chancery courtroom, and Lao recognized him with certainty.

"You're the man from Col-orvue!" Lao flashed at him angrily.

"That's right, Voter Protik. I'm Casto Roche." The man held out his hand. Lao ignored it.

"I ought to beat you all the way from here to Nuyork!" he growled—with audacity, since Roche was a good deal bigger. "I trusted you, once."

"You trusted me twice," replied Roche amiably. "I think you'd recognize me as someone else with a little different make-up."

He held his hand to his face

and puffed out his cheeks slightly.

"Attok! My lawyer!" yelled Lao. People in the corridor turned to stare at him. "I wondered why you disappeared after I paid you that fee! I see it all now! You were part of this whole dirty—"

"Before you get too excited, Voter Protik . . ." Roche did not complete the sentence, but turned under his coat lapel to exhibit the badge which identified him as a United Nations agent.

Lao gulped and choked off his tirade.

"I'm here to try to stop these divorce proceedings between you and your wife," said Roche.

"Don't you think you've come to the wrong people?" suggested Alina, apparently not nearly as impressed by Roche's badge as Lao was. "My sister is the only one who can stop the divorce."

"Besides, it's too late," said Lao, regaining his voice. "The hearing is finished. The judge will give his decision in a moment."

Roche said, "That can be stopped at a word from you. As a matter of fact, the judge is waiting for me to confer with you before calling the court back into session. I've told your wife why the government is interested in preserving your marriage. She is willing to drop the divorce proceedings if you are."

"Perhaps you'd better tell us why," said Alina coolly.

ROCHE sighed. "All right. But it's rather involved. We haven't let it be publicized widely, but the world is faced with a very serious sociological problem. I suppose both of you are aware that there are a great many more women than men.

"Of course," said Lao, his face brightening with reminiscence.

"Of course," concurred Alina, giving Lao a thoughtful glance.

"If you've read the Sunday supplements, you know why," said Roche. "Always, more boy babies have been born than girl babies, but the high mortality rate among boy babies has balanced the discrepancy. Now the mortality rate has climbed tremendously higher for boy babies. We do not know why. We do know that the ratio of women to men is increasing. At the last census taken by the Calculator, it was 9.78 women to each man.

"Under our present social system of monogamous marriage, this means the actual birth rate is decreasing. Even the large number of illegitimate children doesn't make up for the lack of men in the world. That, of course, is the reason the Polygamy League has gained so much strength."

"Well, don't they have a point?" asked Lao. He added

hastily: "I don't hold with the ideas of the Polygamy League, you understand, in spite of the propaganda that I was connected with it."

Roche smiled.

"That propaganda was manufactured by UN agents," he confessed. "So were all your troubles, including the dummy corporation. Colorvue Publicity had no other purpose but to maneuver you into marriage with Grida Mattin. A little unethical, I'll admit, but sometimes we have to work that way. You'll be happy to know that the damage suit against you has been withdrawn. You can get your old job back with Consolidated Ads and be restored to the Psycho-Artists Guild any time you wish. And we've even arranged for the Gallery of Traditional Art to re-hang your paintings.

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "the government has given serious consideration to the ideas of the Polygamy League, but the Calculator rejected them; it discovered that they would have an unfortunate impact on our social structure. So polygamy is not the answer.

"The Calculator tells us it is very improbable that anyone now living will find the answer.

"But the child of Lao Protik and Grida Mattin can—and probably will—solve the problem."

"I'M AFRAID your Calculator is wrong," said Alina. "Go back and tell your government Grida Mattin is unable to bear a child."

"The government has that information," replied Roche, frowning slightly. "We must consider it a soluble problem, because the Calculator has the information on file and it still gave us a high probability on the marriage. The Calculator is a machine. It doesn't make mistakes."

"It's made a mistake this time," said Alina positively. "Lao and I are going to be married. I don't think he will give up our chance for happiness for any such shaky scheme."

"We have no way of forcing him," admitted Roche, "but I believe Voter Protik should speak for himself, knowing how important this is."

"She's right!" said Lao, anger in his tone. "I think the government has interfered with my life enough as it is! I've done my part, and the government didn't even do me the courtesy of letting me know I was doing it. I love Alina. I don't intend to be tied to Grida for the rest of my life just on the outside chance you'll come up with a cure for her sterility."

He turned his back on Roche.

Roche looked at Alina. She looked back, coldly. With a shrug, Roche left them and

went through the door to the courtroom.

A few moments later the bailiff threw open the courtroom doors.

