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WITH FLAMING SWORDS

By Cleve Cartmill

● The accident that a new weapon killed some and mutated others produced—the Saints, the self-appointed, selfish, self-adulating Saints, who ruled the world with decidedly unsaintly violence and—with flaming swords.

Illustrated by F. Kramer

You could shock men, I thought, and suffer no consequences. Men were merely slaves. Slaves allowed to serve us, to bring their produce to

Eden, to give us their arms and backs and brains.

But these were Saints, here in the big hall. Their massed auras were a blaze of blue

against which I narrowed my eyes. We were Saints, with three hundred years of traditional conduct behind us.

And what I had said was not

condoned by tradition. I had called them men.

They took it in silence for a few seconds and stared at me, beside the throne of the Patriarch. Then they began to yell, and I felt a sick shame for them. They lost their dignity.

I yelled into their hubbub.

"I invoke the rule of silence!"

The Patriarch raised his glowing arms. Quiet fell.

"Against my will," the Patriarch said, "I command silence. We will hear the rest of Saint Hanson's heresy."

That stopped me for a moment. I loved this old Saint, as did we all. He was so wise, so helpful at all times. For the others here in the auditorium I had little feeling. They were Saints, as I was, but all our lives and deeds centered around the Patriarch. His white robe and banded turban symbolized all the ritual and ceremony which governed our actions.

He had called it heresy. So strong was my conditioning, so carefully had I been trained from birth, so accustomed had I become to accepting his verdict as truth, that I believed him—for a second or two.

Heresy. That, if proved, was unforgivable. They could have my life for it. All of my work, and all of Jennings' would have been wasted. I thought of our efforts secondarily, though; primarily, I did not want to die. And I knew that I could die, in spite of our sham and hypocrisy about "ascension."

But I couldn't leave it at that, with just the accusation. A conviction that I was right would not let me back down. Nobody, not even the Patriarch, should stop me before I presented my argument.

I turned toward the Throne and faced him respectfully. "It is not heresy, your Reverence. It is truth. I have proof." His glowing face did not change expression. I spoke to the audience, narrowing my eyes again

before the collective glow of their auras.

"Listen, men." They gasped at this. "Yes, men you are. I, too. We have nothing of divinity. We are like the others, like the laborers who built Eden, from which we have enslaved the entire human race. Oh, I know our slavery is called supervision and leadership. It is imposed in the name of good. But we have no right to make servants of men, for we are men. Wait," I cautioned as several hands went up, "let me tell you the truth. We are set apart by our auras, but those auras are the result of disturbed germ plasma in our ancestors."

They refused to take this, rule of silence or no. They shouted again, and Saint Evan Wakefield led an angry group down the wide aisle.

"Quiet!" I yelled. "Let me finish!"

Surprisingly, Saint Wakefield checked the group he led and raised his long arms with their nimbus of blue. Quiet fell again.

"Brethren," Saint Wakefield said, "Saint Hanson mouths heresy. No doubt of it. He has given us cause to strip him of his robes and his turban. Even so, he deserves to be heard. But not here, not here; this meeting is too unwieldy." He addressed the Patriarch. "I suggest, your Reverence, that Saint Hanson meet with the High Council tomorrow. Perhaps that smaller group can restore his sanity. At any rate, it can make a comprehensive report with the Brethren."

"It is so ordered," the Patriarch said. "Go with good."

I watched them go, each with his blue radiance which even our desert sun could not entirely dim. I felt troubled, not because they muttered among themselves, but because Evan Wakefield looked thoughtfully at me for a long time. We had clashed before, on matters of

doctrine and procedure, and I knew him to be ruthless and clever.

I was one voice among so many millions, for the whole world believed that we were near to angels, placed among men to lead them out of the Collapse. That we had so led them and brought order out of chaos was final proof, in the popular mind, of our divinity.

One voice is easily silenced.

Oh, there were scattered others, like Jennings, but they had no power, no means. I had the means, in my apartment, to demonstrate the scientific, not divine, origin of our auras, but without the consent of the Brethren I could do nothing.

One voice is easily silenced.

Presently I was alone in the big hall. Even the Patriarch left me without a word. This impressed me with the seriousness of my position more than any other event. Always the Patriarch was ready with advice. But I had called him a man, and he had removed himself.

I could use some advice. From Jennings? No, for I knew what he would say. Attack. He'd roar it at me. If battle is inevitable, begin it yourself. Turn the modulator on the Council, wipe out their auras, and then tell them. That's what Jennings would advise.

But though I agreed with him in principle, I couldn't do it. They were Saints. I was a Saint. My conditioning was too strong. I couldn't trick them. It was not our way among ourselves. Trick men, yes. We did when necessary. But not each other.

I had to play fair, and I knew it. I was troubled enough by my secrecy. I hadn't told anybody, not even Jennings, that my modulator was finished and successful. Nobody knew of my laboratory adjoining my bedroom, not even Ellen.

Perhaps, I thought, if I tell the Patriarch what I've done, he will advise me. That wise old man will know what to do. I

was a trifle shocked at my thinking of him as a man. That was the first time it had been in my thoughts.

I hurried up the aisle and out on the steps.

He was not in sight on the broad, sloping flight that went down to the river we had made. I went around the gleaming administration buildings, examining each street that stretched, spokewise from this administration center of the circular island which was the inner city. Saints aplenty were on the streets, and a few were on one of the bridges which connected us with the outer city where our "slaves" lived, but the high banded turban of the Patriarch was nowhere to be seen.

I decided not to search. I could waste the whole day. He might even have taken his plane from the landing tower. He could be in Los Angeles or San Francisco by now, or well on his way to New York. Or anywhere. Even Shanghai, where his mother lived. He visited her every few days.

So I went to my apartment. I could call the Patriarch from there, wherever he might be. En route I walked alone. My fellow Saints didn't see me. They looked through me. I had the feeling that I was invisible, like an "ascended" Saint. I was here, among the others, but they couldn't see me.

Loneliness is frightening. Invisibility must be the height of loneliness. You can see, hear, smell, but you can't communicate. To be stranded on some tiny fleck of land in the sea is not as bad as being ignored by everyone. There, you know what your battle is, simple survival. But here, with eyes resting on me briefly but blankly, I had a fleeting doubt of my existence, a fleeting belief in ascension.

But a tele-technician, rounding a corner, glanced at me and covered his eyes with a respect-

ful arm as I passed. I was alive, then. I was in Coventry, but I was alive. I felt like singing as I turned into my apartment.

Ellen was there, and my heart bounced at sight of her golden beauty. She was like that. Gold. Her green eyes were flecked with it, her skin a paler hue, and her hair an aureate helmet.

She covered her eyes with a pale forearm as I entered, and stood and bent her knee.

"Stop that!" I said.

She obeyed, but her eyes were cast down. I lifted her chin in my hand and looked at her. Presently a tremulous smile flickered on her broad mouth, and I kissed it to life. She submitted. No more than that. A little flame of anger licked at my heart, but I said nothing. Plenty of time for that after we were married.

"It's nice of you to call, Ellen. Can I offer you anything? Food, drink?"

"No, your Reverence. Thank you."

"Don't call me that, Ellen. My name is Robert."

"But I can't!" she cried. "It's familiar, and wicked."

"How do you expect to address me when we're married?"

"With reverence, with respect, as a Saint should always be addressed."

"A man wants intimacy, and friendship, and love, not reverence, from his wife."

"Oh, don't call yourself a man!" she pleaded. "It's—blasphemy."

I looked at her. Her eyes sparkled, like ice in sunlight, but the sparkle was from moisture. She was near to tears.

"Sit down, Ellen." She did, on the couch. "Say, 'Yes, Robert.'"

"Please," she begged. "Let me tell you why I'm here, first."

"Say, 'Yes, Robert.'"

"Yes—Rob— Oh, I can't! Let me tell you. Saint Wakefield—"

"He sent you?"

"Yes. He asked me to dissuade you in what he called your mad scheme. He called me. I came at once. My plane is on the roof."

So this was Wakefield's first move. It was a weak move, because Ellen couldn't stop me. I loved her. I loved her very much, but I wanted a wife, not a worshiper.

"Go home, Ellen."

"Please listen to me, your Reverence. I don't presume to question what you are doing, for I haven't the intelligence—"

"You're as intelligent as I am," I snapped.

She was shocked. "Oh, no! I am only mortal. I can die."

"And I can die." Her eyes popped, and I betrayed the Brethren. "You may as well know," I said, "because the world will know soon. Saints do not 'ascend.' They die. There is a secret crypt. Several hundred are buried there. We are men."

"No," she whispered. "No."

"Yes. Listen. Here is the truth. Nearly three hundred years ago, a new weapon was introduced into warfare. It was fired only once. The destruction was so great and terrible that nations by common consent outlawed it, for it destroyed friend and foe indiscriminately. Thousands were killed within the radius of its effect. It was silent death, for the gun was a ray gun. But listen. On the edge of that area of destruction, people were affected by that ray. Their germ plasm was affected so that male children born of those individuals were born with an aura. Do you know anything of genetics?"

"No."

