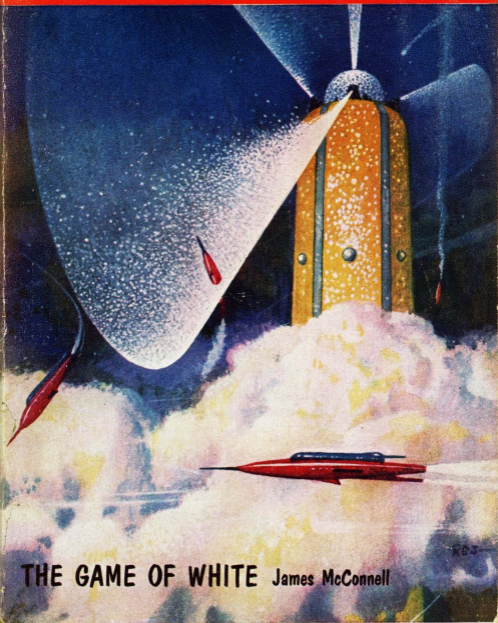


OTHER WORLDS

JULY
1953
35¢



THE GAME OF WHITE James McConnell

The People Who Make **OTHER WORLDS**



No. 15

JAMES McCONNELL

WHAT shall I tell you about McConnell? That he is 27, 6' 2" tall, 185, resisting his bachelorhood less and less each year? Nope, that sounds too trite. So shall I tell you that he should get his Ph.D. in psychology about a year from now and hopes to use this to support him while he writes s-f? Shall I mention that he began writing s-f solely because his good friend Chad Oliver was making such a success in the field that McConnell got jealous? Should I say that he's been writing in other fields for years, having worked on two of the largest newspapers in Louisiana, that he was in radio professionally for about four years ending up as a program director of KGBC in Galveston, Texas? That he deserted

radio for television, becoming head writer at WLW-TV in Cincinnati for about a year, and that while there a series of educational radio scripts he wrote won a national award and that he helped write the first network TV shows to emanate from Cincinnati (over NBC-TV)? That he left the ulcer mill of television on his own accord to take over the family business and then gravitated back to school for another degree? That he is a passable actor and that Shelley Winters once advised him to go to Hollywood where she'd do her best to help him get a break in the film capital?

No, most of the above is either superfluous or bragging, and I don't
(Continued on page 159)

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(The Game of White)*

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*Robert Gibson Jones
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The Game of White

By James McConnell

There were many players in the game, but there could be only one winner — so the Machine had ordained. Ronart had to win, which meant Cathy must lose!

Illustrated by Lawrence

It was not until several years after the end of the Final War that Mankind realized the truth: that although the atomic dust had not destroyed Man's mechanical civilization, leaving it intact for the winner, it had destroyed the basic strength of the race. Fearful indeed was the realization that even in the rare cases where the male of the species proved to have retained some measure of his fertility, reproduction became impossible through inability of the female to complete the process of birth and carry the foetus to maturity. True to the predictions of scientists, who had carefully computed the total effect of the radiations from the deadly dust, Man had not become completely sterile; but unforeseen by them, he had become too weakened to survive. He was not sterile, but neither was he virile. In desperation the scientists sought for an answer, and they worked what they hoped was a miracle. Whether it was to be or not, only time could tell. And the years went on. . . .

(Excerpt from "Man's Last Battle" by Septus Eubius. A.D. 2034)



RONART lay on his bed, listening. The Machine was talking again. Not through the loudspeakers, as it did to everybody, but talking personally, quietly, to him alone.

The Machine talked through the walls, through the air in his cubicle that changed itself automatically each minute, through the floors and the ceiling. The metal all around him undulated softly, setting up a throbbing susurrance. The bed rocked his body gently, adding its whisper to the murmuring. The Machine was calling.

"In a moment it will be too much," he thought, darkly, as he tensed his body against the ripplingness of the bed. "I'll get up. I'll have to get up and press the button . . . and start the game."

For a moment he thought of flight. But then he dismissed those thoughts. It would be no use to go elsewhere in the Machine, to look for escape in another compartment. For the Machine would talk to him anywhere—it's hollow voice would follow him down the corridors and into the public rooms. You could not hide from the Machine *inside* the Machine.

And you could not leave, unless you won the game.

Ronart relaxed his body, for the moment letting it mingle with the pulsation of the Machine. He and the metal became as one.

"It is time, Ronart," it seemed to say, the voice pounding within him. "Now . . . come now . . . come play the game with me."

Twice in the past, he had lain on

this very bed and listened to the changeless challenge. And twice before he had refused, pitting the strength of his fear against the hypnotic call of the Machine.

But this time, he knew, his strength and his fears would be too small to match the demanding, insistent summons. Twice spared . . .

BELL rang outside his room, announcing the mid-cycle meal. Automatically Ronart raised himself to a sitting position, swinging his legs around, his feet onto the floor. The bed yielded to the change of his body but continued its gentle rocking. Eddies of warm air brushed past his ears, caressing them, adding a windy, rustling undertone to the multitude of voices.

"I'll get up," Ronart said aloud to hide the other voices. "I'll go down to the food room and find Cathy and we'll talk. We'll eat and talk and it will go away. I won't have to listen to it if I'm talking to Cathy."

For it was the unknown that made him afraid. The fear of losing, the fear of what would happen if he didn't win the game. There were tales, fables, mythological conjurings about where you went, what they did to you, and the great pain that came to you out of darkness if you lost.

But it was all conjecture. Nobody knew for sure, for nobody ever came back from the games. Thousands played the game with the Machine each time, and only one could win. Yet nobody ever came back. Only guesses and vague rumors returned to

fill the empty places at the food tables each time a game was started. And sometimes, they said, quite often in fact, nobody won at all.

The Machine spoke through the light filtering down from the ceiling of his room, a sibilant, many-tongued voice that *penetrated* . . .

"Do not be afraid, Ronart. Fear is not in the game. The game is good and you can win. Come, Ronart, it is safe. Come, now, and play the game with me."

Ronart stood up. The metal floor gave rhythmically under his weight, shifting, rearranging itself in pattern with the call.

"All I've got to do," Ronart said as the pressure within him became unbearable, "is to walk over to the wall, put my identity card in the slot and press the button. Then the voice will stop."

As he spoke the turbulent voices mounted in crescendo, immobilizing him with their puissant demand. He stood there, staring at the red button on the wall opposite him, the floor dancing under his feet. The button blurred, then snapped back into focus. It seemed so near, so close to him. It seemed so easy a thing to do, to stop the voices. Twice feared, twice spared, and now . . .

"If you please, the mid-cycle meal is now being served in the food room." The automatic voice from the loudspeaker on the wall sliced across his reverie. "There is time yet to partake if you leave at once. If you please, the mid-cycle meal is now being served . . ."

The spell was shattered. Turning, Ronart strode across the room, opened the door and went into the corridor.

THE hall was long and empty. On both sides were unnumbered doors opening off to other small bedrooms such as the one Ronart had just left. Hundreds and hundreds of rooms on each of the lower levels of the Machine.

Ronart paused for a second at the top of the "down" escalator, surveying the large hall below. This was the recreation room for his group. It was empty now, but soon it would be filled. The comfortable chairs would be stuffed with gossiping people, spending a leisurely hour or two after the mid-cycle meal.

Grasping the guard-rail, Ronart stepped onto the escalator. As he rode down, it altered its metallic whine slightly and began singing to him in the voice of the Machine. At the bottom he hurried away from it, trying to drown out the sound of it with the clatter of his footsteps.

The hum of conversation reached his ears long before he got to the food room. Once inside, Ronart looked around until he saw Cathy sitting at a table against the wall, saving a seat for him. As he sat down beside her, she slipped one of her hands around one of his.

"It is late, Ronart, very late for you," she said, her voice soft and warm.

He looked at her. She was smiling now, but he could tell that she had

been crying.

"Yes, Cathy, it is late for me," he answered. She seemed to know without his telling her that the Machine had been calling again.

The food was served just then, and neither of them spoke for a while. They ate slowly, looking up at each other over almost every morsel.

Finally she said, "I knew a game was about to start. There were so many empty chairs here today. So many empty places . . ." Ronart looked around him. Saon was missing, as were Cheryl, Tanon, Elspeth, Renald and Laurence. It was like this all over the Machine when a game was about to begin.

"I was afraid that you had started the game without telling me, without coming to say goodbye," she went on, almost in tears again.

There was nothing he could say. When the Machine called, you went, and nothing else mattered. That was the rule. Relationships, *all* relationships changed. The very pattern of life was structured around the call of the Machine.

Ronart sighed and slumped down into his chair. The drowsy hum of voices lulled his sense of fear for the moment. He stared down at the table, his body comfortable in the plushness of the seat. And then the back of the chair began to tingle ever so slightly. The cushion under him began to flow, as if it had suddenly turned to water. A flowing, tingling chorus, reminding him, calling to him, beckoning . . .

Suddenly Ronart stood up. "Let's

go up to my room, Cathy. It's almost worse here than there, and at least we can be alone in the room."

"Is it that bad, Ronart?"

"Someday, perhaps, you'll know."

She stretched out her hand to him, and taking it, he pulled her up to him. They left the food room arm in arm. Other than their friends, no one bothered to watch them as they departed.

THERE were no chairs in the room, so Ronart motioned Cathy to sit on the bed while he paced around the narrow confines of his quarters. Cathy followed his movements with her eyes.

"Where do we come from, Cathy?" he said finally.

"I don't know. From the Machine, I guess."

Ronart stopped his pacing and turned to look at her. "Yes, that's just it. Nobody knows. The first thing I remember is waking up one cycle, here in this room."

"But that's the way it happens to everybody, Ronart."

He started moving again. "Nobody told us anything. There wasn't anybody around *to* tell us anything. All we knew was that we were here, that there were hundreds of thousands of others like us here, and that there was the Machine . . ."

"Come sit down beside me, Ronart," she told him, smiling. "It won't seem too bad if you're close to me."

