

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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● FEATURE SPACE-AGE NOVELET

A LITTLE INTELLIGENCE *Robert Randall* 6
The murder of an alien envoy and the killing of a cat — the two events fitted together, but why kill a cat? But the riddle had to be solved, or peace between Earthman and Pogatha was out.

● NOVELET OF WORLDS TO COME

THE VARIABLE CONSTANT *Russ Winterbotham* 51
The "Instrument" which showed the invaders both how to conquer and rule human beings also predicted Gerd Thine. But could even so perfect a machine consider every possible contingency?

● SHORT STORIES

FUELING STOP (illustrated on cover) *Calvin M. Knox* 39
Otherworld beings can be both dangerous and cute-and-friendly!
THE LAST PARADOX *Edward D. Hoch* 110
Was this a solution to the seeming paradox of time-travel?
BOY *Richard Wilson* 113
Here's one eventuality the Founding Fathers couldn't anticipate!

● SPECIAL FEATURES

DO YOU KNOW YOUR SCIENTIFIC EXPERTS? *Joseph C. Stacey* 48
IT'S ALL HOW YOU LOOK AT IT *Isaac Asimov* 50
Sing it to the tune of "The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring"!

● DEPARTMENTS

THE RECKONING (Your report on the June issue) 99
THE EDITOR'S PAGE *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 100
Continuing the survey of "Yesterday's World of Tomorrow: 1928."
SCIENCE FICTION ALMANAC 117
DOWN TO EARTH (Your letters and Our comment) 119
READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON (double-barreled) 129/130

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Man's conquest of space had just started, before the aliens came to Earth...

THE VARIABLE CONSTANT

Novelet by RUSS WINTERBOTHAM

Out of space came the Beorhi, to rule Earth and its peoples, guided by the device they called "The Instrument". Now, several generations later, the long-foreseen crisis had arisen; and not only Gerd Thane, but also Alciar, Febris, and Charis Ryna were expected to play the roles they would now perform. But a machine that can give first-order predictions can only prophesy so much; and the probabilities that the Instrument stated did not include the unpredictable human element.

A MAN CLOTHED in black tunic and pantaloons, with a close-fitting skull-cap on his head, touched Gerd Thane's arm. "If you're through, come with me."

Thane looked up and saw the silver seal of the Beorhi suspended by a chain on the man's chest. He saw the deep-set eyes and the narrow countenance of Acair, the Chief of Police.

Thane realized this might well be his last day on earth.

He stood up, clicked his heels and bowed, as prescribed for everyone in the presence of an official who wore the Silver Seal.

"Febris has sent word that I am to come immediately to his office." Thane reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper on which the order was written.

Acair glanced at the signature. "Febris be damned. Come with me."

"I must pick up my tools," said Thane. He leaned over and started putting them in his bag.

Acair's foot shot out, kicking

the bag out of Thane's hands and sending it across the room. It struck a worker, who did not seem to notice.

None of the workers seemed to notice what was going on, and there were many in the factory where Thane had been making repairs. They stood with lusterless eyes, staring vacantly at the machines in front of them. Their ears had grown accustomed to the whine and the whir, the clang and the clatter, and that they no longer heard the din. Every sense was conditioned to the task.

It was not all conditioning. Thane knew that part of it was heredity. For six hundred years, human beings had been bred selectively by their overlords, the Beorhi. Now most people were rubber stamps of what the Beorhi considered prime man—men who caused no trouble, who had no independent thoughts, and who did exactly as they were taught and told to do.

THANE, HOWEVER, was different. He was a throwback, one of the few permitted to live on the face of the earth. Most throwbacks were liqui-

dated as soon as tests proved they would not conform to the master plan; but some were placed in government positions. Acair, himself, was one of these—a man needed to spy on other throwbacks, and to carry out the orders of the Beorhi.

A few like Thane were needed for special occupations—such as electronics, in which Gerd Thane was a master technician. These few were isolated in fact and in theory. They were not permitted to have friends; they could not marry, and they were restricted to certain quarters of the city.

Thane stood up trying to restrain his anger. He was near death, he believed. Acair had suddenly decided that Thane's usefulness was ended—or at least so it seemed. Thane wondered why Acair bothered to make the arrest himself; he wasn't sent to dirty his own hands with such jobs.

But suddenly and inexplicably Acair's manner softened. "You will never need your tools again, Gerd Thane, and you have nothing to fear. From this moment on, you will enjoy the privileges of an officer of

the government, a servant of the Beorhi."

Thane shook his long black locks, and looked down at Acair—for he was fully a head taller than the frail, sharp-faced police officer. "Is this why Febris wanted to see me?"

Acair seemed amused. "In a manner of speaking. Later, I'll tell him why you didn't keep your appointment. Come on, Long Haired One; my business is urgent."

THANE FOLLOWED, half-smiling at the reference to his hair. For months Gerd Thane had spent money for books instead of haircuts. Books were rare, and generally forbidden; most of them were very old, dating back to the Twentieth Century, eight hundred years gone, and two hundred years before the Beorhi came out of space to become Overlords of the Earth.

Acair led his companion to an underground conveyor belt which whisked them to the Palace. They stepped off the belt and entered a long, wide tunnel which ended in front of a bank of revolving doors, guarded by police in green uniforms.

The officers saluted the Silver Seal worn by Acair, and stood at attention till he passed. Acair plodded straight ahead, past the public elevators to a private car in the back. They went up many floors and got off in a large square chamber.

On all sides of the room were doors; and in front of each stood a man in the red tunic and blue pantaloons of the Royal Guard. Each of these was armed with a heavy Service revolver, but as Acair stepped from the elevator they clicked their heels and bowed. Then one opened a door and stood aside as Acair led Thane into his private office.

At first Thane thought the wall on the far side of the room was alive; then he realized it was divided into four large television screens on which were lifelike figures. Each screen showed some government activity. One covered the spaceport; another revealed planetary defense units, with space-narks ready to defend Earth from interstellar attack; others showed offices, with important figures going about their business.

There was no sound, but each picture was in color.

"Sit down," said Acair, still watching Thane with amusement.

THE YOUNG man sat, still watching the screens.

"Interesting, isn't it? These are monitor screens of the Palace circuit. Rhys controls them directly from his study, and he changes the scenes by pressing buttons like these." Acair pointed to a panel at his left.

"It is rather confusing without sound."

"Oh, the sound's there," said Acair, touching a red button.

Instantly, one of the pictures grew brighter. Gerd Thane saw that it was the defense setup. A colonel in the foreground was giving orders to his men, who went through the operation of loading a space-nark and adjusting its aim.

"Colonel!"

The colonel broke off and turned, facing the camera, at the sound of Acair's voice. He saluted immediately as he saw the official's face in a monitor at his end. "Yes, sir!"

"How long have you been on camera?"

"More than two hours, sir, and it is very trying. Some of our men are camera-shy and they make the damnedest mistakes."

"Don't worry about it," said Acair. "I don't think Rhys is watching." He switched off the sound by releasing the button, then turned to Thane. "Rhys usually looks at about a score of pictures a minute; but now the scenes aren't changing, which is a pretty good sign he's not watching."

"You can't control them?"

"No, and it's not very helpful to me," said Acair. "Everyone knows when he's on camera, and nobody's going to do anything that will get himself in trouble. When we want to pin something on somebody, we plant an undercover operator."

THANE WATCHED the picture until he heard Acair's voice again. "There may be an explanation as to why Rhys is not watching; he may be ill."

Thane turned his eyes from the scene. "I hope his majesty's illness is not serious."

Acair laughed. "Don't give

me that. You're a throwback, one of the few capable of hating Rhys and every other Beorthus on Earth. You'd be pleased as a fat hog if every last one died."

Thane couldn't help feeling shocked at words he had never heard spoken aloud, for all that they expressed his thoughts exactly. Acair must be very sure of himself.

"Don't worry, lad," said Acair. "I'm not trying to trick you. Now tell me; have you heard about the epidemic?"

"Epidemic? What epidemic?"

"I guess our isolation of throwbacks is gossip-proof if you haven't heard it. Well, very few know about it, outside of some high officials. An epidemic has done what we human beings haven't been able to do for six hundred years; it's gotten the best of the Beorhi."

Thane's eyes widened, but he said nothing.

"It is time now for earthlings to strike if they want independence," said Acair. "I'm not talking about these dull-eyed pigs who don't even know they're alive. I'm speaking of throwbacks, like you and me."

THE MAN was talking revolution, and Thane was in favor of it—he had nothing to lose. But he wished that he had someone other than Acair to plot with. Someone he trusted.

"Here's the situation," Acair went on. "About three years ago a Beorhus living in Australia came down with an illness completely strange to them; and at first, it was thought it was something he'd caught from earthlings. But our medics couldn't diagnose it, either. It's a horrible infection; it's like gangrene, but it's Beorhi gangrene and it's contagious."

"Oh!" said Thane.

"Don't be alarmed; it doesn't attack earthlings... The first Beorhus died; so did the second. In three years, the whole race has been wiped out—except for one.—Twenty thousand of these caricatures of human beings, who come from God knows where, have been wiped out."

Thane felt alive, really alive. It was as if some great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"The one survivor," continued Acair, "is Rhys XXVII,

the Big Boss of our planet. And he alone knows the secret that made his race the rulers of mankind. How long he'll escape is only a question of time; sooner or later, he'll succumb to the disease. When this happens, we must seize The Instrument."

