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NEWSHOUND

by

Milton Lesser

The Fourth Estate was highly specialized in the 22nd Century; for example, a good newsman predicted coming events — and made them happen. . .

DARIUS McLeod leaned back comfortably and watched the mayor sweat.

His Honor popped a phenobarb tablet between his lips, tossing his head and gulping the pill down without water. His moist, nervous hands left their wet imprint on the desk top when he reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a clipping from the morning's *New York World*.

"You people elected me, McLeod," he said. "Now get me out of this mess."

"We merely supported your candidacy, Your Honor," McLeod said easily. "But let's see what you got there."

"It amounts to the same thing," the mayor pleaded. "For God's sake, give me a break."

McLeod shrugged and unfolded

the *World* clipping on his desk. "Naturally, the *World* will oppose your administration," he began. "Otherwise they'll never be able to live down the *Star-Times*' scoop on your election."

"That's precisely what I was saying. The way I understand it, you people will have to support your man. The *Star-Times* can't abandon me to the wolves, not now."

"I'm only a reporter," McLeod explained. "We report events, not make them."

"That's it. That's what I mean. The attitude. You're treating me like a child."

"You're acting like one."

"All I want is what's fair. Whatever you think is fair."

"Then let me read this thing."

The column clipped from the

Kirkbacks
FAMILY HOME AFTER ROUTING PESKY SKUNKS
 Mrs. Helen Lutzler and her four children were back in their home after a long absence.

House Built to Last 1,000 Years Won't
BY JOSEPH BOELANDER
 The man who built the house that will stand for a thousand years is not the man who built the house that will stand for a hundred years.

Probe Into Mailbox Blast Brings Arrest Of 8 Students

Sheriff's job broke up a team of eight students who were arrested and booked for a mailbox blast. The students were from a high school and were charged with a total of \$2,500.

FORGETS OWN MIND BLINDNESS
 Public Works Co. Feb 27
 The man who forgets his own mind blindness is the man who forgets his own mind blindness.

Mayor Killed in Holdup



World bore the cut-line COMING EVENTS. McLeod had always liked the *Star-Times'* LOOKING FORWARD better, although he had to admit that the *World's* cut of a swami rubbing his crystal ball had a certain fundamental appeal for the masses. House-written, the *World* column appeared under the by-line of Nostradamus.

McLeod scanned the printed lines quickly. There was a prediction on the outcome of the World Series. It had better turn out incorrect, thought McLeod: the *Star-Times* had spent a small fortune building up the opposing team. There was something about the dangers of forest fires and an indirect reference to the possibility of a conflagration next week in the Adirondack Game Preserve. (The *Star-Times* would be alerting its fire-fighting unit to prevent such a possibility, McLeod knew.) There was a talk of an impending war between Yugoslavia and France at a time when relations between the two countries were never more harmonious. McLeod wondered how the *World* would ever swing it. He read the last two items aloud.

"We think it's high time the mayor of New York be exposed for his corrupt political dealings. We wouldn't be surprised if the mayor were forced to resign his office in

January . . . What ace reporter of what rival New York daily is going to meet with a fatal accident next week? Remember, you read it here first!"

"January," said the mayor as Darius McLeod folded the column and lit a cigaret. "That's next month."

"They could be talking about me."

"Eh? If I'm forced to resign, you'll be scooped."

"Yeah, scooped," McLeod mused. "We're their chief rival. I'm the big Huck-a-muck over here. Those dirty sons — they can get me out of the way and scoop us at the same time. Listen, Your Honor, check back with me later. I've got to see the City Editor."

"But I'm not politically corrupt —"

"We'll decide. We'll let you know," Darius McLeod shouted, already running from his glass-walled office and through the clattering din of the City Room, disturbing the milling knot of scribes and gunmen going over last minute instructions from the Crime Editor, shouldering by the line of trim, pretty co-respondents receiving their briefs from the Society Editor, almost knocking down the Medical Editor who was either on the point of finding a cure for the

World's latest plague or dreaming up one of his own, McLeod didn't remember which.

McLEOD found Overman, the City Editor, perched on a corner of his desk and barking orders into a microphone. "What do you mean, he won't jump? We said he'd jump. Coax him. Push him if you can get away with it, I don't care. Don't make it obvious." Overman cocked his gaunt head to one side, listening to the receiver imbedded in his ear. He looked like a walking ad for hyper-thyroid treatment, with bulging eyes, hollow cheeks and fidgety limbs. He couldn't sit still and he didn't try. "All right, we'll hold up the story. And you're the guy who asked for a raise." Overman dropped the microphone hose back into its cubby and looked up. "Sometimes I wonder what the hell they think a reporter draws his salary for. What do you want, Darius?"

"The *World's* gunning for me, chief."

"I already saw it."

"Then don't just sit there."

"What do you want me to do, hold your hand? Of course the *World's* gunning for you. Great story for them, and they also kill off our star reporter in the process. If they get away with it."

"Damn it!" McLeod exploded. "This is the twenty-second century. If the *World* says I'm going to meet with a fatal accident, then my life's in danger." McLeod winced at his own words. In a matter of minutes he had been reduced to the mayor's level and he didn't like it.

"Counter-prognostication has already taken steps, Darius. Don't go off the deep end on me. It happens like this every time. Even a top-flight reporter sheds his own sophistication when the story's about himself."

"How do you expect me to take it?"

"Just relax, that's all."

"Maybe you want me to write my own obituary."

"Don't try so hard to be funny. Excuse me." Overman cocked his head again and listened, then pulled out his microphone and barked: "All right, all right. Don't cry. We can't get them all. I'm not saying it was your fault. Report back in."

"What's the matter?" McLeod wanted to know.

"Harry Crippens is the matter. Remember Congressman Horner? That story yesterday?"

McLeod recalled it vaguely. Something about Horner committing suicide unexpectedly.

"Well, he didn't jump. The

World's Security Forces rescued him and got a scoop. Another wrongo for us, Darius. That's the second story Crippens bungled this month."

"Maybe it wasn't Cripp's fault, chief." Crippens was a plump, owl-faced man with big, watery eyes swimming behind concave glasses. McLeod had always liked him. He was the grimmest, saddest, cryingest, most logical drunk McLeod had ever met. Wonderful drinking partner.

"I didn't say it was. Just thinking, though."

"If psychology flubbed a dub on Horner, you can't blame Cripp."

"Not what I mean. The *World's* prediction is vague, see? Who's a star reporter? How do you single the man out? Any big by-line guy will do, right?"

"I guess so."

"Crippens gets his share of by lines, Darius."

"Hey, wait a minute—"

"Why spend the time protecting you next week if we don't have to? It's expensive and not a sure thing. We'd hate to lose you, Darius."

"Thank you."

"But Crippens is bungling. He ought to meet the *World's* requirements. We do the job for them the first of next week. They get their story and we keep our number one man, alive. How does it sound?"

"Rotten," McLeod said. "I'm not going to sit by and let Cripp take that kind of rap for me. What kind of louse do you think I am, anyway?"

"Let it simmer, Darius. There's no hurry. I suppose His Honor has been around to use your crying towel?"

McLeod nodded. "That's right."

"I thought he would. It was your series of articles that got him elected in the first place. You saved my life, now support me. One of those deals. It was obvious the *World* would try to show corruption after their own candidate lost."

"Is the *Star-Times* going to protect Mayor Spurgens' record?"

OVERMAN jerked his head from side to side, the stretched, translucent lids blinking over popping eyes. "It's always easier to prove corruption than disprove it, you know that. We'd be backing the wrong animal, Darius. I've got it figured, though."

"How do you mean?"

"They won't have much of a story if something violent happens to the mayor between now and next month. I don't want to see it in LOOKING FORWARD, though. Just make it happen and get the scoop. See? We can't let the mayor resign. This is the surest way."

"Anything particular in mind?"

"It's your assignment, Darius. Whatever you do is all right with me."

"That poor guy treated me like his father-image before. Well—"

"You're not weakening, are you, Darius? There's no time for emotion in this business, none at all. You've got to go out and get a story before some other outfit changes it on you. Or you've got to make *their* stories fail to happen. And whatever you do, you've got to keep the TV outfits guessing. If news starts happening according to Hoyle, we're all through. Us and the *World* and all the other newspapers wouldn't stand a chance, not with TV right on the spot. Keep TV guessing. Confused. Never sure. Give some crumbs to the *World*, even, if you have to.

"So there's no time for thalamic responses, Darius. Do I make myself clear?"

McLeod bristled. "You never had to give me that kind of lecture. You think I'm a cub or something? Don't worry about Mayor Spurgess, we'll fix him up."

"Splendid. But there's something else. Crippens."

"I told you how I felt about that. I don't want any part of it. Talk about your Judas's —"

"Crippens or you, Darius. The *World's* gunning. You know it."

"I can't tell you what to do. But I'll warn Cripp, that's all."

"That would make your own assignment rather difficult."

"What assignment are you talking about?"

"Crippens. The way I figure it, you have a lot at stake there. We'll let you handle Crippens."

"You're crazy!"

"You are if you refuse. We won't give you a single Security man for protection. Remember what they said in COMING EVENTS. Your one chance is to get Crippens before they get you and then let the *World* scoop us. I would suggest the first thing next Monday morning, but then, it's your baby."

"First Mayor Spurgess and now Crippens. Are you trying to make me a hatchetman?"

"A reporter, Darius. You've always been a good one."

"But Crippens is my friend."

"I wish we had another way out. Crippens has his place on the *Star-Times*, but we thought too much of him. We don't want to lose you, Darius. You can take that as an objective compliment and sleep easy. Your job's secure."

"Thank you very much."

"Don't be bitter. A man in the newspaper business is top-dog these days, see? I don't have to

tell you. We're not passive receptors. We control things. We make things happen. We play God, but we've got competition. You've got to take the good with the bad, that's all. See what I mean?" All the while they had spoken, Overman had not moved from where he had perched his small frame on his desk, but his nervous legs had walked miles, his scrawny, sleeve-rolled arms had waved, flapped and gesticulated, his wide, bulging eyes had darted about the frenzied confusion of the great room where news was created and missed nothing. It was Overman's passion, McLeod knew, his alpha through omega. He suddenly wished it were that simple for himself. Less than half an hour ago, it would have been.

"We'll have our obituary people compose something tender for Crippens," Overman said. "Keep me informed, Darius."

"I haven't told you I'd do it."

"Whose obit would you rather see them write?"

"You could protect me instead."

But Overman jerked his head side to side again. "It's the same as politics. Much simpler to make news than to prevent it. The one sure way to protect you, provided you don't foul things up with Crippens."

"Well, I don't —"

"One of you makes the obituary page next week. The *World's* already seen to that. Take your choice, Darius."

"Yeah . . . sure."

"And don't forget about Mayor Spurgess. You've got a busy time ahead of you. Good luck."

Walking back toward his own office, McLeod saw that the flow of co-respondents had slowed to a trickle. He swore softly. The last girl in line was Tracy Kent, a tawny-haired divorce specialist with an admirable record. McLeod liked Tracy, but it was strictly brother-sister stuff.

Tracy was going to marry Harry Crippens.

CHAPTER II

"HEY, Darius. A girl gets hungry for lunch around this time every day."

McLeod smiled. "Won't Cripp be along soon?"

"Search me." Tracy rubbed her stomach under the smooth, tautly drawn fabric of her dress. "When this piece of machinery starts to gurgle, I eat."

"Well, I was going to head over to the Press Club in a few minutes anyway. Don't you have to get yourself caught with someone to-

day?"

"Later on. Tonight. Now I'm hungry."

Tracy Kent was long and almost lean with hips angular rather than rounded and the clean lines of her long-striding legs accentuated by the tight sheath of skirt as she walked with McLeod toward the elevator. She was all woman unless you happened to look at her a certain way, when you caught a glimpse of something coltish, almost like Peter Pan, in the way she carried herself or smiled at you. She did not look like a vamp, thought McLeod, which helped explain why she was such a successful co-respondent.