"I don't know much. My line is radiant frequencies, as you know. But I'll give you the gist, as a geneticist gave it to be. Nature altered the germ plasm as a defense against the L ray. For some reason not clear even to my informant, the

defense mechanism manifests itself in males by a glow. Each blood cell has a luminescent nucleus, so to speak. Female children have the same resistance to the L ray, but they don't glow. I don't know why, any more than I know why hemophilia passes through the female only. But there it is. That's the truth."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she quoted a phrase from the Codex. "'And in the midst of chaos, the Saints appeared. They showed the way, and peace once more lay on the land.'"

I shook my head. I had pity for her, and for all the others. The tale of those glowing boy children ran through my mind, how ignorant, ordinary parents eyed the nimbus of their child with awe and fear. I knew. It had happened to me, in a sense.

The fear was gone, by the time I was born. My father and grandfather had glowed before me, and they felt none of that first superstition. By that time, the Codex had been written, rules had been laid down, and the Saints ruled the world from their new Eden. But the ordinary citizen reflected the ancient awe. They flung up their arms, and ordinary little boys were afraid to play with me.

"I wanted to play," I said to Ellen, "when I was a kid. But I was a Saint, and set apart. I went to school with other little Saints, and we were not allowed to play. We had to learn so much. So many things to know, so little time to learn. We were lonely little boys. I knew, even then, I was like the others."

"No," she said. She had one pale hand across her vivid mouth in a gesture of—fear? Despair? A little of each, perhaps.

"And now," I said, "I want an ordinary life. But belief and faith have made me a superhero. That, and something else which I have sworn not to reveal. You see, Ellen, I know the whole shabby farce, the trickery, the

mystery. And I am rebelling. They may kill me, but I'll prove my point. We are merely men. Supermen, while you and the others believe. But if that belief is shattered, we are ordinary, and may find happiness."

"Please believe that you are wrong, your Reverence. Even if you're right, you're wrong. You will destroy faith. That's all we have, our faith. Take it away, and what will become of us? Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, Ellen. Listen. Once upon a time a man could call his soul his own. He defended his liberty down to the last breath. Then a series of dictatorships made liberty a remembered word that had no meaning any more. Then, chaos. Then, Saints. It was natural that they should make their own dictatorship, for the world had been conditioned for five hundred years to that. So men are slaves again. But listen, Ellen. You didn't learn this in school, because you are not a Saint, but men were happy once. They laughed, and they battled adversity with high hearts. Do you hear laughter anywhere?"

"Why, yes. Children play games."

"For a brief period, I'll grant you, children have a taste of laughter. But away from home, only. I've watched them. They don't laugh in their homes. How could they? How can a home be happy when, at any time he chooses, any Saint can walk into any home in the world and take what he chooses, wife, child, or chattel?"

"But that is his due," she protested. "Any such home is honored."

"You may not know this word, Ellen, but it's self-explanatory. Phooey! Here's another. Nuts!"

She gasped at this. I tried another tack.

"Do you love me, Ellen?"

"Naturally," she answered. "You will choose me at the next Festival."

"But is it me you love? Rob-

ert Hanson? Would you love me if I were the boy next door, and not a Saint?"

She couldn't see it. She couldn't see me, under my robe and turban. She just looked at me helplessly.

"Go home, Ellen," I said gently. "Some day, you'll see what I mean, maybe. I want an ordinary home, and ordinary kids. I love you as a man should love a woman. You are a person, I am a person. We're equal."

On her gasp, Evan Wakefield entered. He shot a quick glance at Ellen, and apparently read her expression correctly.

"You may go now," he said crisply.

"Here, wait!" I said. "She isn't a piece of furniture, to be shoved around."

"She is female," he reminded me.

"Yes," I sighed. "I can't break that tradition in a breath." I turned to Ellen. "Thank you, my dear, for coming. Think over what I have told you."

She bent the knee to us both, and went out to the levitator. In a few seconds, the gong on my wall announced that she had taken off.

Saint Wakefield sat in the big-gest chair, almost overflowing it. He folded his powerful hands and looked at me with an expression of kindly concern.

"Brother," he said, "I'm worried about you. I want to help." "Do you want to help the world?"

"Of course. Always."

"Then help me put an end to this sham and hypocrisy. I have the means, but I can use help."

He frowned. "I don't understand," he murmured.

I told him what I had told Ellen, but in more detail.

"I think the Saints are honest in their belief," I said. "But the proof of my contention lies in our actions. The lie about ascension. You know we can die. Then there's the lie about

a Saint's lethal wrath, our most carefully guarded secret."

"Don't speak it," he whispered.

I ignored this. "Each of us carries a ray gun in his turban. How do you suppose the people would feel if they knew we scotch rebellion or irreverence by touching the button on our robe, that it isn't righteous wrath which causes them to fall dead?"

"I beg you," he said. "Stop."

"Why? I tell you, these things are proof of our mortality. Superstition and fear made us angels, and we believed, because we were children. We believed so strongly that we ascribed supernatural factors to events we could not otherwise explain. The ignorant said that a Saint cannot die. So we rigged up a secret burying place, and called death ascension."

"I'll admit," he said, "that we can't explain what is apparently death, but the ascension story is in the interest of common good. People would be unhappy if they thought we could die."

"And so they're enslaved because they think we cannot. They forgot the big gun by the time the first child was born with an aura. It didn't occur to anybody that his parents had been in a restricted area when the gun was fired. It didn't occur to anybody that his parents were religious fanatics. The fact of his aura was proof enough of divinity. But he knew, the first Patriarch knew he was an impostor."

Evan Wakefield's blue eyes hardened. "You can be put to death by that statement," he said grimly.

"Not if I can back it up," I said. "Listen, man, I'm not spouting theory. I have facts. But one more point about the first Patriarch. If he didn't know, then why did he study the L ray, why did he secrete a miniature gun in his turban, as we do today? Why did he kill

thousands of scoffers, and call his weapon righteous wrath? Maybe he thought he was acting for the best, but his action proves he knew he was a fraud."

Wakefield got to his feet, towered over me. "You're insane," he said. "You can't destroy the very foundations of our civilization. Right or wrong, you can't destroy these."

"They were destroyed before," I pointed out.

"And the Saints built them again. Surely that's worth something. In fact, everything."

"It has served its end. What we have now is a culture of master and slave. Oh, we treat them well enough. We must keep our animals healthy. But they can't call their breath their own, because we can take it away if we don't like the part in their hair. And we're no better than they."

"Stop this, Saint Hanson!"

"Like hell I'll stop it! I have worked with a man, a scientist, in collecting proof. I know that our auras can be destroyed by scientific means. If those auras were truly divine, nothing man-made could destroy them."

"How do you know this?"

"I'll show you, presently."

"Who was this man? Jennings?"

"No," I lied. "I won't tell his name."

Wakefield diverged for a moment. "Magda Jennings," he said softly. "I shall choose her at the Festival."

"But she's his wife! They're very happy."

"She's beautiful," he said.

"That's part of what I mean," I said grimly. "Don't you feel shame at robbing a man of . . . of anything, regardless?"

Maybe his bewilderment was honest, I don't know. But it seemed honest. He stared at me.

"But I'm a Saint," he said.

"All right," I grunted. "I'll show you. Come in here."

He followed into my bedroom.

I slid back the wall panel and went into my laboratory. I looked at the modulator with pride of achievement, the pride which comes from having made something with your own hands. It was so compact, so neat, so efficient.

I took a slide from the temperature chest and slid it under a microscope. "Look. This slide has specimens of my own blood cells. You can see the glow."

He applied himself to the eyepiece. "Yes."

"Keep looking while I adjust the modulator. That glow was caused originally by a radiant frequency. It can be destroyed by a counter frequency which this machine will generate. Keep looking."

I adjusted the modulator and turned the rheostat. He raised a white face presently.

"It vanished," he whispered.

"I haven't tried it on a Saint yet," I said. "But it will do the same to us. That, I contend, is final proof."

"Yes," he said reflectively. "It seems to be. Well! This needs some thinking. How does this machine work?"

I showed him the simple controls.

I trusted him, even though I differed with him. He was a Saint. We do not trick each other.

He turned it on me, wrenched the rheostat far over.

My aura winked out.

I hadn't expected this. I was stunned, long enough for him to raise the modulator high in both hands. Before he could fling it to the tile floor, I leaped at him.

"You devil! You shan't!"

But he was so large, so much stronger. I did some damage, I suppose, but he kicked me into a corner, into semi-consciousness. Through a blur of pain I saw him smash the modulator, and throw the wreckage into the waste chute. He leaped back

and slammed the door against the atomic blast which sprang to life and consumed my machine.

He looked down at me. "That takes care of that. I'll see you at Council meeting tomorrow—ah, Saint!"

My first thought after Wakefield left me was of what Jennings would say. He would call me a fool. And so I was, a trusting fool. I had allowed myself to be tricked.

Then a sensation of nakedness knifed through me. My aura was gone. Destroying it hadn't hurt, at the time. But now it hurt. Never had I imagined how it would feel.

I had thought of it many times, of course. But I couldn't have imagined this desolation, this despair, this shame of facing men. They wouldn't cover their eyes, now. They wouldn't bend the knee.