THE INSTRUMENT. Gerd Thane often had wondered what it was, but neither he nor any other man—not even Acair, or Febris, the Adviser—knew how it operated, or what it was. All that was known was that this machine had enabled fewer than 100 Beorhi—who landed on Earth six hundred years ago—to conquer the planet.

The first Beorhi pilgrims had been welcomed by space-conscious earthlings. They were received as friends and scientists, lavishly entertained, and presented with the highest honors, giving mankind a few spectacular gadgets in exchange. It was much the same as the Europeans trading glass beads for Indian land.

Then by intrigues, and carefully-calculated coups, the fox put his nose into the hen

house; and it was only a matter of time before he was able to squeeze in his entire body. Human beings found themselves second class citizens on their own planet. The conquest was not entirely bloodless, but the Beorhi operated so smoothly that Man was scarcely aware of the change. And it was done with The Instrument.

"Seize it?" Thane asked.
"Best destroy it."

"Don't be dense," replied Acair. "Someone must rule the Earth after the Beorhi die. Better us than someone else—like Febris."

"I won't help you," Thane said.

"Choose your words carefully, friend. I can make things very uncomfortable for you. If you are counting on help from Febris..."

"Febris is no patron of mine."

"Even if he were, I'm not sure he could help you." Acair looked sharply at the young man. As head of the police, he had access to records which showed exactly what kind of a person Gerd Thane was. The Beorhi had ways of working these things out. Perhaps The

Instrument could measure a man's character. This must have been how the conquest was done—the Beorhi knew in advance just what human reaction to expect to any move they made. They had studied men's weaknesses, learned how humans could be bribed, coerced and flattered arranging man's downfall.

THANE HAD read in his books that one of the ancient sages of mankind had shown that those who enslaved were the greatest slaves. He was not sure of the exact wording, but this was the thought. "I'll have no part in taking the place of the Beorhi," he said.

"Think of what you're saying!"

"I've already thought it out. Throw me in prison—do what you will. If the Beorhi have conquered the world with some sort of special machine, or some new weapon I won't help you learn to use it."

"What are you saying?"

"Simply that if freedom is within man's grasp I'm not going to help it get away."

A CAIR WAS trembling with anger, but he restrained

himself. "Be sensible," he said. "You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. Certainly, there won't be much change in the world, but your own individual fortune will be much better. You will be the most wealthy, the most powerful man on Earth, except for myself. You will have special privileges—the privileges the Beorhi enjoy now..."

"The privilege of sending men to their doom, I suppose."

"Bah! Why should you care what happens to other men? Think how much better off *you'll* be."

"I don't think any amount of comfort will erase the knowledge of what I'm doing to others," said Thane. "You see, I've been an underdog too long."

Acair clenched his fist. "One last chance. Remember, you may regret your decision if it's the wrong one. I can make you suffer considerably..."

"Not half as much as I'd suffer making the decision you think is right. Go ahead. Do your worst."

"I will." Acair touched a buzzer and the door swung open. A uniformed guard, look-

ing smart except for his dull eyes, stepped in and saluted.

"Put this man under arrest," Acair said. "For treason."

The guard stepped forward and snapped handcuffs on Gerd Thane's wrists.

"At least," said Thane, "I'll get a hair cut while I'm in jail."

II

ELSEWHERE in the Palace of the Beorhi at that time, Cort Febris, Adviser to Rhys XXVII, had just entered the Royal Bedroom. Febris closed the gold-studded door behind him, took a short step forward, halted and tried to click his heels; but his legs were too fat—he bowed.

"Forget that infernal nonsense, Febris," came a brittle voice from the bed. "I'm too sick for that foolishness."

The Adviser did not stop; it was unthinkable to his conditioning that even he should enter the bedchamber of Rhys XXVII without executing the triple bow. Rhys did not wear the Gold Seal of his office, but

it was imprinted on the canopy above the bed.

The third bow. "I'm dying," said Rhys harshly, "and you stand there gyrating like a slat on a hinge. Or, I should say, like a barrel on a hinge."

"I do as your ancestors ordained," said Febris solemnly.

"Curse you. Curse my ancestors. Curse Rhys the Great for bringing our seed to this infernal planet."

Febris paled, unaccustomed as he was to hearing the sacred ancestors cursed. He went to the bedside. The covers outlined the frail, twisted body. Rhys looked small, thin, and even less human than usual. His long arms looked like thin rods, with the skin stretched tightly over them. Beneath the leathery skin, Febris saw the throbbing pale green veins and cord-like muscles. Rhys' large oval head, much larger at the top than at the bottom, was sunk deep into the pillow. It was bald. A long hooked nose, a tiny chin, and a fish-like mouth. Two large liquid eyes seemed to dominate the face. They were brown and like man's, except that they moved independently; and sometimes

one eye looked down while the other looked up.

"I have caught the contagion," said Rhys. "I, the last Beorhus, am dying."

FEBRIS pulled down the covers and looked at the shrunken body. The symptoms were there—the great black sootches on the yellowish skin, like over-ripe spots on a banana.

"I'll give you the drugs," said Febris.

"They have all been tried," said Rhys. "There is no cure. I have even used the Great Instrument, but to no avail. All I know is that, during the six hundred years my race has been on your planet, a chemical change has been taking place in our bodies. As a result, we have become susceptible to a virus. The disease has a way of appearing suddenly and inexplicably. Perhaps if it had been slower in manifesting itself, we might have found time to cure it. But it is too late for that now; in twenty-four hours I'll be dead, and there are many things to do."

"Aye," said Febris. "Indeed, things must be done."

Rhys' long arms reached out feebly and pulled the covers back over his chest.

"You do not know whence the Beorhi came, and it is not important. It is enough to tell you that it is far from your sun, and there are many of us still living on the planet of our origin. Special ultra-dimension navigational factors made it possible for us to reach Earth in a few months, but the return trip requires years. Communication by electronic methods is virtually impossible—not only from a standpoint of power, but because of the many years a message must travel before reaching its destination.

"**S**OME YEARS ago, during the reign of my father, Rhys XXVI, a messenger was dispatched, giving an account of our colony here on the earth." Rhys paused and looked reflectively at Febris, wondering if the earthman realized the full import of the message.

"I have calculated the time needed for the journey, and I had reason to expect the messenger's return during my reign. Along with him may

come a new expedition of Beorhi to join us here." Again he paused.

"I trust they will not come now," said Febris; "they may catch the virus."

"I'm not afraid of that. Since my race required six hundred years to become susceptible, the new colonists will be safe for a time. Before the danger point comes, we'll have a cure."

"Have you any idea when the Beorhi will arrive?"

"It may be tomorrow, or it may be next year," said Rhys; "but it will not be too far in the future. However, the fact remains that neither myself nor any of my kin will be alive to see them." Rhys was wondering about the strange light in Febris' eyes; he had never seen the little fat man so excited before.

"Men of Earth will receive them gladly," Febris declared solemnly.

"They will scarcely notice. Through the centuries we have bred initiative out of the race of man, except for a few throwbacks, such as you and Acair. A certain amount of initiative

is needed to conduct our affairs, and we can trust men like you to carry out our orders. All of you know that you are better off under us than you'd be without us. The rest of the earthlings are dead—except in the matter of chemical reactions inside their body. They have no hope, no ambition, no initiative. They do not think of tomorrow, and as long as they are fed regularly, they are happy. We have domesticated man."

RHYS PLUCKED at his cover. "I hope that I can keep death away for twenty-four hours; there is much to be done."

Febris shook his head. "You are far too weak to do anything, sir. Even if you can maintain life within your body, you cannot move; the disease robs you of strength."

Rhys' large eyes seemed to glaze. Febris had seen many of the Beorhi die of this disease; he knew that Rhys would soon be utterly helpless. The ruler could talk, of course, but his long arms would be unable to touch the alarm device at the side of his bed.

"At this moment," said Rhys, "I am the only living creature on Earth who knows the secret of our power. It must be preserved for the Beorhi who are coming here." he gazed up at the earthman. "You, Febris, are a horrible thing in which to place the trust of a Beorhus!"

Febris bowed as if it were a compliment. "Sir, your trust could not be placed in better hands."

"I know you!" exclaimed Rhys. "A slimy, hand-licking sycophant. But at that, you're the only earthling that I know will do as I say. You don't dare do otherwise than serve the Beorhi—your own kind would tear you into small cube steaks and feed you to the dogs! You're the most hated man on Earth, Febris; don't forget that. Even men who know nothing, and cannot think, would like to see you dead. Their souls know that through you, and your kind, they have been thrust into ignorance and slavery!"

"What I have done," said Febris, "was through loyalty to the greatest creatures in creation, sir." His face was pale.

RHYS CONTINUED, without taking notice of his remark. "Below the Palace, is a secret room. In that room is The Instrument; it is like a machine, yet different. *It* does not act, it tells you how *you* should act. It can kill the spirit in a human being by exposing his vulnerability. One of your leaders once said that there were greater dangers than that which merely kills the body—and he could have been talking about The Instrument.

"In an envelope under my pillow is a set of instructions on how to operate the machine, as well as questions, written in mathematical form, for it to answer. Take these instructions; use the secret passages to avoid being halted by Acair's guards; and enter this subterranean chamber without being seen. Operate the machine as I have set forth in my instructions. Get the answers and bring them here to me. I will then give you orders for your course of action after I am dead."

The eyes of the little fat man grew bright with excitement. "I would do as you say, sir, except for one thing."