"One of these days I'm going to stop feeling like a brother toward you," McLeod promised as they climbed into his copter on the roof.

"You're flattering but tardy, Mr. McLeod. I'm going to marry the guy."

"Crippens?"

"Don't look at me that way. He's your friend, too." Tracy grinned as the rotors flashed above them, then pouted. "Darius, do we have to go to the Press Club for lunch?"

"Mixing business with pleasure, I guess. Got to see some people. Why, does someone bother you

over there?"

"That Weaver Wainwright, always staring at me like he wants to sit down at his thinkwriter and let the world know what it's like with a co-respondent. Me."

"Wainwright's one of the men I want to see."

"The *Star Times*' hot-shot reporter hob-nobbing with that riff-raff from the *World*?"

"You named it," Darius McLeod said as their copter rose up from the roof of the *Star Times* building and retreated from the checkerboard pattern of other copters resting on their landing squares. "Why the sour face?"

"Because I read COMING EVENTS, Darius. Do you think Wainwright's been assigned the job?"

"It's a damned good guess. He just got back from overseas. He's been sopping up spirits like a blotter over at the club and making nasty noises while waiting for a new job. This is probably his baby."

"Why, Darius?"

"Because he's their number one boy."

"No. I mean, why you?"

McLeod shrugged. "Does there have to be a reason? It's good copy for them. The *Star-Times* loses a guy who's been around,

too. That's the newspaper business, Tracy. Don't look for any reason."

"Don't be so calm about it. What's Overman going to do?"

McLeod considered the question as he brought the copter down expertly through the lanes of local traffic here at the edge of the city. Off in the distance, rank on rank of hemispherical suburban homes marched off, in orderly rows, to the eastern horizon. The Press Club, almost directly below them now, had snipped half a dozen square miles from the patterned picture. It was castle, game preserve and sylvan retreat not for one monarch, but for hundreds. Newshounds, newshens, gunmen. Flashing letters swam up at them from the green woodland, blinking on and off garishly — **THE FOURTH ESTATE.**

If he told her Overman had failed to offer any protection, she'd realize another alternative had been selected. It would be better if he lied. "What's Overman going to do?" he repeated her question. "The usual. I'll be protected. Don't worry about me."

"But if Wainwright's all they say, he's like a bloodhound. Be careful, Darius."

"Hell, I said don't worry. I have till next week, anyway."

"This is Friday."

"Yeah, Friday." Their copter alighted with hardly a quiver. Uniformed lackies were already polishing the chrome and glass by the time McLeod helped Tracy to the ground. She came down lithely, long hair whipping about her face and brushing against McLeod's cheek. A girl scantily clad as an American Indian led them across the landing field and along a path through the gnarled oaks which made the Fourth Estate resemble more a chunk of Scotland than Long Island. But while they couldn't see the acres of neon tubing from the ground, their pulsing glow spoiled the effect.

THE clubhouse itself was an architectural nightmare of quarry-stone, turrets, battlements — and great, soft-hued thermoglass walls. Music stirred the air faintly with rhythm as they crossed the drawbridge (which actually worked, McLeod knew) and entered the lobby. The pretty little squaw disappeared and was replaced at once by the weapon-check girl, dressed in top hat and tails, but not much else.

She smiled professionally at Tracy, then frisked her expertly, finding the trick pocket in her skirt and removing the tiny but

deadly parabeam from her leg holster. Tracy grinned back like a yawning cat. "I'd have given it to you."

"I'm sorry, m'am. They all say that." The weaponcheck girl turned to McLeod. "It's the law around here, you know that. Good afternoon, Mr. McLeod."

The hands darted with quick, practiced precision over him after he nodded. He felt the sleeve-holster slip out by way of his armpit, was given a numbered check for both weapons as the girl hip-wagged away and suspended their weapons from hooks in her arsenal. They were then led to a table near the bandstand, where they ordered cocktails.

"It's an awful lot of fuss just to eat lunch," Tracy said. "Every time that weapon hen paws me like that, I want to scratch her big, wide eyes out. Darius, I'm still afraid for you. Is Wainwright here?"

"I haven't looked, but don't worry. I have till next week, anyway."

"They could kidnap you and hold you somewhere till they're ready to kill you."

McLeod tried to hide his momentary confusion by making a production of lighting his cigaret and smiling at someone he hardly

knew at a nearby table. Tracy certainly had a good point — which he hadn't considered until now.

Tracy glanced about uneasily in the dim light. "Did Overman think of that? I don't see any Security men around."

McLeod exhaled a long plume of smoke and watched it get sucked into the unseen currents of the climatizer. "They don't let themselves get seen," he said easily. "They wouldn't be good Security men if they did, would they?"

"But what are *you* going to do, Darius? Can't you take some kind of positive action? It's not like you, just sitting around and waiting."

McLeod wanted to change the subject, for Tracy had a way of ferreting out the truth even if she suspected nothing. He'd always thought she was wasting her time as a co-respondent and often told her so, but she'd always countered by striking a bump-and-grind pose and saying she had all the equipment. "Have you heard about Cripp?" he asked her now.

"Only that he was going out on an assignment. Suicide I think."

"Unfortunately, the guy had a change of heart. They had to tear up the obit."

"Was it Cripp's fault?"

"I doubt it. Suicide and murder

are two different things. Psychology fouled up, that's all."

"But Overman must have been furious, anyway. Poor Cripp."

"Overman'll get over it. Cripp's a good man."

Tracy shook her head slowly. "Thanks for saying it, but Cripp isn't cut out for the newspaper racket and you know it. A couple more flubs and Overman will begin to think Cripp belongs to the Anti-Newspaper League or something."

"Very funny," McLeod told her. "I can just see it now: Cripp a subversive."

"Shh!" said Tracy, raising a finger to her lips. "We shouldn't even talk about things like that. Mentioning the Anti-Newspaper League in here is like eating beefsteak in Delhi." -

A figure approached their table and sat down at the empty chair without receiving an invitation. "Did I hear something about the Anti-Newspaper League?" the man demanded, chuckling softly. He was tall and gaunt but well-tanned, the whites of his eyes very bright against the skin of his face. He had a long, sad nose which drooped mournfully almost to his upper lip, mitigating the effect of his smile.

He was Weaver Wainwright, ace reporter of the *World*. -

"WE'RE just a couple of subversives, Mr. Wainwright," Tracy said.

"So that's why the *Star-Times* is filling its pages with wrongos these days. How do you do, McLeod?"

"Never felt better. Ought to live to be a hundred, at least. Can we get you something?"

"As a matter of fact, I've just had lunch. Brandy might help my sluggish liver, though."

"Brandy it is," said McLeod, and gave the new order to their waiter when he arrived with a pair of Gibsons. "According to what I read in the papers, the *World's* thinking of starting a Tong War with us." McLeod hid his impulse to smile by making a conventional toast to Tracy. He wondered how much his unexpected candor had unnerved Wainwright and decided to study the reporter's reaction carefully.

But Wainwright merely grinned, making the upper lip all but disappear and the nose become more prominent. "At least you read a good newspaper," he said. "I don't think it's fair for you to say we had war in mind, McLeod. Nothing of the sort. Our Prognostication division merely indicated that a certain well-known opposition newsman was going to meet with an unfortunate accident next week.

While prognostication is pretty reliable — especially coming from a good newspaper — it's hardly the last word. Ah, here's my brandy." And he began to sip and stare over the rim of his glass at Tracy.

"Nice stay in Europe?" McLeod wanted to know. Under the circumstances, Wainwright's composure had been admirable.

"Fair. But then, you read the papers."

"You mean that business about Yugoslavia and France?"

"That's right. Your man — What's his name, Kitrick? — thought there would be peace. He's wrong, you know. All you have to do is touch a spark to the right fuse in the Balkans, I always said. Kitrick was trying to put the fire out by spitting."

"Wayne Kitrick didn't think there was any fire to put out," Tracy told the *World* reporter. "As of now, there isn't."

"Give it some time," Wainwright promised. "You see, the President of Yugoslavia was indiscreet in his youth, most indiscreet. With elections approaching there, he had the alternative of — well, you know what a newspaper can do to a man of position who's been indiscreet. Drink to it?"

They did. In spite of everything, McLeod had to admire Wainwright.

In the old days, nations went to war for economic reasons, over diametrically opposed political philosophies, because of religion. Today, a sharp reporter dug deep to unearth closeted skeletons and moral potsherds and literally blackmailed a chief of state into war. Wainwright was sharp, all right. History might one day write up the whole series of twenty-second century wars as Blackmail Wars, but meanwhile the U. N. could only gnash its collective teeth while Wainwright picked up a fattened paycheck.

"I'll bet you're proud of yourself," Tracy said.

"I don't see why not. Kitrick will be reamed, my dear."

"And so will a few million innocent people."

"Perhaps you weren't fooling when you mentioned the Anti-Newspaper League. But of course, you're pulling my leg."

"I'm a co-respondent," Tracy said coldly. "I don't have to turn cart wheels over your end of the newspaper game."

"Tracy," McLeod said. This was one facet of the girl's character he'd never seen before. He could almost see the gears meshing into place inside Wainwright's skull. He didn't mind talk which bordered on the subversive, as

long as it came from Tracy, who was quite outspoken about a lot of things, but Wainwright might have other ideas.

But Wainwright said, blandly, "From a moral standpoint you carve out your pound of flesh every now and then too, my dear. Or don't you think framing innocent men in compromising circumstances is immoral?"

"You wouldn't understand the difference," Tracy said.

"It is a difference of degree, not kind."

TRACY bit her lips and did not reply. It was like a revelation to McLeod. He suddenly wondered if Cripp knew how maladjusted his fiancée was.

Abruptly, Wainwright changed the subject. "Are you well insured, McLeod?"

"I never could figure out who to name as beneficiary."

"That's a shame."

"If you've planned anything now, I thought you'd like to know *Star-Times* Security Forces are all around us," McLeod bluffed.

"You underestimate me, sir. Prognostication comes up with the raw facts, which I sift for story material. I merely wait for things to happen. However, in case you have any inclinations to put the

shoe on the other foot, I'm sure you realize *World* Security men often lunch at the Fourth Estate."

That, McLeod suspected, was no bluff. Tracy was still nibbling on her lip but managed to cast a worried look in his direction. They ordered and ate in silence while Wainwright swirled and sipped another brandy.

"Have you heard about poor Mayor Spurgess?" Wainwright asked as McLeod cooled his coffee with cream.

McLeod scalded his lips. The *World* reporter was playing cat-and-mouse with him, taunting him overtly. Perhaps Wainwright figured he could kill two birds with one stone, getting McLeod while McLeod tried to protect the mayor's record. He hoped Wainwright had not thought of Overman's alternative.

"You're a busy man," McLeod finally said.

"I detest inactivity. I assume since you wrote Mayor Spurgess into office, you are going to protect his name. Miss Kent, could you excuse yourself for a moment?"

Tracy waited until McLeod nodded, then stood up and mumbled something about going to powder her nose. McLeod lit a cigaret and waited.

"Now we can talk," Wainwright

said. "Recognize the spirit in which this is said, McLeod: you're a fine reporter."

"Thanks."

"But you're as good as dead. We've written your obituary."

Strangely, the announcement brought no fear. Although it had only been a couple of hours, McLeod felt as if he'd been living with the idea for years. "You haven't printed it yet."

"In time. But we don't have to print it. Naturally, it's news, McLeod. You have a well-known name. But there are others equally well-known. More well known. We can come up with a wrongo occasionally. Basically, we want to kill you because you're too valuable to the *Star Times*."

"Your motive doesn't interest me. And I have some news for you: I'm a long way from dead."

"Don't be melodramatic, McLeod. We'll get you. A routine assassination-accident doesn't often become a wrongo, you know that. We have decided to make an offer to you."

Now McLeod's skin did begin to crawl. Statistically, the assassination-accident case was more fool-proof than any other. Gunmen commanded good salaries and did their work expertly. Ninety five per cent accuracy could be

expected. "I'm listening."