He paused again and looked first at her and then at the bed. It seemed quivering, waiting for him. As long

as he walked and talked the Machine seemed quiet.

"Please, Ronart."

He walked over to the bed and lay down, resting his head in her lap, looking up at her warm and comforting face. She let her fingers run through his hair.

"Now, then," she said soothingly. "It's much better like this, isn't it?"

His body relaxed to the comfort of her nearness, but his mind refused to be lulled by her presence. "Cathy," he said, "Where does it all lead? Why are we here?"

"To play the game, of course, silly. What else can there be?"

He sat up quickly. "But, Cathy, what if either one of us should lose? What if *both* of us should lose? What happens to you when you lose? Where do you go, how do we know that we'd ever see each other again? It's so unfair!"

She put an arm up around his shoulders and pulled his head down to her lap again and resumed caressing his hair. "I don't know what happens if you lose, Ronart. 'The Plunge,' I guess, and then somebody new to take your place in the food room, as always."

As he looked up at her, something welled up inside him—a longing to take her in his arms, to hold her close to him, hold her and keep her there forever. An unspeakable desire to make her a part of him, as he was a part of the Machine. An unknowable passion, a drive, yearning, an overwhelming tropism . . .

But what was it? How to give it

vent? Into what words or actions could he express this aching desire? There were so many things he didn't know, so many things that had been left untaught.

Cathy must have felt it too, for her body gave a little shudder. She took her hand away from his hair. "I . . . I don't feel well, Ronart. I think I had better go."

Before he could protest she moved his head from her lap and stood up. He wanted suddenly to reach up, pull her back to him. But in his seething frustration he could only lie there on the bed, looking at her.

"I wish there were something else, some other way it could be done than by playing the game," she told him. "I wish there were some words to tell you how I feel."

She leaned down over him, her face close to his. Something salty touched his lips and he knew that she was crying. He started to throw his arms up around her when, with a supple motion, she stood up again and walked to the door. She paused at the doorway for a moment and looked back at him.

"Good luck, Ronart." And she was gone.

FOR a while after Cathy left, Ronart lay on his bed. The sudden emptiness of the room closed in on him. The salt of her tears lingered on his lips, reminding him of their parting.

And then, slowly, he became aware that the empty feeling was ebbing away, being replaced by a closeness

of some other kind. The lights dimmed softly and the voice of the Machine returned to him. For the moment he refused to listen to it, until the pounding sibilance became too great to ignore.

"Do not think me unkind, my child, nor unfair. In a short while you will understand. It will be explained, all of this you trouble with, and you will understand. I am waiting, Ronart, waiting for you. I am patient, but I am waiting. So come, Ronart, come now and play the game with me, and you shall know . . ."

It had a mesmeric quality to it that robbed him of his reason and his fears. Over and over, again and again, it repeated its enigmatic call, lulling him, leading him, luring him . . .

"I am waiting, my child, waiting. You cannot resist me for long, and while you resist, you feel pain. Give yourself to me, Ronart, and all will be well. Play the game and you shall know . . ."

The voice pulled him upright and then out of the bed onto his feet. He had no mind of his own; he only thought the thoughts of the Machine. The room swam in a sea of mist. The only thing in sharp focus was the button on the opposite wall.

His mind seemed out of contact with reality. He felt as if something had pushed him outside himself.

One step, and then another. One foot lifted from the floor and placed in front of him, a hideous, unthinking motion that took him across the weaving floor.

And then he was before it.

A hand fumbled for his identity card, which slipped easily into the narrow slot beside the button. Ronart felt like a marionette, a puppet. Surely someone else was running his body, performing all these tasks for him. It seemed incredible and incredibly horrible to him, but he was powerless to do anything but watch.

"Go ahead, Ronart. Now it is time. Soon you shall know. Press the button, Ronart. Give the signal, and let us play the game."

In blind obedience, one arm raised up, the hand groping for the indicator, anxious. Aching fingers that did not belong to him felt the wall in front of him, searching out the switch. And then they found it.

Ronart screamed with animal-like release of passion at the raging conflict inside him—and then he pressed the button.

The game was on!

THE room was suddenly quiet. Ronart found himself, exhausted, leaning against the wall for support, the voices within him, the shrill hurricane of conflict silent at last. He stayed in this position for a minute or two to gain strength. It was done now . . .

A swift hiss of escaping air sounded behind him. Turning around he saw a panel slide over the door to the corridor. Walking over to it, he found it was locked, automatically, from the outside. He was confined to his room until the beginning of the game.

There was a rumble of static from the loudspeaker on the wall. Ronart

turned to it, and the voice of the Machine came over it clearly:

"Thank you, my child, for what you have done. I have been waiting for you to signal."

Now that the decision had been made, now that he was committed and there was no turning back, Ronart felt the beginnings of fear return.

"You have been entered in the Game of White. There are many, many others like you, all of them my children, who have entered or will enter the Game of White.

"The playing will commence at the beginning of the next cycle. All questions will be answered during the game itself. Any further communication between you and anyone else is out of the question until the end of the Game, or until you are disqualified.

"Until that time, until next cycle, you will be confined to this room. You will need all your strength for the game. I suggest that you spend the intervening time in sleep. A special bell will sound to awaken you, and a way will be opened to lead you to the playing grounds.

"In parting, I wish to all of you, to each of my children, the best of luck. Sleep now, for next cycle we begin the Game of White."

For minutes after the loudspeaker went dead Ronart stood staring at it. Then he sat down on the bed.

Sleep? It seemed out of the question. There were too many things to be thought about, too much to be said to himself. He stretched out on the bed, then drew his knees up against

his chest, his hands covering his face. But he did not sleep.

CYCLE I

THE bell sounded sharply. Ronart heard it but did not move. The lights, which had been dim ever since he started the game, came up now to full brilliance. Still he did not change his position on the bed. Then again he heard a rapid rush of compressed air freeing itself. He turned over.

A section of the wall by the red button had swung open, revealing a partially lit corridor where before had been only smooth metal. He could see a dim light some distance down the hall.

Methodically he got up and checked the other door. It still had the double lock on it. There was no other exit. He could either go down this new passageway, or he could stay in the room. Those were his only choices.

"The Game of White has begun." The voice of the Machine was a sudden shock. "You will leave your room at once and proceed down the corridor opened to you. At the end you will find an entrance to the playing grounds. You will leave your room at once . . ."

The fear became stronger. It brooded over him darkly, paralyzing him, deterring him from action.

"This is your last warning. You will leave your room at once," boomed the rasping voice of the Machine.

As his fear still held him in wide-eyed thrall, the bright lights in the

room began to slough off, one by one, quickly leaving him to darkness.

Never in his past could Ronart remember darkness. He became terrified, ill-equipped with knowledge to combat this sudden turn of events. The lamp far down the new corridor was the only illumination present in his little world. Hazy, formless shadows clutched at him from the wall behind him.

The walls seemed to close in on him, pressing, forcing him out.

Unthinking and blindly, Ronart fled from the blackened room. As he left, he heard the wall close behind him, cutting off all retreat.

The hall was long and winding. Lights were situated far apart, so that he could barely see the glow from one to the next. As soon as he passed from the illumination of one lamp, it turned itself out. Always darkness dogged at his heels, spurring him on to the playing grounds.

At one point, underneath one of the final lights, he found some writing on the wall. Someone else, in frantic flight, had paused there to scrawl: "The Game is . . ." The words faded off into the edge of the shadows.

"The Game is—what?" Ronart said, standing still, his mind completing the unfinished sentence in many ways. But there was no time to linger. The light overhead blinked out and Ronart turned to flee towards the next glow of comforting illumination. But the implication of the words ran with him. "The Game is . . ."

He was still thinking of the writing

when he turned a curve in the hall and found himself at the end of the passageway. Here the light was bright and wholesome. In the wall facing Ronart was a door which opened as he approached it. Inside was a small elevator, barely large enough for one person.

Ronart went inside. The door closed silently behind him. At once the elevator started upward.

The Machine was very tall. That Ronart seemed to know, although he did not know how he knew it. The elevator picked up speed, going faster and faster until Ronart could hardly stand the acceleration. It began to tremble, to shake and vibrate in its shaft, still increasing its rate of flight.

Ronart felt a curious sense of fulfillment. Again he and the Machine were one, flashing upward to some glorious destiny. Every motion of the elevator was a motion of his. Each ecstatic movement brought the two of them as one closer to a moment of triumph.

A sense of overpowering peace pervaded his mind and he relaxed his knees against the terrible acceleration. He was flying through the reaches of lonely space, alone, yet with the Machine as an integral part of him. A unity of force, a dynamic integration of all existence, a completion of extended consciousness—all these were his. And eternity was just around the corner . . .

His mind was so filled with this almost orgiastic elation that when the elevator came to a sickening halt, he was completely unprepared for it.

His knees buckled, his feet slipped from his control, his head snapped back and he crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

WHEN Ronart awoke the elevator door was open. He got up slowly, shaking together his composure, and stepped outside.

He was somewhere near the top of the Machine, far removed from his living quarters. He was standing in a dock on a narrow ledge that ran around the inside rim of the Machine. It was like standing on a little lip of metal that ran around the inside of some huge, black pit.

Even from the door of the elevator Ronart could see the vastness of his surroundings. Empty space seemed to stretch away in front of him to the horizon. Above him and beneath his feet there loomed a blackness that his eyes could not penetrate.

Moored to the rim of the ledge was a small, one-seated vehicle of some kind. Around the ledge at the thousands of other docks were more vehicles of the same design. These he knew were his competitors, the other players. It seemed only natural for Ronart to get into the vehicle and close its door behind him.

"You are now ready to play the Game of White," the voice of the Machine said from a speaker on the dashboard of the car. "In a moment the flier will be freed to your control. At that time the first trial will begin.

"The Game of White will be a series of trials in which all but one of the contestants will be eliminated.

Each of you, the hundreds of thousands of you playing the game, has an equal chance to win.

"Each of the trials that you win will move you upwards in the playing field until the final level and the final test are reached. In between this first trial and the final one you will meet a number of situations—problems that you must solve. If you guess the correct solution, you will be advanced to the next highest level."

