Laurence M. Janifer

Count Down

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES

Count Down

four short stories by

Laurence M. Janifer

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There exists, first, a class of statements dealing with events which, to the best of present knowledge, appear objectively true, and, second, a class dealing with such various public beliefs as have acquired among the multitude the same force as members of the first class. The duty of an official dealing with the public, therefore, is usually to adjust matters in such a way that events objectively within the scope of the first class are made to appear events within the scope of the second. As the multitude immovably believes that it is primarily fixed upon truth--perhaps the most usual of the second class of statements--its belief may not be denied--nor, as a rule, can this mythical belief serve as a basis for action in the objective world.

The Public Notes of Isidor Norin

(Minister for the Dichtung, c. 2300 A. D.)

CAPITAL COMPLEX:

CAPITAL CITY:

1500 H., 27 MAY 2113

"If we're ever going to establish a self-sustaining colony we have to support it now; that ship has to go out."

Freeman looked at the round, red, decisive face of Liam Harcourt and sighed. A meeting of the Council, even an informal one, was far from the best place to give Harcourt a lesson in the elementary rules of dealing with human beings--if, after all, there were any such rules. But the Minister for Public Order had to be sat on--an imperative at least as insistent as Harcourt's own that ship has to go out, and as

important. More: he had to be made to understand. The damned fool had, as of May 2113, the ear of the emperor, and a good deal of influence with Dace and the rest of the Interplanetary Flight people as well; and neither Walther IV, nor the respected Dr. Dace, was the sort of paragon, it appeared, of whom Dall Freeman dreamed: a man immune to irrelevant personal influence. Rule one, perhaps: there are no paragons.

However: "I see," he said, as mildly as possible. No minister present showed the least surprise at the tone. It had been a long time, Freeman supposed, since he had trained himself into Old-Mildness-Whenever-Possible, and though recognizable outbreaks of the old Unreconstructed Bastard occurred, he took as a minor triumph, all in all, that the new character had become accepted as--quite normal. Quite predictable. "The ship has to go out," he went on in the same tone. "We all see that much, Liam. But it cannot go out this week. And there seems no way whatever of arguing with that limitation."

Harcourt made a sound two-thirds of the way from a cough toward a dog's wet bark. "I've heard quite a lot of argument with it," he said, and sent a fast, heavy look around the Council table.

Prater Shaw blinked behind his enormous imitation-ancients' spectacles, and leaned forward as if he were eager for his cue. "Oh, scientists,"he said, with immense high-tenor scorn. Behind the facade of Old Mildness-Whenever-Possible, the Unreconstructed Bastard began to curse rapidly, steadily and explosively. "They're not practical men, Lee," Prater went on, as if he were saying something totally new. "Surely you know that. They just don't understand the way most people think, that's all. And we have to take that into account the very first--"

"Most people," Harcourt said--a trombone interrupting an English-horn solo--"don't think. And I won't bother bandying idiocies even with

a Minister for... what's the new title?... Travel and Communications."

Freeman forced himself to interrupt the Unreconstructed Bastard's picturesque, if silent, soliloquy.

"We don't really need to fight about this, you know, between ourselves." The four other ministers present helped out with a background mutter of agreement; and Prater, of course, with several more blinks, chimed in.

"Oh, I had no intention--"

"Yes," Harcourt said dully, "we know that. You seldom have." And, while Prater was apparently sorting that one out for possible insults, the big red-faced man went on. "I don't give twenty credits for the opinions of most people. In a matter like this, they have no competence at all. The decision has to be left to technical men--to experts, if you like the word."

Freeman sighed again. "Would you want to tell that to 'most people'?" he asked.

"The public,"' Harcourt spat, "has no competence in the matter!"

"Very well," Freeman said, a little weariness showing through; he had been fighting a single battle, on the same terms, for a week and a half, and was inclined to think boredom the chief terror of war.

"Explain it all to them--tell them they are not competent."

"They wouldn't agree! They wouldn't understand--"

"Exactly," Freeman said, still in his softest tones. "And they wouldn't even agree to the parts they did understand; they'd like none of it." Perhaps a small victory in the continuing war occurred; only Prater--

thinly eager--and Harcourt--turning from red to purple-decisive--showed any interest at all.

Neutrality was an advantage to anyone who knew how to use it, as it nearly always was. "The only difficulty," Freeman went quietly on, "is that, unless someone re-invents the ancient fuel and firing methods in a great hurry, we will have to go on with our own techniques. Which involve a single, inalterable exhaust speed, and--therefore--a single, inalterable track for the Roubins to follow. The experts, Liam, have been through all of this for us, in testimony and otherwise, and their figures are scarcely questionable now. It's simple enough: exactly one point eight years, plus a few-odd days and hours, elapse between one trip and the next. Given only one ship speed and only one Earth-Mars track, we can send one ship every--well, call it every twenty-one months. If we pass this one, we wait for twenty-one months, and so does Thoth. And Thoth isn't even that self-sustaining, not yet."

"We know all this," Harcourt said. "Why don't you--"

But boredom was a weapon for both sides. "Liam," Freeman said, "after ten days of talk I have no idea at all what anyone knows. I respond to what you say; but I've got to lay a ground of some sort here."

"Now--"

"Please," Freeman said, even more gently. "Thoth isn't self-sustaining. That's why the Roubins is needed. Thoth won't wait twenty-one months; they'll start right back here long before then, probably via the Moon--ours, or one of theirs."

"Exactly," Harcourt said, as if he'd won something. A prize for bullheaded idiocy, perhaps, Freeman thought. A steel carving of an

animal head with an open cavity where the brain might have been expected. Suitable for ashtray, paperweight, or missile. "Exactly. That's why we have to ignore this--silly outcry. It will wear itself out, Dall; you'll see. As soon as the Roubins reaches Thoth safely, it will die down completely."

"Eighty days from lift-off," Freeman said.

Sam Murin spoke up weightily, around his great black pipe. "It seems a long time."

"Seems, Sam? It is a long time," Freeman said. "As Minister for Information, you know the effect of eighty days of uproar better than anyone else."

"Except the emperor," Sam put in.

Freeman shrugged. "If you like," he said. "At any rate, this is supposed to be a popular government--an elective government. Responsive to the wishes of the people." He let the words hang in the dead air for a second. "The government would fall."

Harcourt muttered something inaudible. He seemed to be practicing looking noble. "If it has to be--" he began.

Freeman caught the shadow of an immense distaste on Sam Murin's square face, and broke in. "Very well. If we're to be sacrificial, let's consider the result. The government falls." He looked round at the others: neutrality in most faces, stubbornness in Harcourt's, while Sam Murin went carefully blank and Prater Shaw seemed to be trying for dutiful. "But what government succeeds us?" he went on. "A government pledged to 'cut all this space-adventuring to the bone'--you've heard the speeches.

Dismantle Thoth. Continue Moonbase by yearly shuttle and no more.

Drop all probes, all attempts at colonization or exploration. Yank the human race right back to Earth. If you want to step out in favor of that--"

"Moonbase," Sam Murin said. "Dall, why not get the rocket to Moonbase and start it to Thoth from there? It'd get rid of the numbers problem, wouldn't it?"