Pain from the beating and kicking Wakefield had given me hardly registered in my churning

skull as I went bitterly to bed. Tomorrow I must face the Council, and that meant going along some of the streets in my new unglowing nakedness.

And I did. I skulked the first few blocks, but such men as I saw—street laborers, technicians and shopkeepers—covered their eyes as if I had not changed. My robe and turban marked me as a Saint. Their reactions were so deeply ingrained that perhaps they saw an aura.

I walked boldly then, and as I mounted the long reach of wide steps I felt that I had triumphed. For my condition, and the manner in which it was brought about, was proof of immortality, proof that we were not divine.

We were men, as the Council should see. Being wise men, they would end this psychological farce which made us slave owners, and all men should be equal again.

I thought this with a high heart, and hurried. But the in-

stant I entered the Council chamber, Wakefield looked at me in horror, pointed a quivering finger, and leaped to his feet.

"Divine justice!" he said. "Look, brethren! God has punished him!"

He waited for them to look, but hurried on with his analysis and accusation.

I blurted something—anything—but the Patriarch waved me to silence. Then I felt like crying, as I had seen men break into tears before sentence was passed on them, for it was too late to say anything.

II.

I was allowed to defend myself before the Council. Oh, yes, I was given a chance to speak—after Wakefield. I don't know how I looked; I know how I felt.

I had knots in my stomach. I had a hurt somewhere in my throat. I had a tightness in my ears. I had bitterness.

"I have nothing to say," I told



the Patriarch and the half-dozen Saints.

"Then you admit," the Patriarch asked kindly, "that you spoke heresy, and God removed your aura as punishment?"

What could I say? It was my word against Wakefield's. I hadn't told anybody of my modulator. I hadn't showed it. Of course, Jennings knew I was working on it, but he was a man. His word was worth nothing here. Ellen knew Wakefield had been at my apartment, but she was female.

"I admit nothing," I said. "I can only threaten, and that seems pointless."

"It seems self-evident," the Patriarch continued, "that your blasphemy has been rewarded justly. Here is an example for unbelievers."

Unbelievers? He had said it. I knew nothing of unbelievers, except for isolated cases such as Jennings and myself. Unbelievers? What was this?

"I suggest," the Patriarch continued, "that a public ceremony is in order. An excommunication, so to speak. Hanson is now neither man nor Saint, and cannot live in either world. He must be driven out, with scourges."

The Council didn't understand. The Patriarch explained.

"We have no precedent, true," he admitted. "Nor have we any previous instance of falling so from this estate. We shall bring it to the world's attention."

It didn't take long for the set-up. They called in all the Saints, massed them in the auditorium. I stood again on the platform, but this time I was the only one present who had no aura—until the technicians came with telavidiview screens and equipment.

The general public, of course, was not admitted, but the whole world saw the ceremony. From Kamchatka to Kalamazoo, from Capetown to Chung King, from Sydney to Siberia, they saw and heard on their telescreens.

The Patriarch officiated.

"Robert Hanson," he said solemnly, "for twenty-eight years you have been a Saint. You blasphemed, questioned your own divinity, raised a doubting voice. And therefore, in the natural course of events, divine wrath stripped your symbol of office from your unworthy body. You have no aura. Because of your former estate, you are not a man. Because of your present lack, you are no longer a Saint. You shall be driven out, scourged to a life without hope of salvation."

He addressed the screen, solemnly, his organlike voice rolling through stirring phrases. "Men! All men everywhere, hearken! This poor one, Robert Hanson, shall walk henceforth alone. No voice shall be raised in his defense. No hand shall give him aid, no heart shall bleed, no eyes shall see, no ears shall listen. He is unworthy. His spirit is unclean, and none shall make him unafraid. Let him scabble for his life. Let him find shelter in the storm itself, in the blazing sun, and let the night cover him with blankets of bitter cold. He is alone. Alone, until death shall claim his worthless soul and torture it in hell forever and forever."

He pulled off my turban, without checking on whether my ray gun was still there. He stripped off my robe. I stood practically naked before the Saints. I don't suppose any greater humiliation exists than to be stripped before an elaborately dressed group. I felt about four inches high, for the ceremony had now picked up a life of its own. Its sonorous rhythm, its grim solemnity, its religious simplicity had caught me up.

"Out!" cried the Patriarch. "Drive him out!"

They didn't hurt me. The Council had flimsy little whips, and they just tapped my bare shoulders. But the symbolism was terrifying.

Down the aisle I led this pro-

cession. With measured beat they laid the scourges across my back, and they chanted: "Out. Out. Out."

The world watched; the scanners followed and sent their images across the horizons.

Out of the temple, onto the steps which were packed with those who lived in the outer city. The temple door swung shut at my back, and I faced a long gantlet of grim faces.

Somebody threw a stone. Another. I don't know why. I suspect smoldering resentment of their masters prompted it. Then the air was full of missiles, and I ran down the long steps. I was not going to let them kill me. Not this way, like a dog.

I didn't try to dodge. I just ran, blindly. Perhaps that was wisest. I don't know. Stones, sticks, and other solid objects left my body welted with bruises, and blood. But if I had tried to dodge, to twist and weave, perhaps they'd have killed me. They'd have caught me, at any rate. As it was they were breathing on my neck as I ran across a bridge into the outer city into the maze of little streets.

Somehow, I got away. Not consciously, not by shrewdness, because I didn't care. I was out on my feet, with the voice of the crowd only a vague roar in my ears. I was not conscious of this dying away down another alley, for the roar of my blood drowned all other sound. I fell into a little lane, and crawled under a house.

I don't know what happened after that.

The room where I opened my eyes had a familiar look. So did the voice that bellowed at me have a familiar sound.

"Bob! They damned near did you in. Magda!" Jennings yelled. "Bring the poor devil some soup. Or something equally loathsome."

I rolled my eyes toward the

voice. He was in white, stripping off rubber gloves. His slate-gray eyes were cold, although his massive face was twisted in a grin at me.

"What was the matter with you?" he demanded. "You ran like you had a broken leg. I could have caught you at any time."

"Were you in that crowd?" I demanded.

"Certainly. Somebody had to lead the fools down a blind alley. I had a hell of a time holding them back."

"I suppose you accounted for some of these bruises, too."

"Nope. I missed you. Oh, I threw my share, but mostly I hit some of the other slaves."

Magda came in, as dark as he was blond. She carried a bowl in her slender dark hands.

"Hello, stupid," she said. "Get outside of this gupp. It'll put blood in your veins."

They salved me and fed me, and listened to my tale.

"Too bad for us," Jennings said, "if you're caught here. Maybe we'd better rub him out, eh, Magda?"

"It'd be safer," she agreed. "How do you want to die, Bob?"

"Smothered in kisses, no doubt," Jennings answered. "Well, you ought to be able to travel."

"Are we traveling?"

"Hell, yes. I don't want some filthy Saint walking in here and finding you. Wakefield, for example."

I sat up on the bed. "Wakefield," I said. "He'll choose you, Magda, at the Festival."

Neither of them said anything. Jennings moved over and touched his wife. He touched her with his fingers—her blue-black hair, her olive face, her eyelids. She just stared, empty-eyed, at the floor. Her hands clenched, but she didn't clutch at Jennings, she didn't cling.

Presently: "Drink up, Bob," she said. "We'd better go."

"But where? You can't hide from the Saints."

"We can," Jennings said. "Do you think I've done nothing but putter since you gave me your ray gun to experiment on germ plasm? I may be a scientist, Bob, but I'm a man, too. I made my preparations. I saw the day coming when we should wipe out the bloody Saints. We're ready to go to work."

"With one ray gun," I asked, "you intend to wipe out the Saints? They're immune to it."

"This is no place to work out strategy," he snapped. "We haven't time. Snap into it. Here's a pair of pants. Magda, get him some sandals."

They went into action. While Magda went into another room after clothes, Jennings started packing laboratory equipment.

"But how can you leave?" I called through the door. "If a patrol plane stops you, you have no permission to show."

He laughed grimly. "We're not going by plane. Why did you think I want you to wear sandals? I don't give a damn whether you're fashionable or not. But I don't want to have to carry you because your feet start bleeding."

A gong sounded a mellow note, and Jennings came to the door. His eyes were slitted, his face grim.

"Come here!" he whispered fiercely. "Hurry!"

I leaped off the bed and ran to him in my bare feet. He grabbed one of my arms, yanked me to the waste chute door.

"Crawl in there," he whispered.

I drew back. "I'll be burned to a crisp."

"Don't argue, you fool! This is a blind. It doesn't work. Get in, feet first. There are hand holds. Hang on till I let you out."

When I was in the chute, hanging to short rods in utter darkness, I reflected that Jennings was a man you obeyed. He had pushed me around since that day I'd met him, when he

didn't put an arm across his eyes in salute.

He had completed his historical research on that day, and in the flush of knowledge was contemptuous of Saints. It was fortunate I had been the Saint he insulted. Others, like Wakefield, would have killed him without asking questions. But I had asked, and he had told me. We had become friends. The only friend, I thought, I had ever had.