"Join the *World*."

"Come again?"

"I'm sure you heard me. Quit the *Star-Times* and join us. We'll match your salary, we won't kill you —"

"But the *Star-Times* will!"

"You'd be valuable to us, aside from your abilities as a reporter. No doubt, they've included you in any long-range plans they might have. We'll have them piling up wrongos from now till doomsday."

"Which is exactly why they'll have me killed if I become a turncoat."

"We'll offer you full protection."

"I'm already getting full protection — from the *Star-Times*," McLeod lied. It was almost a tempting offer, although its virtues were purely negative. The *Star-Times* had refused to offer him protection because Overman thought it would be simpler and more certain to serve up a substitute reporter for the kill. If McLeod accepted Wainwright's offer, at least he'd be able to sleep easy regarding Crippens. But if the *World's* real purpose was to remove McLeod from the *Star-Times'* staff, one way or the other, they might risk an all-out Tong War and still gun for him.

Besides, no turncoat newspaper-

man had ever survived six months. McLeod knew it and was sure Wainwright knew it and guessed the *World* reporter was promising him all he could under the circumstances — a temporary reprieve.

"I know what you're thinking," Wainwright told him. "The *Star-Times* will get you if you turn on them. If necessary, they'll drop everything else until you're dead."

"Well, yes. That's just what I was thinking.

"I don't envy your position," Wainwright admitted. "You believe I'm offering you a few months more of life at best. But you're mistaken, McLeod. *It will appear as if we have killed you.* We can do it, working together. But I offer you life. The accident will all but destroy you, although means of identification will remain. Don't you see what I'm driving at? We can substitute some derelict for you, then change your appearance and employ you on the *World*. The *Star-Times* will never know the difference."

IT was a daring plan. It was just the sort of thing which made the newspaper business in general — and Weaver Wainwright in particular — so omnipotent these days. McLeod did not try to hide his interest. The plan had more

than negative virtues, after all.

"How do I know I can trust you?" McLeod asked.

"I'm afraid you don't. But let it simmer. What it boils down to is this: you're going to have to take a calculated risk either way, McLeod. No doubt, you've devised some scheme to give us a fat wrongo instead of your corpse. It may or may not work. Statistics say it will not. On the other hand, I promise you life. My plan not only could work, it *should* work. The risk there is that I may not be telling the truth. You'll have to decide . . . here comes Miss Kent."

"The girl with the crooked face," said Tracy, sitting down. "Unless you tell me it's straight."

"As an arrow," said McLeod, hardly hearing his own words. The more he thought of Wainwright's plan, the better he liked it. If Wainwright were telling the truth, he'd be able to get both Cripp and himself off the hook at the same time. "I'll think about it," he told the *World* reporter, who was smiling and getting up to leave.

"Call me," Wainwright said, and was gone.

"What did he want?" Tracy asked.

"The usual," McLeod told her, realizing a near-truth was often the best lie. "That I join up with

the *World* and get protected.”

“You wouldn’t last a month and you know it. So why did you tell him you’d think about it?”

“To let him think I was playing both ends against dead center, I guess. I don’t know. I just want to come out of this thing alive, Tracy.”

“I was thinking. There must be something we could dig up about Weaver Wainwright, something we could hold over his head so he’d rather be guilty of a wrongo than see it revealed.”

“I doubt it. Anyway, you don’t blackmail newspapermen.”

“You don’t kill them, either. Darius, did you ever stop to think how — how awfully evil this whole setup is? I don’t mean just about you and how the *World* wants to make a story out of killing off the opposition. I mean everything. I mean Weaver Wainwright starting a war in Europe so his paper can get the inside story on it. I mean the President of Yugoslavia being blackmailed by a garden variety newspaperman. I mean Cripp getting chewed out because he went to cover a suicide and the man didn’t jump. We ought to celebrate, don’t you see? A human life was saved. I mean me getting myself caught with important men so their wives sue for divorce and we

get the story. I mean disease that doesn’t have to happen and medical cures held back until one paper or another can scoop them. I mean scientific discoveries which aren’t made because research scientists and development engineers are on newspaper payrolls and perform their basic research and experiments, then wait for the newspaper stories to be released at an editor’s leisure. I mean . . . oh, what’s the use? You’re laughing at me.”

McLeod was trying not to smile but meeting with little success. “I just never heard you talk like that before, that’s all. Tracy, you’re like a little girl in a lot of ways — idealistic, romantic, building castles on air and not accepting the real world, but —”

“Real!” Tracy cried. “It’s phony from the word go. We’re making it — to suit headlines.”

“Stop shouting,” McLeod said in alarm. “People are staring at you.”

“I don’t care about them.”

“Well, I do. Before you know it, they’ll be investigating you for Anti-Newspaper tendencies. What’s the matter with you?”

“My God! Don’t sound so gosh-awful righteous, Darius. You treat this newspaper business like a religion.”

“Maybe I like being top dog.”

"So now you're going to get yourself killed. A sacrifice to the Headline God."

"Stop it," McLeod said. "I won't get killed if I can help it."

"And if Wainwright can help it too, is that the idea?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sometimes I . . . I hate you, Darius McLeod. That's what I'm talking about. They're going to kill someone else and change your face and let you work for the *World*." Tracy stood up and patted her lips with a napkin.

McLeod climbed to his feet too. "How did you know about that?"

"Don't bother getting up. I can find my way back alone, thank you."

McLeod sat down, staring at her.

"Maybe it's because I'm a spy. Maybe I work for the *World*." Tracy pivoted and stalked away, her heels click-clacking defiantly on the marble floor. McLeod gaped after her until she disappeared.

CHAPTER III

McLEOD made an appointment to see Jack Lantrel, the Gunman Chief of the *Star-Times*, Saturday morning. He spent the remainder of Friday pondering and drinking a little too much. The combination yielded a hangover,

but not even tentative conclusions. While Tracy Kent had become an unexpected enigma, he couldn't spend too much time on it. Wainwright's proposal nagged at all his thoughts, but he kept telling himself he couldn't trust the *World* reporter. And for the first time he found he didn't like the feeling of power inherent in a newspaperman's position. Having the power of life and death over nameless, faceless people was one thing, but playing the role of the Greek hag who snipped the thread of life with a pair of indifferent scissors for Crippens was quite another.

Lantrel met McLeod in the Gunman's office, greeted him and said, "Dragging me down on Saturday, this better be important." Jack Lantrel was a harried-looking little man. You always expected a great, bosomy wife to come charging in to henpeck him, although, like McLeod, Lantrel was a bachelor. He straightened the thinkwriter and the other items of office equipment on his desk with mechanical efficiency. He was an old fuddy-duddy, thought McLeod, but he had signed the death warrants for hundreds of people.

"It's a job," said McLeod.

"Well, that's what I draw my check for. But we work on a rigid schedule, Darius."

"Then call it a priority job. Mayor Spurgess."

Lantrel looked up from where he'd been drumming his fingers idly on the desk. "Motive is none of my business," he admitted. "But did you say you want to have Mayor Spurgess gunned?"

McLeod sighed. "Yeah."

"I'm glad my particular job is comparatively simple. You just elected the guy."

"And now we want him killed. Overman would sleep easier and so would I if you did it by tomorrow night."

Lantrel grunted something, prodded the intercom button on his desk and demanded in his high-pitched voice, "Will you please get me the habit file on Mayor Spurgess?" He turned to McLeod. "Sunday night, eh? That doesn't give us much time."

McLeod shrugged and watched a secretary bring in a bulging plastic file envelope which Lantrel flipped through expertly. "Here we are. Subject generally dines late Sunday night, reviews his Monday morning schedule, smokes a pipe and plays with the TV set until he's convinced there's nothing to interest him, then . . . oh! here we are . . . takes a walk around twenty-two hundred hours, alone, without his wife."

"Sounds simple," McLeod said.

"An assassination-accident," Lantrel informed him with surprising enthusiasm, "is never simple. Despite the statistical expectancy of success, there are too many random factors you have to contend with. If the weather's bad, perhaps subject won't take his evening constitutional. Perhaps subject's wife will break the pattern with some company for dinner. Subject might conceivably take a friend along with him. You see what I'm driving at?"

McLeod nodded. "All I want to know is this: can you do the job Sunday night?"

Lantrel scanned the file again. "Subject leaves his house at twenty-two hundred, returns by twenty-two forty-five. That gives us forty-five minutes. Probably, Darius."

"Good enough."

LANTREL slid a gunman form into his thinkwriter, hunched himself down in his chair and watched the machine type. Presently the sheet of paper slipped out the other side of the squat machine and McLeod read:

DATE: 14 Dec 2103

NAME: Darius John McLeod

ASSIGNMENT (CURRENT): City Desk

JOB NO.: 03-4-12

CLASSIFICATION: Top Priority
SUBJECT: Peter Winston Spurgess, Mayor, New York City
DATE OF EXECUTION
 (APPROX): 15 Dec 2103
METHOD: Vehicular, or other, accident
CODE: 4-12-DJM
APPROVED: /s/Jack Lantrel

JACK LANTREL
GUNMAN EDITOR

THE UNDERSIGNED HEREBY CERTIFIES THAT JOB NO. 03-4-12, HEREAFTER REFERRED TO AS 4-12-DJM, HAS BEEN ORDERED IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE EXISTING REGULATIONS GOVERNING ASSASSINATION-ACCIDENTS, AND THAT 4-12-DJM HAS BEEN APPROVED, ORALLY OR IN WRITING, BY THE City Editor. THE UNDERSIGNED IS COGNIZANT OF THE FACT THAT ANY FRAUD OR DECEIT IN THIS APPLICATION, WHETHER FOR PERSONAL GAIN OR OTHERWISE, IS PUNISHABLE BY SUMMARY REVOCATION OF HIS (HER) NEWSPAPER LICENSE.

DARIUS JOHN McLEOD

It suddenly was no simple matter for McLeod to scrawl his name at the bottom of the sheet. He was aware of Lantrel, a puzzled expression on his face, watching him. It seemed entirely routine to affix his signature, but quite suddenly he was aware of the machinery that would put into operation. Gunmen would be selected for the job, would study Mayor Spurgess' habit file, would agree with Lantrel

on the *modus operandi*. Within thirty-six hours, Mayor Spurgess would be dead.

Darius McLeod executioner?

Hardly. He was merely carrying out an assignment. Newspapers were active agents in the modern world. If it had not been his assignment, it would have been someone else's. You could hardly consider it murder. Murder was punishable today as it had always been— by capital punishment or a long prison term. A newspaperman was above reproach — or imprisonment.

McLeod saw the parallel that he had first seen in Overman's office yesterday. He was both executioner and victim. Even now as he was signing the application for Mayor Spurgess' death, perhaps Weaver Wainwright was signing one which read, SUBJECT: Darius John McLeod, reporter, New York *Star-Times*. The *World* Gunman Editor might now be studying *his* habit file, weighing the various factors to determine what situation seemed most promising as a vessel for his "accidental" death. Did the editor know that McLeod often spent weekends racing across country or down to South America in his jet? It was there in his habit file in all probability. Did he know that McLeod visited the

Star-Times space station once every fortnight because he was being groomed to cover the *Star-Times* dash to the moon, if ever they got the jump on the *World* space station and could leave Earth's gravitational field without the near-certainty of being tracked and shot down by a *World* rocket? Did he know the thousand one little habits which, combined in various predictable patterns, made up McLeod's life? Unfortunately, the answer had to be in the affirmative. It left McLeod feeling a little sick.

"What's the matter. Darius? Is something wrong?"

"Huh? No. Nothing." McLeod signed the application. "There you are."

"Fine," said Lantrel, placing the application in his out basket. "Call me at home tomorrow afternoon, Darius. I'll give you the details so you can cover the assignment. You know the number?"

McLeod said that he did and left. He wondered if Weaver Wainwright would make a similar call. The worst part of it was that he didn't know when.