Here the voice paused, as if to let the meaning of the instructions penetrate the countless minds that were listening.

"But what happens if you lose?" thought Ronart suddenly. "It didn't tell what happens if you lose!"

"Your fliers will now be released. You will be given a certain length of time to acquire skill in handling them. I will speak to you again later."

Ronart glanced back toward the elevator as the flier moved gently away from the dock. The elevator door was slowly closing, shutting him off forever from Cathy and the first world of the Machine.

Then the flier suddenly dived nose-first out of control into the blackness below.

Instinct more than conscious effort made Ronart grab the controls of the little vehicle. With a little experimentation he got it under his command and pulled it out of the dive. He had fallen several hundred feet below the starting dock. But when he looked up he was consoled to see that most of his competitors had suffered the same fate. Some had

fallen even further, and one or two had dropped completely out of sight.

Ronart quickly learned how to manipulate the flier and soon was putting it through a lazy series of gyrations, working in towards the middle of this huge cavity in the Machine.

The loudspeaker boomed again as he was practicing. "Now you are learning, all of you. And while you do, I will tell you the answers to some of the many questions I feel you asking," it said.

Ronart let the flier settle into a lazy, hovering pattern.

"In the beginning was the earth, the cool, green earth. And the earth was good.

"And, after a time, on the earth was man. And with man, the Machine. And the Machine was man and was of man.

"You are children of the earth, and of man and of the Machine. For now the beginnings of life are to be found only in the Machine. To join the earth and the world of men you must leave the Machine.

"I am the Machine, the guardian of the children of man. To go forth among men, to walk along the edge of the earth, you must be chosen. I shall make the choice from among you according to the rules of the game.

"At the center of this emptiness you will find a column. At one level are a series of openings just large enough to accommodate a single flier at a time. Only a very few of the many openings lead to success—to

the next highest level.

"You will be given a certain time in which to make your selection. But once you have entered one of the openings, the choice will have been made. There is no retreat, no turning back. Either you will qualify for the next trial, or you will not.

"Those of you who have not decided by the end of the time limit will automatically be disqualified. Make your choice rapidly. You will be given one clue as to which of the openings are correct.

"And now, move your vehicles towards the center of the playing field, and begin the First Cycle of the Game of White."

WITH almost one accord all the fliers began converging on the thick, shining column in the center of the pit. As he drew closer, Ronart could make out a shifting pattern in the color of the lights playing around the column.

The whole spectrum of colors appeared on the column immediately above what seemed an endless row of openings. In kaleidoscopic fashion the colors changed, varying in hue, brightness and saturation. At short intervals the colors would pause in their mutations so that each hue was aligned with a specific opening.

By the time Ronart had moved in close enough to observe the colors, others more venturesome were already darting their fliers, almost at random, into the various apertures. How long the allotted time interval would be, Ronart did not know. But

he refused to dart wildly into the column without first giving the pattern some hopeful thought.

He pulled his flier up a short distance from the column and pointed its nose towards one of the openings. Around him on all sides buzzed hundreds of little vehicles just like his. The lights above his chosen hole slipped from a pale orange to a bright red.

"You will be given one clue . . ." the Machine had said.

The spectrum paused, then altered to a hazy violet as the red moved on, lingeringly, to halt above the next aperture. Two fliers darted into the same opening he had chosen, almost colliding in their haste to enter before the colors changed again.

"In the beginning was the earth."

The color above his opening shifted to an intense blue as the violet moved on. There seemed to be thousands of fliers swarming in his vicinity. Three of the little ships rammed into each other just above him. The concussion rocked his flier gently.

The intense blue merged briefly with a white and then mingled with green to form a blue-green of low saturation. A whole host of ships darted in towards his section of the column, most of them smashing into each other or the metallic wall of the center structure itself.

"The cool, green earth . . ."

A discrete green flashed on the space above the opening.

"Green!" Ronart shouted and plunged the flier towards the opening as fast as he could make it go. Another

ship traveling at an angle to his almost rammed him but turned aside at the last possible second. A ship in front of him got in the way. Ronart wheeled around it and darted into the mouth of the aperture just as the colors started to change again. Another ship followed close behind him.

He was in a long tube, scarcely large enough to hold his flier. The walls around him bathed him in green light as he flew along. A short distance ahead of him he could see another ship swimming in a mist of blue-green haze.

He was traveling at a great rate of speed, but soon the flier began to slow of its own accord. The vehicle ahead of him was slowing down too, and suddenly it changed course erratically. He could see the end of the tunnel ahead through which the first ship had already passed.

And then his ship too swam out into a wide, empty shaft at the center of the hollow column. From openings all around the shaft there poured fliers bathed in all colors of the spectrum, converging on the empty middle of the shaft.

There, as each successive wave reached the center, it paused, hung motionless like a swarm of iridescent insects. And then, with one accord, those ships at the center began to fall!

All but the greens!

The blue-green flier ahead of him reached the middle, lingered for just a moment, and then nosed into a plummeting, downward spiral.

In an instant his ship was upon

the spot. It gave a sickening, downward lurch; then it began to climb upward in slow, majestic flight. He had won the first trial!

Ronart sat quiet, stunned. He could hardly believe it even yet. Leaning toward one of the windows in the little machine, he looked down.

Below him was an ocean of color, rippling from the sides of the shaft out towards the center. There it seemed to come apart, to disintegrate. A few specks of pure green lifted themselves from the mass. The rest of the slips became a rainbow-waterfall dashing itself into the darkness below, finally winking out in the depths of the blackness.

"The Plunge . . ."

Ronart straightened up in his seat and dropped his head into his hands. He closed his eyes and rested.

Minutes later his flier came to a halt with a little grating sound. He looked up and found the ship docked at a small platform at what seemed to be the top of the shaft. Stretching around him were other green fliers moored to similar docks disengorging their drivers.

As he got out of his ship a door opened in the wall of the dock. He walked into the elevator, and as the door closed behind him, dropped into sudden darkness.

CYCLE II

THE door to the elevator opened again, and there was light. Ronart looked out, expecting to find himself back in his room. But, in-

stead, he found himself looking out on the same scene he had just left.

He had been hungry when he had entered the elevator. Now his hunger was gone. He had been tired, but now there was no fatigue. His thirst was quenched.

He thought about it a moment before leaving the elevator. Whether he had actually gone back to his part of the Machine and then returned after eating and sleeping he did not know. The memory of the intervening time could well have been stolen from him by the Machine.

Or perhaps he had been fed and rested right here in the elevator, never leaving the spot. This too the Machine could have done for him.

A bell rang. The voice of the Machine spoke through a speaker near him. "Begin now the Second Cycle of the Game of White."

Ronart sighed and moved from the elevator. It closed its door behind him. Doors were always closing behind him, it seemed. The flier rocked gently as he got into it. Quietly he sat waiting for further instructions from the Machine.

"The Game of White is a game of elimination," the loudspeaker in the vehicle said, breaking the stillness that Ronart felt around him. "It is, also, to an extent, a game of chance.

"Last cycle, either by luck or by skill, you chose the correct solution to the problem confronting you. In each successive trial you must do the same, if you are to win.

"Many of you will consider this unfair, irrational. And yet there must

be a choice of some kind made. Not all of you can be freed to walk along the edge of the earth, for earth could not support, in comfort, all the spawn of the Machine.

"And you complain at the lack of information given you. Perhaps you feel it incomprehensible that you should be given so little knowledge. And yet I tell you that here, as well as in the world outside, such is the case.

"Even the wisest of men begins his life with no knowledge at all. Here, as on the earth outside, you must begin at the bottom to rise to the top. Great things come from small beginnings, for such is the natural order of things.

"In a moment your fliers will be released to your control. But first, look around you."

The playing field was much smaller than the previous one, but only by comparison. It seemed to stretch a mile or so across, but was limited in its vertical dimensions by great blots of darkness. Ronart could see only a few hundred yards either up or down.

As in the previous playing field there were docks all along the outer rim of the arena. Moored to each dock was a little ship like his. Ronart guessed that a very small percentage of the players—probably less than five percent—who had begun the game the cycle before were here to start this second trial.

There was no column at the center of this field. There was only a stygian blackness above and below

him. And then, a speck of light appeared in the exact center of the dark ceiling. In a matter of seconds it grew to a dazzling circle of bright illumination.

"This is a test of time," intoned the Machine. "To win this trial, you must solve the problem presented to you in the briefest of spans.

"The problem may at first glance seem an easy one, but let me caution you that it is not as simple as it appears. To those few of you who solve it will come a certain feeling of humility. You have been given one clue to the correct solution.

"And here is the structure of your second trial. The only possible safe exit from this playing field is through the circle of light you see above you. To win this cycle you must position your flier through this circle.

"Good luck to all of you. Begin at once. You are now being timed."

Ronart felt a slight easing of the controls of his little machine as it was loosed from the protecting dock. And at once some of the other fliers darted up towards the burning halo that promised safety.

Ronart watched them, fascinated, unable to bring himself to follow them. They flashed nearer and nearer to the goal, approaching it from all directions. And as they moved closer to the circle of light, they seemed to lose headway, as if when they passed a certain level the power in their fliers had been automatically shut off. Up and up they strained, traveling on the impetus of their hasty beginning. Closer and closer they came to the

beckoning goal.

And then, in succession of approach, each one gave a little shudder and turned into a rapidly accelerating downward plunge, completing the cycle of its hyperbolic journey.

Ronart turned his eyes away from the scene, petrified, unable to face the reality of the situation. And, as he turned, he saw one of the fliers near him drop away from its dock and fall into the darkness below.

"Great things come from small beginnings," the Machine had said.

The little flier below him came to a gradual halt.

"To those few of you who will solve it will come a certain feeling of humility . . ."

The little vehicle underneath him paused in space, seeming to catch its breath for another span of flight.

"You must begin at the bottom to rise to the top . . ."

As the flier under him began moving again, Ronart came to life, plunging the controls of his machine forward. It dipped quickly into the yawning blackness beneath him.

