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Vol. 27, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

AUGUST, 1952

## A Complete Novel

**THE LOVERS**.....Philip José Farmer 12  
*Amid the deceit and treachery of the Earthman's scheme to conquer Ozagon, Yarrow broke every taboo to love Jeannette*

## Two Novelets

**THE HOUR OF THE MORTALS**...Kendell Foster Crossen 74  
*Among the immortals Fenimore would still be—the top man!*

**PAGE AND PLAYER**.....Harry Neal 110  
*The Cronies had their own odd ways of getting things done*

## Short Stories

**MAJOR VENTURE AND THE MISSING SATELLITE**.....Charles E. Fritch 64  
*When everybody tried to get into the act—the hero fled!*

**FAMILY TREE**.....Boyd Ellanby 95  
*The old boys of the past may prove a little hard to handle*

**NOISE**.....Jack Vance 101  
*Was Evans insane—or was he the sanest man on the ship?*

**HERE LIES BOTTLETHWAITE**.....Dave Dryfoos 126  
*He thought he saved his neck, but he was testing a theory*

## Features

**THE ETHER VIBRATES**.....The Editor 6

**THERE GOES A SPACEMAN**.....A Prediction 11

**CURRENT FAN PUBLICATIONS**.....Jerome Bixby 141

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Cover Painting by  
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STARTLING STORIES. Published every month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1952, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$ .25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In corresponding with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. August, 1952, issue. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



## I

**T**HE Honorable Lucien B. Fenimore, Minister of Sanity, completed his annual address to the new students of the World University and listened to the round of applause. After three hundred years of practical politics, his every action and tone were works of art; his smile, as he left the room, seemed to carry a personal intimacy to each of the students.

Outside the University, Lucien Fenimore climbed into his luxurious aircar and ordered the chauffeur back to the

Government Building. When they arrived there, the Minister went directly to his office on the two hundredth floor.

His secretary, a pretty little brunette from Crete, looked up as he entered.

"Vice-President Bonelli and Party Leader Eden are waiting in your private office," she said.

The schooled smile returned to Lucien's face as he went through the inner door.

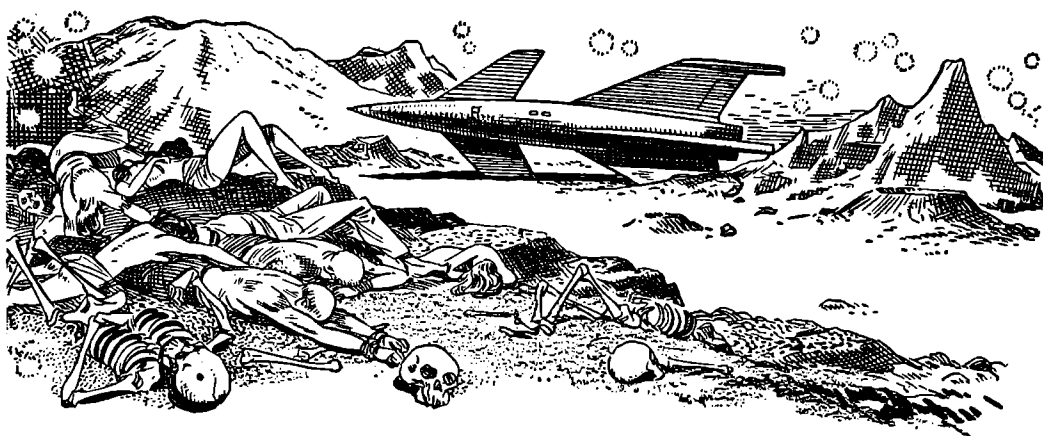
"Well," he said, his geniality perfected by three centuries of practice, "this is

## Fenimore Signed His Own Death Warrant, but

# The HOUR of the MORTALS

*A Novelet by*

**KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN**



a pleasant surprise. Sorry you had to wait, gentlemen, but this was my day at the university.”

The two men waiting in the office were quite different in appearance. Vice-President Bonelli was the fashion-plate of the government, always giving the appearance of being ready to go before the video cameras on a world-wide hook-up. Ross Eden, on the other hand, was a man who might have been taken for a small merchant. His clothes were careless and rumpled, his features non-

descript. He took pride in the fact that he had never been seen on the video screens and could walk down any street in the world without being recognized.

“Hello, Lucien,” Bonelli said. “How was it?”

“The usual group of wide-eyed innocents,” Fenimore said, chuckling as he dropped into his own chair behind the desk. “Now, what can I do for you gentlemen?”

“I believe Ross is the harbinger of good news,” the vice-president said, “but

**Among the Immortals He'd Still Be Top Man!**

I wanted to get a couple of matters cleared up first, since your vacation starts tomorrow." He put a sheaf of papers on the desk in front of Lucien. "Here are the latest Certificates of Unsanity—that group of petty financiers who didn't want to play ball with Ross, and a few minor individual grafters. If you'll sign them now, I won't have to hold them up until your return."

The Minister of Sanity stopped with his pen poised above the first sheet. There was a twinkle in his eye as he looked up.

"I suppose it's safe to sign without reading them," he said.

"Sure," Bonelli said promptly, "only don't come complaining to me if it turns out that you've given your best girl friend over to the Minister of Assassination. Even the immortals can look to their laurels. They can't die, but they *can* be murdered."

"Charged with draining national resources," Ross Eden added. "But considering Lucien's age, we couldn't charge her with more than petty larceny."

Were the jokes no more than that, Lucien wondered. He tried to weigh the tones back of the words, remembering the many times that a jest had masked a fatal blow.

"Well," he said, with a chuckle in which the others joined, "it's easier to get a new girl friend than it is to wade through all of these papers." He quickly flicked through the papers, signing each one. He resisted the impulse to go back and read the names on each Charge. "I guess everyone will have to stay sane until I get back."

"I hope so," the vice-president said. He picked up the papers and looked solemnly at Lucien. "Have a good rest, Lucien. You've earned it."

"Maybe *you* need the vacation. That's the first time I ever heard you say that anyone had earned a rest."

The vice-president grinned, waved to the Party Leader and left.

Lucine stared at the door after it

closed. "How long has Bonelli been in the government?" he asked idly.

"Ten years," Ross Eden said.

"Ten years," repeated Lucien. "The president five years—Lessing twenty years—Schwartz twenty-five years—" he broke off and looked at Eden with a smile. "There aren't many of us left—the original party leaders."

"No," Ross Eden said quietly. "There's only Williamson, you and me. Immortality didn't wear well with the others."

"Williamson, you and me," Lucien repeated. A vague smile hovered on his lips. "Just the three of us. Were you ever superstitious, Ross?"

"No. Why?"

"I was thinking today—there's only three of us left from the old days—who have stayed in politics for three hundred years. Then there's the Council of Three of the Mortals. And—and the Three Immortals."

"What made you think about them?" Eden asked.

"The class," Lucien answered. "They wanted to know about the Mortals and the Immortals. They'd heard rumors, read pamphlets."

"What did you tell them?"

"The usual. Then I also told them that throughout the history of Man the number three has had a sacred meaning—that people have often assigned a threeness to things whether it was true or not."

"That's good," Ross Eden said. "I'll tell the others to use it."

A SILENCE fell between them. *The memory of three hundred years is between us . . . That's why there's so little for us to say to each other.*

"Ross," Lucien said suddenly, "do you know how long the Mortals—the Council of Three—have been chipping away at us?"