WHEN he reached his bachelor apartment in the East Seventies, the door recorder told him that two visitors, one male and one female, were waiting for

him. McLeod felt the comforting bulk of his parabeam in its arm holster and loosened it there. If they had entered his apartment it was because their fingerprint patterns had been included in the locking mechanism, but he couldn't take any chances. He opened the door and sighed his relief.

"Morning, Darius," Harry Crippens greeted him cheerfully, bouncing up from a web-chair and extending his hand. "Shake hands with a reporter who just got a big, fat, unexpected raise."

McLeod lit a cigaret and said, "I'm very glad to hear that, Cripp. Did Overman tell you?"

"Nope. First I knew of it, I read it in the paper. Take a look."

As McLeod took this morning's *Star-Times* from Crippens, Tracy entered the living room from the kitchen. "Coffee in a minute, Cripp," she said. "Oh, Darius. We're making ourselves to home, as the expression goes. Did you see that crazy thing in the paper?"

"I'm about to," said McLeod.

"Crazy!" Crippens cried in mock horror. "I get a raise right before we get married and she says crazy."

"Well, it doesn't make sense."

McLeod turned to the Internal Affairs page of the *Star-Times*. With the newspaper profession sup-

planting Hollywood fifty-odd years ago as the world's most glamorous, articles on internal affairs had evolved from small islands of type in a sea of advertisements to a place of importance with their own daily page and special editor.

"Three column head," Crippens said proudly. "Liberal quotes from the King himself. Maestro Overman."

"That's what I mean," Tracy repeated. "Crazy. Only yesterday, he was chewing you out."

The article said that a new star was on the *Star-Times* horizon, and went on to discuss all the successful assignments Crippens had handled. There was no mention of his wrongos which, McLeod knew, were considerable. A two-column cut of Crippens as his thinkwriter was included and the caption rendered a thumb-nail biography. The article concluded by mentioning a raise in salary which gave Crippens more than Tracy and almost what McLeod earned.

"That's great," McLeod said, finding it difficult to maintain his enthusiasm. Damn Overman, he didn't miss a trick. Fattening the calf for slaughter.

"Now the girl's got to marry me," Crippens declared. "I earn more money than she does." He was flip, building effusively in the

best newspaperman fashion. He was not the serious, intent Crippens McLeod had always known, although, on closer examination, McLeod realized that the owlish eyes looked quite sober.

"Quit your kidding," McLeod told him. "Harry Crippens would probably celebrate by discussing his next assignment, or making a study of the moral factors involved. What's the matter?"

"Not a thing," Crippens assured him easily. "Here, have a drink. It's your whisky."

"In the morning?" asked Tracy.

"This is a celebration, girl. There you go." And Crippens sloshed liquor into three glasses. His hands were shaking.

"I said what's the matter?" McLeod ignored the drink.

Crippens didn't. "Not a thing. Not a single, solitary thing."

"Go ahead and talk to him," Tracy said.

"Don't mind her, Darius. Have another?" Crippens poured for himself.

"Darn it, Cripp. Even if it means making me feel better?"

"Darius wouldn't do a thing like that, that's all."

"Like what?" McLeod wanted to know.

"I have to hand it to you,"

Tracy told him. "I thought you'd do your best to change the subject."

"Like nothing," Crippens said. "I mean it, don't mind her. She had some silly idea . . . I don't even want to talk about it."

"Darius," Tracy asked abruptly, "what have you decided to do about Weaver Wainwright?"

"Please," said Crippens.

"I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm not going to let him kill me if I can help it."

"Do tell. Does Cripp fit into the picture at all?"

McLeod hoped he could substitute evasion for outright lying. "Why don't you ask Overman?"

"Because I'm asking you."

He didn't think Tracy would ask Overman. He didn't think Overman would tell her the truth if she did. He saw she was waiting for an answer and said, "If the answer to that question were yes, you wouldn't expect me to tell you. If it were no, I ought to consider it an insult, coming from friends."

"We never stood on ceremonies before, Darius."

"Tracy, for gosh sakes!" Crippens pleaded. "Darius is my friend."

"I'm still waiting for an answer."

McLeod walked to the door and opened it. Crippens opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. He glared at Tracy.

"Get out of here," McLeod said. He was behaving like a child he realized. But more than anything else, he needed time to think.

Tracy went through the doorway, staring straight ahead. McLeod wished she would look at him, or holler, or slap him. She said, "All right, Darius. If that's the way you want to play it."

McLeod heard them arguing in low tones as he shut the door behind them.

Just what do you do, he thought, when your whole world starts to blow up all around you? You don't kick over the remaining traces. You try to re-establish the familiar, comforting pattern in some small way.

McLeod called the mayor's residence and got through to Spurgess at once. The flabby, thick-jowled face looked sickly white, like putty.

"McLeod, thank God. I thought you'd forgotten."

"Not on your life. I just wanted to tell you everything's going to be fine. You won't have to resign your office for political corruption. We'll see to that."

"Oh, thank you," said Mayor Spurgess. "Thank you very much."

"Sure," said McLeod, and cut the connection. Give or take a couple, Mayor Spurgess had about

thirty-six hours to live.

And McLeod?

SNOW was falling in thick, slow flakes which melted on contact with the ground when McLeod went outside after lunch. Since neither the *Star-Times* nor the *World* was depending on the cold virus or influenza for medical headlines this season, it was comparatively safe venturing out in this weather.

This, McLeod thought, seeing it for the first time in a strange, new light, was the city. Gray-white sky, overflowing snowflakes. Slidewalks, covered for the winter, conducting crowds of bovinely unaware people from place to place. Steel and glass and stone, soaring skyward, disappearing in the feathery white snow which, up above, was not feathery at all but a solid gray pall.

Did the cud-munching people know the truth about newspapers? McLeod doubted it. The old name had remained — newspapers — but the function had changed. We give them each day their daily cud. We don't report. We motivate. You didn't find it anyplace. It wasn't written. It happened and it was accepted. Maybe they did know. It might make a good book, if people ever went back to reading books again. Not yellow journalism, but

ROY G. BIV journalism, for all the colors in the rainbow. Concepts had changed. How? After the Third World War? The Fourth? People wanted to believe what they read. Each individual existence was precarious, cliff-edged, ready to fall or scramble back to safety. People believed. Almost, it was as if they had forgotten their Western Christian heritage, in which they moved through time from past to future, active agents in a static environment. Now they embodied the old Greek idea. People didn't flow. Time did. They stood backwards in the river of time, with the future flowing up, unseen, behind them, becoming the present, flowing on and becoming the past which lay, decipherable, before their eyes. Only newspapermen had eyes in the back of their heads.

Look out, cancer's coming. I read it in the *World*. (The *World* Medical Corps sows the seed, and the incidence of cancer increases.) Good newspaper, the *World*. Always lets you know what's coming. I see where the *Star-Times* says the cancer rate is dropping. Hope they're right. (Newspaper Medical Corps battle mightily, offstage, and the *Star-Times* wins. Temporarily, no more cancer.) What do you know, the *Star-Times* was right.

Star-Times says we ought to have

a spaceship on the moon soon. Thrilling, isn't it (*Star-Times* astronauts prepare to launch a two-stage rocket from their space station, but *World* astronauts intercept it with a guided missile and destroy it.) Well, looks like the *World* was right. Space travel soon, but not yet.

Senator Blundy's daughter was attacked on the campus of that there college up-state, what's its name? You read about it in the *Star-Times*? You know, it's not so bad, being small time, I always say. Things like that only happen to important people. Yes sir, we're lucky.

World says it's a Brinks, one of those unsolved robberies. Three million dollars from the Bank of New York! (But *Star-Times* detectives go to work and find — or sometimes frame — the criminal.) Hey, it's not a Brinks anymore. Maybe I ought to read the *Star-Times* more often.

That Weaver Wainwright earns six hundred thousand dollars a year, but my kid wants to be a politician. Some kids you just can't figure.

McLeod wandered into a bar and got himself mellowed, then found another and repeated the process. When he returned to the street and made his way to the slidewalk, the

snow had finally begun to stick. Someone in the bar had recognized him and asked for an autograph. It hadn't stirred him at all. Was he maturing or turning sour?

Returning home as dusk descended on the city and street lights gleamed on three inches of snow, McLeod learned from his door recorder that he had one female visitor. That would be Tracy, he thought, and prepared himself for more unpleasantness. Why couldn't they leave him alone?

"Come in, Darius. Shut the door." He did both, turned, and saw Tracy pointing a parabeam at him. His hand fumbled with the trick sleeve of his jacket, but the storm-coat got in his way. Tracy's parabeam zipped audibly and McLeod turned to stone.

CHAPTER IV

"I'll unfreeze your head so you can talk. You realize I ought to kill you."

His head tingled and he found that he could open his mouth, blink his eyes and twitch his nose. He couldn't turn his neck. From the chin down he was helplessly immobile. He was a disembodied brain with a face. He wished he were sober.

"Cripp still doesn't believe me," Tracy said. "He insisted I come

back alone and apologize. So I came back."

"But not to apologize."

"To get some information, Darius. I could be wrong. I don't think I am."

"Out at the Fourth Estate yesterday, you knew what kind of proposition Wainwright had made me," McLeod said, stalling for time while he tried to summon a logical defense. His mind was almost a blank.

"Sometimes I talk too much. Yes, I knew. Never mind how. I'm doing the questioning, and I want answers. When I read about Cripp in the Internal Affairs section, I put two and two together. Wainwright's assignment had been vague, so I guessed you and Overman had decided some substitution might be in order."

McLeod was silent.

"I advise you to talk, Darius. If I killed you now, it would be a bit ahead of schedule, but I think that would still satisfy Wainwright. Don't you?"

"You're bluffing," McLeod said — and hoped. "You couldn't possibly be on assignment to kill me. So you'd be subject to the same laws which face the general public for murder."

"All right. Maybe I won't kill you. But you feel no pain under a

parabeam, Darius. Remember that. I could start burning your hand with my lighter and work up to your elbow and you wouldn't even know — until I unfroze you."

"You wouldn't," McLeod said. "Maybe we don't see eye to eye now, but we're friends."

Tracy began nibbling at her lip. Her eyes were big and watery, as if she'd been fighting back tears. "Sure — I liked you. Maybe I still do. I don't know. I'm all mixed up. You know me, Darius. I'm liable to do anything — anything . . . when I'm all mixed up like this. I don't want to hurt you, not if I can help it. I like you, Darius. We've had fun together. Great times."

"That's better." McLeod's confidence was returning. He'd be out of freeze in no time now. "Just unfreeze me, and we can talk about this like two sensible people."

"I like you, but I'm in love with Cripp." Tracy removed her lighter from a pocket of her blouse with trembling fingers. She lit a cigarette and didn't extinguish the flame. She came closer to McLeod.

"Cut it out," he said. He felt sweat rolling down his forehead from his hairline and making his eyes blink. Parabeaming did peculiar, unpredictable things to the metabolism. The room seemed fur-

nace-hot.

"Then answer my question."

There was no sense being maimed, McLeod finally decided. Tracy knew the truth anyway. She just wanted to hear him say it. But now she brought a tiny mini-recorder into view from where it had been resting on a table and flipped the switch to on.

"What's that for?"

"Cripp. I want him to know. I want him to be able to protect himself from you. We're recording now, Darius. Answer this question: do you and Overman plan to use Cripp as a substitute corpse to satisfy Weaver Wainwright and the *World*? Is that why Cripp got his raise and all that unexpected publicity?"

McLeod licked his lips and tried to look down as Tracy's hand disappeared from view with the lighter. He saw no smoke but imagined his flesh beginning to crisp.

"Answer me. Did you and Overman plan to kill Cripp and give Wainwright his story that way?"

McLeod read nothing in her eyes, not even hatred. He said, "Yes. That's right."

Tracy shut off the mini-recorder, pocketed her lighter. She reversed the parabeam and McLeod felt his limbs begin to tingle with minute

sparks of pain.