The dying ruler's eyes grew more cloudy. "Have I overlooked something, Febris?"

"Alas, my lord, my ward!"

Rhys tried to stir, but he was too weak to rise from his pillow. "I can give you a reward—I'll turn you over to Acair!"

"I would not, sir, if I were you," said Febris, smiling. "He might not be as good a risk as I am to carry out your orders."

Rhys closed his eyes and nodded; of the two, Acair was less trustworthy. "What do you want?"

"You say that perhaps a year will elapse before the Beorhi arrive. During that time, someone must rule Earth and keep your empire intact, so the domain can be turned over to your kind without trouble. May I suggest, sir, that you make me your heir—to rein as Febris I?"

FOR A MOMENT, Rhys lay as if stunned. Then his fish-like mouth opened and laughter burst forth. "Make *you* ruler? That is impossible. No other earthling would accept

you; there is nothing about you that isn't duplicated over and over throughout the world."

"If you make me your heir, I would be an adopted son," said Febris, patiently. "That would make me a Beorbus; people are conditioned to respect and obey the Beorhi."

"I would sooner adopt an ape."

"Perhaps so, but you have no other choice in the matter. Either you'll make me your heir, or I'll do nothing you ask."

"I'll have you executed." Rhys tried to reach the alarm bell, but he could not move his hand.

"You can't. Give me the seal—your seal, made of gold. Not the siver duplicates that you pass out to Acair and others."

Rhys seemed to sink deeper into his pillow. His glazed eyes both shifted toward a desk on the far side of the room. "It is in that desk," he whispered. "The key is around my neck. God help me, there is no other way."

Febris reached down and felt a thin gold chain hanging

around Rhys' neck. He unfastened the key and strode across the room. He unlocked the desk, found several drawers inside.

"The second drawer on the right," said Rhys.

Febris opened the drawer and drew forth the gold seal, the insignia of the ruler of the earth. He slipped it into his pocket, and started to turn away from the desk; then his eyes fell on a slender letter-opener lying in a pigeon hole. He reached out and grasped it.

"It seems to me, Rhys Beorhus, that there's no more need for you to stay alive."

Rhys tried to scream, but his voice was hardly as loud as the chuckle that Febris gave in reply. The Adviser went to the bed without bowing, lifted the letter-opener, and brought it down on the paper-thin skull of the dying man.

Febris held it there a moment. He watched the veins underneath the skin, till they ceased throbbing, then he withdrew the sharp instrument. Carefully he wiped away the pale green blood with his hand-kerchief and cleaned off the letter-opener.

He found some black sealing wax, and filled the hole in the skull. It looked like another splotch of the deadly disease.

"No one will ask questions," he said. "It will be accepted as a fact that Rhys XXVII died of a virus."

III

THE ELEVATOR containing Gerd Thane and the guard shot downward toward the castle dungeons. The guard seemed not to pay little attention; after all, the prisoner was in handcuffs and the guard was experienced in handling prisoners.

None of them had ever shown so much as a desire to resist. This one, of course, had eyes a little brighter, and he carried himself a little straighter than most, but they were all alike. What was the point of resisting arrest, anyway? A man couldn't go far without being asked to show an identity card, and anyone supposedly under arrest would land right back in the pokey before nightfall. And the penalties for escaping were something to make a man think twice before he tried it.

Acair had not warned the guard that Thane might take desperate measures. He felt secure in his own regulations, that prevented anyone from entering or leaving the Palace without rigid checks.

And, of course, Acair had no way of knowing the elevator would stop before it reached the dungeon level.

The guard roused himself from his semi-stupor as the door opened. In it stood a young woman, black-haired, about nineteen or twenty, and with charms that Thane remembered only from the photographs in the rare books he had bought. Her eyes, furthermore, held none of the dullness that marked so many of the females he saw so often on the streets.

"You can't get on," the guard told her. "This elevator is being used for police business."

"Why not? Your prisoner is wearing handcuffs, isn't he?"

"Regulations forbid it."

"Hang the regulations," said the girl. "I'm not going to wait for another elevator." She stepped aboard.

THE GUARD'S jaw dropped almost to a forty-five degree angle. He had to think for a second or two before he knew what to say. "Disregarding regulations is a criminal offense," he reminded her. "I shall have to arrest you, if you don't get off the elevator immediately."

"All right; arrest me."

The guard frowned. There was a complication here. "I can't; I have only one set of handcuffs."

"Take them off the prisoner and put them on me," said the girl. "Heavens to Beorhus, must I tell an officer what to do? I think I'd better report you to Acair."

The guard almost trembled. "No! Please don't do that, miss!... You see, ma'am, if I remove the handcuffs from my prisoner, he might escape."

"Close the elevator door," she said. "Your prisoner can't get out if the door's closed—not unless someone gets on, as I did; and there's really no reason for anyone boarding a down car at this floor—the conveyor level."

"You got on."

"I'm a social worker," she

id. "I came to relieve suffering in the jail."

THE GUARD had never heard of such a thing, but it might be something new some official had introduced. The young woman seemed to make sense. He could close the door, arrest her, then start the elevator and deliver both prisoners at the same time. He wished he'd done more thinking in his life. He wasn't used to it. But it all seemed sound.

He unlocked Thane's handcuffs, and Gerd Thane swung both hands upward even before the cuffs were removed from his wrists. The blow caught the guard on the jaw, sent him reeling. His head hit the metal wall of the car and Thane struck again. That was all.

The girl smiled at Thane. "Let's go," she said. "We'll take another elevator upstairs." She opened the door as Thane removed the handcuffs.

She seemed to know what she was doing; he followed her to another elevator and stepped in it. She touched a button and sent it upward.

"I'm not sure I understand

why you're doing this," said Thane.

"The most important thing to understand is that you're better off than you were a few moments ago," she replied. "En route to a dungeon for treason, isn't the best position there is."

"I'll agree to that. But who are you and why did you do this?"

"My name is Charis Ryna. And the reason I'm doing it is because my boss told me to."

"Who is your boss?"

"The Adviser."

"Febris?"

"Yes, but don't let it throw you. I found you only because it was to everyone's advantage that you didn't get locked up in a dungeon. Right now, you're the most important man I know of."

"THAT SEEMED to be Acair's idea too," mused Thane. "I wonder if Febris has the same reason for thinking so."

"Yes, and so have other people. Acair isn't the only man on the Earth with a police system. Febris has been spying on

Acair for years and knows every move he makes. He knew that Acair pulled you off the job in the factory and brought you here. I expected to have the pleasant opportunity of rescuing you from Acair, but all I got was a chance to outsmart a dim-witted palace guard. It was really too easy—it took practically no talent at all."

Thane, who had felt so elated at his escape a short time before, now sighed. He had to go through the whole business again. "Really, Miss Ryna—or is it Mrs. . . ."

"Miss," she said, "and let's not get strung out in some kind of an argument. Acair would have you in custody for only one reason—that you refused to do what he wanted to. It stands to reason that if you wouldn't do what Acair asks, Febris will have a difficult time persuading you to do what *he* wants you to do. Febris probably would wind up last in any popularity contest you can mention. Our problem is to keep you out of a dungeon—and you're bound to go there by shouting your princi-

ples in the face of the most powerful men on Earth."

Thane was mystified. "You mean I shouldn't tell the truth?"

"Don't lie unless you have to," said Charis Ryna. "Honesty is rare these days in people who can think. But there's a lot more at stake than truthfulness, and Febris and Acair aren't sparing perjury to gain their ends."

"I dislike treachery in others; I don't want to practice it myself."

"Admirable," said the girl; "but impractical. You're valuable, Gerd Thane. Maybe you don't know it, but I do; I've had my eyes on you for a long time."

THREE WAS truth in what she said. Since her earliest childhood she had been taught to admire the characteristics exhibited by this young man. The Beorhi had arranged this—why, she had not known till recently, but the ways of the Beorhi were strange.

"It seems as if everyone's had his eyes on me," said Thane.

"These are critical times. The Beorhi are nearly extinct. The only living one may soon contact the disease, and then we'll have intrigue up to our ears. Every little pipsqueak that can have an independent thought—and many who can only half-think—will consider himself a candidate for the Gold Seal of authority the minute that Rhys dies. But only Febris and Acair are clever enough to be feared. And both of them have the morals of a tapeworm, that's why I've picked you, Gerd, to be the next ruler of Planet Earth."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." The elevator stopped, but before she opened the door, Thane caught her arm and pulled her around to face him. Her beauty left him breathless. "Who are you really working for?"

She smiled and pulled away from his grip. "For you, you big ox; and since we're going to be through a lot of things, if we last long enough, stop calling me Miss Ryna and call me Charis."

"All right, if you'll call me Gerd."

She reached up and patted his cheek. "That's just fine, Gerd. Now let's go see my boss-in-name-only."

IV

FEBRIS did not announce the death of Rhys XXVII. He had much more important things to do; besides, he felt it would be much better if someone else made the discovery. Just in case an inquisitive mind—of which there were still a few on Earth these days—might find that a black spot on the dead emperor's skull was sealing wax and not the product of deadly disease.

He used Rhys' own private elevator to descend to the secret room. The papers under Rhys' pillow had contained full instructions on how to get to the room, but he was not prepared for what he found there.

The room was large, possibly a hundred feet long and fifty feet wide, and one entire side was taken up with the largest electronic machine he had ever seen.