"More than two hundred years," Ross Eden said easily. "That ought to prove something. They've made no progress in two hundred years."

"Haven't they?" Lucien said. "Most

of the time I've thought they haven't too, but sometimes I wonder."

"What can they do?" Ross Eden asked, a thin edge of contempt in his voice. "They can't stage a revolution. They have no way of getting weapons, unless they use kitchen knives. Even small groups can't get together without our knowing about it. We have too many police, too many spies, too many video taps into too many homes."

"I know," Lucien said heavily. "I read the latest report of the Minister of Political Crime. 'All public places and eighty-five per cent of all private

our replacements."

"You need your vacation, Lucien. You're tired."

"Maybe I am," Lucien said heavily. "After three hundred years anyone is apt to be tired—except Ross Eden. The questions from the class today reminded me how they keep chipping away, patiently knocking off a grain here and a grain there. Do you know how many Charges of Unsanity I've signed against people we thought were members of the Council of Three? About four hundred that I can remember. And it's never stopped them; we know no more about them now than we did two hundred years ago, in spite of our spies."

"We know one thing just from their methods," Eden said quietly. "Despite their calling themselves the Mortals, we know that the Council of Three have immortality. Only those of us who are not limited by death can afford the luxury of such slow methods. It's their advantage. And it's our advantage . . . I can name you at least two of the Council of Three."

Lucien looked in astonishment at the impassive face of his Party Leader. "Who?" he asked.

"George Fraya and Gary Polti."

"Why them?" Lucien asked. "They were the first ones to be charged with unsanity. Just before the third—no, it was the *second* election—anyway, that's all of two hundred and ninety-five years ago that we sentenced them to die because they still fought to grant immortality to everyone."

"They were the first ones condemned," Ross Eden said, "but they were also the first to escape. Somewhere along the line, they recruited another and that is the Council of Three. We haven't found them yet—because it's almost impossible to fine-tooth-comb twenty billion people—but I know them."

*How can he be so sure of anything after three hundred years. . . .*

"How can you be sure?" Lucien asked aloud. "There have been many escapes

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## Pattern of Murder

MAN, ever facing the enigma of Death, has long sought the secret of immortality. And it is conceivable that he may find it. But in doing so, will he raise more problems than he solves? The poor we have always with us; will we not then also have always the rich, the greedy, the avaricious and ambitious and cruel? If Death did not come naturally, might not murder become an institution? The nature of society would change in odd ways and the morals of today might be the sins of tomorrow. Here is a look at such a society, at a man trapped in a futuristic pattern of ritual murder.

—The Editor

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homes are now tapped, either audeo or video or both, and monitored through cybernetic listening posts.' But there is another weapon, Ross—fear."

"Nonsense."

"Is it? I wonder. For one reason or another, we've gotten rid of most of the original members of our Party. Assassinations. Executions. Now only three of us are left. We got rid of them because we were afraid of them in some way. Maybe the Mortals caused us to be afraid of them—to whittle down our own political body, one cell at a time. They've been working on the students, you know—the place where we must get

since then. The politically-condemned and some who were obviously wealthy enough to buy escape . . . How many have escaped, Ross? Do you know?"

"Roughly three thousand," Ross Eden said promptly.

"Three thousand," Lucien repeated, and marveled at the figure although he'd already known it must be about that. "Three thousand who escaped assassination and how many have we killed, Ross?"

"Not enough," Eden said crisply.

"You're right, of course," Lucien said, nodding. "Not enough—or not the right ones . . . You know, Ross, another thought occurred to me today."

"What?" Eden asked a little impatiently. He was becoming tired of the conversation.

"With only you and Williamson and myself left alive of the original Enterprise Party—of the first who had immortality," Lucien said slowly, "how long do you suppose it will be before people start getting the idea that we are the Three Immortals? That we are the three men who want to own the world for ourselves, sharing neither power nor money with any others?"

**R**OSS EDEN'S face moved in a mirthless grin. "Perhaps," he said, "there are some who already suspect us—or part of us . . . But enough of this, Lucien. I'm not going on a vacation as you are, so I have to get to work. Here, by the way, is why I dropped in to see you." He placed a bulky package on the desk.

Lucien Fenimore slit the top of the package. Neat bundles of green paper were revealed.

"Vacation expenses?" he asked.

"If you're going on a long vacation," Eden answered. "There's a hundred thousand there, in small bills. Remember that monopoly bill you introduced in the cabinet? I told you that World-Wide Aluminum was interested in it. Well, this is how much they were interested."

"And to think my mother wanted me to be a dentist," Lucien said. He was

regaining his normal mood. He took a briefcase from the desk drawer and stuffed the money into it. "It was nice of World-Wide not to forget."

"I had to twist their arms a little," Eden said. "But that's my job—seeing that my boys are taken care of." He stood up.

"You know, Ross," Lucien said, looking up at him, "there's something else I sometimes wonder . . . Why do you even bother to divide these—shall we say *emoluments*?—with the rest of us? You could keep it all for yourself and get away with it."

Ross Eden grinned. "One way or another," he said, "it eventually comes back to me. I cast my bread upon the water and it comes back sugar . . . Well, Lucien, think of me hard at work tomorrow morning when your vacation starts." He waved a hand and was gone.

Lucien Fenimore called in his secretary and dictated a number of routine letters and interoffice memos. While these were being typed, he called various associates and took care of official good-byes. Then he signed the letters and memos and went home.

Home to Lucien B. Fenimore was a small house of some twenty rooms, perched on the edge of a large artificial lake. An old-fashioned iron-grille fence separated the well-landscaped lawn from the quiet residential street. Although invisible to the eye, there were a number of energy-beams sweeping the area above the house so that the minister's slumbers might not be disturbed by low-flying air-cars or liners.

After a luxurious dinner, served by his butler who was the soul of perfection, Lucien spent a leisurely hour sipping coffee and brandy and making notes in the journal which he faithfully kept. He retired early, read for a while and then went to sleep.

Promptly at nine the following morning, the butler entered his bedroom with juice, freshly flown that morning from the Mediterranean, marmalade delivered a moment before from the area once

known as Scotland, toast, coffee, and the morning newspaper. Lucien propped himself up in bed and watched the butler arranging the breakfast.

*Does he look too young? Lucien wondered. . . . There it is again, the eternal suspicion. Does this one look too young? Is that one a spy? Does the other one mean what he says? This has been the price we paid for eternal life and eternal power.*

"Your paper, sir," the butler said respectfully. With one finger he nudged the paper nearer on the tray.

He'd never done that before. Lucien looked quickly at the butler's face, but there was nothing to be seen there. He picked up the paper, feeling the beginning tremor in his fingers.

## II

**H**E UNFOLDED the paper and his breakfast was forgotten. There in the center of the newspaper, carefully boxed in heavy black lines was the name of—*Lucien B. Fenimore*.

For an awful moment Lucien sat staring at the newspaper, refusing to believe what he saw. He'd known for a long time that he was inviting this—there had been too many private deals—only a fool could have hoped to get away with it indefinitely. He looked at the newspaper and blinked his eyes. It still looked the same. Blink as many times as he could, the name still stood there on the page, giving to the world the name of a man who bore the sign of assassination.

*No matter what the circumstance, you cannot face death with equanimity after three hundred years of freedom from the fear of death. . . .*

"Matson," he said. Despite his best efforts there was a slight quaver in his voice.

"Yes, sir?" the butler said.

"Matson," he tried again and was pleased that his voice sounded firmer, "have you read the morning paper?"