"It would, Sam," Freeman said, "except for another numbers problem. It would be approximately three times as expensive--and despite what the Dichtung says every time a new budget item for Rocket and Interplanetary Flight Group comes along, there just isn't that, kind of available credit for the asking."

Murin nodded very slowly. "Nor likely to be," he said. "According to research and interview groups, and spot eavesdrop checks, the public has had about as much spending for `cold, empty, airless, useless space'--I quote a recent speech by one of our Opposition friends--as they're going to stand.

Nevertheless, contingency funds--"

"Are useful for many things, Sam," Freeman said. "But not for anything this big. Contingency funding is like petty cash; immensely useful, but you can't draw on it indefinitely, or to any large extent."

Prater looked up suddenly--struck, obviously, by what Prater considered an idea. "But the Opposition... I mean, if they did get in, if we went ahead and the government did fall on this issue--if they got in, I mean--well, they wouldn't stay in office forever, you know."

"They wouldn't have to, to do the damage we're talking about." There were times, Freeman reflected, when he seemed to be teaching a primary school. Remotely, he imagined that everyone, probably, felt

the same now and again. Still... "Give them two years--and I think they'd have two years without much trouble--and we'd have to start over again from scratch. No probe program, no proto-colony, nothing in this area at all would last two years without real support. And--we'd have to start over again with the people, too, Prater." He looked over at Murin. An authentically calm man, Freeman thought, and wondered whether or not he envied the quality.

"Two years is a long time," Murin agreed, on cue. "People forget. They have to be educated, or reminded... well, find your own word for it... all over again. They have to be re-convinced. And God, if any, has no more idea than I do whether, after two years, re-convincing would be in the least possible.

It isn't the sort of question you can expect Information to answer--we deal only in very immediate futures."

"Well, then--" Harcourt began heavily.

"Well, then, we have to send the Roubins," Freeman cut in. "Except that we can't--which is where this talk began."

Harcourt nodded. Judicious. Thinking it over. "With--it occurs to me--your fond acquaintance Richard Hamsun in command. Dall, it irritates me to have to work for that man's success--"

"It isn't his success, and there's nothing really irritating about him," Freeman said as mildly as he knew how. "He's the best available--and he knows it--which is why he was invited to the Year Day Gala. I took some care to introduce myself to him then, and to make as sure as I could that he remembered me.

Admittedly, he has an unfortunate habit of saying what he thinks... but he is the best available, and the success won't be his, or mine, or

yours. The success will belong to the human race. We need to spread out--"

"I remember Hamsun's speech," Harcourt snapped. "It hadn't occurred to me that you'd had one of your staff write it--or written it yourself."

"I didn't." Quite tiring, Freeman told himself--exhausting, in fact. Also, necessary. "It's just that the proposition is sufficiently obvious to occur to more than one person."

"Perfectly obvious," Harcourt said.

"And every survey--am I right, Sam?--makes it more and more evident we're stalled. The Roubins has to leave within a six-hour period. We have that much leeway--but all of it falls on Friday. Friday, June 13th, in the year 2113. Which puts a curse on the ship--for all I know, on Thoth, on Hamsun, and on the entire program; I wouldn't put anything at all past the quasi-rational hysteria a good superstition can work up. The people won't stand for the curse." "Damn it," Harcourt exploded, "it's perfectly ridiculous!"

And Freeman wearily nodded. "I know," he said. He gestured toward the sunken imitation window of the Council chamber, a ten-foot square purporting to display the world outside the Complex. "I know," he said once more. "And you know. And we all know." He gestured tiredly at the window.

"Now, Lee--tell them."

CAPITAL COMPLEX:

IMPERIAL AUDIENCE CHAMBERS.

1040 H., 29 MAY 2113

"Very well," Sam Murin said, tamping shreds of something or other carefully and precisely down into his big black pipe. An authentically calm man. At times, the most irritating type of human being available. "We have secured--at any rate, Dall, you have secured--an audience with the emperor, which will begin in twenty minutes and, for all I know, end in twenty seconds." The pipe was, apparently, sufficiently loaded. Murin touched one of those new things--an Induction Coal--to it and began surrounding himself with smoke. "After all, I am the Minister for Information, Dall. I think the least I deserve is a small bit of information. Such as: What am I doing here? What are you doing here? What in the name of God-if-any is this whole official audience all about?"

And in all those words he had never raised his voice. It was, Freeman thought, an admirable performance, of its kind. And Sam wasn't a bad fellow, take him all in all...

"I think we can get Imperial backing for the Roubins," Freeman said. "And for a small idea of mine."

Murin made a sound rather like hm-m-m. "I know your small ideas. One of them almost cost Prater Shaw his nomination--not that Prater knows it, and not that it's worth my telling him."

"I hadn't meant to--"

"Doubtless," Murin said comfortably. "And what you did mean to do--well, you did. Playing politics, as they say--the only game for adults."

Freeman tried to sound relaxed. "Who was it called it that?"

"Eberhardt," Murin said. "Psych professional, and--at the moment--influential. In fact, psych man in charge of that section for the Interplanetary Flight Center." A cloud of smoke lifted his words to the

domed, undecorated ceiling. "Thinks politics is harmless and ignorable--you know the type. But don't sidetrack me."

"I wasn't trying to," Freeman said. "What I want to do is attack the whole stupidity of superstition directly--on 3V, wherever and whenever possible. Ministerial dignity might make a dent here and there; but of course I need Walther's permission. And yours."

"Mine?" Murin managed to look rosy-cheeked, innocent and sly, all at once. For a man of Murin's experience, with Murin's oversized features and flat long face, it was distinctly a feat.

"Yours," Freeman said flatly. "You control 3V--all of it that counts, anyhow. Don't give me the sort of bafflegab you hand the public. If I want to spread a view on 3V, I need you with me."

Murin nodded. "I'm with you," he said.

At the far end of the great plain room, a set of double doors opened, two uniformed men entered and stood at attention, and, as Freeman and Murin watched stiffly, a reasonably tall man, run a bit to fat, with a spiky whitish beard, curled white-yellow hair and the tiny pair of half-eyeglasses that were his public trademark, walked in between the uniforms, glanced round the room, and waved a somewhat languid hand. The doors banged shut; the men in uniform remained inside the audience chamber, one at each door, at full attention, and fully armed.

As he came toward the small Imperial seat at the room's center, Walther took a sad look back.

"Very disappointing for them, isn't it?" he said. "I mean: one would think they'd be horribly bored, guarding one man month after month, with never the slightest hint of an assassin to guard against--" He

reached the chair, slid into it, and waved Freeman and Murin to seats nearby and facing him. "You wouldn't be planning to kill me, now, would you?" he asked. "Or anything exciting like that? I really do feel a certain responsibility for the way I've wasted the time of these poor young men--"

"Damn it," Freeman cut in, "you don't have to stick to the public manner here. You know that."