I had given him my ray gun for experiments on germ plasm. These had confirmed his theory that Saints were men. Men with an aura, yes, but men. Nature had provided the aura as a defense. And nature, not knowing that the ray gun had been outlawed, continued to pass that defense from one generation to the next.

I cursed myself a little, there in the darkness. I had worked secretly and alone, and had failed. One voice is so easily silenced. What now?

Voices filtered through the pyrolite door. One belonged to Wakefield.

"You are packing?" he asked.

"To fumigate my laboratory, your Reverence," Jennings answered. "Some stray substance came into the damned place, and I've got to clean it out before I can go on with my experiments."

"I see. Where did Magda go? I didn't see her as I came in."

"Shopping, your Reverence. You know how women are."

"Hm-m-m, yes. Where is Robert Hanson?"

"I don't know, your Reverence."

"Don't lie to me, Jennings."

"No, your Reverence."

"I have reason to suspect that you are connected with a group of unbelievers, Jennings. If anyone would shelter Hanson, that group would."

"But I saw the ceremony, your Reverence. I obey. And I know nothing of unbelievers."

There was a long silence.

Wakefield finally broke it. "For your sake, I hope that is true. Hanson escaped. I can tell you, and all men, that he will be hunted down. Some man shelters him. That man and all others associated with him will be put to death. Do you understand?"

There was another silence.

Then: "Be very good to Magda, Jennings," Wakefield remarked casually. "For I will choose her at the Festival."

This time, the silence became painful.

"Did you hear me?" Wakefield snapped.

"Yes—your—Reverence."

"Your attitude," Wakefield said thoughtfully, "is not as respectful as it should be. Take care, man, lest I loose my wrath, and you die."

Footsteps died away, and presently the thin note of a gong came to me. Footsteps came again, and the door was jerked open. Jennings didn't look at me.

"Come on," he said abstractedly.

I crawled out, brushed the dust of the chute from my bandages. He watched, but he didn't see me. His eyes were wide and blank. Then he came to with a start, and grinned.

"How did you like our priest hole, Bob?"

"Is that what you call it?"

"It's a prehistoric term. Came from England, when some faction tried to exterminate some kind of religious group, called priests. Citizens hid them, and called the hiding place a priest hole. Magda!" he roared. "Where are those clothes?"

She came in, her dark eyes apprehensive, fearful. She had clothes for me, and I slipped them on. She examined me when I was dressed, and, still with the faraway look, said:

"You're very good-looking, Bob. I hardly know you, without your trappings."

"Stop jabbering," Jennings said. "I've got enough compe-

tion, without your luring others under your spell. Help me, both of you. It'll be dark in an hour. We've got to be on our way."

We slipped out, packs strapped to our shoulders. Magda was dressed like us, in shorts, shirt, and hat. We were three men, apparently, cloaked in the irrigation fog which the weather bureau was already blowing across the city.

Once, a patrol plane slipped silently above us, and we froze in a shadow. It went on, and no voice hailed us. We marched, and were on the desert in a few hours, where there were no voices, except those of coyotes, to hail us. For a little while, we felt safe.

III.

In that air-conditioned cave in the Mojave Desert, I learned a number of things. Chief among these was that man will sacrifice whatever he has to regain lost freedom.

I had heard two hints of an underground movement. Here I met its leaders. Most of them were from this continent, but they came from all over the world. They came by plane, for they could get permission. But they slipped in at night, stayed for a few hours, and proceeded to the destination marked on their pass and checked in at the nearest monitor's office.

There was Thompson, tall, laconic, with one eye and hard hands. He was from the South, representing three hundred who chafed under the yoke of superstition.

There was Koto, the dumpy Mongolian whose daughter had been taken by a Saint for a house servant.

And Billings, whose wife had been chosen at a Festival.

And Donjian, who had wanted his son to be a scientist but had watched him follow a Saint to be a body servant.

And Miss Blake, whose fiancé

had not seen the Saint who killed him for not saluting.

And others. They slipped through the camouflaged cave entrance to hear the thrilling news that Saints were mortal. I was exhibited. They were friendly, though somewhat aloof, and they hurried away to spread the word.

All this was done at night, of course, for patrol planes passed over during the day. We had seen them on the first day, far out on the horizon, circling like black buzzards, searching.

"They're looking for us," Jennings said when he spotted the first. "Magda! Turn on a screen. Let's see what the news is."

We adjourned to the central chamber, and looked at the big screen while each of our images appeared.

"This is Robert Hanson," the announcer said. "Look at him closely. This is the way he appeared as a Saint. And this, after he lost his aura for heretical statements. All persons take warning. Robert Hanson is believed to be alive. If he is sheltered in any house, fed by any hand, or helped in any way, those who give him aid shall die."

Jennings and Magda appeared together on the screen.

"This is Jennings and his woman. He did not report to his local monitor today. When his quarters were searched, they were found empty. But spots of blood and a discarded bandage in a secret hiding place indicated that someone had been wounded. It is believed that they may have sheltered Robert Hanson. The same prohibitions apply to them as to Robert Hanson. Any person giving information of their whereabouts will be rewarded. If a man, he will receive a pass exempting him from reporting to any monitor for thirty days. If a female, she may be among the first candidates offered to the Saints at the coming Festival."

Magda shuddered. "That's a pretty reward."

"Hell," said her husband, "it is for most women. You're a little brighter, because you married me."

"Ha!" she scoffed. "A fat lot I learned from you, except to jump when you call. And that's plenty."

"Turn off that damned screen. They're showing the thing over again."

As this blond giant and his wife bickered in this friendly fashion, I forgot that I was being hunted. Nobody had ever spoken to me like that, and I missed it suddenly. All those years of being set apart rushed over me again. I wanted to be on terms of tender contempt with someone. Perhaps that would be possible with Ellen, now.

I came back to the cave. "I've got you in trouble," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Let us worry about it, Bob. Magda and I knew something like this would happen some day."

"The odds are pretty big, Jennings. We haven't any weapons. Except one ray gun, to which the Saints are immune."

"We'll find one, Bob. We're as smart as they are. Smarter, in our specialized fields."

Magda stood and looked at her husband steadily. She was grim. "Listen, if you mean what I think you do, the deal is off. How are you going to find a weapon which will kill a Saint without experimenting on Bob? You can't do that. I put my foot down, right now!"

I gaped a little. Women didn't talk like that. Oh, in banter, maybe. But she was serious.

Jennings was placating, to my further surprise. "Of course we won't experiment on him, honey. We need his specialized knowledge. I'll want a little of his blood to see if he's still immune since he lost his aura. That's very important."

"Why?"

"It'll decide whether we take the long or short view."

His voice held an ominous note, but he wouldn't amplify any further. I was a little uneasy, but anxious to get into action.

"Let's do it now," I said. "If those planes really were searching for you, we may not have too much time. Why do you think they were, anyway?"

"Why else would they drift along so close to the earth? It'd be natural for 'em to look around out here. I've done a lot of work on the protective hereditary characteristics of desert life. That's what got me to checking the Saints, in fact. One day I suddenly thought—"

"You thought?" Magda flared. "I was the one who thought, you big ape. I said suppose something had happened a long time ago to ancestors of the Saints, and a protective mutation occurred."

"So you did, so you did, babe. Not that it matters. I ran down the history on more than a hundred, and knew that's what happened. But anyway, those planes are searching for us, all right. This country was my stamping ground for a long time. We don't have any fires in the daytime. No smoke of any kind, and we don't poke our heads out. Let's get to work, Bob."

We went into his laboratory, paneled with gloflex, gleaming antiseptically at a few degrees above zero. We put on smocks and gloves, after sterilizing our arms, and put some of my blood on a slide.

Jennings took the turban gun from a small wall recess and adjusted the nozzle so that a very few rays could slip through the neutronium screen. He held it near the slide, and pressed the activator button.

He examined the slide, and looked at me thoughtfully.

"Bob, you've told me several times that what you wanted most from life is to be an ordinary

man with an ordinary home and ordinary kids."

"Well?"

"Just how strong is that particular selfishness?"

I frowned and went over to the microscope. "Let me look."

The luminescence was gone, as I knew. But the ray gun had not disintegrated the blood cells. There was no breakdown. I was still immune.

I looked at Jennings. "Well?"

"We need you, Bob. We need your brain, and your experience in radiant frequencies. So I want to know where you stand. This means that we must wipe out all the Saints. All."

"Including me?"

"Including you."

"I don't want to die, Jennings."

He grinned. "Wasn't thinking of it. What we've got to stop is the birth of any more Saints. Sterilization."

I walked around the laboratory, not really seeing the shining instruments and equipment, the specimen jars. Since I had learned from Jennings that I was only a man, one thought had been driving me—normalcy. I wanted it. I wanted it more than I wanted to see the Saints' domination ended, for it was a personal desire. The other was idealistic.

"Why should you expect me to help you," I asked, "when by so doing I commit suicide?"

"But you won't die," he protested.

"The name of Hanson will die. I feel a pride in the name. I want it to live."

"It will, Bob. People will remember it forever as the name that emancipated the human race."