"Yes, sir," the butler said. "Begging

your pardon, sir, but as you're aware, the servants in this house are completely loyal to the government."

Lucien looked at the butler, seeing nothing relevant in the statement. It was true that the servants had been through every loyalty test known to Man. No servant was ever hired for an official without a complete cybernetic boiling.

*Odd, he thought as his mind wandered again for a moment, that cybernetic machines can detect even the smallest psychological flaw in the mortals but cannot be adjusted to check us, who have immortality. Odd that we should have mortality. Odd that we should have learned so much about the mortals and so little about ourselves. . . . I wonder if I would have the discipline to pose as a mortal and fool the machines? It isn't impossible. . . .*

He became aware that the butler was speaking again.

"The staff, sir, has asked me to tell you that they are proud to have been employed by you."

"Proud?" Lucien said tonelessly. *If they are loyal to the government, and the mark of assassination means that I am considered no longer useful to the government, why are they proud?*

"Yes, sir," the butler said. "Perhaps you hadn't noticed, sir, but they've printed the story on the inside pages. Most unusual, sir, but I presume it is due to your prominence and to the rather heroic precedent."

Glancing again at his name, Lucien saw for the first time that there was a line in small type directly below. It simply announced: *story on page 7*. He turned the pages and found the story. It was headed by his name, this time in slightly smaller type, but once more boxed in the black lines of death:

### LUCIEN B. FENIMORE

**Critics of the administration were effectively silenced late last night when it was learned that Lucien B.**

Fenimore, Minister of Sanity, had signed his own Certificate of Unsanity. Members of the political opposition have often charged that the Ministry of Sanity and Ministry of Assassination were merely means of getting rid of persons no longer useful to the administration. The unselfish and patriotic act of the Honorable Lucien B. Fenimore in declaring himself mentally unfit for public office, and automatically condemned to assassination, comes as the best proof of administration honesty that could be offered the people. The Certificate of Unsanity for Lucien B. Fenimore, President Edward Leigh announced this morning, will become a permanent exhibition in the World History Museum.

As he finished reading, Lucien found himself possessed by a certain morbid admiration of Ross Eden. He remembered a time—many, many years before—when the cabinet had discussed the criticism of the administration. He remembered how Ross Eden had suggested that they could always answer it by having the Minister of Sanity declare himself insane. And everyone had laughed at the joke.

*You have to listen carefully even to the jokes . . . .*

FROM the direction of the doorway, a muffled cough brought him back to the present. He glanced up and saw the butler still standing there, expressionless. But Lucien thought he knew what he saw in the eyes.

"Bring me the phone, audio-instrument only," he said. Then he added, with only a touch of irony: "And thank the staff for me."

The butler left, but in a moment he returned with the phone and plugged it in. Lucien dismissed him then, turned the volume on the phone down low, and put in a call to the party headquarters.

"Enterprise guarantees honest government—good morning," came the answer of the girl at the political office. "Are you on video? My screen seems inactivated."

"No screen," snapped Lucien. "Let me talk to Ross Eden."

"Who's calling?"

"Lucien B. Fenimore."

"I'm sorry, Mister Fenimore," the girl said instantly, "but Party Leader Eden is not in. I will tell him you called."

Lucien disconnected. He had not missed the fact that the girl had called him *Mister* Fenimore instead of the usual title. He knew—he should know, he reflected wryly—that Ross Eden would not be in any time he called now.

He tried calling President Leigh next, but the results were the same. Neither were Vice-Presidents Bonelli, Montague, and Ronsmann in. Finally, more out of curiosity than anything else, he called his own office.

"Office of the Honorable Howard Hayden, Minister of Sanity, good morning," answered a girl. "Are you on—"

Lucien hung up without speaking. He noticed that his hands were trembling and he glanced around at the walls of his room with a nervous smile.

*Is my home tapped,* he wondered—and knew that it was. *Will Ross look at the film and be pleased that I reacted like all the others? Am I frightened enough to please him?* He thought about it, and knew that he couldn't be more frightened than he actually was.

An hour later, Lucien was still seated on the edge of the bed, the untasted breakfast beside him. Now that it was too late to do otherwise, he wondered if he shouldn't have been more careful. It was impossible to think that a man who knew every political dodge in the book couldn't find a way of saving his own life. Yet, now that he was faced with the problem, he was not sure that he could.

Once more it was the butler who interrupted him by appearing in the doorway.



"A gentleman to see you, sir," he said. His face bore the proper amount of disapproval at finding his master still in pajamas.

"Who?" Lucien demanded. *Who would come to see a condemned man?*

"The Honorable Marlborough Williamson. I have taken the liberty, sir, of putting him in the Blue Room."

The Chief of the Assassins himself. Lucien stared at the butler, feeling the muscles of his stomach tighten. For a minute he thought, perhaps he was to be killed at once, in his own home, before he had the chance to think of a way of following the others who had escaped.

Then he remembered that it was never done that way.

"Tell him I'll be right out," he said.

Lucien dressed with trembling fingers which had difficulty in locating the zippers, and he cursed the betrayal of his fingers. He exposed his face to the Shav-Light and then used the Energy-Massager until his cheeks were glowing with color. When his mirror finally assured him that he looked almost as usual, he went to meet his guest.

*I remember, he thought as he walked through the house, the spy-film that was taken of Anton Morris right after he read his name in the paper. He did the same things I've just done. The trembling fingers making dressing so difficult, the Shav-Light and Massager to bring the color of life to cheeks already as good as dead. Does it please someone that we all act alike?*

As he passed through the hall to the Blue Room, he caught a glimpse of the butler staring from a doorway. *Does he know what it's like? . . .* His steps quickened with irritation.

Marlborough Williamson, Minister of Assassination, was a short man whose slender frame was well-padded with flesh. His cheeks were round and rosy, his eyes perpetually twinkled with good cheer. As Lucien entered the Blue Room, Williamson turned from examining a richly-bound set of world literature.

"Such a beautiful set of books," he said, one pudgy hand still caressing the binding. His voice was soft, almost like the brush of a warm hand. "I sometimes think there is nothing so lovely as an artistically-designed book."

"Yes," Lucien said evenly, "I've always been fond of that set myself. It was given to me a hundred years ago by the Party—for two hundred years of devoted service."

**I**F THE Minister of Assassinations was aware of the irony, it wasn't revealed in the smile he gave Lucien. "The Party always gives the best, doesn't it?" he said. He dropped into a nearby chair, being careful not to muss the crease in his trousers. "Have you seen today's paper, Lucien?"

To his surprise, Lucien realized that he had no longer to weigh every word, listen to the shading of tone in which the word was spoken; and with that realization, the uncertain feelings he'd always had for Williamson coalesced into loathing.

"I've seen it," he said. "Did you come here to kill me yourself?"

"In your own home?" exclaimed Marlborough Williamson. His fat face pinched up in disapproval. "You should know me better than that, Lucien. These things must be done with a certain air."

"Then why did you come?"

"To discuss the amenities of the situation, of course. Due to your government rank, and your long years of service to the Party, I am handling your case personally. It would be unseemly for a mere agent of my department to kill a man of your standing."

"Of course," Lucien said, with a calmness he didn't feel. "Then there are just one or two things you can tell me, Marlborough. Why has the Party decided to assassinate me?"

Williamson inspected the gloss of his fingernails. "The official records merely report that you are insane—as you should know," he said. "But—off the record, because we've been friends and

associates longer than men once lived—it seems to me that you've made a number of mistakes recently. The biggest mistake was in declaring Prentice Murray insane and ordering him assassinated. And, unfortunately, one of my men carried out the order before I became aware of the situation."