The emperor blinked. "Minister," he began, very slowly, "there are moments when one nearly understands the reputation you once had--the reputation one had thought you had long lived down. Such impatience--" He made a vague gesture with one hand.

Freeman took a deep breath. Old Mildness-Whenever-Possible. "My most sincere apologies, Sire,"

he said, most quietly. "I have been so frustrated by recent events that even the basic forms of politeness at times drop from me. I most sincerely beg your pardon."

Murin, at Freeman's right, made a strangled sound and managed to sit still. Walther IV nodded with elegant, precisely calculated graciousness.

"Very well, Minister. I had hoped for an enjoyable chat... but, then, of course, one must be businesslike, even when Imperial, mustn't one? And, as you have requested this audience, I shall ask you to state our subject--which, I take it, is somehow connected with your recent... ah... frustrations?"

Freeman waited for a polite second and nodded. "If Your Imperial Majesty please--" he began.

"No need to overdo the manner," Walther put in quietly.

Freeman shrugged. "I'd like you to hear something," he said. "This is a copy of a tape taken for record at the Space Center. We've been going through a good deal of material, and perhaps this--to provide background and an emotional setting--will be of use."

The emperor appeared to hesitate; then, with a wave of one thin hand, he said: "Oh--very well, Dall.

Go ahead."

Freeman reached to the small box on the floor at his left, and touched two buttons. There was a small, continuing hiss. "The first voice belongs to Richard Hamsun," he said, "our selected pilot for the shoot to Thoth. The second belongs to a Dr. Beirin Eberhardt, the acting head of the Psychological Section there. The occasion was one of the scheduled unofficial chats' with psychological personnel."

"I see," the emperor said. Nothing could have been more noncommittal than those two sounds.

Suddenly a harsh voice began to speak in the room. "How did it start?"

"This business about thirteen?" Eberhardt's much smoother, older voice asked.

"All this--superstition," Hamsun said. "Suddenly it's all over the place. How did it start out?" There was a brief pause.

"The men at the Center," Freeman put in hastily, "know that curiosity is considered a healthy trait, when allied with safeguarding traits; they occasionally make a point of displaying it."

"Of course," the emperor said, and Freeman snorted to himself: what

need was there to explain the obvious to a politician who worked at his job all the time--not part-time, only when chosen for the Council, like semiprofessional Dall Freeman? "No one," Eberhardt was saying reflectively, "really knows. Though of course Dr. Allerton's work has brought a good deal of it to public attention with--ah--a certain amount of force. His diggings and subsequent research into the days of the ancients... well, of course it's been established that the superstition didn't spring out of the Clean Slate War itself--though the myth that followed it, the 'thirteen hydrogen bombs,' gave it... ah... a new lease on life."

"Myth?"

"The truth is," Eberhardt said in an oracular tone, "that no one has any clear idea how many such...

ah... devices were set off. I doubt whether even Dr. Allerton's researches will tell us that in any certain way. But--the superstition long predates the War, and was quite common among the ancients. They had begun the exploration of interplanetary space, you will recall--and when accidents of a serious nature developed during the Moonflight which one 'country' had numbered thirteen, the significance of the number--to such persons as owned to the old superstition, of course--was naturally much increased."

"I can see that," Hamsun said. He had no chance to say more; Eberhardt was sailing straight on.

"One line of research, duplicating the principles involved in the hydrogen-bombing techniques themselves," the psychologist said cheerfully, "and then attempting to fix very precisely the amount of residual radioactivity in ordinarily .. . ah... stable materials... as well as other techniques... all this may eventually provide some trustworthy figure, though I doubt it, for the number of bombs used,

their exact power, and so forth. But current belief merely asserts, without feeling the need for any proof whatever, that the number was in fact thirteen." "Sure," Hamsun said, a bit distantly. "Heard it all my life."

"The basic superstition, however, extends into the past beyond any records which the ancients were kind enough to leave in the chaos our ancestors inherited. Quite a lot of material, actually, though with a few odd gaps, and a certain... ah... reluctance among our immediate ancestors to pursue the records at all. We must understand, you see, that--though the War was much more than a century ago, we call those who suffered it ancients: a psychological mechanism to displace them further from us, to put the entire period so far into the past that it need not be the concern of any living person. Ancients indeed--when available material coherently displays a written history more than five thousand years long! But popular terminology is inescapable."

In a short pause, Hamsun muttered: "I imagine so." No one else spoke.

"And in any case," Eberhardt went on, having apparently taken on new breath, "the horror of the number thirteen can be traced back as far as written records go; doubtless it was common in the Stone Age. There are numerous theories regarding its origin, none being finally convincing. Where it began, and why, we simply do not know."

Another pause. The hiss of the tape filled the big chamber. "But... well, did they take it so damned seriously, back then? You'd think--"

"Some, doubtless, did," Eberhardt said, "and some did not. The proportion seems to have favored... ah... sanity more than it now does; we have records, at least, of a flight numbered fourteen."

"Sanity?" Hamsun asked, sounding shocked. "The... ancients?"

"Precisely," Eberhardt said calmly. "You make a common error, Richard: you assume that society--that even one man--is all-of-a-piece, so to speak. The ancients were suicidally mad: the Clean Slate War is sufficient proof of that. They were also, as regards... ah... serious superstition, more sane than we. I believe that their various 'countries' were pervaded by a--miasma, so to speak--of generalized superstition, cropping up here and there in specific forms. But, certainly so far as thirteen is concerned, we are less sane; we allow the superstition, which has no rational base and for which no rational base is ever offered, to influence rational acts."

"Like this shoot," Hamsun said.

"Exactly," Eberhardt said at once. "One of the... ah... ancients said that 'progress is not total,' which is entirely correct. All of a society does not progress at the same speed or in the same way, even assuming that we can define what we mean by progress. And another ancient wrote, within a very few years of the War, that his particular `country'--one of the more highly advanced--owned more television sets than it did flush toilets. The shoot numbered thirteen was watched, via flat 3V in color and quite satisfactory detail, by human beings many of whom sat in houses `protected' against witches and curses by 'hex signs' and the like.

And we... we are attempting the colonization of Mars, and we may be hurtfully, even fatally delayed by a superstition absolutely sense-free and older than recorded history."

"You really think they can stop us?" Hamsun said after a second or so. The three listening men sighed and stretched somewhat, out of weariness; the psychologist's tendency to lecture was hard on everyone.

Dall Freeman felt, briefly, a bit sorry for Hamsun.

"I have no idea," the professional voice said calmly.

"Then maybe--"

"But I have learned," the voice went on, with no change in tone whatever, "never to underestimate human stupidity."

Freeman moved forward and cut off the recording. The silence that came down on the room seemed exceptionally empty, exceptionally sad. "It goes on for some time," Freeman said as briskly as he knew how, trying to dispel the general wash of emotion. "But you've heard the essentials."

"Very well," Walther IV said rather slowly. Murin, hands behind his back, kept silence, watching and waiting; Sam was a good man, all in all. Not a subtle man but a good one. "What is it you want of me?"

Freeman shrugged. "It ought to be obvious, Sire."

