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WHAT IS DOUBT?

BY RICHARD SNODGRASS

ILLUSTRATED BY DREANY

It was all in the regularized and regulated books, and in the absolute facts of the Instructor—everything except what Meadows had to know. Even for that, was was an Answer. . . .

William Meadows, Classification B-2-11-7 (sophomore-second semester-dormitory eleven-room seven), sat stiffly on the concrete slab nearest the escalator of Building III. Outwardly, he was identical to the other students standing and sitting around the courtyard; his spotless white cover-alls, short blonde haircut and white boots were in perfect order of neatness. Inwardly, he exerted every ounce of control he had—hoping, even praying in his own way that there was no physical manifestation of his fear which might tell the others he was on the verge of insanity!

If anyone saw even a faint hint of deviation in, say, his eyes, it would mean Lowerlevel. It would mean he would never

get the chance to ask what *now* had to be asked. Staring toward the waterless fountain in the center of the courtyard, he felt a slight tremble fluttering his fingers.

Not relaxing, he broke the stare, glancing up at Building I opposite Building III, and identical to it. Under the Arizona sun, it squatted like a frosty, unmeltable block of ice. On his left was Building II; on his right, IV. There were no structural means of support visible on or in any of the four buildings of Annex D, Liberal Arts Section, University Twelve.

University Twelve, according to the caption on the aluminum plate implanted in the waterless fountain, stood on the same ground, nine miles east for the



former city of Phoenix, Arizona, where a small college, Arizona State College of Tempe, had stood before the Eight Hour War of May 16, 1993, followed by The Renaissance and Reorganization for Security, Phase One.

May of Ninety-three, he thought, shoving his hands down in the deep pockets. Twenty-one years ago. Monmouth, Illinois. Four years old with a blue bright sky over the little town, muttering maples making backyard shade over him as the damp, clean-smelling sand tickled his fingers. The sandbox had been green. He even remembered his father painting it the summer before. Then the sun blotted out by a thick cloud, earth-made, oozing up from the direction of the Monmouth Ordnance Plant, and his mother running out from the kitchen, flour on her hands, crying, grabbing and hurting his hand. Five days in the scary shadows of the basement—"Please turn on the lights, Mom!"—then going to identify the rotting, burnt blackness they said was his father. His mother whispering, "Remember that, Billy. Remember as long as you live."

"As long as I live," he muttered, looking at the other students, all men, who sat and stood woodenly about the court.

Yesterday, he had had a long time to live and work, and these men had been his friends. Today—today he did not know.

Because *they* were still secure. And he was not.

The thought made him hurry his eyes around the courtyard, afraid someone might have heard the thing still screaming in his mind.

I am no longer secure!

But they were not looking at him, or at each other. With the portable wire-recorders in their right hands, they did not sit or stand together. They did not talk to one another. They all seemed to be listening to the mumbling static of the four loudspeakers, one on each building.

He tried again, for the last time, to force his mind back into its former, logical channel, but it was impossible—now. Even though he recognized the new factor, the utterly illogical factor for what it was, it was impossible to stop it from creeping among his psychological machinery, destroying everything, growing and feeding upon itself. It was a virus without cure; a reason without rhyme.

It was Doubt.

Simple, pure, stupid Doubt, destroying his life, even though they had analyzed the thing the year before in Psychology Two,

coming to the obvious, logical conclusion that Doubt stemmed from Distrust of Fact. And it followed, therefore, that there was no such thing as Doubt since Fact is irrevocable. A belief, of course, could not be doubted simply because it was not Fact and did not, therefore, exist.

But Doubt did exist, he knew, recognizing the thing growing stronger second by second as he sat on the uncomfortable slab of concrete. *What is?* he asked himself. What is not?

What? Where? How? Who? Why?

And he had the answer to this last one, at least in his own case. Why he was no longer secure was due to a radical old man, dying, smiling, telling him where to find a book.

An unauthorized book.

A book not cleared by Security Six.

A book entitled, "An Introduction To Philosophy," published in 1947, when the world had not yet realized or evolved to a point where it saw that Security was the answer. The Total Answer. Before men had been shown, through reorganized education, that to get Security they must give up the myth of Freedom expounded by stupid idealists. Before they saw that Truth, Beauty and God were Security.

But it was wrong, all wrong, he knew, seeing in his mind his grandfather on the bed, his breathing much too rapid, his words broken by weak, child-like coughs.

"Out in the middle of that cornfield, boy. Where we walked when—when you were four—before they came on your fifth—birthday and took you away—to school." He laughed, coughing. "School—drool. Out there by that oak—buried on the north side of the trunk—you'll find a book." He paused, his breath coming in short, almost desperate gasps. "It's an honest to Good book—not a spool of wire. Read it. No matter what they've told you—think about what you read. Understand, boy?"

The old man had died that night and, after the funeral he had returned to school, planning to turn the book over to Security Six. Instead, he absently dropped it in his desk drawer and forgot it.