Febris had known that The Instrument was electronic. By deduction, and by unguarded remarks, he had learned that somehow a huge electronic brain had managed to keep earthlings in subjugation for six hundred years. He had not the vaguest idea how it was done; but he did know that Rhys made regular visits to this secret room—and immediately thereafter, certain new laws appeared and old ones were abrogated.

He knew, too, that before any couple could be married, applications had to be made through the Beorhi. Right now, stacks of punched cards lay in baskets which were being fed mechanically through one unit of the machine. Electronics would decide what couples could marry to develop a race incapable of independent thought—but even electronics was not infallible in predicting the results of mating. Most unions turned out satisfactory to the Beorhi, but Mendelian upsets sometimes took unusual turns. The result was throwbacks, such as Febris himself.

Parsimoniously, the Beorhi had found uses for these throwbacks; they knew that most of them would see the advantages of bending to the will of the masters, if they were granted certain privileges. Whenever a throwback was discovered, he was presented with a choice—death or service against his kind. Once in a while, a throwback was overlooked. Gerd Thane was not the first—he was only the first to be of any importance. And Febris wanted him.

FROM HIS pocket, Febris pulled the written instructions. He went to a keyboard and slowly and carefully typed out the rows of figures on the paper. Lights blinked and the machine whirred; presently an automatic typewriter began clicking. Out came a sheet covered with figures.

Febris looked at them blankly. What did they mean? he knew nothing of mathematics, and the answer meant nothing to him. Yet, somewhere among those rows of symbols was the answer to everything he wanted to know: how to rule Earth until the Beorhi came.

While the information was valuable, it was not what Febris really wanted to know. He believed that the machine, like all machines, did what its operator geared it to do. He was not interested in turning Earth over to the Beorhi again; he had The Instrument in his hands, and by merely moving his fingers in a certain way across the keyboard, he would know what steps to take. But he did not know how to move his fingers.

Febris frowned, shoved the sheet of paper into the pocket of his tunic, then boarded the elevator. Before it reached Rhys' private chambers, he got off, and went to his own office.

Special Agent Ryna and Gerd Thane were there waiting.

V

THE GREAT fleet of monstrous space ships went through the complicated maneuver that jerked it out of hyperspace at the rim of the solar system.

Admiral Vacana of the Beo-

rhí summoned Vitti Rhys, the courier who had brought the message to the home universe. "There are nine planets," he said. "Which is ours?"

"The third, sir, but it is scarcely visible from here, since it lies so near the sun."

"Is it within communication range?"

"Not with the power we have. However, cosmic ray oscillation can be brought in very faintly."

The admiral phoned to the communications center. He waited patiently for an hour, then he called again.

"Sorry, sir," said the operator. "I've signaled repeatedly, but get no reply."

"Cosmic ray signals are very difficult to deal with," said the admiral. "We'll try at closer range."

VI

CHARIS RYNA and Gerd Thane had come directly to Febris' office. Here in a soundproofed room, which Febris was permitted to use for his private business of Palace Adviser, they had made plans.

It was all well and good for Thane to stand by his principles and refuse to put an instrument of power into the hands of men like Acair and Febris, said Charis. However, deception would be better than an open stand of incorruptibility. Neither Febris nor Acair would hesitate to apply torture.

"If you're going to help anyone, you've got to stay alive and healthy," she said.

Charis knew only a little more about The Instrument than Thane himself. Even Febris and Acair only guessed how the Beorhi used it to control the earth. It was electronic; that much she knew. "I've heard that it has the powers of prophecy," she said, "but I greatly doubt if a machine could ever be built that would correctly foretell the future."

THE BEORHI had guarded The Instrument from all earthmen. Only a member of the master race could operate it, and it was hidden in a secret room of the palace. If Thane were permitted to work on The Instrument, he must

stall sufficiently to prevent Febris from learning its secret—and, instead, learn how to manipulate it to protect earthlings from their enemies.

Thane accepted only the suggestions from Charis with reservations. He agreed that he must use deception. While he found Charis charming, and admitted to himself that he had never seen a woman so full of beauty, and so delightful to talk to, he noticed that she had said nothing about her own motives.

She admitted she had been ordered to rescue Thane from Acair, but at the same time she had told him that this was not the sole reason for the risks she had taken. And her hints at a plan which included outwitting Febris himself, suggested personal motives. Was she another copy from the ambitious mold which had cast Febris and Acair? Did Charis Ryna wish to rule the Earth? Was she working for a third megalomaniac?

Thane wondered if there were anyone on this planet he could trust.

But even as he asked him-

self this question, he knew that he was falling in love with Charis Ryna. No matter how overpowering the weapon of the Beorhi was to earthlings in general, he saw that Charis was a far greater threat to Gerd Thane. Before he knew it, Thane held her in his arms.

ALL THIS was interrupted as Febris stepped into the office and saw Thane embracing the girl.

"What in the devil? Is this the only way you could get him here?"

Febris was not angry. The despair he had felt, because he had not been able to operate The Instrument, had vanished at the sight of the man he knew to be a wizard at electronics.

Thane and the girl parted suddenly. "It was my own idea, sir," he said. "However, I make no apologies; I love her. Had I known before that you had such a beautiful assistant, it would have been unnecessary to send her to fetch me. I should have come here of my own accord."

Febris chuckled, and turned

to Charis, who blushingly adjusted her slightly ruffled hair. "He hasn't aligned himself with Acair?"

"No, sir," said Charis. "Acair, you know, was quite niggardly and thought he could bluff Thane into doing without reward what he had in mind. When Thane stood up for his rights, Acair ordered him to the dungeons. Fortunately I stepped in at the right time, and the guard will have some explanations to make when he recovers from what happened to him."

Febris laughed loudly; he was in good humor now. "Sit down, Gerd Thane. I'm sorry, Charis, but I must talk to this young man alone. Later, you two will be together again." He turned and gave Thane a sly wink.

"I understand," said Charis. She walked to the door, she turned and gave Thane a smile as she went out. Thane hoped that she was not a third contestant for world power; if she was, he was a prisoner with less hope of escape than if he had been placed in Acair's deepest dungeon.

FEBRIS took a chair beside Thane and related his experience with the electronic brain. As he talked, the mystery of The Instrument seemed to clear slightly for Thane.

"The principle behind such electronic machines," he said, "is that nearly anything can be translated into mathematical values. If The Beorhi found a way to evaluate human strength and weakness, and feed the figures and symbols into the machine, it would be a simple matter for them to reach an almost infallible method for conquest of mankind."

"But wouldn't it require a great deal of study and research?"

"It would, Febris, but this study itself could be done partly with The Instrument, which can calculate in a few seconds what hundreds of men might require centuries to do. Furthermore, you must remember that when the Beorhi arrived on Earth, they were received as friends. Earthmen shared their knowledge, never suspecting what these beings planned. If that sounds incredible, you

have to remember that they took their time—and The Instrument showed them how to move without arousing suspicion, even as they were gathering the information they needed.

Febris cleared his throat. "They had their reasons, of course."

"Could a man have done the same thing?" Febris asked after a pause.

"An ape could have done it, if he had the ability to follow the strategy outlined by The Instrument."

FEBRIS pondered a moment; he sensed that this young man must be handled carefully. "If Rhys dies, which is quite likely that he will, a human being must become his successor. Man has regressed considerably in six hundred years, and it would require a great deal of planning to put our race back on the level of pre-conquest times. Could The Instrument be used for this?"

"Indeed it could, sir," said Thane. "What was done by The Instrument can be undone by the same agency."

"Ah! And an electronic wizard, such as you, might learn how to operate this marvelous invention, eh?"

"Perhaps I could sir," said Thane, struggling to hide his feelings. The very words of Febris, no matter how phrased, carried overtones of ambition.

"Then do it," said Febris. "I will lead you to the Instrument."

"Sir," said Thane, "I am only human. Don't you suppose that the Beorhi have safeguarded this electronic brain, so that their slaves can't use it?"

Febris stood up. "I have news for you, young man," he said. "The race of Beorhi no longer is a threat to humanity. All of them, save one, have died of a plague that does not affect men but which is fatal to these men from space. The one survivor, Rhys, himself, contracted the disease. On his deathbed, less than two hours ago, he made me his heir; he adopted me as a son—making me a member of the Beorhi race in every respect possible—by decree. Of course," and he smiled, "he could not alter my physical construction. But I

have been with the Beorhi so long that I think as they do, I know their manner of life. I am one of them."

From his pocket Febris produced the Gold Seal.

THANE SPRANG to his feet, so conditioned was he to the royal insignia. He executed a triple bow from sheer force of habit. It is hard for a man to rid himself of a lifelong custom, even when he knows it is wrong.

"Then you will inherit the earth, your excellency?" Thane asked.

"Indeed I will," said Febris. "Poor Rhys, however, is too weak to confide the secrets of The Instrument to me. Perhaps he senses that, although royal decree has made me a Beorhi, I am still human inside—and that with his death, mankind will end six hundred years of subjection. However, the change must be gradual so that our brethren can assimilate it."

The hypocrite! thought Thane. "And you want me to fathom the secrets of The Instrument for this guidance?"

"That is correct. And, I

might add, you will be amply rewarded. I am not blind; I know love when I see it. When you disclose the underlying principle of power embedded in The Instrument, you will be wedded to Charis Ryna."

Febris knew, a few things about manipulating human weakness—if love was a weakness—Thane decided. But Gerd Thane had made his own resolution before he met Febris. No matter what happened, Thane was resolved on his course of action—so far as Charis was concerned. However, he did his best to appear eager. "That is generous of you, sir," he said.