"I don't understand," Lucien said. "Do you mean because I failed to share with anyone else the bribe I received from Murray's nephew?"

"Must you put things so crudely?" Williamson murmured. "However . . . your biggest mistake, Lucien, was in forgetting that Party Leader Ross Eden is married to a Murray. The old man was his wife's uncle."

"Are we drawing the line at relatives now?" Lucien asked. He felt the desire to strike back, and with the sentence of death already upon him saw no reason to restrain himself. "I remember a brother who was declared insane so that an inheritance could be claimed. It was two hundred and fifty years ago, but I remember."

"Please," Williamson said, holding up one pudgy hand. "Let's not invade the field of personal sorrow. I have never ceased to grieve over the untimely death of my brother. He was always very close to me."

"Especially at the last," Lucien said.

"You sound bitter, Lucien—a man should not be bitter when he's facing death. And such a death, Lucien!" The fat little man sat up in his chair and his face glowed with pleasure. "We're arranged it so that you'll die a hero. The man who had the courage to declare himself insane. Think of it! There will be people crying behind your coffin as it's carried through the streets—something that hasn't happened at the funeral of a government official in centuries. Your body will be interred in a glass coffin on the Wall of Heroes. And I—I, Lucien, will assassinate you in such a fashion that the wound will be like a medal of honor!"

"That's kind of you," Lucien said, his voice heavy with irony. "When do you plan this artistic moment?"

"But that would be unfair!" The little Minister almost pouted. "If you knew, you might worry. No, Lucien, I have raised the standards of my craft. You are frightened now, but that will pass. You will begin to plan, to hope that you can escape, or that the Party will relent. You will begin to spend your money, to enjoy yourself—a little feverishly, perhaps, as though always aware that the moment of pleasure may be your last. Then, when you find something which gives you so much pleasure that you almost forget my presence—then I will strike. That moment may come soon—today—tomorrow—the next day—or it may take longer."

The two men stared at each other, the one grimly and the other with the eagerness of an artist about to attempt his masterpiece.

"Suppose," Lucien said slowly, "that I don't want to die—even artistically? Suppose I wanted to buy my freedom? I am a wealthy man—certainly among the top fifty men in wealth. Suppose I converted my wealth into cash and offered it—somewhere?"

WILLIAMSON shook his head sadly. "You wound me deeply, Lucien," he said. "Do you think I have no ethics? No integrity? That I'm interested only in money or power?"

"What are you interested in?" Lucien asked. *Besides murder . . .*

"In serving the State. There is no higher interest."

"Let's put it another way then," Lucien said harshly. "I have been in the inner circles of the Party for a long time—longer than anyone alive except you and Ross Eden—and I've always kept a rather extensive diary. You'd be surprised, Marlborough, how much information one can collect in three hundred years. Suppose I decide, since I'm about to die, that I want to make a present of my journals to—say—Leeds Burke, the

head of the Equalists? Of course, if I were sure that I was going to be able to continue making entries in my journals, I would want to keep them in my possession."

Marlborough Williamson looked at him as though he had used obscene words. Lucien remembered, in one of those odd flickering recalls he'd been having more frequently, that the fat face had worn the same expression once when someone had told a dirty joke in a cabinet meeting.

"I can't believe you'd do such a thing, Lucien," he said finally. "No—you must be joking. Even if you could bring yourself to perform such a dishonorable act, you must know that nothing could come of it. From now until the moment when you depart this life, Lucien, I or one of my men will be with you every minute. Such an action could only mean that you were completely unstable and I'd have to step in sooner." He shook his head, pursing his full red lips. "I'd simply detest it, but, under the circumstances, I'd have to carry out my duties prematurely. I just can't imagine that you'd do such a thing, Lucien."

Lucien B. Fenimore felt anger bubbling up in the crucible of his fear. He stood up and pointed toward the door.

"Get out," he said hoarsely.

*It feels good, he thought, to order someone away from you when you dislike them. It feels good after three centuries of watching every word. Almost good enough to die for—almost.*

"Don't be rude," Williamson said crossly. "After all, there is a certain tradition about this sort of thing, you know."

"Get out," Lucien repeated.

"Oh, very well." Williamson stood up and looked at Lucien. He smiled, a soft stretching of his lips that was almost a caress. "But if you change your mind—I'll always be near, Lucien." He walked across the room, stepped delicately through the doorway and was gone.

## III

**A**FTER the door closed, Lucien stood in the room, his whole body shaking. It gave him comfort that for the moment he could not tell whether it was with anger or fear that his body shook. . . .

When he finally felt calmer, he wandered from room to room. There was no place to go, so he merely walked aimlessly, blindly, through the great empty house. Whenever he passed through one of the front rooms, he peered from the windows—always seeing the solitary figure who waited and watched.

*I wonder, he thought, if anybody will come to see me? Or call me? Anybody. . . .*

So passed the morning, while Lucien slowly overcame his fear. He refused lunch and went into his study. He looked once more through the window at the plump figure in front of his house, then resolutely drew the curtains. He seated himself at his desk and faced the problem of saving the life of Lucien B. Fenimore.

There were three thousand before him who had escaped. All he had to do was to find the doorway through which they had passed—or to permit the doorway to find him.

First, he began to remember what he knew of the methods of Marlborough Williamson, so that he might have a rough idea of the time in which he could safely work. He recalled the purging of Layton, Nadek, Slindermann, Manikov—all of them co-founders of the Party and all dead for at least two hundred years. Each of them had died almost eleven months after the sentence of assassination had been passed. Layton had been killed—he could even remember the jokes about it—while enjoying himself in an Asiatic Palace of Pleasure, the same bullet accidentally killing the girl who was with him. Nadek had been poisoned in a government-owned Drug Dreamery on Mars. Slindermann had

been knifed in a gambling palace on Venus, at the very moment that he broke the bank. Manikov, on the other hand, had been killed trying to escape. Lucien remembered that the report had stated that the assassin had waited until Manikov was passing Pluto's orbit before blasting the tiny ship, and Manikov in it, to cinders.

If he were careful, there should be plenty of time.

*But can I be sure? Perhaps I'm considered a special case. . . .*

He felt his fear surge up again, but he forced it back. He felt that he had to act on what seemed a logical assumption about the pattern in Williamson's work. Otherwise, he could waste all of his time worrying about his executioner's next move.

He turned to studying the known incidents related to those who had been condemned and had escaped. Many were mentioned in his journals, and when the information was incomplete he checked in other files he had. He'd gone through a great number before he realized that he was indiscriminately searching for clues, when in reality there were two types of men who had escaped assassination: political figures, like himself—and undergrounders, little people, nobodies. The methods of escape very probably had differed; there was little chance that the same kinds of opportunity, the same avenues of escape, had appeared to both. The little men, Lucien thought, had probably been just plain lucky—something Lucien could hardly count on for himself. So . . . his clue, if it existed, was among the men of wealth, the men who must have purchased their escape.

He'd gone through dozens without finding a single thread before he thought of Jassac. Gilbert Jassac, who had been the World's richest man—who had tried, five years before, to put the president and half the cabinet in his pocket through blackmail. He had almost succeeded, and Lucien remembered how he

had been routed out of bed at three in the morning to sign the Certificate of Unsanity. Despite the haste, however, Gilbert Jassac had never been assassinated.