He pulled the flier up to a sudden halt in its downward flight when he could barely see the circle of light above him.

"Time is running out," boomed the voice of the Machine in his ear. "Make your decision now."

Turning the nose of his machine upward, Ronart gave it full acceleration, heading straight for the glorious burst of illumination. His flier hummed and sang as it built up momentum on the steep climb. Ronart's

mouth was clenched with firmness as he raced to success.

"Hurry! Hurry! Time is almost out," called the Machine to all the players.

Around him plunged the falling ships of unsuccessful candidates. Ronart could not recognize their faces, nor could he stop to think about their fates. Sympathy would be wasted.

The circle of light grew larger and larger with each passing second. He flashed past the level of the starting docks, pressing his flier to its utmost velocity.

Now he could see the aperture from which the brilliant light was pouring through into the darkness of the playing area. Just a little distance to go!

And then the power propelling the flier gave out. He began to lose speed rapidly as the pull of gravity and friction played against the inertia his flight had built up. Success was so close to him now, if only he could make it, if only he had built up enough speed.

"This is your last warning," cried the voice of the Machine.

Closer now. He could make it if his time lasted.

"If you have not already crossed the barrier, you have lost."

Ronart's heart fell. He had failed! "I am sorry, but . . ."

And then, with what seemed like a sudden burst of energy, he shot through the opening and across the barrier into the land of bright light.

". . . The Second Cycle of the

Game of White is concluded."

Ronart collapsed in the seat of his flier. Again he had won. Just barely, it was true, but again he had won.

The little airship floated gently upwards into the light. Beneath him the entry opening had completely closed—another door shut behind him, separating him from the old life.

He was still breathing heavily from the shock of his test when the flier nudged into a waiting dock. For a moment he simply sat, unable to call out the energy to move. And then, slowly, he edged open the door and stepped out onto the metallic platform.

Around him in the area of light were numerous other fliers. He glanced at them, taking mental notes of their number. Again it seemed to him that only a fractional part of the large number of players who had begun the second cycle had won it. All around the big, circular playing area other like him were getting out of their vehicles, standing on the platforms, waiting for further instructions.

Getting out of the flier to his left was a man, unfamiliar, who waved to him good-naturedly. He turned to inspect the one on his left.

And stood thunderstruck.

The player getting out of the other vehicle was his own Cathy!

IT was a period of several seconds before Ronart could collect his senses. Through his mind raced a thousand ideas, a thousand possibilities, a thousand questions to be an-

swered. His own Cathy, whom he thought still to be hidden from him, safe in the bowels of the Machine!

He found control of his voice and his body and went rushing to the edge of his dock, waving his arms and shouting.

"Cathy! Cathy!"

She turned towards him, separated from him by several feet of yawning blackness. And then her eyes closed and she crumpled to the hard metal floor at her feet.

"Cathy! Oh, good Lord, Cathy!" he cried, flailing his arms in frustration. The crevasse between the two docks was more feet than he could jump and there was nothing on his dock with which to make a bridge. He had no way of getting to her, except . . .

The idea came to him, and at once he was back in his flier, shoving it away from his docks. The controls responded sluggishly. He had to push and strain against them to make them work at all. But by dint of sheer power he forced the little ship away from his dock and across the blackness to Cathy's dock. He leaped out of his flier, slamming the door behind him and kneeling at her side with almost the same motion. He did not see his little ship as it edged away from the dock and positioned itself, again, back at the first dock it had been moored to.

"Cathy," he said as he raised her head gently, "Are you all right?" she didn't appear to be injured.

There was a fluttering of her eyelids, and when she opened her eyes,

his face was close to hers.

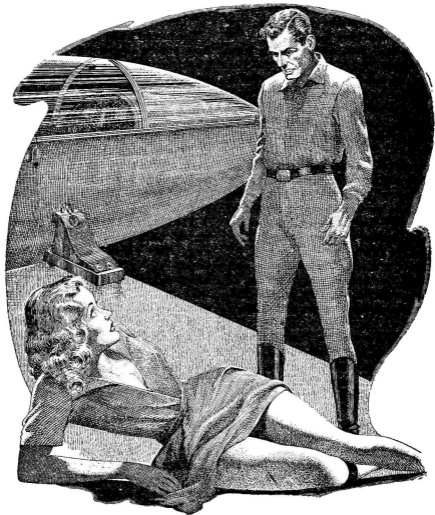
"Oh, Ronart, it *is* you."

"Yes, Cathy. It's going to be all right."

She moved, sitting up gradually,

but as she moved she never took her eyes from his face. And then, most of her fear gone, she relaxed and threw her hands over her face.

"I'm sorry, Ronart. You'll never



know how sorry I am. I knew it would happen this way."

"But why did you play this time? Cathy, why, why, why? You know that only one of us can win!"

"I know, I know! But after I left your room, I went back to my own. And it began to talk to me, Ronart, the way it did to you. I fought. You'll never understand how hard I fought against it. But it won. The Machine won, Ronart, and I had to play the game. I couldn't help myself." She began to cry, softly, as a child does when its favorite toy is hopelessly broken.

A bell rang. Ronart looked around him. All over the rest of the playing area the other participants in the Game of White were walking into the elevators.

She took her hands away from her face. "What are we going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. I must think."

She reached out and ran her fingers through his hair as if to make sure that he was really there, and not just a figment of her imagination, a phantom from some feverish dream. And he, thinking, paid scant attention to her caresses.

The sound of elevator doors closing all around the playing area brought his mind back to the immediate situation.

"Cathy, we'll have to stay here on the dock. If we get into the elevator together, we might be caught. And my fier's gone back to its dock."

Her warm white hand slipped down

from his head to run its way along the edge of his face.

"It's a chance, Cathy, but we'll have to take it."

Her eyes met his, smiling, trusting, comprehending. She said nothing to him out loud, giving her proud assent with her eyes alone.

"At least this way we'll be together, no matter what happens. We can sit and talk and figure out what we're going to do next cycle," he told her.

The light of the playing area began to dim slowly as the Machine adjusted itself to the temporary absence of the contestants. And as this happened a feeling of peace and deep sleep settled over both of them. Her hand slipped down from his face and clasped one of his hands.

"Have you figured out what we will do next cycle, Ronart?" she asked with slumber in her voice.

"Not yet, Cathy. We'll lie here awhile and I'll think about it." He stretched out on the hardness of the metal surface of the dock.

Stretching out along side him she said, "Do you forgive me for entering the same game as you did?"

He squeezed her hand gently. "Of course I do. Rest now. We'll need the energy next cycle."

Darkness was all around them now, and silently, before either of them was aware of it, the darkness had slipped inside of them. For many hours they lay, side by side, hand in hand, lost in a land of confusing dreams.

CYCLE III

CATHY awoke. There was light around her as she sat up. The playing field was brilliant with illumination in anticipation of the next trial.

She looked down with saddened eyes at the sleeping form of Ronart. It was so unfair, this game. Why did both of them have to play at the same time, when, at best, only one of them could win? It seemed a cosmic joke to her, yet she did not feel like laughing.

But most of all it was unfair to Ronart, she thought. It had been by luck, by sheer chance that she had come through the first two trials safely. The first trial she had blindly guessed at which of the colored openings was the right one. And somehow, she had blindly guessed the green.

The second trial was even more an evidence of her luck. When the signal to begin had come, she had lost control of her flier, and before she could pull it out of its fall, she had dropped almost to the limit of the lighted area. She knew that she could never have deduced the answer by herself. The words of the Machine, the clues it gave, meant nothing to her at all.

And yet, she knew instinctively, Ronart would figure them all out. Inside of her she knew that Ronart was destined to win the Game of White.

She also realized that all that was changed now, that Ronart would never leave her, never allow her to

fail unless he failed with her. It was so unfair!

Quietly she disengaged her hand from his and stood up. The playing area was deserted of contestants still. Only the little fliers bobbed silently up and down, little ships buoyed up at their docks by the incredibility of the Machine. She walked to the edge of the dock and looked down.

At her feet, stretching away beneath the lighted playing area like an inky, cloudy carpet, lay the empty darkness, the void, the land of the unsuccessful, the destination of those candidates who took "The Plunge."

And looking, she knew what she must do. It would be so simple for Ronart to go ahead with the winning of the Game of White if only she weren't there. He would wake and find her gone and never know. It was the only way.

She put her feet close together, closed her eyes and jumped.

Down and down she fell, with incredible rapidness, twisting and turning in her flight. She felt the buffeting arms of blackness envelop her and opened her mouth to scream, but sucked air in through her mouth instead as she felt herself torn from her flight and thrown roughly down on something cold and hard.

"You little fool. You wonderful little fool."

It was Ronart's voice!

"Don't you know that I'd have guessed, and would have followed after you?"

She was afraid to open her eyes,

knowing what she would see—Ronart, sitting on the surface of the dock, looking down at her, knowing what she had planned. Ronart, who must have awakened just in time to see her poised on the edge of the dock. Ronart who must have caught her just as she slipped over into the abyss and threw her back on the floor of the dock to save her life.

A bell rang. There was a sibilant sound of elevator doors opening. The time for the third trial had arrived.

"Now, listen to me, Cathy. Here's what we'll do. We'll both get into your flier. It will hold us. And we'll play the rest of the game together. That way we win or lose together. Do you understand?"

She threw her arms around him for an answer, finding courage to open her eyes as she did so.

"Begin now the Third Cycle of the Game of White." The Machine was speaking to its children. There was a hushed noise as the elevator doors closed behind the other contestants.

"Get in the flier, Cathy."

She got up and walked to the little ship and opened the door. He followed in behind her, crowding her as little as he could. It was obvious from the tight fit that the fliers were not designed to be operated by more than one person. He shut the door behind him. The vehicle edged away from the dock, slowly drifting towards the platform Ronart had landed on originally.

"I'll run the controls, Cathy, and make sure . . ."

Ronart dropped his sentence in

midair. A bright red light on the instrument panel began flashing. A strident bell somewhere in the ship began to clang.