"And now, since Rhys may die any moment, we should go at once to the secret room. Rhys gave me the instructions for reaching it, and a rather vague description of how to operate the machine. He neglected to tell me how to interpret the results; which is vastly different from mere operation. That is why I need your help."

"I see no hurry before Rhys dies."

"He will be dead very

soon," said Febris; "possibly he is gone now. We must take over the reins of government immediately, before a man like Acair can bring about a *coup d'état*."

Thane nodded slowly. There was no way he could stall longer. "I think you're right. Let's see the electronic brain."

Febris led the way through a maze of palace passages, through secret doors to a forbidden part of the building.

VII

A CAIR EXAMINED the body of the dead Beorhi emperor. He saw that the Beorhus had been afflicted with the plague, and he noted also that Rhys' death was the result of something else. Febris' attempt to hide the wound in the being's skull would have deceived an ordinary earthling, but not a throwback.

However, Acair did not make his discovery public. There was ample time for that, and this knowledge could be a handy lever to use against his rival.

Instead, Acair made a search for the royal seal. He did not know where it was kept, but he suspected that it was gone; and if it was gone, the man who murdered Rhys had it.

He found something else, which was just as important. It was a book which contained a diagram of the Palace, a page for each level. It showed secret passages and the way to a chamber that was the most secret of anything owned by the Beorhi—the room of The Instrument. Apparently, Febris had not known about this; and if Acair got there first, Febris could have the seal.

"I want three dimensional, color photographs of the body," Acair told one of his men. "Then deliver the corpse to the sepulchre."

The man nodded and Acair left. He went at once to Febris' office. The girl Charis Ryna was there, but Febris was gone. She did not know where her superior was.

"It seems to me, young lady, that you owe me some answers," Acair said.

Charis smiled sweetly. "Answers? I have very few items

that could possibly add to your vast store of knowledge."

"About three hours ago," said Acair, "I sent a prisoner to the dungeons in company with one of my men. This man, a loyal soldier, was later found in an elevator suffering from a beating. He managed to give a description of a girl who had helped his prisoner escape. The description fits you perfectly, my dear."

CHARIS smiled. "Perhaps you'd better talk to Mr. Febris about it. I don't know the answer to this, and he will tell you about my movements in the past few hours."

"I can't wait to talk to him," said Acair. "You come with me; you're under arrest."

"You're forgetting that I have immunity as a member of the Adviser's staff. If you want to arrest me, talk to my boss."

"Febris has very little power now. Rhys is dead."

"Dead?" The girl stiffened. If this was true, the war between Acair and Febris had begun.

"Yes, dead," said Acair. "Come with me!"

He reached down and seized her wrist—then his eyes fell on the desk blotter in front of her. On it she had scribbled with a pencil: "*Gerd Thane.*"

Acair took a second look; his mouth broke into a smile. "I think that is evidence of your complicity in Thane's escape. As well as the fact that you think a great deal of him."

Charis closed her lips tightly.

"You need not answer that question; I know the answer. I also know that it would take a stronger man than Gerd Thane to resist your charms."

"Gerd Thane will have nothing to do with your conspiracy, nor that of Febris," she said. "Why don't you leave him alone?"

"Because he knows something. He is an important man because of his knowledge; and you, my dear, will be the key to unlock that knowledge."

VIII

THE BEORHI fleet was well within the orbit of Pluto when it received the first message from

the earth. It was a long message, repeated over and over and it came by gamma frequency instead of radio, or cosmic ray.

The words were phrased in the old Beorhi tongue, quite different from the modern language spoken on the home planet today; but Admiral Vacana was well versed in the classics and read it quite easily:

..Deadly disease has annihilated the race of Beorhi on the third planet of the solar system. Our affairs have been placed in order to formula 495-238B, with constants Y and Z placed in the ninth position and constant Q multiplied to the power of minus seven.

Our affairs are being administered by The Instrument under the regency of an earthling named Febris, whose value is 6.7342 multiplied by pi, which is a dangerous evaluation but which offers the best possibilities for

success under the formula.

Febris, as his evaluation will show, is unscrupulous and will undoubtedly attempt to further his own ends. His first step, according to our mathematics, will be to appropriate The Instrument and use it to rule the Earth. He knows nothing of electronics, or of mathematics, or of our method of evaluating intelligent beings. He must enlist an ally. For this purpose, we have carefully schooled a throwback called Gerd Thane, formula 376-772Y, pretending to overlook his qualifications as a thinking creature.

Thane, as his formula will show, is far more dangerous in many ways than the relatively slow-thinking Febris. Furthermore, he is motivated by a variable constant which make his actions difficult to predict. Ordinarily we

would have liquidated this type upon discovery, but several have been placed in stock for emergencies. To guard against unpredictable developments we have also stocked a counter-balance, 376-771-Z, a female of almost identical type, which as you know could be manipulated so that she could become his vulnerable point. She is known as Charis Ryna.

If Febris is successful, which is unlikely, in using Thane to convert The Instrument to his purpose you have nothing to fear. Under the formula he will rule men with such tyranny that by the time you reach Earth, he will be hated universally, and the Beorhi will be welcomed as deliverers. You will lead a revolt and put a new formula into operation.

If, on the other hand, Febris is unsuccessful, you will face either

Gerd Thane or a man named Acair, formula 9.5643 multiplied by pi. Acair is as unprincipled as Febris and much more cunning. However, he can be approached and governed by guarantees, and rather than to lead a hopeless cause he will turn over Earth to you.

If Thane is inner of the final struggle for supremacy, the variable constant will come into play and you may find it necessary to determine the exact value of this constant before making your move. Approach Earth with extreme caution; do not land unless you have sufficient mathematical odds to justify safety and be prepared to fight.

We believe we have placed enough counter-checks in opposition to Thane to prevent his access to power. We know that Febris and Acair will use Cha-

ris Ryna to check his moves. We urge Thane's destruction immediately, through whatever agency you may have, since his type is extremely dangerous.

That is all.

Repeat message... Deadly disease has annihilated the race...

ADMIRAL VACANA read the message through twice and then looked up at old Vitti, the messenger who had summoned the Beorhi to Earth a second time.

"Tell me about the earthlings," he said. "Are they great fighters?"

Vitti laughed depreciatingly. "They are not. Dull and uninteresting beings, almost all of them. They have lost the ability to think past the next meal; a few determined Beorhi could exterminate them."

"The formulae for Gerd Thane and Ac 'r do not indicate this."

"You saw the specimens I brought back from Earth, Admiral. Do you think we have much to fear from them?"

"No," said the Admiral with a grim smile, "not if they are typical. However, Vitti, our greatest scientists gave them examinations much more complete than the Beorhi on Earth could have given them. There has been progress in this direction since the first pilgrims made their trip. We found that, as you say, these beings were dull, almost incapable of independent thought. But in spite of this apparent stupidity, there is a second brain, a subconscious mind that has a great deal to do with their actions. Even though this second brain seldom protrudes upon conscious thought, it may harbor a character that is quite different."

"You think they may inexplicably react in some unforeseen manner?"

"INDEED, it is quite possible," said the Admiral. "There may be an instinctive reaction that cannot be planned against by our machines. This variable may be the one that the message refers to; and it may be more apparent in this Gerd Thane than others of his

kind. His entire existence may hinge on a certain sub-conscious desire that we do not understand."

"You are making too much out of something that may cause us no trouble," said Vitti. "If this second brain is asleep, it is unlikely to awaken or cause us trouble."

The Admiral nodded. "You are probably quite right. Too bad about our brethren. Do you think the disease might infect us?"

"Apparently the Beorhi do not think so, or they would not have urged us to land. However, we can determine the chances with our electronic brain. I think the factors can be determined from the message."

"Let us hope so. I, for one, am much more worried about this man Thane than a virus called X."

IX

AT HIS FIRST sight of The Instrument, Gerd Thane knew that he would not have to resort to trickery, nor would he have to

stall to prevent Febris from learning how to use it. He could not use it himself.

For some minutes he stared at the flickering lights, listened to the hum of the motors. The electronic brain seemed alive with activity. At one end, a small conveyor belt fed cards into a unit. He looked at them, found out that these were matching human beings for marriage. The Instrument had bred mankind into stupid animals.

Thane laughed silently. Why was he calling other men stupid? Alongside the minds that had created such a machine, he himself was an ignoramus.

Thane understood electronics; that was his trade. He knew enough elementary mathematics to grasp the principles by which The Instrument had made the Beorhi masters of the Earth; but he did not understand enough higher mathematics to use it.

"Good God," said Thane to Febris. "I can't run this thing; it's beyond my powers."

The fat man was jarred out of his complacent assumption that he would be heir to the

Beorhi. "You lie!" he said. "Records show that you can!"

"I don't lie; the records do." He remembered that Charis had told him of examining certain records which showed Thane's character.

"You have the potentiality," said Febris. "All through your life you have been periodically examined by agents of the Beorhi. They know exactly what kind of man you are. They know your capabilities and your limitations. All of your classifications have been put on cards, just like the cards that assign couples for mating. By devious means, I obtained a listing of certain throwbacks like you. I learned that you were an electronics expert, that could operate The Instrument."

THREE IS more to this machine than the electronics by which it operates," said Thane. "Sure, I can run this thing; so can you. You did it, with a set of instructions. Anyone, save a few of the dull-witted slaves that do not even know they are alive, could do it.