"A name on a plate, or a statue. It isn't good enough."

"You won't help?"

"I don't know what you want me to do."

He explained. A synthetic protection against the L ray, so that the underground could overpower the Saints on Festi-



val day. All the Saints would be massed in Eden, and accessible.

"We have equipment, time, and opportunity here, Bob. Maybe you could work out something. Sort of the opposite of your modulator."

Even as he talked, I began thinking of formulas, and induction ratios.

"It may be possible," I said, "and it seems good strategy. On this other business, though. Listen, I don't have an aura. There's no reason to suppose my children will have."

"We can't take a chance, Bob. Suppose you make another modulator, and we remove all the auras, Saints and children

alike. We'd have to wait a whole year before we could be sure that no more children would be born with auras. Inside a year, those who still weren't convinced could band together. If the next generation glowed, the believers would do battle. We could easily have another collapse, and blood all over the streets."

"We could form a defense, too," I said.

"Granted. But what about throw-backs. Suppose a kid is born a hundred years from now who has an aura. If conditions at that time should be ripe for a renaissance, the race would be shackled again by superstition and fear."

I wanted to be honest with him. I had to be. He was my friend.

"I'll tell you," I said. "I won't promise anything. I want to think it over."

"But listen, Bob," he began.

Magda interrupted us. She came quickly through the door, alarm tensing her dark face.

"Shh!" she cautioned. "Somebody's coming through the entrance."

"Lights?" Jennings snapped.

"I turned them off," she answered.

He touched a button, and the laboratory was in thick darkness. My first reaction was a feeling of sadness. I couldn't light my own way in the dark any more.

Jennings slipped out softly through the door, turban gun in one hand, flashlight in the other. We crept after him, through the central chamber along a tunnel until we could hear the rustlings at the entrance. We crouched motionless, listening.

The sounds came nearer, as if a body were wriggling through the camouflage of sagebrush and mesquite. Jennings leveled flashlight and ray gun.

The beam cut a flaring cone out of the blackness, and framed a head and face at the far end. This was an incredibly ancient face, with generations of wrinkles all but burying its beady eyes. The head was as large as my two fists, and it was some seconds before we identified it. A huge desert terrapin.

"I thought it was out of some prehistoric nightmare," Magda chuckled with relief. "Come on in, Methuselah. Welcome to our study club."

"There's your guinea pig, Bob," Jennings said. "You can experiment on him."

IV.

As the days slipped by, the search for us must have become a source of embarrassment to the Saints, for there was no further mention of it on the telavidview after the first week. The search continued, though. The planes circled closer each day, drifting with the wind.

We watched, now and then, when they landed to search a patch of desert brush, or one of the great rock monoliths which jutted from the desert floor.

Our cave had been located and dug with cunning, but we knew that they would find us eventually. So I spent long hours in the laboratory, and Jennings directed the movement at night, when one or more of its leaders reported for instruction and information.

Jennings gave them assurance that I didn't share. I was not

sanguine about my ability to make a shield against the turban guns of the Saints. But Jennings told them I would deliver, and pointed all effort toward Festival day, when the psychological effect of an exposé would be at a maximum.

They brought reports of new converts, and all wanted to be in at the kill.

Thompson, his one eye gleaming murderously, voiced their sentiments: "Let me get one of their throats in my hands is all I ask. That's all. I could die happy, then."

I was present when he said that. I asked about it, was told that the unbelievers wanted to kill the Saints.

"Then I'm through," I told Jennings and Thompson. "I'll not stand for killing them."

Thompson glinted at me, struck a match for his pipe on Methuselah's back. "Thought you didn't like us bein' slaves, Hanson."

"No."

"Funny way to talk, then."

"The Saints are honest in their error, Thompson. They honestly think they're divine. Anybody would. If all of us thought you, for instance, were a genius and convinced others, you'd be convinced before long. You'd be a superman, as I was, simply because belief made you so. Your honesty would be no less simply because you were mistaken. I say they don't die."

"What do you figure to do, put 'em in cages?"

"No. Show them their error, and let them help set up some form of democratic government. Who else has enough training to do the job. Monitors? They're slaves, like the rest of you."

"Saints won't help," Thompson insisted. "They like to grind us down too much. They like the best of everything, from women on down, and not workin' for it."

"Make your choice," I said.

"Do it my way, or do it without me."

"Can you do Hanson's job?" Thompson asked Jennings.

"No," Jennings said. "Nobody can but Bob."

"Then I reckon we got to," Thompson said regretfully.

"The rest won't like this. I don't. Too much chance. Kill 'em, they won't bother any more. They been free enough killin' us. Try not salutin' one, see what happens."

"Make your choice."

"Got no choice," he said. "When do you figure to be ready?"

I realized how tired I was. "I don't know, I don't know. Everything jumbles together in my head. I've made so many diagrams, tried so many circuits, I don't know where I am."

"But the Festival's only a week off," Thompson said.

Jennings gave me a keen look, and Magda shook her head at Thompson. He got to his feet, and Jennings walked to the entrance with him.

"I wondered," Magda said, "how long you'd last."

"What do you mean? I'm all right. I'm just tired."

She smiled at me. "Sure, sure. Just wait, though, till you see your surprise."

She wouldn't tell me what, but she showed me the next night. She pushed Ellen ahead of her into the laboratory.

"I'll lock the door after I'm out," Magda said. "If you want out, beat on it."

She disappeared, and the latch clicked. Ellen stood with her back against the wall, bewilderment widening her gold-flecked eyes in which no recognition gleamed.

"What . . . what do you want?" she whispered. "Who are you?"

"Don't you know me, Ellen?" "No. No."

"I'm Robert Hanson."

She tried to shrink through the wall. Her lips parted to let in a rasping breath. She flung

out one clawed hand, tensed the other against her pale throat. She said nothing. She stared.

You can take an emotional blow. It won't kill you. But sometimes you wish it would.

"What's the matter?" I growled at the open-mouthed girl. "I'm not going to harm you, you little fool."

She whirled and beat her fists against the door. "Let me out, let me out, let me—"

Magda yanked it open, pushed Ellen aside as she entered with Jennings.

"What the—" Magda began, eying us both. She broke off, frowned at Ellen. "What's eating you?"

"Let me go!" Ellen said passionately. "You wicked people! I didn't want to come when the man wouldn't tell me why or where. Oh, you'll be punished for this, terribly!"

"For what?" Magda demanded. "You're not hurt."

"For harboring that"—she leveled a finger at me—"that thing!"

Thing? Yes, I thought, that's what I was to the ordinary person. This is what the Saints had accomplished. Blind, unwavering fanatics, conditioned for years and years to believe in fear and hysteria.

You can be sick with emotion, too. But you don't die. It just seems that way.

"Go away," I said. "Leave me alone."

"Let me go," Ellen cried again. "Let me go!"

Magda looked at me. "I'm sorry, Bob." She turned on Ellen. "Sometimes I am appalled. I'm not going to like having you in my hair. But I don't guess you're worth killing."

"You're not going to . . . keep . . . me . . . here?" Ellen faltered. "Not from choice, my pretty. Necessity."

"Go away," I said again. "All of you."

My tone turned their eyes on me. "I'm sorry," Magda said

again. "I thought she'd be what you needed to snap you out of your slump."

"Please . . . go . . . away!"

They went, and I looked at the floor for a long time. I had no particular thoughts. I felt even worse than I had before the High Council.

I told myself over and over: she's not worth this, she's not worth this.

I said to myself: "Are you a child who's lost its candy? You wanted to be a man. Well, be one."

I went back to work.

Sometime later Magda came in. She touched my arm.

"Go to bed, Bob. It's daylight."

"Leave me alone, Magda."

"Bob, you look awful. You'll kill yourself. Please get some rest."

I sealed the small neutronium box. "It's finished."

"Really? Will it work?"

"Certainly!" I barked. "Where is Methuselah?"

She grinned at me. "Ellen was what you needed, after all."

We placed the box on Methuselah's broad back. Jennings brought the turban gun.

"Wait!" Magda cried. "Are you certain it'll work, Bob?"

"No," I said. "I think maybe, though."

She got a leaf of lettuce for Methuselah. "Here, fella. If you die, you'll be happy. He loves it," she said to me, "if it has a touch of salt."

Jennings added his farewells. He patted the patterned shell. "So long, mascot."

I hadn't seen much of the ugly and somehow awesome creature. I'd been busy. But the Jenningses had made a friend of him.

I touched the button of the little box, and joined in the exclamations. For Methuselah had an aura, bright and blue like a Saint's.

"There's a bona fide Patriarch," Jennings said.

"He certainly looks legal," Magda added.

"It didn't have that effect on me in the lab," I said. "Pick it up, Magda, before he fires the turban gun."

She did, and had an aura. Methuselah's winked out the instant she took it in her own hand, as did hers when she replaced it.

Magda shivered. "I don't like to look like a Saint in any respect."

"Well," I said, "let's test."

Jennings aimed the gun, pressed the activator. Methuselah continued to chew the lettuce leaf with an appearance of ancient philosophical calm.

Jennings lowered the gun. "It works on him. But how about me?"