Lucien found practically nothing about it in his journals, and no more in the other files. He sat down and concentrated on digging up his few memories.

The victim of an official assassination, like everyone else, was permitted to pass his wealth along to his heirs. There were only two exceptions to the law of inheritance. If a man were convicted of treason, the government confiscated his property. In the case of suicides, which was also a serious crime, the person who brought proof of the suicide could claim the property of the deceased.

In Jassac's case, Lucien vaguely remembered, some Worker had testified that he saw Jassac commit suicide. It seemed to Lucien that there had been some other interesting angles to the case which he couldn't recall. He decided it might be worth it to check further.

He went to the safe in his study and opened it. He took out a small packet of bills—but underneath the bills his fingers grasped a small electronic Vibrator which he'd had secretly made fifty years before. Attached to the wall it would serve to jam any spy-outlet which might have been tapped into his home. He'd never felt a need to use it until now.

CARRYING it concealed beneath the money, he went into his bedroom. Under the pretense of searching beneath his bed for a slipper, he attached the Vibrator to the wall. Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of the Government Informat. It was the custom to let condemned officials still enjoy most of their official privileges while still alive, but he wasn't certain if this applied to him until he heard the robot voice plugged into his phone.

"Jassac, Gilbert," he said. "All information concerning his death in 2532."

He waited impatiently until the mechanical voice began its report.

"Jassac, Gilbert," the Informat robot said. "Age: three hundred and ten years at the time of death. Former vice-chairman of the Enterprise Party. Was the wealthiest man in the World. He was officially declared unsane on March 11, 2532, the Certificate being signed by Lucien B. Fenimore, the Minister—*correction*: the former Minister of Sanity." Lucien winced at the evidence of the timeliness of the robot's information. "When agents of the Ministry of Assassination arrived at his home to carry out the execution order, Gilbert Jassac was gone. On March 13, 2532, a Worker named Roal Leaf appeared and testified that he had seen Gilbert Jassac commit suicide, by drowning. Ten days later, the High Court of the Republics admitted the Worker's testimony as proof of death, although the body was never recovered."

The mechanical voice seemed to hesitate, as though not sure it had included all information in the file. Lucien knew he'd have to ask specific questions to get the rest of it.

"Investigations or arrests in the matter?" he asked.

"No investigations or arrests after the declaration of suicide."

"What about immediately after his disappearance?"

"An agent of the Ministry of Political Crime," reported the robot, "claimed that he traced Jassac to the office of Leeds Burke, Chairman of the Equalist Party. The Minister immediately arrested Leeds Burke, but he was released twenty-four hours later without further investigation. The record of his questioning has been officially erased."

Lucien's pulse quickened. This might be the clue he was looking for.

"What happened to the Worker who testified that Jassac committed suicide?" he asked.

There was another short wait. Then: "Roal Leaf, the Worker, after testifying, left in a public air-car. Five minutes later, there was a head-on crash between it and another public air-car, in

which Leaf and one of the drivers were accidentally killed."

Lucien B. Fenimore, after three hundred years of politics, no longer believed in coincidence. He didn't believe in accidental accidents either. He began to feel surer of his ground.

"Who collected the estate of Gilbert Jassac then?" he asked.

"Howard, the son of Roal Leaf."

"And what happened to Howard Leaf?" persisted Lucien.

"Howard Leaf was murdered the night of June 3, 2532, in the old section of the city. The body was not found until the following day, a full thirty minutes after someone had presented a sight draft for the entire Jassac fortune at the World-Ways Bank where Howard Leaf had deposited it. The man who cashed the draft was never located and neither was the murderer of Howard Leaf."

"What was the amount of the draft?" Lucien asked.

"One million billion Ergs."

Lucien Fenimore whistled soundlessly as he replaced the receiver of the phone. *That must have been the price of life for Jassac—his entire fortune. But then a man with immortality could make another fortune.*

Lucien was thoughtful throughout dinner. His preoccupation passed for bravery, and there were many admiring glances exchanged between the servants. Only the butler continued to stare at him with impassioned eyes.

*Somebody said it a long time ago, thought Lucien. A man is never a hero to his butler . . . He knows what I'm feeling inside, what I'm thinking . . .*

When dinner was over, Lucien went back to his bedroom without even glancing through the window. He made sure that the Vibrator was in place and then went to the phone. He switched on the tight-beam circuit, permitted to all officials, which made it impossible for the call to be tapped on the outside. Then he dialed the number of Leeds Burke.

"Hello," said a voice which he recognized as Burke's. "Use the video circuit, whoever you are."

"No video," Lucien said. "Burke, this is Lucien B. Fenimore. You should be able to recognize my voice."

"I do," Burke said after a pause.

"You've seen the papers?"

"Yes."

"You don't have to be so cautious," Lucien said, controlling his irritation. "This call is on a tight beam and I have a Vibrator in my room. I want to see you, Burke."

"Why?"

"I think we could find things to talk about," Lucien said dryly. "For one thing, I'm thinking of selling my memoirs. For another—we might talk about Gilbert Jassac and one million billion Ergs."

"All right," Burke said in the same tone of voice. "I'll be in my office all morning tomorrow. Come in any time."

"Fine," Lucien said heartily. "I'll be there." He hung up and smiled to himself. A little later, he removed the Vibrator from the wall, being careful to mask it. The monitors would show two or three hours of distorted film and sound track from this one circuit, but that sometimes was the normal result of a temporary magnetic flaw.

**L**UCIEN FENIMORE slept well that night despite the threat which hung over him. Only once during the night did he dream of Marlborough Williamson, and even then the climax of the dream was a triumphant one in which the plump Minister of Assassination, complete with apple in mouth, was served to a group of festive cannibals.

He was up early the following morning, ate a large breakfast, ordered his air-car to pick him up at the front gate, and strode jauntily from the house. The Minister of Assassination was replacing one of his agents as Lucien arrived at the gate.

"Good morning, Marlborough," Lucien said.

"Good morning, Lucien," the Minister returned. "I'm glad to see that you are—shall we say—less hysterical this morning than you were yesterday. You look almost happy."

"Just full of plans," Lucien said hastily. He reminded himself not to look too confident—it might encourage the Minister to strike prematurely. "When a man is about to depart this life, he must make plans, you know."

"Ah, yes, plans," Marlborough Williamson said softly. There was a cherubic look on his face. "Plans to—escape, Lucien?"

"Escape?" Lucien asked, a touch of mockery in his voice. "But I thought you had learned so much from the first three thousand escapes that such a thing was no longer possible. Isn't that so, my dear Marlborough?"

"Yes, but so few seem to realize it. I hope, Lucien, you will not make me kill you while attempting to escape. It would lack dignity."

"Naturally, we must think of dignity," Lucien agreed.

"I'm glad you agree," Marlborough said. "Yesterday, I was very disappointed in you, Lucien . . . Now, what are your plans for today? It is perhaps best that you tell me. I shall follow more discreetly than is possible if I don't know."

Lucien looked at the beaming face with inward loathing, but managed to keep it from creeping into his expression. "I'm going to the Globe-Ways Department Store to do some shopping. After that, I shall see my attorney and then back home."

The Minister of Assassination smiled happily, but there was a worried expression back of his eyes. "Good," he said. "I'm glad you're being efficient about this. But I do hope that once the business details are out of the way, you'll begin enjoying yourself. If you'd like, I can even recommend a few pleasure spots which have just recently opened . . ."