"But I cannot *use* The Instrument. There is a vast difference between mere operation and intelligent use; in order to use this electronic brain, I must know higher mathematics. I must know how to appraise values that I cannot even understand, in order to learn weaknesses of the human race. And I must translate my questions into mathematical terms to feed into the transistors and electrical circuits."

"You could learn to do it."

Thane sighed. He had been wondering about that. Yes, he might learn—if he knew the mathematical values of greed, double-dealing, honesty, integrity and a host of other things. But would man be better off if he were described by symbols and appraised by electrons? Someone had said that man is a piece of the universe made alive. But life connotes a freedom of action and a choice of some sort. Figures destroyed life or made it rigid, deterministic.

On the other hand, perhaps human characteristics were variable. Different external factors might change the value

of the abstractions of the soul. Greed multiplied by one constant might be vicious—and by another might be admirable. It was all very well to assume that X equals greed and Y equals altruistic honesty; but if these were multiplied by a motive named Z, would the final result be good, or damnable?

No doubt the Beorhi knew how to perform these mathematical miracles, but Thane could not. No man since the Twenty-third Century had known higher mathematics. The subject was reserved for the Beorhi alone.

“**I** KNOW THAT you have bought forbidden books, Gerd Thane,” Febris was saying. “Perhaps one of them contains these higher mathematics you speak of.”

“Some of them do,” said Thane, “but I don’t understand them. Certainly, I can’t grasp it well enough to give the human equation.”

Febris pulled an envelope from his pocket. “Here are the instructions Rhys gave me,” he said. “They tell how the machine is run.”

Thane studied the sheet for a moment. The instructions were clear; they told which keyboard to use. But there were several. Why this particular one?

Thane went to the keyboard. He looked at it closely.

“And this is the answer that came from the machine,” said Febris, thrusting the second sheet in front of Thane.

Thane looked at it and laughed. The figures were the same that Febris had copied from the original. “Look,” he said. He pointed to the electric typewriter. It was running, repeating the meaningless figures over and over again.

Thane was puzzled at first, but now he noted certain familiar features of the unit connected with the typewriter. He went to a control panel and twisted a dial.

A hidden speaker spluttered and took on life. Presently a sing-song voice began speaking in ancient Beorhi.

The language of the conquerors had been corrupted by terrestrial tongues in the six centuries since the Beorhi invasion. The change that took

place was comparable to the corruption of Anglo-Saxon by the Norman Conquerors of Britain after 1066. The Beorhi had used original words of their own tongue to describe what they used, while the earthlings still used their terms for the raw materials. On the other hand, many of the Beorhi had picked up phrases of the vulgar language and the final blend was roughly analogous to the blend of English of the Elizabethan era—partly Anglo-Saxon, partly Norman French, but different from both, just a stone's throw from twentieth century English.

Classical Beorhi was still taught to a few earthlings who had daily contact with the Master Race. Among them was Febris. Thane, too, had learned the tongue and he also understood the words that came from the speaker.

IT WAS A message, being sent into space from the Palace to a fleet of Beorhi ships bound for the earth. Thane and Febris heard their names mentioned and realized that everything that had happened to them was part of a plot—a

cleverly-designed scheme with earthlings moving like puppets on strings into a position that would throw the world back again into Beorhi hands.

Febris clenched his fists. His face paled. He swore under his breath. "They can't do this to me! They can't take what is mine!"

"The earth never was yours, or any man's."

But Gerd Thane knew that while the general plan had worked out as described in the message, there were certain things that had been overlooked. Rhys had expected to die, but Febris was spoken of as a regent, not heir. Something was amiss at this point, unless Rhys had lied to Febris. It was hardly likely; the Beorhi did not have to lie to gain their ends. They had mathematics on their side, and mathematics must tell the truth.

The surrender of the seal was a greater concession to Febris than Rhys had anticipated. Could this throw the entire equation out of balance? Or was the value of the seal so near zero that it would not change the result?

There was another variable, too; the Beorhi had not anticipated Acair's move to reach Thane first. The master race had expected a struggle between Thane and Acair, only in the event of Febris' overthrow. But the struggle had developed ahead of time.

NEVERTHELESS, the Beorhi were right, in general. The differences in their plan from what had actually happened, only disclosed that there were too many variables for even master mathematicians to foresee. The final equation had three answers: Febris, Acair and Thane were equally able to become dominant.

And what of Charis Ryna's position in the problem? Undoubtedly she introduced factors that would be hard to evaluate for a final solution. She might be Thane's weakness, his vulnerable point; yet, he knew that she might also be strength. Her mathematical constant was close to Thane's, therefore her motives must be nearly akin. If so Thane's value could double with her help. And if the Beorhi themselves recognized

Thane as the most dangerous enemy..."

He broke off, and not because the message was repeating itself again. The secret door to the room had reopened. Standing in the doorway was Acair.

"Febris, my dear friend," he said sarcastically, "your ability to win friends and influence important people is improving. You, the most unpopular man on earth—not even excepting myself—have gained the friendship of this sterling, incorruptible young man! Only a few hours ago, he swore that he would rather die than betray his planet. Can it be that your motives are also pure?"

Febris spluttered with rage; he took no heed of what Acair was saying. "Get out of here, you scoundrel. We are two to your one; and by the authority of the Gold Seal of the Beorhi, which I wear around my neck, I can have you torn apart and your pieces thrown to the palace dogs."

ACAIR SEEMED not in the least afraid. He threw back his head and laughed,

"You talk big, Febris," he said. "And lest there be more in your words than a loud unpleasant sound, let me warn you that the Gold Seal means nothing to me. I am not conditioned to click my heels and bow three times when I see it. Furthermore, I have a very helpful device—an invention of the earthlings of old, known as the Equalizer."

The police chief drew from a holster at his side, a very large automatic pistol.

Febris trembled and shrank from its staring muzzle. "Don't be hasty, Acair. Remember, I can be a great deal of value to you, just as you can help me. We should be friends, and not enemies in the event that Rhys dies."

Acair was still grinning. "He's already dead, Febris, as you well know," he said. "Although he had the fatal disease, it's my opinion—backed with photographic proof—that he was murdered. The Gold Seal won't protect you, if I wish to let it be known that you got it by assassination."

"But you won't, will you, Acair?"

"Not immediately, Febris. You see, I need you, just as you said a moment ago. Not as much as you need me, but if you've won over this young man, I'd say you were in a splendid position to bargain. Shall we join forces? My silence on the assassination, for your willingness to make me partner?"

"Listen to that speaker on the wall, Acair." It was Thane who spoke now, turning up the volume so that Acair would have no difficulty understanding the words in the strange Beorhi tongue.

Acair listened. His smile faded and his face grew black with anger. He understood the ancient sing-song words and his eyes shifted from the speaker to Thane and Febris as he began to understand that, clever as he believed himself to be, he had been only a plaything of the master race.

WHEN THE message ended, Thane turned off the speaker and spoke to the police chief. "I know your motives, Acair, and I know what Febris plans. But if one fact is clear, it's no time for us to

fight. More important than the fact that both of you are rogues, is the fate of the human race. We can do nothing against a new invasion of the Beorhi if we fight each other. If we join against them, we can do much. They expect us to fight each other; we can upset their carefully prepared plan by joining forces. Are you willing?"

Febris whined: "I have the seal. Before he died, Rhys made me heir."

"Shut up or you'll be a dead heir," said Acair. He looked at Thane. "You, I could trust, but I don't trust the revolving so-and-so; he'd murder us just for the privilege of wearing that gold thing around his neck. He murdered Rhys, you know."

"Rhys died of the plague," said Febris, insistently. "You're just trying to turn Thane against me."

"The plague of a sharp instrument through the skull," said Acair. "And you're not smart enough to get away with it. Even Thane here had gotten around you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, old friend, that you've been took, as the old saying goes. I don't know how the lad got smart, but I expect that Charis Ryna had something to do with it. But it's a cinch that if he's able to master The Instrument, he'll do it for himself and not for you."

FEBRIS turned on Thane. "Is this true?"

"You promised that Charis and I..."

"Ah!" said Acair. "And if I told you that I have this young woman under arrest, would you desert Febris?"

Thane felt as if he'd been struck with a fist. "You're bluffing!"

"I'm not bluffing. But no harm will come to her—yet. It seems that the Beorhi think you are important, too, young man. You've got a certain—ah—variable constant in your soul that can make things troublesome for them. I think we'd better keep you around. And I believe that Febris, for all his dull wit, is smart enough to see that he can gain nothing by trying to oppose me now. Later, he may try to murder

me, but I'll be on guard against that. Right now, Thane, you'd better do as we say. If Charis Ryna isn't reason enough, I can think of other reasons..."

It was too late now to use cunning; Thane had to act. He charged Acair while the police chief was in the middle of the sentence. Acair had not expected the rush, and he was unprepared for the blow that sent him reeling back against the door frame. He tried to use the gun; but before he could regain his balance, Thane charged in again and seized the wrist, twisting it sharply till Acair screamed with pain and dropped the weapon.

THEN THANE buried his fist deep in the small man's shrunken belly. Acair doubled like a broken stick. As he stood in this position, gasping for breath, Gerd Thane brought the side of his palm down sharply on the back of Acair's neck, near the base of the skull. The hatchet-man of the Beorhi collapsed,

Through the brief battle, Febris had stood half stunned;

but when Acair's gun fell to the floor, he shook himself out of his frightened state long enough to make a dive for it. Thane turned just in time and kicked the weapon out of reach. He jumped aside as the fat man reached out for his legs, in an attempt to trip him.