Walther's grin was as sharp and distant, as cold and plain, as ever Walther had been. An unusual man to be elected emperor, Freeman thought briefly; one would expect a friendlier type, more accessible, more obviously "understanding." But then--

The phrase father image occurred to him and he dismissed it with impatience: Whatever the truth was it went deeper than that. Another ancient saying, from God knew who or where: The most thorough lie that can be told is: It was as simple as that. Probably quite true, which was why politicians were in the lying business...

"I'm afraid," Walther said coolly, "you'll have to tell me, Minister. I'm not in the mood for riddles this afternoon."

Which bothered Murin, a good man but not a subtle one. Freeman knew that the luxury of responding to personal insult had to be jettisoned in the first month of elective-political life, if there were to be a second month. Walther had got rid of it long ago. "Very well: I want Imperial backing for a series of appearances on 3V. Appearances by me--"

"Obviously," Walther said dryly.

"--Talking about this superstition and trying to combat it with the facts."

Walther's grin returned. "The facts, Minister?"

Sam said: "Dall--"

"The facts," Freeman said. Walther appeared to assess the idea for a minute.

"You'll lose," he said then. "The Roubins won't take off. Why, Dall--you know as well as I do that the public isn't influenced by facts." A very odd person for an elective emperor. One would think... well, Freeman told himself, never mind. "Nevertheless," he said.

Walther turned away, washing his hands of the matter. "Minister, I want the Roubins in flight as much as you do, and you know that."

"Then--"

"But this--giving facts to the public... this has no chance of success. And you must know that, as well."

"I've made my request," Freeman said.

The room seemed to' hold its breath. After a long time--perhaps

fifteen seconds--Walther's dry, distant voice said, almost casually: "Granted."

"I thank you, Sire."

"But I shall not speak--"

"Of course not," Freeman said, shocked. Did the man want to ruin everything? "I'd never considered it."

Walther turned away from them, nodded slowly. "I have learned, Minister, that you almost always know what you're doing. I very much hope that this time you are right. And if there were any other way--"

"If there were any other way," Freeman said flatly, "I wouldn't have made my request."

CENTRAL BUILDING,

PUBLIC VIEW SERVICES:

STUDIO 3:

JUNE 1, 2113-1930 H.

"And here, brought to you by Public View, the first with the best, to be interviewed by our panel of accredited newsmen, is the Minister for the Dichtung himself, whom you're all anxious to see and hear, so I won't stand in his way any longer: Minister Dall Freeman."

"Thank you, Sidney. Before we begin the interview this evening, I'd like to make a brief statement, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, Minister, not at all; anything you desire, of course. Ladies, gentlemen: The minister is about to make a statement. Minister

Freeman?"

"Thank you. It has been brought to my attention that many of you watching--and many who are not now watching; there are doubtless better things to do on a Sunday evening--are opposed to allowing the interplanetary ship Roubins to take off on June 13th of this year--a Friday, as you know--because you feel that no good can come of so great an event occurring on Friday the thirteenth. Well, ladies and gentlemen--and I mean to include those of all colors, our white brethren as well as the rest--I hope you won't be seriously influenced by what is nothing more than a bit of ancient superstition. There is no magic in the number thirteen, no magic in the day Friday, no magic in their combination. I'm sure you are sensible enough to realize that. The Roubins is needed; it cannot take off on any other practicable date. I hope you won't allow this scrap of discredited superstition to influence you against the takeoff; and I'm sure that, on reflection, you will be the sensible people I have always known you to be."

"Thank you, Minister. And now, if perhaps there is a response... yes, Mr. Delvora?"

"I'd like to ask the minister..."

COLORADO SPRINGS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE:

1600 H. (2000 CAP. COMP.),

3 JUNE 2113

"I've seen that idiot on five programs in four days," Parran Allerton said as he punched off the portable 3V. "And I hope I never see him again."

His sister Marian, keeping him company in the main tent of the expedition, sighed. It was going to begin all over again. "Why, Parr? It seems to me--"

"It seems to you he makes sense," Allerton snapped. "Of course it does. But to the great public...

he's doing harm, not good. They don't want sense. They want... oh, God, I don't know what.

Cosseting. Reassurance. Simplicity." He turned to face his sister, his thin frame blazing with anger. "You, now: you're a logical creature."

"I am?" Marian asked gently.

"And those others--the people--now who was it said Your people, sir, are a great beast--"

"Hamilton," Marian said. "Alexander. An ancient."

"--Those others don't want logic and won't listen to it. They're crazed with their damned superstition, and it will rule them. It can't be stopped... and Freeman, the idiot, is trying to stop it with logic. Like stopping a flood with--I don't know what--a sheet of paper."

Marian sighed again. "But what else can he do? What else is there to be done?"

"Damn it," Allerton said, "he's the politician. He's the one who manages people. He's the one who ought to know what to do; what else is a politician good for?"

"Perhaps--"

"No perhaps about it," Allerton said. "The man's an idiot; I've known it

for years, ever since I met him when we got those silly medals for our second dig; and I'm having it confirmed for me every time I turn on the 3V."

"Then don't turn it on." Marian thought of herself as a practical woman, a breed which had great value around a dig, where emotional upsets, or sudden accesses of happiness and knowledge, were commonly messy matters.

"But I won't let him bar me from--"

"From what?" Marian said. "A heart attack? Please, Parr, listen to me. You've no business getting so upset about--"

Whereupon the wireless, picture-less 'phone rang in the tent.

Parran Allerton was greatly surprised to find that Minister Dall Freeman wanted to speak with him.

And, after half an hour of talk. chatting between Freeman--that idiot--and his sister Marian, and Marian's explanations, followed by further talk with the minister, Allerton was even more surprised to discover that he had--as he expressed it to Marian immediately afterward--joined the ranks of idiocy.

"And the ranks of hypocrisy as well, I suppose," he said. "But, tell me, Marian: what else could I have done?"

"Nothing," Marian said with perfect assurance. "You did the right thing--the only thing. You were exactly, entirely, thoroughly correct, and you deserve congratulations for it."

"Marian--"

"But I'm afraid all you're going to get right now is a report of the

findings in square six.

Disappointing."

"There's always tomorrow," Allerton said automatically, and then, blinking: "Do you know, Marian, I begin to believe there is? I begin to believe there really always is?"

CENTRAL BUILDINGS,

VARIOUS SERVICES:

JUNE 3-JUNE 5, 2113

"And I'm sure that you fine people out there won't be influenced by a silly notion of the ancients, and will ignore their idea that numbers have a power of their own. We all know now that numbers won't influence the Roubins..."

"The upcoming flight of the Roubins has aroused a great deal of controversy, Minister Freeman.

Would you care to make a comment on that?"

"Why, yes, I would, Charles. It would appear that the people are trying to get the entire matter straight in their own minds, and come to the realization that numbers have no influence over the flight of this ship. And I'm sure that, in the end, they will see that the only sensible attitude--the only logical attitude..."