"Don't try anything," Tracy said. "I'm still pointing this at you." Her voice caught. She tried to speak again but sobbed.

McLeod brought his arm up slowly and examined it. No damage.

"I — I guess you know I couldn't do it, Darius. I couldn't hurt you. But I don't want you to hurt Cripp. I want to give Cripp a fair chance. Have you signed an application for his death yet?"

"No."

"Will you?"

They were friends again. McLeod couldn't sense it. Friends who might try to hurt each other, of necessity, but friends. "I don't know," he said.

"Give him a break, Darius. There must be another way out. I could tell you things, if I could only trust you"

McLeod laughed easily, massaging his forearms. "Better not," he said. "Better get out of here."

"Maybe someday."

"Maybe. Thanks for telling me you couldn't do it. That's good to know." He shouldn't have said that. He was acting compulsively, striking back blindly.

The color left Tracy's face. "That was only because you haven't actually threatened Cripp yet. Don't rely on it, though."

She was striking back, too. He staggered to the door and watched her go. Crippens had himself a good woman there, the lucky s. o. b. Maybe that was why he hadn't rejected the idea of killing Crippens, McLeod thought.

SLLEEPING that night, after a dinner which felt like slag inside him, McLeod dreamed he had just signed an application for his own demise on the steps of City Hall while bands played and people cheered. Mayor Spurgess was there with a television camera and kept on pleading for McLeod not to renege, but Tracy clung to the mayor's arm and tried to lure him away to a co-respondent rendezvous. Weaver Wainwright and Overman lurked on the fringe of the crowd, both pointing at McLeod and laughing. Harry Crippens was the gunman.

When McLeod awoke, a gray dawn was seeping in through the windows. He showered and downed some bicarbonate of soda in water, but still felt like hell. A mantle of snow covered the silent streets outside and more snow was falling. Even the meteorologist's job wasn't guesswork now, McLeod thought wryly. Predicting snow, the *Star-Times* had sowed the clouds for it.

It was suddenly very important for Mayor Spurgess not to die.

Early in the afternoon, McLeod called Jack Lantrel at home, but a pert-faced girl smiled at him from the screen. "I'm sorry, Mr. Lantrel is not at home. Is there a message?"

"It's important that I reach him," McLeod said.

"Mr. Lantrel is out. He left no number. What is it in reference to?"

"4-12-DJM," McLeod said, and waited while the receptionist disappeared from view.

"You're Mr. McLeod, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"You don't have to worry about 4-12-DJM, sir. Everything will be taken care of."

"There's been a change of plans. I want the gunmen called off."

The professional smile was replaced by a frown. "Only Mr. Lantrel can do that."

"That's why I want to reach him. I told you it was important."

"But I don't know when he'll be back. Confidentially, sir, Mr. Lantrel just hates snow. When he read in the paper it was going to snow, he said he was leaving town. I'm sorry."

McLeod asked if she knew where Lantrel usually went.

"That's hard to say. He likes to forget about business, you see. He's down south," she added brightly. "Someplace down south. Is there any message?"

"Yes," McLeod said. "I'll be home all day. If Mr. Lantrel calls, have him contact me at once."

But as the afternoon dragged on, McLeod thought it unlikely that the Gunman Chief would receive his message. He had reached the unexpected decision about Mayor Spurgess quite suddenly and now found it almost beyond analysis. He neither liked the mayor nor disliked him. It was not the man who must live, but the symbol.

Symbol? Of what?

McLeod found the idea mildly ridiculous, almost as if he were drumming up trade for the Anti-Newspaper League, self-proselytizing. It wasn't that for the first time in his life, he told himself, he found an intrinsic evil in the newspaper business. It was simply that the system had hit home for the first time, unexpectedly. He had set the machinery in motion for Mayor Spurgess' death; Weaver Wainwright had done the same for him; Overman had decided the *Star-Times* could not afford to lose his services but could manage without Harry Crippens.

There was no logical connection.

If Mayor Spurgess died, that was that. Flowers and a sad song for the widow. But the Wainwright-McLeod-Overman-Crippens problem still remained unsolved. Not to mention Tracy Kent.

Had he become anti-newspaper? The term almost defied definition. The Anti-Newspaper League was one thing, formal, organized, purposeful. But anti-newspaper could mean a lot of things. It could mean slight deviation, non-conformity, the simple desire to earn your keep in some other line. Such a desire was never realized, however. There were only three classes of newspapermen: working reporters, corpses and retired hounds and hens who lived on newspaper farms in old-folk luxury. A newspaperman simply knew too much to be allowed to change his line of work.

No, there was a fourth type. There was the Anti-Newspaper League. What was the old word — Quisling? It referred to politics or some other fields of endeavor, McLeod thought. He wasn't sure what. They were on newspaper payrolls but tried to gum up the works.

Logic was getting him nowhere. He belonged to no cut-and-dry category.

He wanted Mayor Spurgess to live.

Lantrel failed to call by dinner-time or afterwards. At twenty-hundred thirty, McLeod zipped on an insulated jumper, checked his parabeam and went out into the *Star-Times* snow.

CHAPTER V

HIDDEN heat-coils melted the snow which managed to drift over the slidewalks despite their protective canopies, but the streets were covered with snow now more than a foot deep. McLeod felt it crunch underfoot as he left the slidewalks and headed for the mayor's house.

His breath exhaled in quick vapor-puffs against the cold, brittle air. His feet were heavy in the snow but dry. His were the only set of footsteps marring the white blanket which covered everything.

It occurred to him all at once that Mayor Spurgess would likely forego his evening walk because of the weather. Which necessitated another type of accident. Lantrel's men were both experienced and imaginative. You could write a book categorizing all the possibilities

Wind whipped around corners and sprayed McLeod's face with snowflakes. He heard a voice calling far off in the fuzzy white dim-

ness, but soon it was gone. Finally, he reached the mayor's house — a red-brick, white-columned Georgian structure massive and secure on a large corner lot. He crouched behind a leafless privet hedge-row in the driveway and waited, peering up occasionally at the cheery yellow squares of light that were the second storey windows. His ear-crono whispered the time to him: twenty-two hundred hours.

The tell-tale footsteps he had left in the snow were fast disappearing as the flakes fell thicker. He slid his parabeam out through the jumper's trick sleeve and felt the cold knife momentarily into his bare arm. The feeling of warm security, so paradoxical under the circumstances, left him. If he foiled Lantrel's gunmen, Overman would learn of it. If he didn't foil them but tried — which seemed more likely — Overman would also hear.

Just what was he doing here, anyway?

He flexed his stiff muscles and was on the point of standing up when he saw three figures approaching down the street, vague as ghosts in the snow. There was still time. He could intercept them and say he had come to cover the story, something which was expected

of him. He wondered what sort of accident they had planned.

He jogged toward them through the snow, met them still half a block from Spurgess' house. Two were young, possibly still in training. They were tall and looked like soldiers in their slick jumpers. They stared at him arrogantly. The third was shorter, heavier, of calculating eye. The expression of the first two faces said: *we're gunmen—whatever you are, we're better.* The third face said: *we'd as soon kill you as spit, but we don't kill except for hire or when provoked in the line of duty.*

"I'm from the paper," McLeod told them, whispering. "Here to cover the story."

The three faces stared back at him through the snow, crystalizing what he had felt all day but had not been able to explain. Those faces.

They had nothing against Mayor Spurgess. Perhaps they had never even seen him. If they didn't like him and had a reason and wanted to kill him, that wouldn't be so bad. That would be fine. But they were here to kill him because McLeod had signed the application along with Lantrel. They wanted to do the job and get back to warmer places and hot buttered rum or whatever they liked.

"He come out yet?" the older gunman asked.

"I don't think he will, not in this weather. What other plans have you got?"

"We'll just wait and see. We don't have to make the plans."

Had they been able to read McLeod's face as readily as he had read theirs? "I don't understand," he said. "You'll have to think of something else if he doesn't take his walk, won't you?"

"You say you were from the paper, guy?"

"Of course."

"Well, you're not making sense."

McLEOD toyed with his parabeam, then watched as matching weapons leaped into the hands of the two younger gunmen.

"What paper, guy?" the older one drawled.

McLeod felt his heart flutter wildly and checked a strong impulse to laugh.

One of the young gunmen said, "I thought the big boy himself was covering this. Wainwright. I know what he looks like."

"Come on, guy. What paper?"

McLeod knew the mistake could be fatal. Somehow the *World* had learned what the *Star-Times* had planned for Mayor Spurgess. These men were *World* gunmen, come to

thwart Lantrel's men. Perhaps they could, but McLeod might die in the process.

"Listen," he said desperately.

"The other day, Weaver Wainwright made me a proposition."

"Who *are* you?"

"Darius McLeod. Hold on, damn it! If you freeze me now, you'll be making a mistake. Wainwright wanted me to work for the *World*. That's why I'm here, don't you understand? I can tell you exactly what the *Star-Times* is going to do."

"We already know, McLeod. You're skating where the signs say not to, guy. I guess you know that."

"Won't Wainwright be here? Ask him."

"Don't know if he will or not."

One of the younger gunmen had circled around behind McLeod. The other one stood facing him, pointing the parabeam at his chest. The older man seemed to be enjoying himself.

"I don't want Spurgess killed," McLeod said. "That's the truth. I came here to prevent it myself."

"Can you tell me why?"

"No — yes. Because I want to accept Wainwright's proposition. The *World* said I was going to die. Wainwright offered me life."

"We know that you're going to die."

McLeod sucked in his breath. This same wholesome trio had probably received the application for his own death, had probably studied his habit file. "Not before next week," McLeod said.

"Now, I don't know. It's a gift horse, guy. They won't hold up our checks for a couple of hours either way."

"No, but you'll spend the rest of your life as a gunman if you cross Wainwright."

The voice behind McLeod's back seemed bodiless and as cold as the falling snow. "What's wrong with that?"

"You wouldn't understand," McLeod said without turning. "He would." He would win his life the moment he won over the shorter man. His two companions did not matter. "Look. The Gunman Editor on the *World* is near retirement, isn't he? You look like you've been around, but you won't be considered for the job if Wainwright bears a grudge."

"He's pretty smooth," the young gunman with the parabeam said.

"Why do you think I'm here at all?" McLeod insisted. "I didn't know you were coming. I came to prevent this thing myself."

THE man behind McLeod muttered a curse and said, "You

came here for the same reason you always go out on an assignment. To get the story."

But the older man said, "Have you any proof?"

"Only Wainwright. Ask him when he gets here."

"If he decides to come," said the man with the parabeam.

"And if he doesn't?" McLeod demanded. "Are you going to take a chance and —"

"It wouldn't be taking a chance at all," the older man told McLeod. "We could freeze you and box you and ask Wainwright about it later."

"You fool! I haven't told Wainwright one way or the other yet."

"Then we could unfreeze you and let him decide. Go ahead, George."

McLeod could never hope to freeze all three of them before they froze him. Their actions were cut from the same Kantian categorical imperative he had expected of himself and all newspapermen — until today. He felt sorry for himself because it no longer applied, but that hardly helped.

"Someone's coming," the voice behind McLeod said. He started to turn and got three quarters of the way around when the parabeam hit him.

After that, it was almost like watching a melodrama on television. He could watch the action unfold. His sympathies might be directed first one way, then another, but he had no part in the play. He was a statue, standing upright as the snow drifted down and coated him with white. His body-heat didn't escape the insulated jumper to melt it and in a few moments he was an incredibly manlike snowman with a human face. The last thing he wanted to do was stand there, frozen, and watch.

He stood and watched.

Half a dozen figures were clustered close by the white columns at the front of Mayor Spurgess' house. Then, as if they were puppets and all their strings had been pulled at once, they darted behind the columns.

The *World* gunmen were caught in the open and knew it. Parabeam hissed as they fell toward the ground and the snow's protection. Only the shorter, heavier man tried to get up, waddling three or four yards on his knees before a parabeam caught him too and froze him.

Two figures detached themselves from the white columns and ran across the snow toward McLeod, parabeam ready.