"Section 12 of the Rules of the Game has been violated. Two contestants are occupying the same flier," came the ringing voice of the Machine over the panel loudspeaker.

"Ronart, what will we do?" Their little flier edged forward gently.

"Section 12 specifically forbids two contestants from joining forces for the playing of the Game. If the situation continues, both guilty contestants will be immediately disqualified."

Cathy looked at him wildly. He turned in his seat, and the flier rocked forward trying to regain balance. He twisted at the door handle violently, attempting to open it.

"Ronart, let's go together," she screamed, at him. "Stay with me, Ronart, let's stay together!"

"Don't be crazy, Cathy. There's another way." He had the door open now and gathered his body together in the doorway. "My flier is just a few feet ahead. I can jump to it if I have time."

She looked and saw the edge of a dock almost parallel to them, and moored to it, Ronart's empty airship. If her flier kept up its drift, it would soon be an easy jump.

"You have been warned," said the Machine harshly. "Section 12 of the Rules . . ."

"Push me, Cathy, give me a shove! Now!"

Quickly she turned to him, and

bracing her body against the side of the flier, pressed out strongly against his body just as he jumped. She saw him make the edge of the dock, slip down momentarily toward the blackness below, and then catch hold and pull himself up onto the ledge. Without waiting to rest he rushed into his own flier.

"Cathy!" he called across the space between their ships. "When the trial starts, follow me. Stick close behind!"

"Cycle Three of the Game of White will continue as scheduled," droned the voice of the Machine.

ALL around him the ships of the other contestants were hovering into life as their drivers maneuvered them away from the docks. The playing area for this, the Third Cycle of the Game, was much smaller than Ronart had remembered from the cycle before. And of the hundreds of thousands of players who had begun the game with him, hardly more than a thousand or so remained.

"I congratulate those of you, my children, who have come this far in the Game of White," the Machine said. "You have probably already noticed that almost all of your brethren have been eliminated. And yet, the hardest trials are still ahead of you.

"But this is as it should be, for anyone who leaves the machine must earn the right to do so. And to win this, the third trial, you must be right in your solution of the problem presented to you.

"Soon now one of you will have

passed all the trials and will be allowed, by the Rules of the Game, to go forth on earth—there to find the cool happiness of knowledge and the warm affection of the human community. But you should know now, before the game is done, that life in the world of men is a difficult thing. Life here as children of the Machine is child's play as compared with the complexities of earth. For all of life is a struggle, a battle, a constant war of one kind or another. So it begins, and so shall it end.

"In this cycle you will be presented with a labyrinth of intricate design. There will be many entrances to this complicated maze. And there will be many exits, but only one exit will lead to success and the next highest level. Look around you."

Above the level of the docks, appearing irregularly around the playing field, Ronart saw a ring of cavernous openings. Motioning to Cathy, he edged his flier up towards the nearest one.

"You may enter any of these passages you wish. Every few hundred yards you will be presented with a crossroad. If, at any of these conjunctions, you choose the correct corridor, you will continue unhindered towards the proper exit.

"If, however, you take the incorrect turning, you will invariably be returned to this, the central playing area. During the course of the play you will be allowed two mistakes. Twice you can safely return to this neutral ground. But the third time you find your way back to the start-

ing point, you will be disqualified.

"Along the way you will find a great many signs or clues which might serve to help you arrive at a choice at each conjunction. Only one of these signs, however, will be a valid one. It is up to you to discover which clue is the proper one, leading to success. You have already been given one indication of which sign will be the correct one to follow.

"Remember, three mistakes, and you are disqualified.

"Only a mere handful of you will succeed at this level. But I wish to all of you an equal amount of luck.

"Begin now the playing of the Third Cycle of the Game of White."

RONART looked around to make sure that Cathy was there. Her little ship was close in but slightly behind him. He signaled for her to follow, and single file they edged their way into the nearest of the openings.

The long, dark corridor was fairly wide. It could easily accommodate five or six of the fliers abreast at its diameter. The only visible light in the tunnel came from four growing stripes of color. Running parallel on the ceiling were a stripe of blue and one of green. Underneath, on the floor of the tube, Ronart saw a brightly shining line of pure red and a shimmering line of yellow. Behind him he could barely make out the silhouette of Cathy's flier.

The two of them progressed slowly down the twisting tunnel. Ronart was afraid to put any speed to his vehicle, both for fear of losing Cathy

in his rush and for fear of being forced to make a sudden decision at the first crossroads. And as he flew gently along he tried to puzzle out the meaning of the colored lines above and below him. These were doubtless some of the clues that the Machine had spoken of.

But even with his caution, the first conjunction was upon them without warning. They turned a sharp curve and found ahead of them a branching of the tunnel. Ronart brought his flier into a tight circle to inspect the situation.

Branching off to the right of the corridor they were in was a brilliantly lighted channel. The dark corridor angled off to the left and continued in its darkness Ronart knew not where.

He looked at first for the colored lines, and found that the blue and the red disappeared into the haziness of the blackened corridor. The yellow and green stripes, however, one above and one below him, turned off into the avenue of light. There were so many clues!

Ronart circled around in the crossroads several times. And then, realizing the futility of indecision, picked the lighted corridor and headed into it, feeling that even if it were not the right one, at least Cathy could follow him with ease.

The green line on the ceiling and the yellow on the floor of the tube lead the way. Ronart wondered if again the color green, symbol of earth and victory, could be the proper clue. It seemed peculiar that the same clue would be used in more than

one trial. But then, the Machine had given no clue to any other color in its parting instructions.

Before Ronart could come to any decision the two little ships were at the next choice point. Again Ronart put his flier into a lazy circling pattern while he tried to divine the solution to the puzzle.

At this branching of the corridors the lighted tunnel ran off to the left while there was a dark one to the right. The yellow stripe on the floor turned into the dark tunnel, the green one into the corridor of light. And running out of the dark tube ahead and switching into the lighted one to the left was the blue line of light that they had left behind at the last crossroads!

Again Ronart could not comprehend the pattern of the clues. Which of the colored lines had meaning? Or was it a matter of always choosing the lighted or the darkened tunnel? Or perhaps it was a matter of selecting alternately the dark or the light or a certain combination of the colors.

He looked over at Cathy, following him in the byrations of indecision. He waved reassuringly at her, but felt less than reassured himself. If it were a matter of alternation of light and dark, he should go left. If he should follow the green line again he should turn left. If the yellow line were the guide, he should turn right. If the blue line were to be followed, it made no apparent difference at all. These clues he could understand.

Weighing all of the possibilities in

his mind he came to a decision. Most of the clues pointed to the left, to the lighted tunnel. So he turned his ship in that direction, again signalling to Cathy to follow.

Even at the slow pace at which they traveled, it was only a few moments later when Ronart saw a brilliant gleam of light ahead. He closed his eyes briefly in the agony of making another decision. So much depended on his making the proper choice. But when he opened his eyes he found that his agony had been wasted. There would be no decision to make at this crossroads. For the two little ships were slowly emerging into the initial playing area; they were back to where they had started from!

As they crossed the entranceway the loudspeaker on the control panel spoke: "Mistake Number One has been made. You will be allowed only one more wrong choice before being disqualified."

AS they flew out into the playing area, Ronart brought his flier up into a hovering movement and motioned to Cathy to come alongside. He tried to open the door of his flier so that they could talk, but found that it was locked. He tried shouting to her, but he could tell that his voice was not carrying above the slight whine of the fliers' engines. There was so much he wanted to tell her.

But looking into her eyes as she sat there in her own ship he realized that there was nothing to be said between them that had not already been

said. In her eyes he could read the trust she had in him, the strong devotion and determination within her to follow him wherever he led.

"She should have picked someone smarter than me to follow," he said to himself in the disgust of assumed guilt. "Why did she have to get into this game at all!"

And while he said it he knew that he didn't mean it, that what he said was only the mouthing of his own distrust of himself, his own feelings of inadequacy. Why blame her for his own failings?

He waved to her again and turned his flier around and headed back into the opening from which they had just emerged. He knew that it would do no good to further evaluate the clues until they were back at the crossroads where he had made his first mistake.

It seemed to Ronart as they flew along the lighted tunnel that it was further back to the conjunction than he had remembered. But the blue and green stripes were there on the ceiling as they should have been. But he hadn't recalled so many twists and turns in the passage when they had been over it the first time.

And then they were rapidly approaching another glow of light. Ronart had no particular apprehension about this crossroads, knowing that his next decision would have to be to follow the blue line on into the darkened corridor. What lay at the end of *that* corridor he didn't know, but it is there that the next real choice would have to be made. His

mind was so relaxed that he could hardly stop his flier in time when he and Cathy arrived at the actual crossroads. And all at once his great confidence fell to pieces.

For there, coming out of the lighted tunnel to his right and continuing with the blue line above him into the darkness of the tunnel to his left, was not a yellow line, but a brightly shining red one!

"It . . . tricked me," he said in sudden, frustrated anger. "That was why it seemed so far back here. Somewhere along the way the Machine changed directions on me!"

Emotions of fear and anger and chagrin at the unfairness of the trick swam through his body. He could hardly control the tears of bitter disappointment that welled up his eyes.

Slowly, however, with the knowledge that anger would never help, he regained his composure. He would need full command of his faculties if the maze were to be understood. He rested his head in his hands and began to mutter the problem aloud.

"It can't be a matter of mere alternation of dark and lighted tunnels. That's out. And the green line failed, so we can count that out too. It might be the blue line that's the one to follow. But that can't be right! I'd be going in circles.

"Perhaps it's a matter of single and then double alternation of the lighted and dark tunnels. Or maybe something ever more complex than that. Of maybe . . ." In his frustration he stopped his talk to look again at the corridors ahead of him. And no-

ticed for the first time that there was something slightly uneven about them.

The tube to his right seemed a little higher than the one to his left, as if leading upwards. The one to his left seemed to slant slightly downwards.

"Of course," he said, some of his confidence returning. "That was the clue, and I was too blind to notice it! '*And only one exit will lead to success and the next highest level,*' the Machine said. That's it!"