Magda caught a breath. "Don't be a fool. Try it on me."

"Why you?"

"One syllable words, pet. It must work on a human being, or we're in the soup. If it doesn't work, we'll be rooted out of here by guards before long. We'll be put to death. At least you will. Me, I may be chosen by Evan Wakefield. I'd rather be dead. Besides, you're the brains of this movement. Why risk your life when mine isn't worth much? If that gadget doesn't protect me, maybe it'll make you mad enough to build something that'll work."

Jennings looked at me and spoke quietly. "Will you go into the laboratory, Bob? If I've got to do this, I'd rather we were alone."

V.

The scream knifed through the laboratory door, high, shrill, and with almost the smell of horror. I was at the door before it cut off, short, and plunged into the central chamber.

Poor Jennings, I thought as I ran.

But he was kneeling beside Ellen, sprawled on the rock floor. Magda stood beside him,

the generator in her hand, glowing with the sacred blue nimbus. She looked up.

"There's nothing quite like a fainting woman to spoil a tender farewell," she said.

"She's all right," Jennings reported. "Shock, I guess, at Magda's looking like a Saint."

I looked down at Ellen, and didn't feel much of anything. Oh, she was still beautiful, but—

"Did it work?" I asked.

Magda glanced at the generator. "We haven't tried it. I was standing there, a tense and dramatic picture of lovely sacrifice. Both of us in tears as he aimed the gun with sweating hands. Then this blonde split the welkin. Well, let's get it over with." She thought a minute. "I hate anticlimax."

Jennings turned away from Ellen, aimed the turban gun at Magda. "All that emotion," he muttered, and fired.

He lowered the gun, grinned at me. "Well, let's have some breakfast."

Magda caught a deep breath. "Didn't hurt a bit. Good-by, Saints," she said, throwing a look in the direction of Eden.

Maybe they felt the same as I. I don't know. I thought so. I thought their veins must have hummed with exultation, their hearts must have pounded. The Saints could be conquered. The generator nullified the effect of an L ray. They must have felt it. It was their idea.

I looked at them. "What is there to eat?"

"Most anything," Magda said. "Let's get the sleeping beauty conscious."

We tried, but Ellen did not respond to treatment. She remained limp and apparently comatose. But she was alive—pulse, respiration normal, a faint flush on her pale golden skin.

We laid her on a couch and went out to the kitchen.

Halfway through our meal, footsteps pounded along the tunnel floor.

"What the hell!" Jennings said. "Surely they know better than to come here in broad daylight, the fools."

But the men who burst in on us were not members of the underground. They were monitors, four of them. Ellen pressed behind them.

"You will come along!" the leader snapped. "It is the command of the Saints."

Ellen pushed through and glared at us with fanatical fury. "Blasphemers!" she spat. "Now you will be justly punished."

Jennings took the turban gun from one of his pockets. "How did you boys get here?" he inquired pleasantly.

"The woman waved at us from the ground," said the leader. "She will be rewarded."

"We are stupid," Magda said, "leaving her alone. Well, we were pretty excited."

"I'll make you a proposition," Jennings said to the men. "You can help us, or you can die."

"There are only two of you," the leader said with contempt. "We are four."

"But I have this," Jennings displayed the gun. "Each Saint carries one in his turban. It isn't divine wrath that kills men. It's one of these." He smiled a little. "Divine wrath is a stream of terrene and contra-terrene electrons sprayed from a neutronium tube. Well? Don't stand there with your chins hanging down."

"I can't understand," the leader said, "why you don't drop dead. Blasphemer! The woman is right."

"The reason why I don't drop dead is simple," Jennings said. "I'm going to repeat what I have said to you, but I'm going to repeat it to the Patriarch while the whole world watches. I won't drop dead then, either. Let me tell you the reason. Stay where you are!"

He roared this last as they moved toward him, and the thundering tones stopped them. I

thought again: Jennings is a man to be obeyed.

"Listen," he said. "Long ago in an age of unrecorded events, men worshiped light. Sun worshippers, fire worshippers, and so on. Anything with radiance. We call that ignorance, superstition. Yet we have done it for three hundred years, paid homage to ordinary men who were born with an aura. Homage, hell! In every city of the world, the most trivial act is performed according to rules enforced by one of these little ray guns. It's time that light worship comes to an end, and we mean to end it. Listen."

He told them what we had accomplished, what we knew, and what we intended to do.

"You realize, of course," he concluded, "that you can't leave here alive with that knowledge, unless you help us. We have only a few days left. We can't let our plans be known."

It is doubtful if they heard him. It was like telling an astronomer that the world is flat. He knows, and he doesn't hear you. Oh, he apparently listens, but his mind is elsewhere. They were like that, the monitors. They stood quietly, but they probably didn't hear him saying that Saints were mortal. They knew.

"Now we shall go," the leader said. "Come."

"Believe me," Jennings said, "I'm sorry. Stand aside, Ellen."

She was obedient, and her eyes had a queer expression. They were thoughtful, and her hands were no longer clenched. She stood to one side, watchful but not alert. She looked as though she kept her attention vaguely on matters at hand but that her mind was preoccupied. She looked soft again, and the remembered wave of tenderness rose in me again.

The monitors suddenly leaped at Jennings, and one veered off at me. He was somewhat larger than I, and strong with rigid

training which I as a Saint had never had. He'd had some sleep, too, no doubt.

Anyway, I went down before his rush, and he kicked me in the side before he jumped in my face. I twisted away, swept his feet from under him, and he got my throat in his hands. I tore at them, but he was strong.

Suddenly, a sharp crack sounded, and a shattering tinkle. He fell away from me. I rolled free, got to my feet as he raised himself to one knee, and Jennings finished him.

Ellen stood over him with the neck of a water bottle in her hand and a look of wonder on her face.

"I . . . I hit a man," she said softly. "I hit a *man!*"

"And well done," Jennings said heartily. "I was afraid to fire, Bob, for fear of getting you, too."

"Why?" I snarled. "I'm immune. You know that."

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "I forgot."

"So you let me be nearly killed."

"I'm sorry, Bob. All I thought about was that you had yet to make another modulator."

"I've already made it. I had to, to get anywhere on a generator."

Jennings grinned. "If I'd known that, of course, I'd have drilled you."

Ellen looked from one to another of the bodies, then at me. "I . . . I was afraid he was going to . . . to kill you. I'm so ashamed. But I couldn't help myself."

Both Jennings and Magda narrowed thoughtful eyes at her. "What's this?" Jennings asked. "Have we made a convert?"

"Take it easy," Magda counseled. "She went outside and hailed them."

"But I had to!" Ellen cried. "To see a woman with an aura—I thought I'd go mad. But now, after hearing the whole story—"

"You're convinced I was right?" I asked.

"I don't know, I don't know," she said wearily. "It's all so confusing. All I know is that I was terribly afraid they were going to harm your Rev . . . to hurt you."

I stifled the emotion that rose in me, for I remembered what Jennings had told me. The Saints must never have children. This girl could find a normal life with somebody, but not with me. She could become a mother—with somebody else. There were many things I could do toward building the new world we were going to attempt to found. But I couldn't become a father.

So I merely said, "Thank you, Ellen."

She got it. She looked at me for a moment, then an expression of pain flickered across her eyes before she dropped them.

"Let's get going!" Jennings broke in. "That plane is out there. Each of you get into one of those uniforms. We can't stay here."

"Where can we go?" I asked. "We still have five days. Where can we hide, besides here?"

"We're going to risk a call," Jennings said grimly. "We can't do this job alone. As you say, Bob, we have five days. With plenty of help, how many generators could you make?"

"Maybe a hundred. Why?"

"We've got to get out of here. We'll go to Thompson's."

I didn't like this. "And somebody will notice that Thompson has company, and mention it to his monitor, who will come rooting around to see what is happening. You know what will happen then."

"Oh, didn't I tell you, Bob?" Jennings grinned. "You see, Thompson *is* a monitor."

Four persons, with laboratory equipment and a huge desert ter-rapin, crowded a patrol plane. But we managed it, and managed to hide high in the air until night began to mask the face of the desert twenty thousand feet below.

We didn't speak. We kept an eye out for other planes and watched a purple cloak slip across the earth pocked with desert hills. Watched the sun linger, then drop regretfully out of sight.

"Well," Jennings said when it was dark, "here goes."

"God help us," Magda replied, "if a Saint intercepts this. Wakefield would come slaving for Ellen."

Ellen slipped a trembling hand into mine. I pressed it perfunctorily, my attention on the blond giant at the controls.

He sat in the pilot's seat, his feet on Methuselah's shell, and began to warm up the transmitter. As he reached for the power switch, he drew back suddenly.

"What am I doing?" he asked in disgust. "Can you women rig me up something that looks like a Saint's turban?"

With much twisting around, tearing of cloth, and all the other activities that go into making a costume, Magda and Ellen presently contrived a reasonable facsimile of a turban. Jennings tried it on, eyed himself in a small, lighted mirror.

"My, I'm handsome," he commented. "Where's that damned generator?"