But before Thane could rush Febris, the Adviser was on his feet, moving backward to a place where a fire axe hung on the wall in a glass case. Febris smashed the glass with his fist. Disregarding the cuts on his hand, he reached in and grasped the axe.

Thane halted, picked up a chair and caught the blow as it fell. Then he moved in closer, knocking the arm that held the axe to one side and planting a heavy punch on the side of the fat man's jaw. Febris staggered. Tried to lift the axe, but Thane hit him again.

Febris stumbled to his knees. His head was spinning, and he could not lift the axe. "Don't!" he pleaded. "Don't kill me! You can have anything you ask!"

Thane struck again and Febris toppled backwards. Thane

used another judo punch, and Febris lay still. There was less likelihood of his being dead than there was for Acair. Febris was better padded.

Thane leaned over, tore the gold seal from the neck of the Adviser, and slipped it over his own head. He looked down at the object that once would have made him click his heels and bow like a monkey. It was just a worthless badge to him now. No, not worthless; other men would still bow and click their heels, and he needed this kind of thing to meet the threat from space.

Then Thane went through the door to the elevator. He had to find Charis.

X

FEBRIS was groaning feebly when Acair finally drifted back to consciousness. It took Acair a moment or two to collect his thoughts; then he rose on one knee and looked at the bloodied face of the Adviser, a few feet away.

The Gold Seal was gone; Thane probably had it. But

Acair had yet to be awed by the badge of the Beorhi. What was more important at the moment was the fire axe on the floor beside Febris.

Acair stood, swayed a little, then staggered to the axe. He picked it up. Febris stopped groaning, opened his eyes and looked at the upraised axe.

"No!" he screamed.

He never spoke again.

"They don't call me the hatchet-man of the Beorhi for nothing," Acair muttered.

He cast his eyes down toward some papers on the floor. He picked them up, saw they were instructions for operating The Instrument, and tucked them away in the pocket of his black tunic. *Gerd Thane alone stands between me and my empire*, he thought. *And I'll beat him even if I must enlist the aid of the Beorhi who are flying here!*

He went through the door to the elevators.

XI

THANE HAD never been in the Palace before this day, but he guessed correctly that Rhys

would have his living quarters on the top floor, and that privacy would be assured there.

He got out of the elevator, went through a gold-studded doorway, into the rooms of the ruler, and was startled by the luxurious fittings, tapestries, silver trimmings, beautiful paintings and deep soft rugs. There were soft chairs and floor cushions. A gorgeous place. He turned quickly and locked the door, lest Febris or Acair should follow him from below.

Exploring the other rooms, he found a hot meal on a heated stand. Probably the kitchen staff had not been informed that Rhys was dead and had prepared food for him. Thane went to a window and looked out. It was night. He'd been in the castle a long time and was hungry. He helped himself; and after he replaced lids on the various dishes, the heated stand sank through the floor to the scullery.

He went on exploring. He found the study with its wall of life-sized television screens, showing activities all over the earth. The scenes were unchanged since Thane first saw

them in Acair's office. It must have been many hours—five or six at least—since he first came to the Palace. And now he wore the badge that made him Master of the Earth.

Rows of buttons on a panel would help him find Charis. He touched one. He saw the diamond mines of South Africa in place of the spaceport; another button changed the scene to the Queen Maud observatory in Antarctica. He went on pressing buttons, till at last he turned up a man wearing the red and blue uniform of a palace guard.

He touched a red button at the base of the panel. The sound of the man humming softly to himself came to his ears. "Guard!"

INSTANTLY the man snapped to attention and faced the camera. Through the monitor he saw, not Rhys as he expected, but a long haired earthling wearing the Gold Seal. At the sight of the seal his eyes glazed and he clicked his heels and bowed three times. This man was so conditioned that a goat could have

worn the seal and he would have saluted.

"Yes, sire! What are your wishes?"

"A short time ago a young woman, Charis Ryna, was taken into custody by your chief Acair. Where is she now?"

The man blinked. "I do not know, your highness."

"Could you find out?"

"Sir, I am on duty here. I am guarding the bureau of vital statistics."

"Call your superior and tell him to find out."

"Yes, sir."

Thane waited. His mind swept back to the events of the day. He had tried to alter the carefully-worked-out equation of Beorhi, but Acair and Febris had been too well appraised by The Instrument. Perhaps the Beorhi had known there could be no alliance between alien characters. Two and two are always four—but two dogs and two cats are always two dogs and two cats, never four dogs or four cats.

With Charis, he might be able to change the mathematics of this vital equation. He hoped so. To him she was as important as Earth, but he reasoned

that Earth certainly was more important than both of them. Together they would change the equation, become variable factors in a variable world. The outcome of an interstellar war would rest on what difference they made.

Charis had hinted broadly that she had motives other than those shared by Febris and Acair. What were they? Why had she worked against Febris, her superior, whom she was conditioned to obey? He'd never know unless she told him.

PRESENTLY an officer, wearing a silver seal appeared on the screen. He clicked his heels and bowed just as the guard had done when he saw the seal on Thane's chest. "I am at your service, your highness."

"Please give us the details about Charis Ryna, a young woman arrested an hour or two ago by Acair, your chief."

Something in Thane's voice must have alerted the guard. "How is that you speak from Rhys' quarters and wear his seal? You are not a Beorhus."

There was nothing to do but tell the truth. "Rhys is dead."

"He has appointed you regent?"

"In a manner of speaking, I am his regent."

"I have not been so notified by Acair," said the Guard.

"I am not acquainted with the usual methods of communication," Thane said. "That is why I have asked you to find Miss Ryna. If I knew how to work this blasted communications system, I'd speak directly to Acair."

The officer nodded understandingly. He flipped his seal and looked on the back. "The combination for Acair's office is 266-415-272."

THANE LOOKED at the buttons. It was ridiculously simple. There were nine rows of buttons, ten in each row. He pressed the second button in the first column, the sixth in the third and so on. As he pressed each button the pictures changed, but as he pressed button No. 2 in the ninth column he found himself looking into the familiar scene of Acair's office.

Charis was seated there, staring at the wall; at the door was a female officer, wearing a gun.

"This is Our Highness speaking," said Thane, opening the sound switch.

The female officer jumped up and gave the royal salute. "Yes, your highness?" she said reverently. Then she saw Thane's face. Charis, watching, opened her eyes wide, but said nothing.

"To whom are we speaking? Thane asked.

"I am Captain Venghi, formula X32.751, third deputy assistant to your servant Acair, your highness." She paused and continued. "But you are not a Beorhus. Why are you permitted to call yourself king and to wear the Gold Seal."

Rhys gave her the explanation he had given previously, which Captain Venghi seemed to accept. The seal seemed to account for everything, and it was plain to be seen how Febris could have become master simply by wearing it.

"It has come to our attention, Captain," said Thane, after he had explained, "that you are holding Charis Ryna, an assistant to our Adviser, Febris."

"Yes, your excellency, she is here." The captain nodded to Charis.

"Bring her to us at once."

"But—ah—your highness, we understand she helped a prisoner escape."

"Never mind; bring her here," said Thane.

He switched the scene before Captain Venghi could reply.

THANE PLAYED with the buttons, switching from spot to spot as he waited. Beneath the panel he found a directory, which listed the combinations for each of the thousands of government installations surveyed by the monitor system. Quickly he looked up the combination for Planetary Defense, No. 335-333-444, and made a note of it.

A bell clanged, and Thane gave a start. It seemed to be coming from the next room. He rose, stepped through the doorway into a long hallway fitted with bright lights shining from vermillion walls. At the end was a screen, on which he saw the figures of Charis and her escort. The escort was not Captain Venghi, but Acair himself.

Apparently it was a one-way screen, for Acair gave no hint

that he saw Thane. He stood resolutely beside the girl, and he held a pistol in his hand, pointed at the girl's side.

The implication was clear. Thane must open the door and admit both, or Charis would die.

XII

HELPLESSLY, Thane looked around for some means of defending himself. Surely Rhys and the Beorhi Rulers before him had ways of protecting themselves. Didn't they have arms? Thane saw none; nor was there any indication that there were secret devices to protect against assassins.

Perhaps the Beorhi had been so sure of themselves and their mathematical appraisal of human nature, that they relied entirely on their equations to protect them.

Well, if the Beorhi could do it, Thane would try it.

He strode forward, grasped a knob and opened the door.

Acair took the gun from the girl's side. Already Thane was charging toward the man in

black. The gun swung around pointed at Thane, but there was no pull of the trigger.

Instead, Acair stared hypnotically at the Gold Seal on Thane's chest. Something held his finger from pressing the trigger. The conditioning, which Acair scorned, was there, although he claimed the seal meant nothing, he could not fire. Febris had not known this when the gun was pointed at him in the subterranean chamber, and his lack of courage had cost him his life. After the seal was taken from Febris' neck, Acair had no compunction against killing him. Thane swung his fist.

Acair went down in a heap and the gun slid out of his hand. A guard standing at attention nearby clicked his heels, bowed three times, then put handcuffs on his former superior.

"Bring him inside," said Thane.

The guard looked dumb. "I cannot enter," he said.

"It's an order," said Thane; "bring him inside and stand guard over him."

The soldier seized Acair

roughly and forced him to walk through the door behind Thane and Charis.