"Hey, he looks familiar."

"That's Darius McLeod, stupid. Familiar, the man says. They probably caught him and froze him."

A beam sucked the sleep from McLeod's limbs and he was soon massaging his arms together. After two freezes in as many evenings, he'd really have a parabeam hangover in the morning.

"What about those three people, Mr. McLeod?" the man who had unfroze him asked.

"A natural," the other one said. "Here's our accident. Assault and robbery and accidental death. We even have the assailants. Strip these people of their *World* identification. I'll be right back — with the mayor."

NEWSHOUNDS might trick and maim and kill one another, McLeod knew, but never frame other newspapermen for civil crime. You had to keep the public happy with all newspaper people. The police, of course, never investigated very thoroughly these days, since that would be poaching on newspaper territory. They handled traffic very well, though.

There was a commotion in front of the mayor's house, where only one of the gunmen was visible. Presently the door opened. There was loud talking, much pointing.

The gunman's voice was pleading, the mayor's was indignant. Finally, the mayor ducked inside and McLeod hoped he would stay there. Soon he emerged, however, dressed in a jumper. He ran along at the heels of the gunman and neared McLeod just as the other man had finished removing identification cards from the three still figures.

"McLeod, is that you? I knew I could depend on you. You have no idea how much better I'm able to relax now. No, sir. If you said I don't have to worry, I don't have to. What's going on out here? He said you wanted to see me but couldn't move from the spot. Something I can do? What's wrong with them?"

There were not three figures in the snow, but four. "Take a look," the man with Mayor Spurgess said.

The mayor waited for McLeod to answer him, then shrugged and crouched. It was exactly as if he were still under the parabeam, McLeod realized. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do.

The *Star-Times* gunmen had sized up the situation too well. The three men from the *World* were as good as dead now, which would make it close to impossible for McLeod to turn on the *Star-Times* and expect help from Wain-

wright, even if that were what he wanted. He had better play along. It was still a show on television and he could only watch. But now he knew the outcome.

The fourth still figure on the snow suddenly erupted into violent motion. A leg snaked out, an arm — the mayor grunted and fell, staring mutely at McLeod, surprised, offended and outrageously indignant the moment before he died. A knife flashed quickly, expertly, gleaming for a split second before it disappeared through the mayor's jumper.

The standing gunman twirled his parabeam to full intensity and sprayed the *World* men with what was now lethal radiation, halting involuntary actions such as blinking — and breathing.

The gunman smiled at McLeod. "Well, you have your story now. We'd better get out of here while you phone for the police.

McLeod had his story, all right. He felt sick. He would call the police and then go write his story about how Mayor Spurgess had chased three unidentified vandals from his house, only to be stabbed to death while protecting his family. McLeod who was visiting the mayor on business, had naturally joined in the chase, in time to overtake and kill the unidentified vandals

but not in time to save His Honor's life.

The police investigation, if any, would fail to uncover anything.

"Thanks a lot," McLeod said.

"Don't mention it." The two gunmen ran to join their companions and soon disappeared through the snow.

In tomorrow's *Star-Times*, McLeod would be a hero.

CHAPTER VI

"ENOUGH snow for you?" Overman asked jovially as McLeod removed his jumper the next morning in his office at the *Star-Times*. "We're ready to stop it now because the *World* weather bureau finally owned up to its red face. Thirty-two inches."

McLeod nodded. He'd had trouble reaching the slidewalk through the drifts and more trouble struggling through the few yards of high-piled snow to the *Star-Times* building.

"Rewrite showed me the story you sent in last night, Darius. Wonderful. Someone over at the *World* must be biting his fingernails. They've got to be ready for split second changes in the newspaper business, though. If they don't, they're lost."

"What's that little bit of homely

philosophy leading up to?" McLeod wanted to know. Overman rarely made his point without pre-facing it with some mundane generalization. The more important the point, McLeod knew from experience, the triter the generalization.

"We've done a little G-2'ing these last few weeks, Darius." Overman seemed almost on the point of prancing nervously like an anxious racehorse at the starting gate. "I couldn't tell you until it was certain. Harry Crippens is a member of the Anti-Newspaper League." Overman grinned like a yawning owl. "Close your mouth, Darius. Stop gaping. It's the truth."

"But that doesn't make sense, chief." McLeod figured it made very good sense if Overman said so, but he needed time to collect his thoughts.

"Dirty doings at the *Star-Times*," preached Overman. "It's frightening, isn't it? If you can't trust your fellow reporters, just who in the world can you trust? You see, it's not merely Crippens. There's an Anti-News cell here.

"They usually work in pairs, Darius. One to get the information, another to see that editorial policy is not carried out. Don't ask me why they do it. Mis-guided anarchistic tendencies, I suppose. The first

member of the pair very often poses as a turncoat with some other newspaper."

"I don't get you."

"It's simple. That way, he can play two papers against each other and try to make them both wrong. In this case, *she* can. You see, Crippens' confederate is our number one co-responent, Tracy Kent," Overman finished melodramatically.

"Tracy! That's incredible." *Don't think*, McLeod told himself. *Don't think and let it show on your face. Just listen.*

"At this moment, the *World* believes Kent is on their payroll. Kent keeps them informed of what's going on over here and draws two salaries. Crippens is her executioner. Crippens, for example, sees to it that Congressman Horner doesn't commit suicide."

TRACY had put two and two together with a blithe ease which had left McLeod wondering. Tracy had seemed to be aware of the alternative which Weaver Wainwright had offered him at the Fourth Estate. But Tracy hadn't balked because she was a loyal member of the *Star-Times* staff. She should have favored the plan, anyway, since it meant saving Crippens' life. But she hadn't fa-

vored it at all.

Because she'd held out hope for McLeod?

"How did you find all that out?" McLeod demanded.

"We suspected someone. We didn't know who. We planted television receivers and let them talk. Darius, I think you know my position. I'm a newspaperman because I think the public is so muddle-headed and mediocre it can't make its own decisions. Democratic governments try to make those decisions and fail because the people play too large a role and mess things up. Totalitarian governments fail because they're too obvious, especially when the guy next door happens to live in a democracy.

"The answer is the obvious evolution of the newspaper to policy-making journalism. People don't associate us with policy-making any more than they think short story writers or television script writers develop schools of psychology. We're both before the fact and after the fact, but they wouldn't believe that if we ran it in banner headlines.

"That's what the Anti-News-paper League is after. They don't want us to look forward. They don't want us to predict the future and then make it happen. They make inane pronouncements about the essential dignity of man and the

necessity for him to work out his own destiny. They sneer at Ortega y Gasset and deify Tom Paine. They shun authoritarianism in any form and blandly forget that Mr. Average Citizen has always yearned for his little niche in a totalitarian system because he actually wants decisions rained down on him like manna.

"I hate them, Darius. It isn't logical, but I hate them. Between you and me, I would like to strangle them with my bare hands, slowly, forgetting I am a civilized man, forgetting even that we can still use them. But the opportunity is a magnificent one. You could spend all your life G-2'ing after Anti-News people and come up with nothing but wrongos. From now on they'll be playing their little game where I can watch it."

"What about my obituary?" McLeod demanded. "It's the first of the week. I thought you said we were going to substitute Crippens for me."

"I did. I still do. Cripp we will have to sacrifice. But — I apologize in advance, Darius, because I know you won't like this — our G-2'ing was thorough. We received in your apartment, too."

"Don't tell me you can't trust me?"

"Calm down. That's just it, I

can. The cell is spread thin at the *Star-Times*, so thin that we'll have to watch our step until it's uncovered. You see, Darius, you are going to take Crippens' place in it. When Cripp dies Tracy will turn to someone for sympathy. If it looks like you tried to save Cripp because you believed as he did — well, I'm sure you see the possibilities."

MCLEOD nodded vaguely. Anti-News. He was playing the game, almost, the way he felt. But he lacked the name. It was strange how you could amble cheerfully through life accepting or ignoring certain things until you woke up one morning and everything looked different. Whoever had decided leopards don't change their spots was all wet.

" . . . sorry if this sounds cloak-and-daggerish," Overman was saying, "but don't tell anyone. I can trust you. If the conspiracy is as big as I think, the good people at the *World*, the sensible ones, can probably trust a man like Weaver Wainwright. The rest must be suspect."

McLeod grinned. "Why trust me, chief?" he said easily, "I've never been a bug for ideology either way."

"That's precisely why. Newspapering is a job with you, but a

good one. You're our highest-paid reporter. You have a reputation to maintain. A man gets muddle-headed if he starts delving too deeply into ideologies. He's afraid to see black-and-white because the other muddle-heads insist there are such things as grays. You follow?"

"Yeah," said McLeod. He followed, all right. It was all right if you thought for yourself, according to Overman, provided you didn't think too hard. You could attend all the high-brow confabs you wanted, safe in the security of your tailor-made answers. Never doubt. Never guess. You know. You just know. This is so and this is not so and there's never any in-between. The insistence on shadings of opinion between truth and error was a stumbling-block in the path of knowledge. Gray was for people who didn't know the truth about black and white.

"Yes, I can trust you. Thank God for that." "

"I ought to get a raise," said McLeod, smiling and playing the role Overman had selected for him.

"Very funny. You ought to get a move on. We still have to worry about Wainwright and his men. There's no telling when they'll strike."

"So I have to strike first, at Crippens."

"Naturally. Have you filled out an application on him?"

"No," McLeod said easily, and raised a hand for silence when Overman was about to start yelling. "It's too important. I want to do the job myself. It's my life we're playing around with."

"I don't know if I approve. There's something to be said for professional efficiency. The gunmen know their work."

"I don't care if you approve or not. It's my life."

"You see, Darius. That's what I like about you. You always know where you stand."

"Thanks. I'll need some security, though."

"Now I don't follow you."

"Some bargaining power. In case I'm not as efficient as your gunmen. The proof that Tracy Kent and Harry Crippens are Anti-Newspaper."

"It's safe."

"I've got to know more about it."

"On the contrary. Simply carry this weapon with you: if there's trouble, have them contact me. Or contact me yourself. But that would ruin everything, Darius. I suppose if you have to bargain for your life, you wouldn't care."

"That's right. I wouldn't."

Overman chuckled. "You're a

good man."

"And one who knows black from white, remember? Let's be honest with each other, chief. You're lying to me. You really figure if I fail, I fail. You wouldn't be willing to bargain in my behalf with what you have, and you know it. If I can kill Crippens and give Wainwright his substitute story and win Miss Kent's confidence, you'd love it. If I can't, you'll try to find another way. Sure, you think I'm good. But you know I'm expendable."

Overman thumped him soundly on the back. "Darius, we should have been brothers. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. How long would you want me to play this Anti-News game?"

"Until we get all the facts."

"Too dangerous," said McLeod. "Unless you make it worth my while."

Overman hadn't stopped grinning. "Maybe you will get a raise, at that."

"Not maybe. Definitely. Twenty per cent."

"Twenty?"

"Twenty."

"All right, Darius. Twenty it is. You'd sell your mother, wouldn't you?"

"Don't have to worry about it. The Anti-Newspaper League hasn't that kind of money. You're safe."

"I knew it," Overman said. "I couldn't have picked a better man."

"I'll keep you informed," said McLeod, and put on his jumper. He walked out congratulating himself on the way he'd convinced Overman.

Only trouble was, he now knew there was more than black and white in the world but wasn't sure he knew what to do about it.

CHAPTER VII

"I'M sorry," the recorder said when McLeod called Tracy's apartment. "Miss Kent is not at home. Is there any message?"

"No," said McLeod, then lied: "This is Harry Crippens talking."

"Miss Kent left a message for you, Mr. Crippens," said the recorder. "She will wait for you at the Fourth Estate. She says it is important."

"Thank you," said McLeod. "If Miss Kent should check in, will you tell her Darius wants to save Cripp's life if he can? Will you tell her Darius has come to his senses?"

"Darius wants to save Cripp's life if he can. Darius has come to his senses. Yes, sir."