The plane was dark, save for Jennings' aura. When he pressed the generator button, I heard a strange, soft gurgle from Ellen. In the faint illumination of the aura I saw that she had not, as I expected, flung up an involuntary arin at sight of the aura. Instead, the sound she made was suspiciously like a giggle.

"Thompson, monitor," Jennings called into the screen. Over and over: "Thompson, monitor."

Several faces appeared in succession on the screen, not in answer, but out of curiosity. They were strangers, monitors perhaps, but they cut out at sight of Jennings' aura—after the appropriate salute. And one

was Gerald Holmes, a quiet old Saint who was a trifle feeble-minded. He peered at Jennings, nodded, and cut out.

Then Thompson appeared. His one eye widened as he recognized Jennings, and he made a sardonic salute.

"We are coming," Jennings said, and broke the circuit.

We swooped toward a little town at the edge of the desert, several hours from Eden, which was a faint glow against the far sky. With Jennings leading the way through the dark streets, we marched without mishap to the home headquarters of the one-eyed monitor.

Our progress was slow, because Magda insisted on bringing Methuselah with us. Jennings and I carried him by turns, and in turn sought Magda's permission to discard the sixty-pound carapaced reptile.

"But he's our mascot," she protested, as she had protested at the cave when we wanted to leave him behind.

Thompson had a cellar, and means of sending out the word that we were there. I had the equipment set up, and soon men began to arrive.

Of the next five days, I know very little. In some way, Thompson and his men contrived to hide the patrol plane, which we had left in a field, for we used it on the fourth day.

In the meantime, though, we turned out generators. We slept practically not at all; we ate between fusing connections in the generators.

As soon as one was finished, it was taken away. I did not know at the time, or care, where they went. Those outside my makeshift laboratory were familiar with the whole movement, and knew what to do. Although I was involved in

this to the extent that my life was forfeit if we failed, I trusted Jennings. He knew what he was about.

Came the night, then, when Jennings came into the lab and halted the work. He sent my helpers away, and looked steadily at me. He was dressed in a replica of a Saint's costume, but he had no aura.

"This is it, Bob," he said quietly. "The Festival's tomorrow. Come on. We'll want to be present."

"What do you intend to do? What's the program?"

"We've worked it out in detail, and it's too complicated to explain in a moment. We're a trifle pressed for time."

I went with him. He knew what was at stake. If he was satisfied with the plan, I had no questions.

I hadn't known, but it was early evening when we—Magda, Ellen, Jennings, and I—marched through the streets again. In that basement laboratory, I had lost all sense of time. As we marched, I was not cognizant of our surroundings, or any activity therein. I saw that Jen-

nings' giant frame was enshrouded in the sacred blue, and that occasional pedestrians saluted the party, but my head was still full of tiny wires, diagrams, and circuits.

We reached the plane, and boldly slipped into the air. We were safe, because the attention of the world was not on the disappearance of a patrol plane, which was not unprecedented. Nor was it on our probable whereabouts.

It was on the Festival. We turned on the screen and watched elimination contests in London, Vienna, New York, Honolulu, Rio de Janeiro, and others of the five hundred key cities from which the winners would be sent to Eden on the morrow for the Saints to take as mothers of the next generation of rulers.

Elimination contests they really were, but so masked with ritualistic ceremony and formality that they were impressive pageantry. The district chief monitor presided unless a Saint could be persuaded to officiate in the measurement and questioning of candidates. These came in all sizes, colors, and degree

of intelligence; but they had one characteristic in common—they they believed.

"As I did," Ellen remarked, commenting on the protestations of a fiery little Roman girl.

We watched the small screen for a few moments until Magda cut it off.

"You don't now?" she asked.

Ellen considered. "I must be honest—with myself more than with you. Intellectually, I suppose, I don't believe. I think it's amusing. But there are several generations of belief behind me. I can say I think the Saints are merely men, but I have an uneasy fear that I'll be struck dead for it."

Magda looked at me. "I thought you had picked a dud, Bob, a few days ago. I apologize."

Ellen had a sort of glow in her eyes as she looked at me, and the hardest thing I ever did was to turn to Jennings and say casually, "What's up?"

"We're headed for Eden, my boy, whose flaming swords we no longer fear."

Presently we were in a field on the outskirts of the outer city. We sat quietly for a few moments, listening to the gentle rain which the weather station had sent to these acres of cabbages. Ten miles ahead, the shining towers of the inner city thrust toward the stars.

"Bob and I will set the stage," Jennings said to Magda. "You know what to do."

"If you need a quick getaway, I'll be there."

"Good-by—Robert," Ellen breathed.

I smiled, nodded. I wanted to kiss her, but I didn't. I followed Jennings.

We started toward the city, and the plane slipped silently off in the darkness. Jennings and I were apparently a Saint and a monitor on nobody's business but our own.

The generator was strapped to Jennings' skin, under the robe, and his blue radiance was indistinguishable from the real thing. As we entered a street, he took the L-ray gun from some pocket and handed it to me.

"If anybody gets suspicious, drop 'em," he whispered. "I don't think they will, but we can't take a chance now."

"Where are we going?"

"To your old apartment. That's the safest place in town. We've had it under surveillance, and nobody has showed any interest in it." He chuckled. "I'll give you the plan later. You'll love it."

I trailed him a few feet, with the ray gun ready under my cloak. I forced myself not to think of Ellen.

My alertness was unnecessary. Such few citizens as we met covered their eyes, and two women bent the knee to Jennings. He made no recognition of their obeisance, and led the way into the inner city as a Saint should.

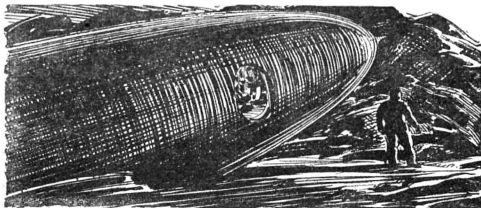
VI.

When you have been a certain person all your life and suddenly, while you are still young, learn that you are in reality someone else, adjustment does not come as quickly as realization. You have formed deep patterns of conduct, thinking, emotion and belief. The inevitable re-formation of these patterns comes slowly, even though the knowledge of your former pseudonymity is stronger than your faith itself.

For this reason, I felt that we were committing a sacrilege when Jennings and I strode down the aisle of the auditorium toward the Patriarch and the giant screen. I hadn't been affected as we moved between, through, and around the crowds which packed the inner city on Festival day; nor when we marched up the steps down which I had so recently plunged with despairing hopes of survival in my heavy heart. But I was uneasy when we entered the auditorium.

Few eyes in that packed and glowing audience noted us at first, for Jennings was apparently a Saint arriving late. I was perhaps unnoticed, or mentally explained as a part of the ceremony to come. All eyes, all ears, heeded the Patriarch's preliminary formalities.

"—are met here," he was saying in that stirring voice, "to commemorate a most solemn occasion. For today we choose



the mothers of the next generation of Saints to replace those among us who will ascend to their reward in the coming months. Those mothers will be the flower of womanhood, selected with care and rigidity. They—" He broke off as he caught sight of us.

A series of crowd images continued to flash on the giant screen behind the Patriarch as we marched toward the stage in the expectant silence which dropped over the audience. The Patriarch looked at us calmly and without recognition.

"Brother," he said to Jennings, and a scanner swiveled to include us in the image which went out to the world, "you are late. You are—" He paused, frowned. "Who are you? I do not recognize you."

Jennings was respectful, though unabashed. "I am Jennings, your Reverence. My companion is Robert Hanson. I should like to say a few words."

Movement in the audience caught my eye. Wakefield. He shot to his feet, touched the button on his robe as he looked at us. An expression of puzzlement knitted his brows when we did not fall dead.

"Kill them, you fools!" he said. "Kill them!"

Several Saints, then more, stood and directed their turban guns at us. Jennings turned, and with impressive dignity waved them back into their seats.

"We're immune," he said, "to your toys. Hanson because he is a Saint. I because he is a genius."

Wakefield refused to take this. He hurried into the aisle and rushed toward us.

"Blasphemer!" he snarled. "Hanson is no Saint, nor you. You may be immune to our wrath, but not to these!"

He flung himself at Jennings, glowing hands clawing toward Jennings' glowing throat. They locked in battle.

Jennings was large, but so was

Wakefield. We all looked on, shocked to silence by this physical combat.

They wrenched at each other, hit at each other, kicked each other. They struggled back and forth in front of the stage, snarling. Wakefield driven by his fury, by certainty, I suppose, that if he did not destroy us, we should destroy all Saints. Jennings had a greater drive—Magda. Here was the man who was going to take her from him.

All the while, scanners translated the scene to images on screens all over the world. The effect on various crowds was shown on the big screen across which were to parade the candidates later.

"Stop!" the Patriarch finally cried. "This is a sacred place!"

He cried too late, for Jennings suddenly picked Wakefield up in his desert-hardened hands, lifted him high, and flung him head-down to the floor.

A sharp *crack!* Wakefield's aura faded, died. He lay still. Jennings looked grimly at the Patriarch.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said, "I've just ascended a Saint." He looked at the scanners, the screen. "He died as any of us!" he shouted. "That's because he's a man, and I can prove it!" He lowered his voice. "May I say a few words, your Reverence?"