"Friday the thirteenth is just another day, ladies and gentlemen. It means nothing to me, nothing to you--and nothing to the Roubins. I'm sure you all know that. And if you do, then the Roubins can take off, can supply our people, stranded and awaiting this needed ship, this desperately needed ship..."

"...Five minutes, Minister."

"Thank you. Sam, what in God's name are you doing down here?"

"I came to see you. To try to talk some sense into you. Dall, do you know how much harm you're doing?"

"Harm?"

"Damn it, don't you read the sampling sheets? The Roubins takeoff gets less popular by the day.

Every time you mention numbers, or superstition, you give the nonsense free publicity: people talk it over among themselves. And... well, you know. 'There just might be something in it.' Dall, every speech you make strengthens the whole idea that numbers run the world. That this silly superstition runs the world."

"Exactly. But why is this harmful?"

"... If you want the Roubins to take off--"

"Sam, I've always thought of you as a good man."

"Thanks."

"An intelligent man, a good minister. But not a subtle man. Not, really, a politician. A politician has only one job."

"To work against the things the Comity needs? Dall--"

"I'm not working against what the Comity needs, Sam. Time enough; you'll see where all this is going very shortly now, so I'll give you a preview."

"Don't do me any favors."

"It's the same favor I did the emperor--yesterday. He had to be ready, you see."

"Ready?"

"All right, Sam. Now listen..."

"First News is happy to present, in its regular weekly interview series, the renowned archaeologist, Dr. Parran Allerton. Some recent discoveries made by him are spreading in influence throughout the Comity. Dr. Allerton is here to explain their significance, and to tell the story of their finding..."

"Minister Freeman?"

". . . Thank you. Now, I want begin by saying once again that numerology has no influence on the real world, the world of events. It's all just a silly superstition. I'm sure none of you fine people out there really believes that numbers influence our world, or influence the takeoff of that vitally necessary ship the Roubins..."

GREAT HALL:

CAPITAL CITY:

2100 H., JULY 17, 2113

Hamsun, after several hours of trying, had finally managed to corner Minister Freeman in a comparatively quiet section of the Great Hall. Around them, the Space Gala was picking up speed and volume. If it hadn't been for Freeman, Hamsun told himself, he'd never have come to the damned thing.

But what he knew was that Freeman had almost killed off the shoot. What he'd heard--the sort of chatter nobody pays any real attention to--was that Freeman had made the shoot possible.

Well, the gala was, more or less, in Hamsun's honor; and no matter what he knew, he couldn't quite keep the chatter out of his head. He needed explanations...

"There are all sorts of rumors," he was saying. "People are convinced you made the shoot possible, I mean. I... well, you know."

Freeman smiled. The way a politician smiles, Hamsun thought; there's never any way to find out what he really thinks. "There are always rumors," he said. His eyes flicked from one person to another as he spoke: studying people, Hamsun realized.

Studying--the materials of his profession; and why wasn't that as respectable as... say... studying equations? "But--Look, you made those speeches," Hamsun said. "One right after another. All about how sensible people were, how they'd never let superstition hold them back--"

"That's right," Freeman said. A girl went past them, laughing much too loudly.

"And those speeches damn near sank the entire shoot," Hamsun said. "Every time you told people they were too smart to believe in superstition --Look, we have a psychologist on the base and he explained it this way--you reminded them of the superstition. You forced them to think about it.

And--when it comes to superstition--people don't think."

"By definition," Freeman put in.

Hamsun blinked. "By... I suppose so." He took a breath. "So you kept stimulating the whole thing, making people think about that Friday-the-thirteenth business, making them even more positive they weren't going to let the Roubins take off."

Freeman nodded. "Something like that," he said. "Yes."

"So," Hamsun said, "you almost did kill the shoot. What I thought. What everybody thinks. Only there was some crackpot talk that you... well, that you made the shoot possible."

"I did," Freeman said.

Hamsun opened his mouth and shut it again.

"First of all, you see, I made those speeches," Freeman said. "No, wait a minute, I did one more thing--I bribed an archaeologist."

"You--what? What does that have to do with..."

"I made those speeches," Freeman said into the silence; around them the gala went loudly on, but even Freeman noticed that with no more than the corner of his eye. "I made everyone conscious of the power of 'numbers. The superstition. Numerology. Thirteen." He gestured. "People who didn't care, people who were unsure... I got them all thinking about numerology."

"And believing in it, damn it!" Hamsun broke in.

"Exactly," Freeman said. "Otherwise my bribe wouldn't have done any good, you see."

"But--"

"Thirteen," Freeman went on, sententiously, "is an unlucky number.

Correct?"

"Well, sure," Hamsun said. "But when it came out that--"

"That--the sixth month, the thirteenth day, the year 2113--all that isn't nearly so unlucky. Attend: 6 and 13 and 21--from 2113--and then an extra 5--for Friday, normally considered the fifth day of the week--add up to 45. And 45 is the luckiest possible number. It was the number of a great and famous weapon used by legendary heroes among the ancients. It was the year--1945--in which one of their major wars ended. Look it up."

"Sure, I know that," Hamsun said. "The ancients thought 45 was the luckiest number there was."

Freeman smiled, very briefly. "But let me go on," he said. "It's also 9 times 5--9 for the planets, and 5 for the planets known in deep-ancient times, before the telescope. It's also 21--the age of maturity for a long period during the history of the most civilized ancients--plus 24, which is twice as lucky as a simple dozen... a dozen, of course being lucky because it was the number of the apostles. Among other things." He paused to breathe. "Right so far?"

"Well--everybody knows that," Hamsun said. "Sure. I mean--"

"Everybody knows it," Freeman repeated. "Everybody knows it, and it isn't true. Not a word of it.

Not one word."

Hamsun nearly dropped his half-full glass. "But--"

"An archaeologist said it was true, over and over," Freeman went on. "And everyone else picked it up, of course. There I was, making speeches about the silliness of numerology and--your psychologist is

perfectly correct--thereby making more and more converts to the damned superstition. And there everyone else was--knowing that numerology made the Roubins shoot a marvel, a wonder and an absolute delight, because--within days, in fact--everyone knew it.' And all I did was bribe an archaeologist--with a grant for a future dig, incidentally, out of what we like to call a contingent fund--to 'discover' the entire good-luck superstition dealing with 45."

Silence surrounded the two men again. After a second Hamsun said: "You mean there never was--"

"Never," Freeman said. "It just happened to work that way. Because, of course, we made it just happen. I'm afraid it will have to be a secret between us, son--and because keeping that secret is in both our interests, it will stay a secret--but we've rewritten history."

This time Hamsun did drop the glass. It shattered. Neither man moved. "Well--talk about just sheer luck," Hamsun said after a while. "If it'd been some other number--one you couldn't work with..."

"It could have been," Freeman said. "And it wouldn't have mattered: any number could have been used. Let's see: 6 for the month, 13 for the day, 13 for the specific year: 31. Add 5 for Friday and get 36--three dozen. Three times as lucky as a dozen. Then add the 21 and get 47--a fine number, has a seven in it, which the ancients really did believe was lucky: we wouldn't have had to invent that part. For that matter, we didn't invent the lucky dozen part, either. But, son: any number could have been used.