"That's very kind of you," Lucien

murmured, managing a stiff smile, "but I think I can manage quite all right." He turned and entered his air-car. As the chauffeur sent the car spinning above the city, Lucien could see the other car following at a distance. Across its front it bore the broad crimson band which was the official emblem of the office of the Minister of Assassination.

A few minutes later, the air-car landed on the roof of the department store. Lucien stepped out and was already going down the glide-way as the crimson-marked car settled to the roof.

## IV

**T**HE Globe-Ways Department Store was one of Lucien Fenimore's secrets—one which he was sure he had kept. A few years earlier, he had managed another deal involving the unsanity of a man whose heirs were anxious to cease being heirs in name only. It had taken a bit of doing, as the man had been an important cog in the Enterprise Party machinery, but Lucien had managed it. His reward had been the stock of this department store. Knowing that the ownership of this particular store might be difficult to explain satisfactorily to his fellow solons, Lucien had arranged for the ownership to be legally invested in the man who was the manager of the business.

A short conversation with the manager arranged things nicely, long before Marlborough Williamson entered the store. A private showroom was set up, into which salesmen would continue to carry wares in which Lucien might be interested. But, in the meantime, Lucien stepped through a back door and into the rear of a delivery truck and was soon entering the nearby office building which housed the Equalist Party.

Lucien was immediately shown into the modest office of the head of the party. He had never seen Leeds Burke—nor could he remember ever having

seen a picture of any chairman of the Worker's party—so it was with considerable interest that he surveyed the man behind the desk. He saw a young man, perhaps no more than thirty-five, with solid plebian features, dressed in a rather cheap uniform. It seemed almost impossible to fit this young man into the role Lucien had assigned him until Lucien caught the look in his eyes. Then he was even more sure that he had come to the right man.

"I had expected an older man," Lucien said in explanation of his stare. "I guess one forgets that ability can go with youth."

"In our Party, ability has to go with youth," Leeds Burke said dryly.

As always, when the fact that so many in the world had such short life spans, Lucien felt the pangs of guilt. But he said nothing. He placed one hand in his coat pocket and then changed his mind. He had brought the Vibrator with him, intending to attach it to his chair during his visit, but the manner of the other made him feel that it was unnecessary.

"Well," Leeds Burke said, finally breaking the silence, "what can I do for the former Minister of Sanity?"

"I want to live," Lucien said bluntly. "I'm under sentence of Assassination and I want you to help me escape."

The Chairman of the Equalists stared at a spot just above Lucien's head. "What makes you think I can help you escape?" he asked. "Or that I would if I could?"

"You can," Lucien said flatly. "Among others, you helped Gilbert Jassac to escape. He was traced to your house, but then the investigation stopped when a *Worker* appeared to testify that Jassac was a suicide. You could easily arrange for a Worker to offer such testimony—you could arrange it more easily than anyone else. Then you also arranged for the Worker to have an accident so that he could never testify against you. And later you arranged for the Worker's son to

write a draft, after which he was murdered. Oh, I know that sort of deal."

"Having arranged enough of them yourself?" Leeds asked lightly. A smile flitted across his face, but vanished as he looked at Lucien. "If what you say were true, what makes you think I would help you? You're not a Gilbert Jassac."

"True," admitted Lucien. "But I am still one of the wealthy men of the World. If you'll check, you'll find that I'm listed among the top fifty. And I have something else that, if used properly, could be worth more than Jassac's billions to you."

"What?"

"I have always kept a journal," Lucien said carefully. "In it I have recorded *every* political act in which I took part during the past three hundred years. It makes a rather bulky journal, but even so, with the proper distribution, it should prove rather popular reading." He paused briefly. "The minute I am landed in a safe spot, I will turn that journal over to whoever has guided me to safety."

**B**URKE swung around in his chair and stared through the window. The silence stretched out so long that Lucien began to wonder if he had made a mistake. Then the young man swiveled back to face Lucien.

"All right," he said. "I helped Jassac and almost three thousand others to escape, as you call it. I'll help you on the following conditions. One, the journal, when I land you the same place I took the others. Two, I will arrange for you to be declared a suicide and collect your estate; I will return a small percentage of it to you."

"It's a deal," Lucien said promptly. For once in his life he did not feel like haggling. "Where is this safe place?"

"The less you know in advance, the better," Leeds Burke said. "Be at my home tonight at ten, ready to leave this planet. Be sure you're not followed. Where will you be leaving from?"

Lucien thought quickly. "I have to elude the Assassination agent," he said. "Do you know the House of Many Doors?"

"I know of it," Leeds Burke said. "Not being a member of the elite, however, I've never been there. You'll leave from there?"

Lucien nodded.

"I'll direct a beam there then," Burke said. "When you get into your air-car, set the robot controls on the twenty-three point eight frequency in channel two and your car will land you at my house."

Lucien nodded again and strode briskly from the office. Elation put a new spring in his step.

Lucien spent the rest of the morning with his attorney, making sure that there was nothing which needed immediate attention. He even complied with the rather discreet suggestion by the attorney that they check over the details of his will. When that was finished, he stopped by his bank and drew out some extra cash—about the right amount that might be expected of a man who was about to start his last fling.

At home, after a simple luncheon, he went into his study and rang for his butler. As he waited, he concealed the new confidence he felt, well aware that somewhere in the room there was probably a video tap.

"You rang, sir?" the butler asked, stepping into the room.

"Yes, Matson," Lucien said. He looked at the butler with something close to affection. "You've been with me a long time, Matson. I'd like you to know that I've enjoyed our—ah—association, if I may call it that."

The barest flicker of the butler's eyes indicated that he too was aware that the room might be tapped.

"Thank you, sir," he said gravely. "I believe it is permitted for me to say that I have enjoyed my position. There have been many times, sir, when I ad-



mired you."

"Thank you, Matson," Lucien said softly. "Tonight, I am going to a pleasure palace known as the House of Many Doors. From there, I may go on to other places—it is rather difficult at this stage in my life to plan my future in any detail. But I'll probably be rather late in getting home."

"I understand, sir," the butler said.

"Until I do get back then," Lucien continued, "you'll take care of everything here, won't you? In the event that I don't get back, Matson, may I say now that I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir."

Lucien dismissed the butler. He spent a few hours re-reading spots in his journals and in idly musing on events in the past. He felt no sadness at the prospect of the new life which he was about to bring into being, only a sort of wonder about what it might be like.

**A**FTER dinner, he took a short nap and awoke much refreshed. Glancing through the window, he noticed that Marlborough Williamson had been replaced by one of his agents. Then Lucien packed his brief case, adding bundles of bank notes at the last, and went out to his air-car. He ordered the chauffeur to the pleasure resort.

The House of Many Doors was another establishment which Lucien Fenimore had added quietly to his possessions many years before. It was recorded as belonging to George de Lacroze, who also managed it, and only de Lacroze and one other knew how Lucien had gotten control of it and passed it on.

When he reached the club, Lucien went first to the bar. He had a couple of cocktails, drinking them leisurely and trying to give the impression of feeling exactly like any other three hundred and seventy year old man out on the town. Now that there was the prospect of action, he lost the speculative mood which had gripped him twenty-four hours before. He was even amused by

the fact that the other customers, who would have rushed up to him a week before, were careful now to say hello quickly and to get away from him. Some of them, he realized, were probably afraid that the Assassin's bullet might go wild. Others were filled with the superstitious dread that the sentence of death might be contagious.