McLeod had left the Star-Times after a hurried lunch in the newspaper cafeteria. He'd placed the call

to Tracy's apartment from his own because the wires might or might not be tapped in his office.

Suddenly he began cursing silently.

Overman had rigged receivers in various apartments — including 'Darius' — to uncover the Anti-News cell. If Overman had heard his conversation with Tracy's recorder, Weaver Wainwright wouldn't be the only one gunning for McLeod.

He found the receiver rigged to his TV set unhooked it, but the damage had been done. He doubted that Overman would constantly monitor the set, yet Overman would see the damning evidence eventually. McLeod could save Cripp's life by simply not killing him, but then what? He smiled grimly. It posed a considerable problem for Overman too, for the City Editor wanted to dump a fat wrongo in the *World's* lap but now would also want to see McLeod dead. One seemed to preclude the other . . . unless Overman decided to give McLeod a week of grace, then kill him. McLeod was still smiling. Perhaps the situation confronting the fictional lady-or-tiger man had been more aggravating, but it was less deadly.

McLeod taped a second parabeam to his right arm and took the

escalator to the roof and his copter.

“HI,” the weaponcheck girl greeted him as he entered the Fourth Estate. “How are you today, Mr. McLeod?”

“Never better.” As she approached him, McLeod removed the first parabeam from his trick sleeve and handed it to her. “I’m ticklish today,” he told her and saw that she was about to say something until she noticed the folded bill wedged between trigger and trigger guard. She nodded, patted his shoulders quickly without searching, and wagged away. It happened all the time, McLeod knew. He wouldn’t be the only one.

“You hurry up inside,” the weaponcheck girl called over her bare shoulder. “They’re doing a combo-tease.”

As McLeod made his way through the darkened room, he saw a well-built man and a delightfully built woman performing the combo-tease on stage. Sweat glistened on their sleek dark skins as red lights shifted and flowed across the stage. It was more suggestive than French pictures, combining features of an Apache dance and a conventional strip. It had been outlawed everywhere but at the Fourth Estate and had everyone’s rapt attention.

Everyone except Cripp and Tracy. McLeod found them in a distant corner of the great room, hunched toward each other across a small table and talking in low tones.

“Mind?” McLeod asked.

“You have your nerve,” Tracy hissed at him, but people to left and right were muttering angrily at them as the combo-tease neared its conclusion. “Well, I guess you’re harmless enough in here.”

“Sit down,” Cripp said.

“Overman knows about you two,” McLeod told them quickly. “The works.”

“You mean that we’re going to get married?” Tracy demanded. “It’s no secret.”

“I mean that you belong to the Anti-Newspaper League. Tracy, you’re pretending to spy on us for the *World*, he knows that, Cripp, you thwart bad news when you can. You both belong to the Anti-Newspaper League. To Overman, you’re both anarchistic. He’d like to see you dead.”

The woman on stage had seemed spent but now rallied and held her own as they danced a frenzied Apache battle from wing to wing. Tracy, who was facing the stage, said, “That’s positively lewd. We’ve all degenerated so much, Cripp.”

McLeod shrugged. "Overman would say that's part of your Anti-News tendencies."

"And you?"

McLeod grinned. "I'm not much for spectator sports."

"No, I mean about the Anti-Newspaper League. I'm not admitting anything, but I just wonder what you think."

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Why don't you try us, Darius?" Cripp suggested.

"You don't have to admit anything," McLeod informed them. "Overman plugged a receiver into your TV sets and monitored them. Mine too, by the way. I called you a while ago. Which put me in hot water too."

"You mean he'll monitor the call?" asked Cripp.

"Maybe he already has. You can check with your recorder if you want to, Tracy."

"Tell me what you told the recorder?"

"That I was going to try and save Cripp's life. That I had finally come to my senses, I guess."

"All you have to do to save Cripp's life is nothing. I was told by someone on Lantrel's staff that you hadn't applied for Cripp's death."

"Another part of the cell," McLeod mused. "Just how extensive is

it?"

"I wouldn't know," Tracy told him coolly. "Anyway, you said Overman knows."

"He does. I don't."

THE Apache strippers had leaped from the stage and now were cavorting acrobatically about the dance floor. A single red spot followed them as they pounced after each other, working their way toward the rows of tables and then among them. McLeod heard quick, eager breathing in the shadowy audience.

"I never knew they came off the stage," Tracy said.

McLeod winked at her. "Maybe one of these days they'll want audience participation."

"Very funny. If you're telling us the truth, Darius, what are you going to do?"

"You tell me. Overman wanted me to kill Cripp, win your confidence and take Cripp's place in the cell. I had to make it look like it wasn't me who did the job. But if Overman monitored my TV, he'll realize I'm not his boy. He'll have to do without an informant. He knows I'm wise to him but probably doesn't want to know. Which means he'll have to act fast."

"But if he eliminates you, Wainwright and the *World* get their

scoop," Cripp pointed out.

"I know, I can't figure it. Overman's got a man-sized problem, but so have you. I don't think you have much time to leave the city. Get lost somewhere. Change your names. Anything."

Tracy bristled. "We haven't admitted a thing."

"There's no time for that. Please, Tracy," Cripp pleaded. "I think Darius is on our side. We're making a mistake if we reject him."

"Unless I'm wrong," McLeod said, "Overman hasn't told anyone but me. He just doesn't know who to trust."

"So he settles for Mr. Judas Iscariot himself," Tracy said.

Cripp slammed his hand down on the table and drew angry oaths from the tables around them. "Cut it out," he said. "Let's listen to Darius. Can you think of anything else to do?"

"Well —"

"If I'm the only one he told," McLeod went on, "and then if he found out about me and decided to come here in a hurry, we can hope he hasn't told anyone else. Chances are, he hasn't. If he found out he can't even trust me, he won't know which way to turn, not until he clears this whole mess up."

"What are you driving at?"

Tracy asked him.

"Reporter, City Editor. It's close enough. Maybe Wainwright can still get his story."

"You mean Overman? You wouldn't dare."

"It isn't just Cripp's life, or even yours, if you still have your mind made up about me. It's my life too. If we can make Wainwright settle for Overman, all this doesn't have to go any further."

"What's your price?" Tracy demanded.

"For Heaven's sake!" Cripp cried.

"I can't blame her, Cripp. I was pretty nasty about it before, and I tried to be pretty tricky as well. I'm still all mixed up. I think I know where I stand now but I can't guarantee anything."

"You mean after all this is over you're liable to change your mind again?" Tracy asked him, giving Cripp an I-told-you-so smile.

"No. Definitely not. At worst, I'll be neutral. At best —"

"At best," Cripp finished for him enthusiastically, "you'll probably be made City Editor in Overman's place. You're the obvious man for the job, and if you could see your way clear to joining us, there's no telling what we might accomplish. Don't you see it, Tracy?"

"All I can see is the combo-tease."

They'll be dancing on our table if they come any closer."

THE team struggled three tables away to a subtle, wild, barely audible rhythm. The man had regained the offensive, but it had cost him everything he wore except for a pair of tight trousers and one billowing, ruffled sleeve which flapped ridiculously from shoulder to wrist.

At the last moment, McLeod thought he saw a leather strap under the sleeve. The couple had reached their table; the man forced the woman back over it, still dancing. The red spotlight winked out like a snuffed candle flame.

Tracy screamed.

The audience had interpreted the darkness and Tracy's scream as the act's final, breath-taking garnish and now buzzed in isolated knots of whispered excitement before the applause rolled deafeningly across the room.

McLeod leaped to his feet, groping blindly in the darkness with his hands. He heard Cripp shout Tracy's name and began to yell himself for someone to turn on the lights. Something struck his head above and behind the right ear and he felt himself falling to his knees. He grabbed at air, then made contact with two bare legs. Still

yelling, he guessed it was the woman — then felt unseen hands tugging at his hair, fingers raking his face. He got up and was grappling with a supple-swift invisible opponent when the lights went on and blinded him.

There were shouts and restraining arms and when he could see again the woman dancer, now almost naked, was pointing an accusing finger at him. "He deliberately attacked me!" she wailed.

McLeod wiped blood from his face and said, "That's crazy." These were more than combo-strippers, he knew. They might be in Wainwright's pay or Overman's. Either way, he was in for it. "They're a couple of gunmen," he said.

The male dancer was covering Tracy and Cripp with his parabeam, which had been hidden under the flapping right sleeve. "See?" McLeod said to the circle of people around them. "He's armed."

The crowd parted to admit the weaponcheck girl to its center. With a quick, deft movement she found McLeod's second parabeam, withdrew it and told him, "So are you."

More figures joined them, in police uniforms, the polished leather harness for twin parabeam creaking on each pair of hips, the gaudy blue and gold uniforms starched

stiffly. "You're under arrest," one of them told McLeod. "You'll have to come with us."

"You're no more police than I am. Since when do police do anything more than direct traffic?"

"You'll have to come with us, sir."

"And then get killed trying to escape? Keep your hands off me."

At that moment, Weaver Wainwright made his way inside the wide circle of onlookers, his long sad nose drooping over his upper lip as he smiled at McLeod. "When our police reporter said it was you, I rushed right over."

"Sure," McLeod said bitterly. "Police reporter. Why don't you admit these people are a bunch of your killers? You've really tailor-made your accident this time, Wainwright. I guess I'll be killed trying to escape."

Wainwright regarded him with bland curiosity. "What I want to know is why you attacked the girl."

"He didn't attack her," Tracy said. "I was right here."

"In pitch darkness," the weapon-check girl reminded her. Apparently McLeod's bribe had been topped.

MCLEOD let his eyes scan the crowd, seeking a friendly face. Here were the minor luminar-

ies of the fourth estate gazing upon their fallen idol. For McLeod, like Weaver Wainwright, had been almost a legendary figure. But Wainwright had engineered the fall and now, like those South American fish which can strip the flesh from a man in seconds, they clustered about McLeod's social corpse. They sensed his demise as surely as if it had been something physical. They waited with avid eyes at the bottom of the ladder for him to fall. Then each figure would ascend one wrung upward and so, each with his own capable hands and thinkwriter, control human history a little more.

If only he could somehow contact Overman, McLeod thought. How much time did he have? He wasn't sure but thought it could be measured in minutes.

"I'd like to call my City Editor," McLeod said.

Wainwright chuckled. "A good reporter to the last. But I see Crippens and Miss Kent here."

"It's my right."

"The *Star-Times* will get its story. Won't you see to that, Mr. Crippens?"

McLeod stared mutely at Cripp, who finally said, "How do you know I didn't attack the woman?"

The stripper pouted and pointed a manicured finger at McLeod. "It

was that man."

"You see?" Wainwright demanded.

"No," Cripp told him. "It was dark. She couldn't tell. If McLeod is arrested, they'll have to take me, too."

A muscle twitched in Wainwright's face, tugging the long nose down and to the left. "Very well. But Miss Kent still represents the *Star-Times*."

Cripp shook his head. "A correspondent?"

"She's capable."

"Too damned capable," McLeod said. "I have positive proof that Tracy Kent is employed as a spy by the *World*." He turned on Wainwright with what he hoped would pass for righteous indignation. "Is that the kind of fair break you try to give the opposition?"

The encircling crowd stirred, trembling with whispers. McLeod pressed his advantage by jabbing a finger at the captain of police. "I demand the right to call my newspaper."

"Well, I don't know." The man looked to Wainwright for help.

"Never mind him," McLeod said. "You tell me. I'm within my rights as a newspaperman, or wouldn't you know about that?"

Someone brought out a portable phone and thrust it at McLeod. The

captain of police looked at Wainwright, who shook his head quickly from side to side. It was all right. Sure it was all right. McLeod could make no accusations in public, the law said. If he started, he would forfeit his right to complete the call. He could tell Overman that Tracy and Cripp had him, instead, but he doubted if the City Editor would act on that basis.

Wainwright grinned. "There's your phone, McLeod. We're waiting for you to call."

"Thanks a lot," McLeod told him, and hurled the instrument at his face.