We just fiddled round with what we had available."

Hamsun tried to think it over. Obviously, the way to get people to do something was to make sure you persuaded them not to do it, and then--"Politics," he said. "It's all politics."

"Exactly," Freeman said, and smiled very briefly indeed. "Politics: which is my science, I suppose.

The science of people--which is an art."

Hamsun tried it again. When you had all the pieces, it made sense. But without them-- He stared at the face of the... the politician. The useless, talky politician. The... Good Lord. "But how could you figure in advance... how could you push the whole thing--"

"The basic rule," Freeman said, "is simple enough." He looked, Hamsun thought, quite satisfied; almost at peace. "I can put it all in one sentence--and all in words of one syllable."

"If you can't lick them, and you can't join them, there is just one thing left to do: lead them."

This was said two hundred years ago by the first great Minister for the Dichtung, Dall Freeman. It remains true; the present writer cannot improve on its wording.

The Public Notes of Isidor Norin (Minister for the Dichtung, c. 2300 A. D.)

LAURENCE M. JANIFER

Knowledge is the ability to predict. A little knowledge is dangerous, of course. But dangerous to whom?

An Agent In Place

It will be very interesting to find out whether I can write this one down and get it published. I'm asking a science-fiction writer to polish it for me, and it will go out under his by-line if only because a habit of anonymity is hard to break; but none of that should make any difference. Whatever else they have their eye on, and I know they're spread thin, they have their eye on me. There is no doubt of that.

Which sounds paranoid until you know the facts. Such as my profession, which is Special Agent, and who they are. They're Central Intelligence--not the CIA, though around Washington we've mostly given up trying to make the distinction; Congress can think what it likes, and our appropriation comes out of the "Miscellaneous" barrel anyhow. CIA is mostly an international net specializing in data recovery, though like everybody else they take on other jobs now and then. Central Intelligence is "specifically nonspecialist," as the Director put it once to a House Committee: we do a little of everything from spy-eye work to protective guarding, and sometimes we make a connection that somebody looking at only one area might miss. We don't get into the news much but we earn our pay. Until recently I didn't know just how thoroughly we earned our pay. But, as I said, they're spread thin. This report may have a chance of getting through. And you might like to know where our small piece of your tax dollar is going.

The Director was telling me that he had access to files "not quite as extensive as Hollywood's Central Casting, but adequate for our purposes," and I was wondering just what sort of impersonation deal I was up for, since to my knowledge I didn't look much like anybody in the news. It had to be that: why mention Central Casting otherwise? So I slumped a little in the chair next to his desk, and took one long,

sad drag on my cigarette, and said: "All right, sir. Who am I supposed to be?"

He didn't congratulate me on the deduction. He wastes very little time. "You don't like impersonation work, I take it?"

"Frankly, sir: no," I said. "You're loaded with makeup and memorization, and you have nothing to do but wait until somebody tries to pot you. It may be useful; it may even be necessary now and then; but it's depressing."

"This isn't quite the usual thing," he said. He frowned at my cigarette. He'd given me a lecture about the Surgeon General once--but only once. "There isn't much makeup, and there isn't much memory.

You're going to be triggered for one phrase--we can do that under depth hypnosis, but I'll tell you what the phrase is and what your action will be; beyond that, we won't tamper with you at all."

The Director is very big on keeping things as open as he can with the rest of us. I've heard him say that we were "valued professional aides, and not chess pieces"--in that same Committee hearing. It irritates me to think about that, now.

"And nobody will try to pot me?" I said. "It sounds unusual."

"Well..." He pushed an ashtray across the desk to me and I stubbed out the cigarette. "I wouldn't quite go that far," he said. Which made matters clear, if not comforting.

"All right," I said. "So... who's in danger? Who am I supposed to be?"

"A man named Welkin--Beer Barrel Dave Welkin," he said. "And, as for who's in danger--"

He went on with quite a speech about the election year, and everybody being in danger, the spate of assassinations in this country since 1963, the job the FBI and the Treasury men were trying to do, and the fact that we were spread so thin we couldn't cover every danger-spot or even every possible target: "We have to confine ourselves to what we can see and know, which isn't much," he said, but I, was trying to get Beer Barrel reduced to a nickname instead of an insult. It isn't the beer anyhow, and never has been; it's the way I'm built.

By the time he was through I was calmed down enough on Beer Barrel to realize that I had never heard of anybody named Dave Welkin, with or without the descriptive pendant.

"Welkin," I said. "All right, sir. If you say so. Who is he?"

"Oh," the Director said, "he's a bum. A Bowery bum."

I didn't ask, "Why?" because I don't like wasted time either. If he'd wanted me to know why he'd have told me; he really does like to be as open as he can with us. Of course he has to decide how open that is.

All the same, as I was picking up what background there was on Beer Barrel Dave Welkin, letting my beard grow, allowing Cosmetics to skin-tone me an unattractive and very dirty gray, and getting used to the clothing, both for wear and for smell, I was trying to get the answer for myself.

All I had to go on was that the job wouldn't last over thirty days, and that the hypnotic trigger business was the phrase Czechoslovakian boundary disputes, which, when I heard it, was going to make me move rapidly toward whoever had said it. It was a good trigger; wandering around the Bowery I wasn't likely to hear it by accident.

I learned that Beer Barrel Dave Welkin would be held under hypnotics in a New York cubby-hole of ours, returnable after I reported in, and I learned that he had a great fondness for beer, had been on the Bowery "over five years" and was about my age, though he looked fifteen or twenty years older, and that his preferred method of panhandling was heading for crowds and bumping his way through them. He sounded as if he might have wanted to be a pickpocket if he'd been a little less bleary; as it was, he probably thought that crowds gave him more handout chances per square panhandling foot.

The trigger sounded as if I were in for a political impersonation job, but nothing else did; Beer Barrel Dave (after the first few days I got so I could hear the phrase without wincing, even inside) was hardly the type. And as far as I knew--and I think I'd know--there were no Czechoslovakian boundary disputes going on anywhere in the world, unless you count a perennial tendency toward revolt against Moscow as a boundary dispute.

I came up with quite an assortment of theories. The first notion was that I was being sent in as an agent in place--an inconspicuous type who does nothing at all until the word comes through, and then pops up from within an organization and starts wrecking it. But agents in place have tours of duty that tend to start at twenty years and go straight on up; and moving toward a person who spoke a single phrase didn't look much like helping to wreck anything. Not to mention the fact that nobody could call the collection of Bowery bums among whom Beer Barrel spent his time an organization, and even if it was it didn't look like one anybody was very anxious to overthrow.

The big question was: who would want to pot a Bowery bum? And for that I developed a variety of ingenious answers. Here are a few: 1. The bum had managed to drift by and hear part of a supersecret

conversation, maybe in involving some brand-new scientific breakthrough, and couldn't be left alive to repeat it to anybody else.

Objection: super-secret conversations are seldom carried on around the Bowery, and it was doubtful that, if he'd heard anything, Beer Barrel would retain much of it for any longer than ten minutes--recoverable under hypnosis, maybe, but that implies that you know exactly who and what to look for. Improbable.