It was about nine-thirty when Lucien finally sought out the manager of the establishment. As was customary, the two men retired to de Lacroze's office to discuss the details privately over two glasses of Martian *Lugnon* brandy.

As he entered the office, Lucien stumbled and was forced to put his hand to the wall to steady himself. The Vibrator, which had been concealed in his hand, remained on the wall. Thereafter, the two men talked freely for the next twenty minutes.

"I'll make you a present of it," Lucien said, waving toward the Vibrator, as they left the office.

The manager grinned.

Outside, the two of them strolled into the Room of Immortals. With the manager standing beside him and giving the pedigree of each one, Lucien watched a number of beautifully-gowned girls walk around the room. Lucien finally indicated a sensuous-looking redhead with a careless wave of his hand. The girls left, the redhead going upstairs, the others back to their own lounge room to await another call.

In front of the Room of Immortals, Lucien and the manager shook hands, both having the air of having concluded a satisfactory transaction. The agent of the Minister of Assassination, standing not far away, had caught a glimpse of the redhead and was inclined to think that Lucien might have looked even more enthusiastic. He found a nearby table, ordered a drink, and settled down to wait.

Lucien B. Fenimore walked slowly up the broad stairs, conscious of the gazes which followed him. He knew that there

was admiration in most of the eyes as he seemed to be following the traditional reaction to a sentence of assassination.

Reaching the upper floors, he saw the redhead turning into a suite of rooms, but he kept straight ahead. Reaching the end of the hall, and seeing that he was unobserved, he mounted the stairs to the roof. There, he quickly found the air-car which the manager had described. It was an old model, weather-beaten and dented. Lucien checked the registration and saw that it belonged to the redhead—who, on the morrow, would have a new one. He climbed in and set the robot pilot. A moment later, the car was in the air.

## V

**S**OME distance beyond the city, the air-car came down in what seemed to be a small wooded grove. Almost instantly a searchlight came on and beyond it Lucien could see the dim outlines of a house. He walked toward it, shielding his eyes from the glare of the light.

A door opened and Lucien stepped inside, adjusting his eyes to the softer light.

It was a large house, more luxurious than Lucien's. Everywhere he looked, there were spacious rooms leading off the hallway and he caught glimpses of the rich oriental rugs, the expensive modern furniture, the valuable paintings and statuettes. Lucien took it all in and lifted his gaze to meet the amused expression of the Chairman of the Equalists.

"You approve of a Worker's taste?" Burke asked quietly.

"Naturally," Lucien said with a smile. "And I'm not surprised. Out of curiosity, I checked up and learned that due to the number of wealthy men who have escaped assassination, close to sixty per cent of the world's wealth has apparently passed into your hands."

"But not all of it stayed there," Burke said.

"Of course," Lucien said mildly. "Not

all of it . . . But I was wondering if the Workers of the World realize how their foremost representative lives."

"Most of them do," Burke said carelessly. "In fact, it pleases them that at least one of their number can live this way. And I suppose it's a symbol of what they hope to have some day. . . . But enough of this. We'd better be on our way. You brought the journals?"

"Of course," Lucien said, tapping his brief case. "And you'll get it when you land me in a safe place. Did you doubt my word?"

Burke shook his head, smiling. "When men are frightened enough, they seldom lie," he said. "Come on."

He led the way through the house to another door and then outside. They walked through the grove of trees until they came to another building. Burke unlocked the door and they entered. There was a small, but fairly new, space ship. Burke pressed a button beside the door and the roof of the building rolled aside.

The two men climbed into the space ship and a moment later, with Burke at the controls, it took off.

Once they were high above the Earth, Burke motioned for Lucien to strap himself in his seat. He did so and felt the sickening lurch as Burke threw the ship into Hyper-Drive.

Lucien had traveled between the planets a few times, but always on the big space liners on which the passengers were largely protected from the change into Hyper-Drive, so he was hardly prepared for the terrible twisting of his stomach, the distortion of vision where everything went a misty gray. How long it lasted he couldn't tell—there was no way of judging time while in the grip of such vast contending forces. When they came out of it with another lurch, Lucien hung limply in his seat, feeling his heart pound as it brought him back to normal.

Burke looked at him and grinned. "It's rugged," he said, "but after a while you get used to it . . . We'll soon be there

and you'll have plenty of time to recover."

"Where is 'there'?" Lucien asked.

"A small, and little known, planet in the system of Rigil Kentaurus. Conditions are almost exactly as on Earth and you'll find it quite peaceful."

"The others—they are there too?"

"All of them," Burke said. His face darkened with anger for a minute. "That is, almost all of them. There were two that I missed—but I brought all the others here myself."

"You did?" Lucien asked softly. "But some of them escaped more than two hundred and fifty years ago."

"Exactly," Burke said, grinning. "I, too, have immortality. Does it shock you to find a mere Worker to be immortal?"

"No," Lucien said. His voice was gentle and thoughtful. "I haven't thought of you as a Worker, or even as a mere representative of Workers, since yesterday when I discovered the clue that connected you and Jassac." He paused for a moment and then went on in the same tone of voice. "You're the third of the Immortals, aren't you, Burke? Ross Eden—Marlborough Williamson—Leeds Burke—the three Immortals who would own the Earth, perhaps even dream of being worshipped as gods?"

**BURKE** looked at him sharply and then grinned. For he saw a man who still looked like the professional politician, hugging his portfolio on his knees, but in the small ship he did not look as impressive as he once had speaking in the Hall of the Republics.

"Why not?" Burke said, half to himself. "You're harmless enough now. If you had been armed the spy-ray would have registered the fact when you entered my house. And you're not going to talk to anyone. Yes, Lucien, I'm the third of the Immortals and our ownership of the Earth is almost completed."

Lucien nodded. "The others," he said. "They didn't escape, did they,

Burke? Up here—wherever we're going—you killed them, didn't you?"

Burke nodded. He was obviously enjoying himself.

"Of course," Lucien said. He shifted the briefcase on his knees as though it had suddenly grown heavy. "Tell me something, Burke. Was it because of this, more than anything else, that I was condemned to be assassinated? You wanted to get rid of me only because I possessed immortality, isn't that it?"

"Of course," Burke said. He was silent for a minute, but it was obvious that he intended to say more, that he was eager to say more. There was only pleasure on his face.

*Of course, he's eager to talk, thought Lucien. For centuries he's had to keep quiet about his great role. There must be no pleasure in being a master of the world when no one knows that you are.*

"Until we were almost ready," Burke said, "you were convenient for us, Lucien. You were a good party wheel-horse, so intent on your own little graft that you paid no attention to us. And we worked slowly, knowing that our immortality would have no meaning if others possessed it too. But it took time. Now the time is about up."

"What about the others who have immortality?" Lucien asked.

"There are no others," Burke said harshly. "We adjusted the treatment at the University a long time ago. The others who think they are immortal have had their lives extended, but that is about all. They'll soon start to age. If you'd checked, you would have discovered there are no immortals over the age of eighty. The older ones have been killed and the present ones will die. The only immortals in the World, Lucien, are Ross Eden, Marlborough Williamson, myself—and you for a short time yet."

"And two others," Lucien said softly. "You're forgetting George Fraya and Gary Polti, the two who escaped without your help."

Burke's face twisted with anger. "We'll get them," he said. "They can't

hold out against the whole world—not against us. We've got the time to hunt them down."

"They have time too," Lucien said, "although I suppose not as much, in one way. You have no worries but yourself. But they will always be conscious that the time they need means that other human beings will be dying—men and women who needn't die if it hadn't been for a selfish few."