Then last night about nine he had run across it while cleaning out the drawer. He opened it, began reading. At first, it was so much nonsense, but he read on just for laughs. Then he stopped laughing, a strange feeling moving through him. He went back and started over, reading carefully. He read all

night and into the sunrise.

He could not sleep even the two hours remaining before class. As he sat by the room window and watched the orange globe rise in the eastern sky, the Doubt had risen in his mind. It had grown and festered during the first two classes, but he had waited to ask the questions of The Instructor of Introduction To Basic Security Philosophy, Number Two.

No matter what, he must ask the questions. It was too big, too intense, too burning to hold down any longer. He would ask—knowing the ramifications.

The four loudspeakers sputtered, then boomed: "The rest period is over. Organize your groups. Two minutes."

He fell in with his group, thirty men wearing the loose, white cover-alls, each carrying a wire-recorder. At the front of the column, the Leader raised his hand, commanded, "Forward!", and dropped it. They moved mechanically, stepping onto the escalator in pairs, and glided upward, two steps between each pair of men. On the Secondlevel—the Lowerlevel had never been visited by a student who returned—they moved off the endless stairs, marched down a doorless corridor of frosty white glass. Presently, the leader held his hand up

again, commanding. "Halt!" He then reached up, pressed a small red dot—the only foreign color in the long hall of white—and a panel glided open noiselessly. They broke formation without a word, filed inside and took their places on the evenly placed concrete slabs. Each man placed his recorder beside him, opened the case and plugged in the single wire. Their heads came up almost in unison, waiting in silence for the Instructor's voice.

The Instructor sat on a concrete slab before them. He was an aluminum case the size of a double-bed. Above it, hanging like a large ear on the glass wall, was a humming loudspeaker. It shattered the quiet: "Start your recorders!"

Each man flipped the switch.

"This morning we cover Phase Nine of Basic Philosophy: The Impregnability of Absolute Security. Before beginning my lecture, are there any questions related to yesterday's lecture?"

Meadows felt the sweat on his forehead, the dampness in his palms; then hesitantly, he pressed the small red dot on the concrete beside him.

The metallic voice hummed, as a professor might do studying his seating chart to see which student has raised his hand.

"Seat six. Row two. Meadows, William. B-2-11-7. Ask your question."

He wanted to give it up. Let it go. It was crazy to—

"Ask your question," the voice said, an edge of irritation creeping in.

He rose to attention, looking at the case. "Sir, who was Rousseau?"

The loudspeaker sputtered. Then demanded, "What?"

"Who was Jean Jacques Rousseau, and what is meant by the social compact?"

It did not hesitate. "Your question is not related to yesterday's lecture. But I will answer it. There was no such individual. There was no such thing. Sit down, Meadows, William."

He remained standing, his damp fingers trembling. "Who was John Stuart Mill, and what is meant by representative government?"

"B-2-11-7. Sit down!"

"Who was Henry David Thoreau, and what is civil disobedience? Who was John Locke, and what is civil government?"

"Sit down!"

Although it was against Educational Regulation 417, several students turned and looked at him as he went on. "Who was Adam Smith, Hegel, Einstein, Bacon, Christ, Jefferson, Des-

cartes, Galileo, Newton, Marx, Gandhi? Tell me?" he screamed. "I demand an answer!"

The loudspeaker hummed, as if waiting.

Suddenly he turned to the class. "I know who these men are!" he shouted, not recognizing his voice. "And you must find out. You and you and you!" His finger moved wildly from startled face to startled face. "Find out. Think about what you find. Study the old books! Read! The Earth is two billion years old. There were philosophies before the Basic Security Philosophy. And there will be philosophies after—" He broke off, the words frozen in his throat.

The panel by which the class had entered slid open. Two robots, each with four metal tentacle arms, moved into the room. They were painted white. Antiseptic white.

He did not try to run. There was a very low moan from several of his classmates as he began walking to meet the machines, whispering, "I asked. No matter what, I asked." For the first time since playing in the green sandbox, he was perfectly happy.

The eight metal arms wrapped around and picked him up; he looked like a man tangled in a coil spring. They moved back

down the aisle as the Instructor's voice commenced again: "Meadows, William, B-2-11-7, has suffered a nervous breakdown. Delusions of this sort often occur due to over-study and devotion to—"

The panel closed. There was now only the harsh noise of the four metal feet on the frosty white floor. Moving toward the elevator, he felt the tears flooding his eyes, misting his vision. It was the first time he had cried since viewing the burnt blackness that had been his father.

Inside the elevator, going down slowly — too slowly — he sensed one of the tentacles unwinding from around his body, then saw the ugly metal thing swing into position before his face, directly below his right eye. He saw the needle finger

poised, waiting, and one last thought raced to his lips.

"Thanks, grandfather. I asked about—"

The needle punctured his eye, then his brain.

As they lowered the remaining distance, the robot on the left sent a radio message to the one on the right.

"This is the eighth one this month."

"True."

"Two in Chicago two in New York one in El Paso one in San Francisco one in Mexico City one here."

"True."

"Each month there are more."

"True."

"Why is this phenomenon increasing?"

"I do not know."

"What is doubt?"

"I do not know."