2. The bum had picked up a bit of some super-secret scientific paper, and had to be rubbed out before he could pass it on. Objection: the same as 1. To begin with, there is really very little super-secrecy going on near the Bowery. And one other question hard to answer: why would Beer Barrel hang on to the paper? If he did happen to stuff it into the one pocket of his clothing that didn't have a large hole in it, what was so tough about simply getting the paper back, and letting Beer Barrel drift on down the street? Of course, if he'd read the paper, and it was known that he'd read it, the contents might be recoverable hypnotically... but that chain of reasoning gets even more improbable than the previous one. No.

3. The bum was really an agent in place for somebody else. That made a certain amount of superficial sense until I wondered about the thirty-day limit, and about returning Beer Barrel to the Bowery after the job was over. The usual procedure with agents in place, if discovered, is either a) watch carefully, and try to dig up the communications link and from there the rest of the apparatus, or b) dispose of immediately.

This didn't fit either procedure, and I couldn't come up with any reasons why not.

4. The bum was really a being from outer space, and...

Well, that will give you an idea. What I'd be doing impersonating a being from outer space who was impersonating a Bowery bum, for thirty days or less, I was completely unable to imagine.

And what any of these ideas, or any one of several others I dreamed up, had to do with my hypnotic trigger and response, I couldn't see at all. The thing was, as far as I could get into it, absolutely senseless; the only trouble was that we're not much given to senseless assignments.

Though that gave me a brand-new idea: suppose the whole thing were a loyalty test, designed to see how far I'd follow orders even if I didn't and couldn't understand the reasons for them...

I've been with Central Intelligence since 1947. It was a very strange time to pull a loyalty test on me, after twenty-five years.

That was my last theory. By the time I had tossed it out I was on Third Avenue near Canal Street, and I was Beer Barrel Dave Welkin.

Three weeks went by as quickly as if they'd been decades.

You have no idea how slowly time passes for a Bowery bum who doesn't drink very much. I spent all of the time I wasn't sleeping in a scratch room or an alley, or panhandling for small change in the cheap bars that straggle all the way up to Fourteenth Street, but I did a lot less beer-drinking than I seemed to be doing. I couldn't afford to be too hazy when the trigger came, or I'd miss hearing it, or be unable to move quickly, or something. And there are a lot of simple techniques for getting rid of a drink without making it obvious you're doing so--especially around the Bowery, where getting rid of a drink is just not what people are looking to see happen.

I found a lot of crowds, mostly at the uptown end of my run: the

Bowery meets both N.Y.U. and the East Village up there, and Stuyvesant Town is only two blocks away from Fourteenth and Third, so I made my way through a variety of student rallies, young-politics meetings, just plain political rallies and an assortment of rush-hours, mostly evening: Beer Barrel didn't usually get up too early.

There was, of course, one candidate most of the students and youngsters favored; you know all about that. Normally, maybe he'd have left the whole area off his speech route, but he needed some big youth-appeal and student-appeal footage for the evening TV shows, so he scheduled an appearance at Union Square--the uptown western edge of my daily travels--for a Friday evening.

Naturally, there was a crowd, a nice big one.

Naturally, Beer Barrel Dave was on hand.

And just as naturally, that speech went on for fifteen minutes and hit the sentence I was, by then, half-expecting: "It is not in our interest--in the interest of the people of this country--to charge out to settle every possible disagreement in the world, from possible arguments over Japanese fishing rights to putative Czechoslovakian boundary disputes--"

And I was triggered. I started for the candidate a good deal faster than Beer Barrel Dave was used to moving.

Of course I never reached him. Somebody potted me instead.

I woke up in our New York cubby-hole, hospital section--where the original Beer Barrel had been stacked away while I worked his tour. I had a large ragged hole in one shoulder, and a variety of bruises and abrasions from hitting the pavement and being slightly trampled in the rush to collect the character who'd tried to shoot the candidate.

He was collected, naturally, before he could get off another shot, and a small bag of psychiatrists is still going around and around about whether or not he's sane, or legally insane, or what. The one sure thing--and it is sure: our section checked it out, and we don't report what we don't know for certain--is that he was an individual, acting entirely on his own, with a specific grudge against this one candidate.

So I found out what my assignment had been. Bodyguard for the candidate, against an assassination attempt.

For a little while, this made no sense at all to me. You've probably ironed out all the wrinkles, but it took me a little longer, being under medication while the shoulder put itself back together.

Obviously, we can see into the future.

We can't see very far, and we can't see anything but the specific matter we try to see (or, first, there'd have been no attempt at all, and, second, there would never be a successful attempt--I hope; but wait around). But we can look through time and see a tiny piece of the near future.

Which is changeable.

Somebody saw that the shot was going to be fired right after that boundary dispute, and that it would hit the candidate unless deflected. Now, guards are one thing: people are used to guards, what with the President and his Secret Service and all. But a bulletproof shield, completely surrounding the candidate, is something else again. A lot of people would feel it made the candidate look like a coward, or somehow made a personal appearance no better than a TV spot, or... anyhow, politicians and their managers feel that way even about the breast-height

combination shield-and-podium gimmick that's now being used here and there. I've heard them. A whole bulletproof shield? Ridiculous, they'd say. Lose the election right then and there.

(Which may or may not be logical, or reasonable. But politicians and political managers aren't logical or reasonable except in spots--thereby making them fair copies of the rest of us.) No, the only acceptable deflection for a bullet is a special agent, I suppose. Somebody, maybe, took a look and saw that, in one possible future, I would be just where I was in the crowd, and I started moving toward the candidate at just the right time. Then matters were carefully gimmicked so that I was set up in the crowd (apparently just that much gave them a future which put me in the right spot inside that crowd) and started moving on cue, at speed.

Sure. Somebody juggled alternatives. Let the bullet hit its mark; let it hit me instead; bulletproof the candidate (out, unacceptable, ridiculous); get the assassin out of the way beforehand; arrest him on the spot with his weapon--and, out of that bag and one or two more minor possibilities (maybe in one future the bullet hit some really innocent bystander), somebody settled for me. Beer Barrel Dave Welkin, the human target. The fat and tattered X marking the safest spot. I think I know why.

Let's say that the future involved a successful assassination. If it's going to be changed, two things have to be considered, and the first of these, simply, is: what's the least possible change required? Clearly, you don't want to add in any more factors than you have to, because every new factor has new results of its own, and so forth... so you find a real Bowery bum, someone who would legitimately be in that crowd anyhow. And you replace him (keeping the bum in cold storage, so to speak, and putting him back on the street in a slightly damaged condition, with a hole in his memory due to a month under hypnotics--but a hole in a bum's memory is just not all that unusual,

especially after he's been, theoretically, shot at and trampled some); that way the bum's life goes on with minimal interruption and no stir anywhere, and the replacement is a setup to intercept the bullet. Given a shut mouth and a career of other odd actions for the replacement type, anyhow, you get the least possible amount of change.