"Idealist," sneered Burke. He seemed to have a sudden thought and twisted to face Lucien. "How did you know about Fraya and Polti?" he asked.

"I knew," Lucien said. "Then two days ago Ross Eden mentioned them again. He felt sure that he was talking to a dead man, so he was careless for the first time in the three hundred years I've known him. He revealed that he knew that Fraya and Polti had not escaped in the same fashion as the others. He could have known that only if he were one of the three Immortals. I had long suspected Ross, but that was the first time I was sure."

"I suppose you knew about Williamson too?"

"Yes," Lucien said, nodding. "I have known Marlborough a long time. I know how efficient his department is. I knew that three thousand Assassination victims would not have escaped if he didn't want them to. A few perhaps, but not three thousand. No, I knew that those who escaped were political figures that someone wanted to torture for information, or men who had wealth that someone wanted."

"But you didn't know about me," Burke said, laughing.

"Not until yesterday," Lucien said. "I confess I never even suspected you, Burke, although I should have. I should have realized that the head of the loyal opposition was the perfect addition. It was perfect from your point of view. A long time ago someone said, if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. But it was even more perfect from the viewpoint of Ross and Marlborough. Yes," he went on, nod-

ding, "you made a perfect trio. Ross Eden furnished the brains. Marlborough was the legal executioner and the planner. You, behind the smokescreen of the Equalists, did the dirty work. And more perfect for them, you were the stupid one."

"What do you mean?" Burke demanded angrily.

"Stupid," Lucien said, "because you still feel confident in the face of the things I've said. What do you think that Fraya and Polti will be doing now? What about the Council of the Three?"

"The Council of the Three," Burke said. He looked again at Lucien and there was hatred in his face. "Fraya and Polti—" He broke off and understanding came into his face. "You," he said. "You're part of the Council of the Three."

"I have that honor," Lucien said. He winced as he realized that in saying it he sounded like the former Minister of Sanity making a speech. *Can I ever unlearn the habits of three hundred years, he thought.* "In a way, he went on, "the Three Immortals and the Council of the Three have been like two inverted icebergs floating through the stream of the last three hundred years. Two-thirds of each were pretty well known; one-third of each was completely concealed. You and I, Burke, were the submerged points."

Burke laughed, but there was no humor in his voice. "But you've come to the end of the line, Lucien," he said. "Your two friends can't save your life now."

"They aren't even trying to," Lucien said. "They're too busy saving the lives of twenty billion other people. I wasn't talking of my own life, Burke. There hasn't been a day in the last three hundred years—since the time I helped Fraya and Polti escape and with them formed the Council of the Three—when my life wasn't forfeit if the occasion demanded."

There was a slight bump as the space ship settled to the ground. There was

a hiss of air as Burke threw the switch that controlled the airlocks. When he turned, there was a gun in his hand.

"Well," he said harshly, "the occasion demands it. Here is your final resting place, Lucien."

"I've wanted to see it," Lucien said simply. He got up from his seat and went forward to where he could see out through the doors.

## VI

**I**T WAS a barren land, covered with what seemed to be a fine pink sand. Here and there were small, stunted shrubs, yellow in color and seemingly on the verge of dying. Scattered across the sand were hundreds of skeletons—some of them sprawled as though but an instant before the white bones had been trying to run.

"I wanted to see them," Lucien said, turning to face the man with the gun. "You wouldn't understand how many times in the past three hundred years I've thought about those people out there—and about the millions of others who died of old age and sickness—when there was no need for any of them to die. I've thought of them and remembered that first congress of Republics when only Fraya, Polti and myself were for granting immortality to all. The outcome was made obvious at once, but Fraya and Polti were too angry to notice it in time. I did, and changed my surface attitude in time to build toward this day."

*You will never know, he thought—nobody will ever know what it was like to watch so many die while we inched forward through history—inched because there were no weapons and no army, only the three of us with our wits and our convictions.*

"If you were so fond of them," Burke said harshly, "go on out and join them. No," he added quickly, "first give me those journals of yours. There may be some clue in them to where we can find Fraya and Polti." The gun was steady.

"There is," Lucien said quietly. He held the briefcase against his stomach and opened the clasp.

A thin stream of almost invisible gas shot from the end of the briefcase into Burke's face. There was a flash of awareness, a straining to send an order to his trigger finger, then he collapsed.

Lucien B. Fenimore continued to open the briefcase. He spilled the money to the floor of the ship, revealing a small video set. The sending key was open. With trembling fingers, Lucien flipped the receiving key too.

"George," he said. His voice trembled and the name held all that he was asking. "George, are you there?"

"Yes, Lucien." The other voice came strongly across the four light years. It could be recognized as the voice of the once perfect butler, Matson. "We made it, Lucien."

Lucien could think of nothing to say, but he felt the anxiety of three hundred years slip from his shoulder.

"We convinced the President that he should call an emergency meeting of the cabinet and a few important citizens," the voice continued. "They made it in time to sit here and watch Leeds Burke's face while they listened to him. Some of them were a little hysterical when they learned they weren't immortal, but that helped to make them fall in line. Come on home, Lucien."

Lucien B. Fenimore cut the contact with Earth and closed his briefcase. He moved Burke's body from the pilot seat and sat down. The airlocks hissed as they closed.

**M**UCH later when the tiny space ship once more landed on earth, Lucien stepped from the ship and was met by two men, one formerly a butler, the other the former manager of a pleasure palace.

"Ross Eden and Marlborough Williamson?" Lucien asked and he clasped hands with the two men at once.

"We went to them even before we called on the President." George Fraya

said. "Fortunately, they both made a break for it. They're dead."

"Everything is set, Lucien," Gary Polti said. He was still dressed as he had been as manager of the House of Many Doors and somehow it seemed out of place with the expression now on his face. "A representative group from the present officials are meeting tomorrow with a large group of Workers. It will not be a completely representative World group, but it'll have to do for our first New World Congress. It's first act will be to grant immortality to everyone—but everything the Congress discusses will have to be voted upon by the people."

"As soon as it was over," George Fraya said, picking up the thread, "we went on an emergency world-wide video broadcast. We briefly told the whole story, including the part that you played throughout."

"Messages have been pouring in since then," Polti said. "Lucien, they want you to be the new first president."

*It would be nice, thought Lucien. After three hundred years of pretending to be something he loathed, it would be wonderful to stand at the head of the other side.*

He shook his head. "No," he said.

"But Lucien—" began George Fraya.

"No," Lucien said firmly. "No office for me or for you two either. It wouldn't

do. We have come through too much. We have made too many compromises, played too many parts. We're cynical and over-wise, whether we know it or not. We would only cause more trouble. No, George and Gary, we made the revolution. That was our job. Now let others take over. That is their job.

"Perhaps, it might be a good idea to suggest to the Congress that the three of us will be willing to serve as a sort of advisory council for a while. But it must be a council which has no power of any sort. And, starting tomorrow, there must be no more publicity about the three of us. Let us make sure that this is one revolution which does not end up with any Little Fathers or Patron Saints."

Lucien B. Fenimore threw an arm around the shoulder of each of his friends.

"We only know how to make a revolution," he said with a smile, "and we made this one damn good. But let's be honest enough to admit that we don't know a damn thing about running a government the way it should be run. We only know the wrong ways. The people will find out how to run it. As for me," he added, with the smile finally spreading to his eyes, "I'd like nothing better than to sit outdoors for the next few hundred years and bake my feet of clay in the sun."