Furor.

The Saints leaped up, cried out in fury, plunged down the aisle. We faced them. The Patriarch's voice roared.

"Silence! Would you foul your own temple?"

This shocked them, checked the stampede. They returned to their seats, but not sheepishly, as their action warranted. They were sullen, and somewhat uneasy.

The Patriarch looked down on us, a tremendous dignity on his lined face. "This," he said, "is unforgivable. Before I strike you down, you may have a word.

Explain your execrable acts, if you can."

I broke in. "May I explain, your Reverence, to the world?"

I felt sorry for him, for he was shaken. He didn't know how to address me, an excommunicated, scourged, and hunted former Saint. After a few seconds of silent indecision, he nodded wearily and seated himself on the Throne. I mounted the stage and spoke into a scanner. Behind me, the wide-eyed crowds replaced each other on the great reception screen.

"I am Robert Hanson," I said. "I had two names. I was a Saint. But listen to me."

I told them what we had discovered, what we had done. Now and then I shot a glance at the big screen, the mixture of expressions on the faces. Some were horrified, some thoughtful, some angry. This latter group increased in number as I told them of the hoax.

"But the Saints have been honest," I insisted. "Most of us really believed in our divine origin. We have not harmed you, we have merely enslaved you. But that slavery is not as irksome nor as rigid as the military slavery which shackled men for centuries before the first boy child was born with an aura. We propose that the Saints remain in nominal authority until governments are established, but that their auras be removed, and—"

"Stop!" cried the Patriarch in a quavering voice. "I shall not allow this blasphemy. If, by

some devilish chance, you have contrived to make yourself immune to our wrath—"

I pulled the turban gun from under my cloak and waved it before the scanner. "This is Saintry wrath," I said. "Each of us wore one in his turban. We pressed a button to kill and called it wrath. Each of these weapons is a miniature duplicate of that greater weapon which brought us into being."

"Stop!" the Patriarch cried again. I turned to him.

"I have revered you, your Reverence. I believed, and still believe, that you are honest. But that first Patriarch was not honest. He knew we could die, knew that science killed for us, knew that 'ascension' was a lie."

"Please!" begged the Patriarch. "You have made statements for which you should be put to death." He faced the scanner. "We have ruled as wisely and as well as we could according to the Codex. This . . . this—Robert Hanson has made serious charges, so serious that they must be disproved here and now. You say"—he roared at me in mighty wrath—"that we are men, that our divine aura is false, caused by certain disturbances of our ancestors' germ plasm. Prove it!"

I took the modulator from my cloak and pointed it at him. I turned the rheostat, and his aura winked out as mine had.

A hush fell, and I was sorry. The old man was trembling. All he had ever known was destroyed. I knew that he felt that sensation of nakedness, for

he shrank away from the scanner for a second. Then he squared his shoulders.

"Listen to me," he cried. "All men everywhere, listen!"

The faces on the screen were intent, with now and then a face whose eyes were narrowed in anger. The angry were not as numerous as when I had spoken, but crowds in various parts of the world were liberally sprinkled with them.

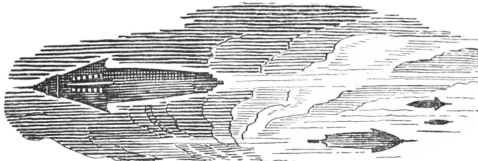
The Patriarch, however, got no further. A commotion in the audience as several Saints leaped to their feet drew his attention, and scanners swung to cover this new development.

"Wait!" one cried. "This proves nothing. They have removed your aura, your Reverence, may God forgive them. But is this proof that the aura is not God-given? It is not! A man may cut down a tree, and kill it. Does that prove that the tree is man-made?"

A mutter of approval rippled the massed Saints, and their expressions began to change. Whereas they had been shocked, frightened, and bewildered, they now smiled with smug tolerance.

Jennings faced them. "The analogy is not valid," he said. He told them again of the small area from which all Saints had stemmed. "Is that not evidence?" he cried. "But wait! We have further proof. Come in!" he cried into the screen.

A hush fell. All eyes swivelled toward the great double doors which swung slowly open



to admit a group of men. Men. Just ordinary men, but by the expression in their eyes, I knew these to be the underground. They sneered.

They marched down the aisle, and scanners threw their images to the world. Watchers on the big screen now had no expression save that of intent interest.

Jennings halted the men, spoke to the Saints.

"Here we have about one hundred of your slaves who have dared to question your right to rule. They enter here, knowing that they may be killed, but willing to die to show the world that Saints are merely men. Watch!"

He waved his hand, and the men packed in the wide aisle glowed with the sacred radiance. Each pressed his hidden generator at the same instant, and the effect was startling.

I watched the big screen, for in those faces we would read success or failure. After all, they were the people we had to convince.

And now I saw anger. Men began to shout, and women—women!—to mouth insults. They saw now, in one dramatic instant, the generations of slavery to an accidental mutation. Here was proof. The crowds began to mill around, and many men slipped out of view with grim faces, intent on going somewhere.

But the quartet of Saints refused even this evidence.

"These are Saints!" yelled the spokesman above the hubbub. "Jennings has some way to blanket their aura. They are Saints which he has kept hidden. They are not men!"

This, too, found favor. The Saints were grasping at anything.

Then a Saint yelled, "Kill them! They have no protection against our hands!"

Jennings made another instant gesture. He motioned the men to the stage, and they poured onto it. We stood there, a hundred against five-to-one odds.

"If you want a fight," Jennings boomed, "we are ready. We have told you the truth. Look at the people. They believe."

This was true. Belief was written on each changing screenful of faces all over the world.

But the Saints, now proving themselves men in the fury of defeat, began to move into the aisle and advance toward the stage.

"Wait!" commanded the Patriarch, but they ignored him.

We set ourselves. We were ready.

They walked slowly, hands clawed at their sides. A few pressed their ray guns to life, but desisted when none of us fell.

The scanners followed every move.

Then a scream rang out from the rear. A woman's scream. Heads turned. A gasp went up. A path widened in the aisle. Scanners shifted.

There was Magda—and Methuselah.

She led him down the aisle with a ribbon around his ancient neck. On his carapace was strapped a generator, and he glowed, as did she, with a blue aura.

The hall was thick with utter silence.

"God given?" Jennings asked sarcastically. "You know that women do not glow, for reasons which we have explained. But say that she is a man in disguise, which she isn't, that leaves Methuselah. Look at him, gentlemen! Saint Methuselah!"

They looked. There is an austere dignity about a terrapin, in the deliberate way in which he makes one slow step after another. They may be stupid, too, but like owls they have the wisdom of ages written in their puckered faces. No dignitary ever moved with the sure courage of Methuselah.

The aura helped, of course. It gave him authority, and character.

A sound broke the silence. A strange sound which focused all eyes on the Patriarch. A sound all but forgotten by adults, silenced by centuries of superstition.

He laughed.

It started as a low, bubbling chuckle. Then this calm old man who personified all we knew of dignity and kindness, tipped back his ancient head and vented a lusty guffaw which made him so lovably human that my eyes smarted.

On the big screen, one group of startled faces followed another as the Patriarch loosed peal after peal of joy. He became weak with it, and groped toward the Throne, where he sat with streaming eyes.

Then, on the screen, one man picked it up. He smiled, chuckled, and then howled with amusement.

It spread. It was infectious. It spread across the world. Men laughed, women giggled, and small children, not knowing why, cavorted with glee.

Presently, this healing emotion communicated itself to the hall as Magda and Methuselah continued their stately march down the aisle. A few Saints smiled, then others.

But, aside from one here and there, the Saints did not laugh. They were amused, but they lacked the unself-consciousness of the Patriarch. They merely smiled.

We—the cabal—waited. Presently the Patriarch came to the transmitting screen again.

"This is proof," he said pleasantly. "Are we agreed, here? Let's have a show of hands."

You could hardly blame them for their reluctance. Here was destruction. For generations, Saints had ruled, and in a few

moments the right to rule had been destroyed by a few men, a woman, and a desert terrapin.

But they agreed, finally. They wanted to know where they would fit into the new order first, but agreed after Jennings explained.

I didn't hear all of that explanation. Jennings told them that the world must look to them as administrators, for they had been trained. They must start the ball rolling.

"And it has suddenly occurred to me," he said, "that you can take your places among men and lead ordinary lives in all respects. Your auras no longer have any psychological significance, and can be removed. But we are agreed, I assume, that future sons of yours should not be allowed to retain the auras with which they will be born?"

He waited for their approval.

"When we were first planning the coming steps," he went on, "we were agreed that no Saint should be allowed to marry and have children."

I swung and faced him intently.

"I was so wrapped up with the importance of the project," Jennings said, "that I didn't see the obvious solution. We can place a modulator in every hospital, and a baby's aura can be removed at birth. Neither he nor his mother will ever know that he bears Saint's blood. You will, therefore, not be set apart from other men, which would cause you some mental trouble. You—"

I heard no more. I slipped out a side door, around to the main steps, that same flight on which I thought I was going to die not long before.

Ellen was waiting there.

THE END.