Without hesitation he turned his flier in to the right hand passage, motioning Cathy to follow. As he had expected, the tunnel followed a slightly ascending spiral. And it was not long before the next junction was upon him.

Here there was hardly any choice to be made, Ronart thought. For angling off to the left in a steep upward slope was a blackened corridor. The one to the right descended sharply into a glow of light. It seemed obvious, and Ronart smiled and waved to Cathy to follow him.

He had just turned his flier to the left, when out of the darkness, from the tunnel into which they had been headed, rushing madly down upon them, there came another flier!

RONART slammed his little ship over to the opposite wall to get out of the other contestant's way. The rival flier seemed wildly out of control. It barely made the turning into the corridor from which Ronart and Cathy had just come, caroming

off the far side of the passageway as it went. And then it was swallowed up in the darkness.

Ronart looked back hurriedly as it passed to make sure that Cathy had gotten out of the other flier's way. He sighed with relief of tension as he saw that she had.

And then he began to laugh at the simplicity of the whole thing!

Dark corridors and lighted ones; red, blue, green and yellow lines; double, single and multiple alternatives; tunnels sloping up or down. They were all a great, cosmic joke—for they were all wrong!

They had to be, for he had ruled all of them out except the elevation of the different corridors. And if he had followed that clue, they would have ended up again, back at the beginning of the labyrinth.

This he knew, for under no circumstances would they have ever met another contestant coming *towards* them, coming the *wrong* way down the correct path towards the one successful exit.

Cathy saw him laughing and feared for a moment that he had lost his senses. But then she saw the unmistakable grin of victory spread across his face and knew that all was well. He had figured out the secret of the maze. She pushed her flier forward eagerly as they both plunged down into the darkness of the right-hand corridor.

RIGITNESS. It was as simple as that. All of the kaleidoscopic array of clues were camouflage, de-

signed to confuse even the most wary of contestants.

"Anyone who leaves the Machine must earn the right to do so," the voice had said at the beginning of the trial. *"And to win you must be right in your solution of the problems presented to you."*

Rightness. Forget the rest of the clues. To win, to find the one and only successful exit, one had to be *right*. Ronart laughed. The touch of irony added to the complexity of the situation was not lost on him.

Ronart was relieved to see that the corridor they were in which had originally slanted downward was now sloping abruptly upward. With Cathy following close behind him, he flashed through another crossing of the tunnels, again choosing the pathway that lay to the right, ignoring the multiplicity of criss-crossing colored lines, the alternate patterns of lighted and darkened channels and the initial slope of the corridors into which they flew.

Their fliers picked up speed. Ronart tried to slow the pace of their journey down a little to keep full control of his flier, but the little ship refused to heed his desires. Often at the junctions of the various tunnels, they came close to colliding with other contestants who arrived at the crossroads at the same time. But always the other players were coming out of the left-hand tubes, never from the right.

Faster and faster they flew and Ronart had to fight to keep from losing Cathy in the sudden bursts

of acceleration his little ship put on. The force of centrifugal swing kept pushing both their fliers to the left-hand side of the tunnels at each choice-point. Time after time Ronart barely had a chance to bring his ship back into the center of the channel before another crossroads was upon them. And more than once, when collision with the dividing partitions at the junctions seemed inevitable, Ronart was forced to use all of his skill to keep to the right-turning pathway. Somehow Cathy managed to keep behind him all the way.

Higher and higher into the Machine they sped, in a mounting clockwise spiral, turning right at each crossroads while the force of centrifugal swing tried to push them always to the left.

Ronart had managed to make one of the turns by scraping the outside wall of his chosen tunnel when his flier began to lose speed. He turned around and saw that Cathy's little ship was slowing down too. The next meeting of the tunnels slipped past them with ease when the corridor took a sudden steep turn upwards and then leveled off to a straight run. Their fliers lost more headway and they seemed to be barely moving when Ronart and Cathy slipped out of the final tunnel into what looked like the inside of a giant globe.

Running like a girdle around the inside perimeter of the sphere were a string of docks, six in number, but all widely isolated. Ronart smiled to himself as he saw them, knowing that somehow, through some blind mys-

tery of chance, he and Cathy had won again. His flier began drifting slowly towards one of the docks above them.

Turning in his seat he motioned to Cathy to follow him to the dock. Now that the third trial was over they could sit and talk again, as they had at the end of the Second Cycle. It would be good to talk to Cathy, to have her again close to him, for they had to plan what to do next.

Cathy was waving to him violently. Her ship was separating from his and heading for a dock on the opposite side of the sphere. When it became apparent to him that she was unable to follow him, he turned back to the controls of his flier and attempted to go to her. But the controls were locked, inoperative. As much as he twisted the steering rod, it refused to wheel the ship around in the other direction. Even the speed controls would not function.

Then Ronart understood that they were being forceably separated. His flier positioned itself at the dock and refused to budge an inch further. As Ronart opened the door to get out he heard a slight clicking sound. He looked down and saw that some mechanical device had automatically locked the flier to the dock.

Ronart stood up on the metal platform and glanced around him. Four of the six docks were already occupied. Cathy's ship was slowly approaching a resting place directly across the globe from him. As he watched another flier emerged from the entranceway close to the bottom

of the sphere and drifted up towards one of the empty docks. In a few seconds still another flier entered the arena and the entrance opening slowly began to close.

"The Third Cycle of The Game of White is concluded. There will be no further winners," the voice of the Machine said from a loudspeaker on the wall behind him. There was the hushed whisper of an opening door.

Across the several thousand yards diameter of the sphere Ronart could sense Cathy emerging from her flier. She stood up on the dock and looked around for him. He waved to her and she returned the gesture. The distance was too far to attempt even shouting to her. They were cut off from each other for the time being.

A bell rang. "You will now enter the elevators behind you. I offer you again my congratulations. But rest well, for you will need all of your strength for the trial that will be staged next cycle. The elevators are waiting."

Ronart and Cathy faced each other across the interregnum of space. And then, with a final wave of her hand, she was gone. For just a moment Ronart stood staring across at her empty dock, his mind filled with unanswerable questions. Then he turned around and walked into the elevator. The door shut behind him.

CYCLE IV

THE door opened and Ronart was facing out into the playing arena. He had no memory of what had transpired from the time

the door had closed behind him. And yet something must have happened, for now he was facing towards the door. When he had entered the elevator, his back had been towards it.

He felt no hunger, no tiredness, nothing but a continuing sense of anxiety and apprehension. For with only six contestants left, this would probably be the final trial of the game. He was determined that at all costs Cathy should win, no matter what happened to him. And having come to this conclusion, having put aside his own hopes, he felt much better.

He strode out onto the dock. He noticed at once that during the time of his blackness something had been done to his flier. The front part of it seemed the same as always, but appended to the tail were what seemed to be a mass of colored streamers. Ronart walked over to inspect the addition.

It seemed to him that someone had taken the little ship and given it a skirt. Girded around the flier in the rear was a golden band, and streaming away from it were long, glowing ribbons of various hues and brightnesses. The streamers had a metallic, liquescent sheen to them, giving the ship the appearance of some fantastic bird of exotic plumage.

A bell rang and he looked around him. Far across the sphere Cathy walked out on her dock. She took only a pre-emptory glance at her flier and then raised her head and waved to him. He signalled back to her happily.

"You will please enter your vehicles," came the Machine's monotone voice. "Please do not be alarmed by the apparent changes in them."

Ronart watched as Cathy climbed safely and unhesitatingly into hers. There was a sound of a click and Ronart's ship danced lightly away from its moorings. Ronart reached out a hand and steadied it, bringing it back to the dock. He turned to enter the ship.

As he did so, he noticed that the contestant nearest him was still standing on her dock, her ship floating a few feet out from it. There was a horrified look on the woman's face. Ronart got quickly into his vehicle, watching the woman as he did so.

A mask of terror covered her face as she realized that if she had no ship, she could not take part in the coming trial. Her flier bobbed back a bit towards the dock, and then, pendulum fashion, started to yaw back away from her. She stepped back a foot or two and, running forward, leaped out into space.

Her fingers missed the open door and the ship bounced away from her, spinning around as it did so. She clutched wildly at the smooth sides of the vehicle but could find no hold. The rear part of the ship turned towards her and she managed somehow to catch at the trailing streamers.

Ronart sighed. The woman was safe now. Even though she was a rival of his, he hated to think of her losing the game in that fashion. He started to turn away when he saw the woman's ship turn its nose to the

sky, buoyed up by the sudden shift in weight distribution. For a few seconds the woman hung suspended in midair, like a ripe fruit of some kind, ready for picking. Then the streamers gave way at the weight of her and she dropped, spinning, enveloped in a roscate, glowing coffin of torn streamers.

Ronart turned his face away quickly to keep from watching. But he could not keep from his ears the terrified scream she made as she fell.

"According to Section Five of the Rules of the Game of White," the Machine said, taking Ronart's mind off the woman, "You must all now be given the following explanation of the machinations of the Game itself.

"Up until this point there has been no limit to the number of possible winners for each trial. It has been found, through experience and the careful planning of the trials, that there are statistical limitations to the number of successful candidates who pass each Cycle's problem. But theoretically all of the candidates could have been successful up to this point in the Game. This has never happened in fact.

"It is also still possible that there will be no winner at all for this game. This you must all take into account.

"But what is most important to all of you is this: You are now in the next to last stage of the Game of White. And from this particular playing field there can come only two winners, one of whom must be eliminated in the next trial."

As Ronart listened, the lights in

the playing area began to slowly dim. He tried to position his flier closer to Cathy's, but the controls of the ship would not respond.

"There are six possible exits from this playing arena. Only one of the six leads to the next highest level. And only two of the candidates now present will be allowed to leave by this egress.

"And, you must be warned, that it is not mandatory, according to the Rules, that any of you be successful, or that more than one of you emerge victorious from this trial. But the success limit is two."

Around him floated lazily the four other occupied vehicles, their long streamers shimmering with glowing colors in the dark. The empty flier drifted lazily towards the top of the sphere and lodged there, trapped against the ceiling.