THANE LOOKED at the girl with puzzlement in his eyes. She had said nothing since he first saw her. She seemed to be in a trance as she entered the study and did not seat herself till Thane told her to be seated. Acair and the guard remained near the doorway.

At last she spoke. "You have won over Acair and Febris," she said. Her voice had a toneless sound, as if she talked while asleep. "Rhys' said it would be thus, I hoped it would not be."

"You wanted me to lose?"

"Yes, your excellency," she said. "But I should not call you that. Although you wear the Seal of State, you are human, like me. And inferior to the Beorhi."

"Charis! What has happened to you?"

"Nothing, Gerd," she said. "But since my earliest childhood, I have been commissioned for a task. The Beorhi worked it out on The Instru-

ment. I was taught one thing—to kill you and to turn Earth over to the Beorhi pilgrims."

As she spoke, she rose. "I do not want to do it, but I must," she said. She walked slowly toward a tapestry on the wall opposite the television screens. She reached up.

"Charis!" Thane's voice cracked like a whip. He didn't know what she intended doing, but he knew that if it was planned by the Beorhi, it would be dangerous for him.

She hesitated at the sound of his voice. "I must kill you, my lover," she said. "All my life I've waited for this moment. Since I was a child, I was taught that a man like you would someday be at my mercy. I was to strike without pity, for the glory of the master race."

"The Beorhi planned this whole thing!" He knew it was true.

"Yes, Gerd," she said. "The Beorhi knew that Earth history moved in cycles of 600 years. All this had been worked out by The Instrument."

THANE KNEW this from his reading. As far as writ-

ten records went, there had been cycles averaging 600 years. Not all were exactly the same, but the average of 600 years persisted as the fatal years for any civilization.

The early Egyptian dynasties ended with the invasion of the Shepherd Kings, the Hyksos, sometime between 1750 and 1600 B. C. Troy fell about 600 years later. Between each disaster civilizations rose to power, then were superseded by other types of civilization. Greek glory followed Troy and destroyed the Persian empire, then fell apart after Alexander.

Rome was founded about 800 B.C., but did not become a great nation until after Alexander. It lived from 200 B. C. to 400 A. D. in a position of Grandeur, then fell before the Barbarians.

The Crusades forecast doom for Islam's bid for power after 600 years of growth. The Reformation ended the feudal reign in Europe and marked the beginnings of Western Civilization. Democracy rose from its humble beginnings in 1600 to the coming of the Beorhi in 2189. Now in the year 2803, it was time for the tide to turn

again. And The Instrument had marked the date in the Beorhi calendar.

Charis was speaking again. "The Beorhi did not foresee the plague," she said, "but they knew something would occur during my lifetime. Something would end their power unless they introduced mathematical factors to change the result. You, Gerd, and I are those factors. We change the result, and we cancel out at the end. Otherwise Earth would again belong to earthlings..."

"Charis!" said Thane. "Earthlings are the rightful owners."

"We must not stop civilization, Gerd," she said. She reached for the tapestry but Thane sprang to where she stood, his black hair flying behind him. He pulled her hand aside, for he sensed that her action would unloose some powerful weapon that might destroy them all.

He hurled her to the floor.

The soldier guarding Acair drew his pistol. "Don't shoot," growled Thane. Charis lay still, as if she had fainted.

THANE STRODE to the control panel and punched out the combination 335-333-444, which he had made note of before. The lower right-hand picture flipped to the plotting room of Interplanetary Defense. Thane pressed the red button, opening the sound. "Attention, please. Hear this."

The corps of men in the plotting room sprang to attention like monkeys, clicking their heels in unison and giving the Royal Salute. Thane was sick of the procedure, but he could not stop the conditioning of the men. It had been instilled since childhood.

He spoke. "Approaching Earth from space is a fleet of hostile ships," he said. "Direct the astronomical detail to plot the course of this fleet and give the range to the space-mark stations."

The officer in charge spoke up "Your excellency! We have already noted the positions from the fleet which now approaches the orbit of Neptune; our missiles could intercept them near the orbit of Uranus."

"Then give the orders to fire!"

"But, all-knowing majesty, have you forgotten that the space-narks can only be fired by your highness through The Instrument?"

Thane's heart sank. The Beorhi had outwitted him to the last. He couldn't stop the invasion. "Never mind," he said; "I'll attend to it."

He looked down at Charis, who looked up, she had heard. "Surrender, Gerd," she said. "Give up. You can't win against the master race."

"First, I'll blast us all!" he said. He gestured toward the tapestry.

"It would only blast one man," she said. "It is geared to The Instrument and it would only strike down the man who would, according to the calculations of the mathematical equivalents of us all, at the moment be most likely to hold the key to terrestrial domination."

The Instrument was uncanny!

"How do you know this?" he asked her.

She looked puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't know—it seems to have been placed in my

brain at some time when I was not aware. By hypnosis, perhaps."

THANE NODDED. Her actions against him were the result of post-hypnotic suggestion. "There is nothing they haven't thought of!" he said.

"No, Gerd," said Charis. "If you agree to surrender, my work is ended. My task is finished. You will be rewarded. I was told that I would long for you, and I could have you if I persuaded you to agree to let the Beorhi land."

Thane tensed. Suddenly he was alive again. A broad smile twisted his lips. If the Beorhi had offered a bribe like this, they must not be so sure of their plot. There would be a loophole; they must know it was within Thane's power to upset everything!

The Instrument could fire the space-narks. The Instrument was electronic! He picked up the directory and thumbed its pages. Yes, there was a camera in the secret room. He pressed buttons. He saw the battered body of Febris on the floor. No time to question Acair

about it now. He pressed the red button for sound.

"Hear this, instrument of the Beorhi! The space-narks are aimed. Fire!"

Lights flashed from the machine. Thane flipped the television view to the space-nark site. He saw twenty narks rise up into the night, hell-bent for the orbit of Uranus and a rendezvous with the Beorhi fleet. Only a command had done it—and the seal on Thane's chest!

He turned, just in time to see Acair use the judo punch he had learned from Thane. The guard, intently watching a scene he had never seen before, had forgotten his prisoner.

The soldier fell with a single punch and Acair swept up his pistol. He moved around from the doorway to get a better aim at Thane.

But Thane acted on impulse. He sprang to the wall, as Acair aimed.

THE EXPRESSION on Acair's face was one of intense determination. He resolved, no matter what his training and psychological conditioning, to overcome the

block that prevented him from shooting at a man who wore the Seal of State. Vessels stood out on his forehead as he commanded his finger to squeeze the trigger.

But the instant of hesitation necessary to overcome the conditioning was enough for Thane. He swept the tapestry from its hanging and flung himself to the floor.

A bolt of flame swept across the room, and struck down Acair who stood where Thane had stood when Charis had threatened the same death. A dead finger pulled the trigger and the bullet thudded harmlessly into the wall. The Instrument had acted again, striking down the man who, at the moment, held the key to terrestrial domination. The Beorhi had figured things down to a split second—but the variable of human nature was such that the key hung in a delicate balance between two men. And the very action of The Instrument itself swung the result!

Charis rose sobbing from the floor. Thane was at her side in an instant. "It's all over," he said; "the Beorhi have lost."

She seemed to shudder and she opened her eyes wide. The hypnotic stare was gone from her eyes and she was herself again. "But I've lost you, Gerd."

"You've only lost your conditioning," said Thane. "Your career, so to speak. In the golden age of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries, many women gave up careers for marriage. Since your career—working for the Beorhi—no longer possesses a future, it might be time for you to give up yours."

She did not smile. "I remember what I did, Gerd," she said. "It was like a trance; I was compelled to do what I did not want to do."

"Hypnosis," he said.

"Yet, would you marry a woman who had tried to kill you?"

"History had several such instances," said Thane, "and not at intervals of 600 years. Even if it hadn't been done before, we should put a premium on originality. Earth as become peopled with rubber-stamp men, and much original thinking must be done if our race is

to get back to where it was 600 years ago."

SHE MOVED gracefully into his arms. There was fire in her kiss. At least the Beorhi had not conditioned that.

Thane released her, took the Golden Seal of State from his neck and cast it into a chair so he could hold her closer. As he kissed her, the guard regained consciousness from the blow that Acair struck. He glanced at the Gold Seal in the chair. Snapped to attention and saluted the chair.

Thane picked up the seal and held it. "Carry Acair's body to the sepulchre," he said. "Then go find the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Get him out of bed, if necessary. Bring him here to perform the marriage ceremony for Charis and me."

"Yes, sir." The guard saluted again, picked up Acair's body and departed through the gold-studded door.

Thane took the seal. "First of all, we have to short-circuit The Instrument forever. Then a proclamation of the First Law of Earth, under which we'll call constitutional conventions."

"What is this First Law?" she asked.

"That all authority derives from the Creator, and that no man is above the law. They're conditioned to obey me—or anyone else who wears this seal. I can't undo that conditioning, overnight, but I can limit it—and whittle away my power until neither I, nor anyone else, can have more than is granted me by common consent. And subject to withdrawal if I abuse it."

She nestled in his arms as they sank onto a floor cushion. "I know you'll be elected Pres-

ident," she said.

Somewhere in space the Beorhi fleet had its rendezvous with the space-narks and there was a great flash of flame and light. Not all the ships were hit, but the remnants turned and fled back through hyperspace in the direction from whence they had come.

The odds were against the Beorhi, who never tackled anything unless the mathematics were propitious. And the variable constant of lowly earthmen had prevailed over the highest mathematics of the universe.