Lao, Alina and Grida filed in with the spectators and attorneys. They stood as the judge entered from his chambers, adjusted his black robes and took his seat. The spectators sat down then, but the attorneys and principals remained standing at the bar.

The judge put on his spectacles, looked over some papers, and raised his head to survey the courtroom. Solemnly he announced:

"It is the decision of this court that Grida Mattin Protik be granted a divorce, as requested, from the defendant, Lao Protik.

"It is the further decision of this court that the co-respondent in this suit, Alina Mattin, being unmarried and having proved herself by her admitted actions to be an unfit mother, her unborn child by the defendant shall be delivered as soon as feasible after birth into the custody of the complainant, Grida Mattin Protik."

"WELL, that blows it up," said Jasso despondently, laying the newspaper clipping on Tern's desk. "Lao and Alina didn't even contest Grida's custody of their child, even though their marriage before its birth legiti-

matized it. Now Grida has the baby and Lao and Alina have gone off to parts unknown."

"I suppose we could find them, if we tried," said Tern. "But I don't see the point in following this case any farther, Jasso. They made it pretty plain to your agent that the Lao-Grida marriage is through."

"Shall I write it off as closed, then?"

"I'm afraid you might as well," consented Tern reluctantly. "How have your alternate combinations turned out?"

"We've succeeded in arranging several marriages in the highest probability group. But frankly, Chief, all the probability ratings for their offspring are pretty low. We had our only real chance in the Lao-Grida combination."

"I don't want to go to the third generation if I can help it," said Tern. "There's always the chance that combinations of low probability individuals might result in high probability offspring. Let's run another test on direct probability, on just those individuals who have been filed for the first time since we began the Lao-Grida case."

"I'll get started on it right away," said Jasso.

TWO days later, Jasso burst into Tern's office highly excited, a section of tape from

the Calculator trailing from his grasp.

"Chief, this is unbelievable!" he cried. "We have an individual here whose probability tests 82.371 per cent to solve the problem, projecting a life expectancy of 50 years!"

Tern whistled and rolled his eyes.

"Pretty high probability!" he said delightedly. "Pretty doggoned high! Baby, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Jasso. He paused, and added slowly and with emphasis: "The child's name is Nina Mattin."

"Mattin?"

"The daughter of Lao Pro-tik and Alina Mattin! Now the adopted daughter of Grida Mattin."

"What!"

"The strange thing about it, Chief, is that Alina Mattin was one of the higher probability mothers we found first. But we checked her against Lao, and the probability for an offspring of their marriage was extremely low. Do you suppose the Calculator has gone completely haywire?"

Tern did not answer at once. He sat, lost in deep thought, for several minutes. Then he began laughing.

He laughed until tears came into his eyes, slapping his knee delightedly. Jasso stood there, looking blank.

"No, the Calculator's not

haywire, Jasso," said Tern, when he could get his breath. "It just has all the facts, and it correlates facts we don't even think about. The reason we get funny ideas about it sometimes is because the Calculator can't talk. As you explained, it can just answer questions, and sometimes we don't ask the right questions.

"From what's happened, I'd say the question you asked the Calculator when you were looking for second-generation probabilities was not 'the offspring of two people.' It was 'offspring resulting from the marriage of two people.' Isn't that right?"

"It seemed the proper way to put the question," answered Jasso a little stiffly.

TERN began laughing again. "It was the right question to put," he choked, "but illegitimacy was the key to the whole thing!

"Look: the Calculator had all the facts. It knew all about the emotional make-up of Lao, Grida and Alina. It knew that Alina was Grida's sister.

"The probability course is obvious! Given a marriage between Lao and Grida, the probability was high that he would meet her sister, Alina, under convenient circumstances. The probability was high, too, considering the

emotional make-up of the three, that Lao and Alina would fall in love. Under our present social scheme, an illegitimate child was likely. So there you are."

"Chief, I know you've been in this business a lot longer than I have," said Jasso slowly. "I've got to confess now that I can't see the slightest reason why the probability for a child of Lao and Alina should be so much higher under these circumstances than if the two of them just met and got married."

"Environment, my boy! It's just as important as heredity. Lao's marriage to Grida was the key to the whole thing. Grida is a motherly, fiercely conscientious type of woman who would insist on rearing her husband's child—no matter who the mother was. And of course the courts would uphold her."

Tern was laughing again. "Anyway, we've got it licked. We have our high-probability individual . . . But I'm glad of one thing. Suppose you'd asked the Calculator to check itself—asked it, for instance, if we knew what we were doing. It would have given us a straight answer, and we would have abandoned the whole project—it would have told us we didn't know at all!"

—END