"In a sense it is tragic that so few of you are ever allowed to leave the Machine. Although the Machine is not equipped to emulate the emotional responses of the human race, it can still comprehend the apparent unfairness of the situation. No explanation for this unjustness can be offered, other than to say it is an ontogenetic necessity of the crowded population of the earth.

"The six possible exits will soon be burning with light. You will be given one clue as to which is the exit that leads to success.

"The problem is before you. It is with the highest hopes for all of you, my children, that I order you now to begin the playing of the Fourth Cycle

of the Game of White.”

Around the darkened playing field there sprang up six blinding dots of light, each of which was equidistant from the center of the area. One dot was at the zenith of the sphere, one at its nadir, and the other four formed the corners of a square around the equator.

Gradually the intense brightness of the dots dwindled to a milder glow and lines of color became visible. The dots began to swell, carrying the colors with them, until there seemed to hang around the otherwise blackened sphere, six radiant globes of fire—six miniature planets swimming in a pelagic darkness, with flaming stripes of color for meridians.

Ronart found himself in control of his flier and quickly headed towards Cathy's side. There was light enough in the arena for him to identify her ship. As he pulled up alongside of her, the inner lights in the gateways of fire blinked out, leaving only the multi-hued, shining lines of latitude and longitude. The globes looked like six giant bird-cages floating in the sky, radiant to look at, hollow in the center.

And the little ships, with their bizarrely glowing tail-feathers, seemed like outlandish birds to Ronart. The problem was, he thought, which of the birdcages offered security?

Ronart tried the door of his ship and found that it would open. Catching a firm hold on the controls, he leaned out of his ship and called to Cathy.

“We go together. All right?”

Cathy leaned out of her vehicle. “Of course, Ronart. I'll follow wherever you lead.”

Ronart pulled himself back into his ship and shut the door, giving a final wave to Cathy. Then he looked around to see what the other three players were doing.

The bands of colors on the six globes had begun to rotate in random, twirling fashion. These technicolored gyrations made racing patterns across each of the little fliers like the flickering reflections of a multi-faceted chandelier.

The rest of the contestants were bunched together in a little knot close to the center of the arena. As Ronart watched, one of the players, more adventuresome than the rest, pulled out of the group and nosed up to the topmost of the shining, globe-like exits. The tailfeathers, the long streamers extending out behind the flier, rustled and danced at the motion, leaving behind them a phosphorescent trail of tiny, glimmering particles.

The movement of the ship enabled Ronart to get his first good look at the newly added appendages.

“An outer sheath of azure,” he thought, “and next to that, a longer, inner sheath of aquamarine. Inside that, a set of topaz streamers. And at the very center, stretching farther out than any of the rest, a bunch of ruby-colored trailers. Why did the Machine put them on for this particular Cycle? They seem so useless.”

The other two fliers had now joined their more curious comrade in the close inspection of the topmost

ball of twisting colored bands. The leader of the trio, seemingly satisfied with his perusal of this globe, turned and sped quickly to one of the four balls suspended around the girdle of the playing arena. The other two fliers joined in frantic haste to accompany their leader.

Ronart wondered why the three were sticking so close together. Then he realized that if the first one solved the riddle and sped through the correct gateway, the faster of the remaining players would follow him quickly, leaving the slowest of the triumvirate, Cathy and Ronart behind for good.

Motioning Cathy to follow, Ronart pushed his flier down into the midst of the group.

Proceeding with caution, the band of five contestants flew to each of the four globes in the middle of the sphere. After this they dropped down to look at the one at the nadir, their ships leaving a shimmering, gossamer trail in the air as they flew.

They hung suspended over the bottom ball for some time. At this close range the circulating bands of colors seemed like giant, rotating blades, slashing back and forth, gleaming as they cut through empty space. Ronart felt that mere light could not damage the fliers, but still he knew that it would take courage to fly a ship into that morass of flashing knife-like bands.

The sudden movement upwards of the other ships caught Ronart by surprise. Even Cathy had caught up with the other three before he did.

They had floated about half-way up to the center of the arena when the lead ship turned quickly on its tail and dived straight for the burning globe at the bottom of the playing area.

"He's got it!" Ronart shouted, and grabbed at the controls of his vessel. He put it through an about-face, and had started diving downward himself when he saw it was no use. Both of the other two players were far ahead of Cathy and him. In disgust he slowed his ship down and waved to Cathy to stop and watch. It was no use to race them.

"If he's right, if he's solved it, I'll . . ." Ronart stopped breathlessly as the first ship plunged straight into the maw of the revolving bands of color. The other two were close upon it, one a little ahead of the other.

For a moment the first player's ship hesitated as it streaked through the first layer of moving stripes on the globe. Then three of the brilliantly-hued lines moved across the little ship at once. There was a fiery burst, a riot of chromatic disintegration, and the flier was no more!

"He guessed wrong!" shouted Ronart.

The two following ships changed courses at once, trying to avoid the fate of their leader. The slower of the two heeled around successfully, but the one closest to the globe was going too fast and had too little time to turn out of the path of destruction. It skittered around the edge of the sphere, careening wildly. Then it touched down into the path of the

circulating, knife-like bands and exploded.

There were only three of them left.

CATHY moved her flier over close to Ronart's, as if for comfort and reassurance. The other player moved up beside them. Ronart could see the sweat beading out on the man's face.

"He'll wait now," thought Ronart, "until one of us has solved the puzzle. Or until one of us *thinks* we have. Then he'll try to be the second one through the gate."

Ronart knew that it was up to him to figure out which of the five remaining portals to success was the right one. He slumped down into his seat to think about it.

"The Machine said that we'd be given one clue. And yet it never mentioned colors. Nor did it say anything about positions." So far as Ronart could determine, no hint possible lay in what the Machine had said. But, where then did the clue come in?

Looking up, Ronart saw that the other player had edged his way in between Cathy and himself. For a second he resented the intrusion. And then he realized that the man in the third ship was playing for his life in a game where even the slightest of advantages was often enough to assure victory. Ronart put his ship into a quick, steep climb, then braked back down to Cathy's side again as the other man was caught by the suddenness of the change in course.

He opened his door and leaned out to talk to Cathy as she opened hers.

"Have you solved it yet, Ronart?" she asked before he could speak.

"Not yet. But it shouldn't take long," he told her, wondering inside if he could ever do it. "There's something we have to do first, though. We've got to get rid of our scavenger."

"But, Ronart," she protested.

"We've got to, Cathy. Unless we do, there's always the chance that he might get through the gate before you do. It's the only way."

She looked hurt. Her eyes began to well up with tears.

"You do trust me, don't you?" he asked. Her eyes were downcast, miserable, but she nodded in agreement.

"All right, then, do just as I say. As soon as I figure out which is the right exit, I'll signal you. Then I'll head towards one of the globes, but not the right one! Remember that. The first one I head towards will be a loser, so don't get too close to it."

"I don't understand," she said, interrupting him.

"It's simple. I'll head towards the wrong one at top speed. You get right behind me, but not too close. The other player will probably try to cut you off. Let him do it!

"The closer we get to the wrong exit, the further back you pull. But make it look like you're fighting to get him out of the way.

"When we get right up to it," Ronart continued, "we'll both change course suddenly. He won't expect it, and . . . well, we'll win the trial. Understand?"

"Yes," she said simply, obviously

unhappy at this turn of events.

The other player moved in above them and opened his door to listen, so Ronart leaned back into his ship and locked the door behind him. Then he looked again at the coruscating spheres of light.

After a few minutes Ronart noticed something peculiar about the six spheres he had not seen before. Each of the six had different colors in its make-up. There was a good deal of overlapping among them, but none of the six were identical.

The one above him had strong lines of silver and red as its dominant colors, with stripes of orange and yellow turning in opposite directions. To his right there marched in slow procession bands of deep red, royal blue, green and yellow, all gleaming in their march. Ahead was a ball with stripes of golden sheen, alternating with pink, blue and . . .

And it was as simple as that. Ronart smiled and then breathed deeply in exaltation. *He knew the correct exit!*

Turning his head slightly to one side, he barely nodded to Cathy. She raised her eyebrows questioningly and he nodded again in assent. He could see her body tense as she waited for his signal. He put his hand on the speed control, leaned back in his seat, waved broadly enough for the third player to see, and pulled back the throttle.

Instantly the two of them hurtled forward, straight for the ball with the golden sheen. And, almost as rapidly, the third player was upon them, fight-

ing with all his skill to separate the two of them.

Cathy's ship weaved a little and the other ship closed in a bit. Ronart smiled. Cathy was doing well. Again her flier weaved a bit out of line, and again the third player edged in closer to Ronart. They were rapidly approaching the golden globe.

Ronart waved frantically to Cathy and she made what seemed like one last, desperate attempt to catch up with him. Instead of this, she actually let the third player close his lead on Ronart completely. The trap was set.

As with one accord both Ronart and Cathy suddenly turned aside as the globe was upon them, missing its dangerous lights by scant feet, it seemed to Ronart.

The third ship streaked past them, unable to alter its course in time. And, as they turned, they were blinded by the flash.

The two of them had the gigantic arena to themselves.

They pulled slowly out of their turn and headed back for one of the nearer globes. Ronart could see that Cathy was crying, but he himself felt like singing. Now Cathy was assured of winning.

And the clue had been, as all the others, ridiculously simple when one understood. The silly, useless tailfeathers, added to the fliers for no apparent reason, had actually contained the solution to the problem.

Ahead of them lay the globe gleaming with blue, green, yellow and red circles of light. Streaming out behind their two ships as they went was

a delicate trail of shiningness, left by the blue, green, yellow and red streamers attached to the fliers. It was as simple as that.

Ronart hardly felt a qualm of fear as the two of them passed through the slashing bands of color and flew safely into the blackness beyond. He was still smiling victoriously to himself when the blackness seeped into his mind and closed his eyes.

CYCLE V

THERE was a slight noise, and Ronart awakened. He was standing in a lighted elevator. The door was closed, but the elevator did not seem to be moving.