He heard a thud and a startled oath and didn't wait to see the results. He whirled and struck out with the edge of his hand, slicing it expertly at the police captain's Adam's Apple. McLeod vaulted over the gagging man as he went down and plunged, head tucked against his chest and knees kicking high, into the first rank of the crowd. He fought elbows, fists, shoulders, legs, warm human breaths, reaching the front of the room and sprinting past the weapon-check arsenal and out into the green, summery glade that surrounded the anachronism of stone and glass that was the Fourth Estate.

PROTECTED by a force field, the grounds around the Estate knew nothing but summer. But elsewhere, McLeod thought as he plunged on toward the copter field, man's control over the elements vied for headlines.

McLeod saw the figure of a man up ahead as he rounded the final turn in the path, still sprinting. The man stood squarely in front of him, blocking his way with a drawn parabeam.

"Did he come this way?" McLeod cried. "Talk, man! Did McLeod come this way?"

"No, sir. He, wait a minute . . ."

But McLeod was upon him, using the same judo-cut that had floored the captain of police. McLeod wrenched the parabeam from the man's fingers as he fell, then found his copter and was airborne by the time the vanguard of his pursuers appeared as tiny dots on the field below.

Less than an hour later, McLeod landed on the roof of the *Star-Times* building, where a slowly circling plow was scooping up the snow, digesting it and spitting out great jets of steam. McLeod doubled the speed of the escalator with his own flying feet and was soon striding across the City Room, nodding briefly to the sychophantic waves and smiles

which greeted him as the *Star-Times'* ace reporter.

"Chief," he said, entering Overman's glass-walled office without bothering to knock, "the wolves are after your fair-haired boy — but good!"

"Wainwright?" Overman guessed, drumming nervous fingers on his desk.

"Wainwright. Something about attacking the female member of a combo tease. If his police ever had a chance to take me, I'd have been killed trying to get away."

"So, what happened?"

"What happened, the man says. They're probably on their way here right now. In order for me to get away, Cripp had to claim he attacked the girl too."

"That's wonderful. Doesn't that take care of Mr. Crippens for us? Well, doesn't it? Incidentally, that was a stroke of genius on your part, telling Tracy Kent you had a change of heart *before* anything happened. Paving the way, eh?"

"Something like that," McLeod mumbled. Then Overman had monitored his call to Tracy's apartment, but had misinterpreted what he heard —

"Sit down, Darius. There. Are you armed?"

"Yes, but you don't think they'd try to take me right here, do you?"

That would be an open declaration of war." McLeod took out the parabeam and placed it on the edge of Overman's desk.

"It would be war — unless I surrendered you to them." Overman scooped up the parabeam and thumbed it to high intensity. "At first I thought that was a stroke of genius on your part, but I wasn't sure. So I had you followed. Your conversation with Crippens and Tracy Kent was ingenious, all right. But it puts us on opposite sides now, doesn't it?"

McLeod had never seen Overman so calm. His fingers no longer drummed their incessant rhythm on the desk, his legs were still. He sat motionless, like a tri-di picture of himself. McLeod said, "Not at all. I only wanted to gain their confidence."

"The one thing that bothers me is this: it looks like I'm going to give Weaver Wainwright his story after all, although there's a chance I can save something for the *Star-Times*. I suspect he'll take you off somewhere and have you killed, but the moment he leaves this office with you, you'll be denounced in the *Star-Times*. Wainwright won't be killing a top reporter. He'll be killing a member of the Anti-Newspaper League."

"You're crazy," McLeod said.

"It might have sounded bad, but it was all part of the same thing. I wanted to gain their confidence and —"

"And offer me in your place to Wainwright's hatchetmen? That's interesting."

"I was lying to them."

"No. You're lying to me. I'll tell you this, Darius. It comes as a great disappointment. Suddenly, all at once, a man finds his organization is riddled with subversives. That's bad enough, but at least he has one man he can trust. He thinks. He thinks, Darius. But he's wrong there, too. Now he can trust no one. Perhaps he'll have to fire his entire staff and start from the beginning again. But it's the one man, the Judas, who hurts most. Even if Wainwright gets you and gets his story — and I get mine — I'll never be able to trust anyone again. Don't you see the position you've put me in? I'm a lonely man, Darius."

McLEOD stood up and leaned across the desk. "We've both been playing God all our lives. What do you think happens when a God loses his worshippers?"

"I haven't lost them. Just the acolytes. There are others."

"There are the people," McLeod said. "Waiting for the medical

cures we promise them but never give. The farmers, praying to their own God while we ruin their crops capriciously to scoop the *World*. The dead citizens of a dozen bombed out cities in a dozen unnecessary wars. The people who haven't read Ortega y Gasset and maybe never even heard of him and can't be convinced they're too stupid to seek their own destinies."

"Ortega was right. Mass man can't discriminate. He's incapable of logical, creative thought. He blunders from catastrophe to catastrophe and grovels at the feet of demagogues."

"He can't be herded and led to slaughter."

"He can't be the master of his own fate, you fool!"

"Perhaps not. But there are people who can create, who can lead. People who pave the way and let the masses follow where they lead."

"What do you think we do? We pave the way. We make the future."

"There's a difference."

"I can't see it."

"You don't want to. The truly creative man merely does his work. The masses will follow of their own free will. Maybe they'll follow the wrong leader as often as not, but we've still come a long way in a few thousand years. It's wrong if

they're led, or pushed, or tricked or —"

"Sit down, Darius. Don't move. The trouble with you anti-news people is you're too romantic. You think because God or Nature created man at the top of the evolutionary ladder, man is good, man can do nothing but move forward in the long run. You think it's a mistake for one man — or a group of men, or an institution — to channel that movement.

"But of all the institutions in man's civilization, the newspaper is the most logical one for the job. We inform, Darius. We are the essence of life. Life perceives and, after perceiving transmits information. Or builds machines to do the job. Sensation, perception, information — the same thing. We're at the top. We belong here."

"Perception should be objective, un-colored. But there's no sense talking to you."

"Perception is never objective, my dear Darius. An individual perceives. Some men are tone-deaf, others color-blind. We all taste the same foods, liking some and disliking others. I say the newspaper belongs on the top like this. I say our creation of news is no different from the hundred varied opinions of a hundred members of the rabble. Unless it's better. We're a cohesive

force, Darius. We simplify. We unite."

"You hamper and destroy."

"We don't rule by force. Have they ever tried to overthrow us? Have they? You see, they don't dislike us. They have faith in us. They can grow roots and feel secure. They don't have a myriad of possibilities confronting them. They have only two on any given subject, except in purely local situations which we don't consider important. Either the *Star-Times* is right, or the *World* is."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"It's very important to me. I believed in you, Darius. I still think you've made a mistake. While it's too late now — you see, we can't really control *all* events, can we? — I would like to hear you admit your mistake. I can never trust anyone again."

"If I admit it?"

"I'll thank you"

"And hand me over to Weaver Wainwright?"

"And hand you over to Weaver Wainwright."

THERE was a disturbance outside, the sound of running feet in the City Room, of many voices. Overman cocked his head to one side, listening to the tiny recei-

ver in his ear then picking up his microphone hose and saying, "In a moment. That's right, I said let them in. But give me five minutes." He dropped the hose. "They're here for you, Darius."

"I gathered."

"Would you make a man who once was your friend happy before you go? Just tell me you were wrong. Tell me if you had your way over again you would remain loyal to me even if you were confronted with the same faulty philosophical notions."

"At the point of a parabeam? What good would it do?"

"Forget the parabeam. I'm two people now. I'm guarding you and I'll kill you if you come any closer to me, but I'm also pleading with you. I'm asking you to give me my salvation."

"I wonder which one is stronger," McLeod said, standing again and leaning across the desk. "Why does it mean so much to you, chief? Let me tell you. Is it because you have doubts yourself and want me to resolve them for you?"

"Keep back, I'm warning you. That isn't it at all. You've made me lose my faith in people."

"I thought you didn't have any."

"In a few people. Please, Darius. Don't come any closer. A man has to trust someone."

"You can't do anything about your doubts. You're hoping I can."

"I'm going to kill you if you come any closer." Overman was still standing like a statue, the parabeam an extension of his right hand. It was as if he would never move again unless McLeod freed him with a word. It was as if the heart too had stopped its beating and only the lips were alive, the pleading lips, begging for a reprieve.

McLeod leaped across the desk, his middle slamming down on the hard surface, his diaphragm squeezing all the air from his lungs. His fingers closed on Overman's wrist and forced it back as the parabeam hissed from his cheek.

Now the lips were still. Now the muscles which had remained so inert for many moments were writhing with activity, each individual cell adding its strength to the whole, to the wiry arms, the thin legs, the twisting, heaving torso. The only sound was the harsh rasping of Overman's breath as they grappled, tumbling over and over, rolling across the floor.

The parabeam was between them, separating their chests. Overman butted with his head, bit, gouged, used his knees and elbows while he held the weapon. The lungs filled with air — McLeod

could feel the torso lifting, the ribcage expanding. The mouth opened to scream for help

McLeod got a hand over it, felt teeth clamp on his fingers, very white, very sharp. The mouth opened again as McLeod rolled suddenly clear to avoid an up-thrusting knee.

Knee hit elbow and hand tightened convulsively. The parabeam hissed against Overman's chest and up, bathing his chin and face and the lips which, instead of screaming, formed the words "tell me" and then closed slowly. Afterwards, McLeod always thought Overman's ears must have retained their sentience longest as the man died, waiting for an answer which would never come.

The door opened. People stood around, looking down at them. Wainwright. The phony police. Tracy and Cripp. Some *Star-Times* security agents.

McLeod stood up slowly, his own muscles twitching. He looked at Wainwright, then pointed to Overman's body on the floor and said, "There's your story. You were modest in your prediction. Not a reporter, but the City Editor. Dead. And listen to me, Wainwright. It's the only story you'll ever get. Try anything else and there'll be open war between our

papers. You understand?"

Wainwright considered, head down, arms folded in front of him, long nose hiding lips from that angle. "They'll probably make you City Editor," he mused. "I'll take the story. You're in the clear, McLeod."

"I want to be exonerated from that false charge."

But Wainwright shook his head. "Do it yourself. You have a newspaper, too. Incidentally, how did Overman die?"

"Say he was looking for something, something important — so important that when he couldn't find it he killed himself."

"That's no story."

"It's a story," said McLeod, "We can make it a story."

"**T**HERE are hundreds of us," Tracy said later. "All over the country. All over the world. We're badly organized. We need organization. You're in a position to give it to us."

"Not overtly," Cripp warned. "But under cover at the beginning, until we build up strength. We'll have to re-indoctrinate young reporters and then forget about indoctrination when we can. We'll be fighting a war all our lives."

"Men like Overman and Wainwright are the alternatives," Mc-

Leod said. "I think even Overman knew, at the end, that he was wrong. But it went against everything he ever thought or believed. I almost could have been another Overman."

"You're not," Tracy said. "You just had to be goosed."

"It's going to be interesting," McLeod told them. "We'll still predict. To stay in business, we'll have to predict, at least to start with. But we'll give our scientists and social workers a free hand, and our predictions will all be practical. Do you realize there hasn't been a substantial scientific discovery put to use in the last fifty years?"

Cripp seemed worried. "Their approach is more sensational. They'll draw the readers. But we have to — to stay in business."

"That was your trouble all along," McLeod said. "You were a bunch of snipers. I think you're wrong. What's not sensational about a trip to the moon or a cure for cancer or controlled weather that actually helps the farmers or campaigning for the better man in an election because he truly has something to offer? We're liable to put the *World* right out of business."

"We can try," said Tracy, smiling.

“Not you, young lady. No more co-respondents. How would you like to be a bonafide social worker?”

But Tracy squeezed Cripp’s hand and said, “No, thank you. I’d rather be a housewife.”

McLeod thought he’d have to settle for loving both of them like a brother — then realized he’d be too busy to do anything of the sort.

THE END