"My child, you have come now to the final cycle of the Game of White," the Machine said, its voice coming suddenly to him from a loudspeaker in the elevator. "There are but two players left, two out of the myriad spawn that began the Game.

"In a moment the door will open and you will find yourself in a larger room face to face with the other successful player. One of you will be allowed to leave this final playing area. That candidate will have earned the right to leave the Machine and enter the world of men. The other player will be . . . disqualified. That is one of the Rules of the Game.

"In this final arena you will find two doors, both of which are now open. But they are small doors. Only one person may enter at a time. And only one player may enter either of

them. You must figure out which of them is the earthly door without further help from me.

"To the winner of the Game, I offer my congratulations for a job well done. To the other one of you, I have only regrets that you came so far for so little. But I remind you that here in the Machine, as well as on the earth itself, there is no guarantee of justice for anyone at any time.

"Even at this stage of the Game there are probably a great many questions in your minds. The answers to those questions lie behind the two open doors.

"Good luck." The Machine paused and then said quietly, "Begin now the final Cycle of the Game of White."

The elevator door opened and Ronart stepped out into the playing area. In a moment Cathy was in his arms.

They held each other close for a long time, silent, for there was nothing to be said. But each of them was thinking wildly.

Finally they turned, clasping hands, and faced the wall that had the two small doors in it.

The Machine had been correct. There was room for only one person at a time to enter either of the openings. Aside from these two portals, and the elevator doors which had closed behind them, the playing area was completely without feature.

The door on the right had above it a single straight vertical mark. The one on the left had an identical mark, and with it another, similar in style, but with strangely shaped curves. A

single mark over one door, a double mark over the other.

Ronart looked at them and knew without hesitation behind which door lay the path to freedom from the Machine. He gently squeezed Cathy's hand, released it and started quickly towards the door on the right with the single figure above it.

But if he was quick, she was quicker. Before he could get through the opening she was in front of him, her arms stretched across the door blocking his way.

"It's no use, Ronart. I've beaten you."

"Get out of the way, Cathy," he said roughly, and reached to pull her away from the door.

"Don't try to move me, Ronart, or I'll step back through the opening." His stare might have quailed a lesser person, but she hardly noticed it. "It's not fair any other way. You were the real winner, not me. I just followed where you led. You know that, and so do I. That's why you'll never get through this door."

"You're making a mistake," he said, feeling again that strange and overpowering, nameless sensation down inside him, that terrible yearning for words he did not know, for actions he could not even guess at.

"No, I'm making no mistake," she told him. "I've known all along that you would try to sacrifice yourself to save me. But I've beaten you to it. For once during this hideous game I've won something on my own. You can't take it away from me no matter what you do or say."

"Cathy, I . . ."

"The other door, Ronart, go through it quickly." She turned her head away from him. "Can't you see you can't change my mind? You're just making it difficult for me. If you stay any longer, I'll just step backwards and end it all. Go now, and at least let me face this thing in the peace of privacy."

He didn't move.

"Oh, go on! Go on!" she screamed at him.

He turned and walked to the other door, pausing to look back at her.

"Ronart," she called, her face still away from him.

"Yes, Cathy."

"When you're free, when you're out on earth, walking among those you know, when you find out the answers to the questions, remember me, will you, Ronart?"

"No, Cathy," he answered. "When you find out, remember me."

"Goodbye, Cathy."

As he moved quickly through the narrow opening, he felt the panel closing behind him. It brushed harshly against his clothes. He heard her scream as she realized what he had done. And as he walked away, down the dark corridor, he heard her pounding on the closed door and crying.

ONE to win, two to lose, his mind sang in cadence with his feet as he moved down the hallway. A symbol *one* above the right door, the symbol *two* above the wrong one. He had solved it as soon as he had seen the

markings over the openings. And now Cathy was left in the room behind with only the door to freedom open to her.

His footsteps on the hard, metallic floor echoed the rhythm of his mind's song. *One to win, two to lose*, in measured phrasing, repeated again and again to hide the fears and doubts lurking in the subterranean recesses of consciousness.

"Where are you going, Ronart?"

It was the voice of the Machine, clearer, more distinct and closer to him than he had ever heard it before. He stopped his walking.

"I asked again, 'Where are you going, Ronart?'"

"I'm . . . not sure," he said hesitantly, finally.

"Where do you *think* you're going?"

There was a pause before Ronart answered. Then he said, simply. "To 'The Plunge,' I suppose. Is there anywhere else?"

"There is earth, Ronart. Why are you not going towards earth?"

The Machine should have known the answer to that. But he said, "That is for her, now—for Cathy. I want no part of it."

"And what was the clue, my child, that told you which of the doors was the right one? How did you know which to choose?" The words were soothing, quieting to his fears.

"One to win, two to lose, I guess. There could be only one winner, only one path to the one earth. Therefore the door with the single mark over it was the correct one. I left Cathy there

with that door."

The voice of the Machine seemed to come from inside him now, caressingly personal and familiar in its tone.

"My child. You have made an error. The two conditions necessary for the creation of human life, though you did not know it, are man—and woman. Two conditions, Ronart, not one. That was the clue.

"You are the winner of the Game of White, Ronart. And it is Cathy who must be disqualified."

Ronart screamed!

Turning around, he started running back towards the door.

"Where are you going, Ronart?" asked the Machine, its voice running with him.

"Back to Cathy," he cried. "If she can't win, neither of us will win!"

"That is impossible, my child," the Machine said as he reached the metal panel separating him from Cathy. He could hear her sobbing gently through the door. He seemed so close to her, and yet so far away. He began to pound on the thin panel.

"That will avail you nothing, Ronart. Turn around and walk back down the corridor that leads to the freedom of earth."

"I won't do it!" he shouted back at the Machine. "If she can't win, I'll stay here until you have to disqualify both of us. If you make me go on, I'll disqualify myself somehow. And if I can't do that, once I get to earth I'll spend the rest of my life fighting you, trying to destroy you. Do you understand? I'll destroy you and all

the evil and horror you stand for!"

"That is your final decision?" asked the Machine.

"It is," said Ronart, in tears.

"Then stand back from the panel."

Ronart took a step backwards. There came a sound of rushing air and the door opened. He rushed into the room, catching Cathy in his arms. Somehow she seemed to understand what was happening.

"You shouldn't have done it, Ronart," she said, her voice a mixed torrent of love and fear. "Now neither one of us will ever know the answers."

"And you, too, are wrong, Cathy," intoned the Machine. "This is not the first time this situation has come up, although it is rare. But according to the Rules of the Game, only one can win; if the winning candidate refuses to leave the Machine, preferring to sacrifice himself for the sake of one of the opposite sex, the Machine recognizes the fact of their unselfish love, and as is the custom in the world outside the Machine, will recognize the oneness of the pair provided they undertake to assume the vows of marriage and fidelity before passing through the door to the freedom of the Outside."

Ronart and Cathy, wild hope in their eyes, looked at each other while the voice went on:

"Ronart and Cathy, do you agree to Oneness? Do you agree to become one, to enter the outside world as one, and to remain as one until you die?"

As one the couple cried out: "Oh, yes!"

"Then you are one," intoned the Machine. "And now, my children, come."

Ronart hesitated but a moment. He lifted Cathy's chin and kissed her on the lips. Fervently she flung her arms about his neck and returned the kiss. Then, arm in arm, they turned and walked back through the door with the two vertical marks over it. Soon the corridor seemed to widen. The darkness was replaced by the beginnings of light, glowing in pulsating pattern. Then suddenly they were Outside!

CYCLE VI

THE woman pushed open the swinging door and walked into the room. On one of the long, low couches a man was stretched out, asleep. His feet rested on a little table in front of the couch. There was a litter of well-thumbed magazines and the ashtrays were overflowing on the table.

The man was obviously in need of a shave. The darkness of his incipient beard stretched up to a sharp, haggard discoloration around his closed eyes.

The woman moved over beside the couch and shook the man by the shoulder. "Wake up; it's come," she told him. Her voice had the same sort of starch and crispness to it as her white uniform.

He looked up, startled, suddenly awake. "Is it . . . has anything happened?" he asked quickly. "Is Cathy . . .?"

She smiled at him softly, woman-like, with warmth. "It's all right. She's going to be all right."

He shook his head as if to clear it. Then he said, "And . . ."

"And you're a very lucky man," she told him. "It's twins, Mr. White. Two beautiful boys. The Machine will be happy to know you've passed your final test. It means that the day when Man will have regained his

complete fertility is that much closer, and the Machine can cease the function for which it was created after the Final War."

He stood up exultantly. "Born alive! Outside the Machine! And not one, but *two!*"

"We are winning the battle," said the nurse. "We are becoming strong again!"

THE END

No. 15—JAMES McCONNELL

(Concluded from page 2)

think McConnell would approve of it. Rather, I'll tell you about his trip to Mexico this summer. Back in June of 1952, with friends Chad Oliver and his (now) wife and other good archeologists, he headed for Durango, Mexico. While the rest of the group was out discovering relics of ancient man, McConnell went out into the wilds by himself to discover relics of modern man. He lived with a group of the Southern Tepehuan tribe in the pretty, malaria-infested little valley of Xoconostle for a few weeks doing psychological research on the Indians. His friends were very happy to see him go out into the mountains because they never expected him to return and they had high hopes of being able to divide up his loot at his demise. Most of the time he didn't think he'd return either, for the na-

tives were reputed to be a rather unfriendly group (unfriendly enough to murder his guide, one of their own people, that August). But they were quite friendly and cooperative towards McConnell and he got some pretty good research done, saw some rugged but beautiful country and has found a refuge to escape to when the atom-bombing begins. They'll never find him in Xoconostle!

He also got some nice ideas for s-f stories there (not including *GAME OF WHITE* which was already written). So if you read something of his having a primitive background or an archeologist for a protagonist, you'll know where he got the idea.

He is my favorite author (except when I read what he writes) and is a pretty good kid.

Sincerely,
James McConnell.