The second thing to be considered, I'm afraid, is that you want to keep your time-viewing top secret.

(Which is why you don't even mention a bulletproof wraparound to the candidate's people--not even if one of them, in a fit of political insanity, might agree.) Hauling in the assassin beforehand needs explanation--in these days of maximum courtroom civil liberty, it needs a lot of explanation. Grabbing him with his gun, on the spot, needs explaining, too: it's hard to say that he got careless and made it visible too soon, when he did his shooting, with that short-barreled .38, through the pocket of his jacket, and never showed the gun at all. (And maybe, in the future or futures that carried that alternative, the guy managed to get off a shot or two while being grabbed .. . and hit somebody more consequential than old Beer Barrel.)

No: being able to see the future, and wanting to keep the ability secret, is the only explanation that fits the facts.

When I got out of my hospital bed I asked the Director about it. "Our job is doing our job," he said, "not wondering about it."

Which may be true. But... whoever can see into the future, right now, in the United States, is also involved in changing it. For the better? That depends... what do you mean by better? In this country, it's supposed to be the people who do the deciding; but if somebody is rigging the dice by choosing his own favorites among possible futures... (See what I mean? Are you sure that this Somebody would

never allow a successful assassination?)... then Somebody is doing enough deciding, all by himself, to deserve that capital letter. And that is an idea I don't like at all.

The Director knows how I think about public knowledge and public decision-making: my dossier's on file, and has been for twenty-five years. And he knows I know about time-viewing, too. So, no matter how thin observers are spread, I know that whoever, or Whoever, does the viewing, in Central Intelligence or further up the line, has an eye on me.

But maybe not all the time--and not very far into the future.

And just maybe, when I come to think of it, the viewers, too, want the rest of us to know that such a thing exists and is being used--and picked me for the impersonation job at least partly because they knew I would do something like this. Letting the news out this way looks to me like doing it with a minimal amount of change...

I hope that's it, I really do; it would show that, up there in the higher echelons, there is as much faith in the people as I hope there is, and think there had better be. But we'll find out...

I'm writing this four months after the event. It will be very interesting, as I've said, to see if it gets through.

Science Fiction on Broadway has been a dismal flop. Here's a suggestion as to why.

Into The Furniture

Laurence M. Janifer

Some years back a TV announcer or maybe a radio announcer introduced a kiddie-SF show with one wonderful blooper. "Here we go, boys and girls," he said breathlessly, "twenty thousand years into the furniture." nA little while ago a (theoretically) adult-SF show opened Broadway. It was called "Via Galactica" and it is now impossible for you to see it, which is just as well and, it might be, a little better. It was not the worst show ever to hit Broadway. It was not even the worst show I have ever seen on Broadway: there have been, and I have sat stunned and disbelieving through, some doozies. But it was distinctly, lousy.

The curtain went up, a Prologue descended from flies in a small bosun's chair, off we went, "one thousand from now," according to the prologue, smack into the hardwooden furniture. A very little about the show may give you some faint notion.

The hero, Gabriel Finn, was a sanitation man on Earth. He flew around in a spaceship modeled to look like an ancient Ford, with headlights and ooka-ooka horn, collecting garbage and then getting rid of it by dumping it into the stratosphere. Earth was in pretty lousy shape, anyhow: everybody was kept happy by revolving cone-shaped hats, which people put on at birth and never, never took off (head size doesn't change? hats expand?) until the age of fifty-five. At fifty-five, everybody committed suicide. Sex was rampant, but babies were decanted or something (I saw this happen on stage but it looked more confusing than I can tell you: the attending doctor put a new hat on the new baby, though). Everybody was blue.

That last is a statement of fact. Blue was the only color Earth people

could agree on, and all Earth skins were bright blue.

Ithaca was different, though. Ithaca (Gabriel got hijacked to Ithaca) was a small asteroid, gravity very low (with Earth-normal atmosphere, though) to which a few! freedom-loving people had emi-| grated long ago. Earth managed lose Ithaca somehow or other, well as another nearby asteroid called Hy Brasil (described, off-hand, as lying "to the west" of Ithaca), and Ithaca and Hy Brasil became distant myths. (It is not easy to lose an asteroid, once charted especially since Earth civilization was spacegoing--a ship arrived on Ithaca near the end of the show in forty-four minutes from Earth takeoff.) The Ithacans converted Gabriel and garnered his genes for their gene pool, since they were about to leave for a new planet circling Aldebaran, in a voyage which will take one hundred years but will seem to them like fourteen months (I think; that got sort of cloudy, too).

Gabriel contributed his genes by going into the hay one (1) time with one (1) woman. He then died heroically fighting off the Earth ship which comes to get the Ithacans, after Earth figured out that Ithaca still existed (and was still where it was charted).

And so on, and so on. Believe me, you did not want to see this show.

Why am I telling you all this? Seems I described the show to Ben Bova, and got asked why there wasn't any good SF on Broadway, and I said there never had been, and he said I wonder why, and I said damned if I know, but I'll think of something.

What, eventually, I thought of is that we were both wrong. We were also both right.

There has been SF on Broadway. There has been good, and successful, SF on Broadway. But there is not likely to be much more;

and a good, successful straight play with an SF theme ("Via Galactica" was a musical, so described) has never happened and is not likely to.

The reasons, I think, are interesting enough to deserve a little space.

The successful jobs are all either musicals ("Connecticut Yankee" with time travel, "On a Clear Day" nwith psi) or screaming farces (just to start arguments, I'll nominate "Three Men on a Horse" as a psi story, and SF). The failures-and there is quite a list, including Arch Oboler and Ray Bradbury--are mostly straight plays.

Part of the answer is that SF is thought to be a gimmick medium-lots of special effects--and only musicals, generally speaking, can stand the cost of the sets and the effects. (But "Via Galactica" had half a million dollars' worth of effects, all marvelous, and failed; "Connecticut Yankee" and "On a Clear Day" had next to none. "Three Men' on a Horse" had none, pe-riod.)

Another part is that Broadway has been taken over by the Broadway equivalent of the New Wave: Al bee, say, and Hooch, and their followers. Not entirely, of course--but enough. And the New Wave is mostly surreal, interested in parable or straight-out lecture and not, definitely not, in the science half of science fiction. The New Wave hasn't had much effect on TV or the movies yet: that's why we've had "2001" and "Charlie" and, on a much smaller scale, "Star Trek." And, being straight-arrow serious and dedicated, it isn't interested in musicals or farces either, so we have had "On a Clear Day," and a good SF farce is perfectly thinkable: Neil Simon may be working on one now.

Now, the science half of SF isn't a necessity for the printed page, or for the movies either. You can get a reader, or a moviegoer, interested and involved in something having only the faintest relation

to reality, as experimental novels and movies show. On Broadway things are different. Broadway cannot distort or ignore reality to nearly so great an extent: it involves real people on a real, visible stage. That much reality demands some measure of reality in the play and the playing, just to make it possible for an audience, seeing the real people, to accept and then get involved in what these people are doing.

There needn't be much reality. "Tiny Alice" is fine, and "The Fantasticks." And so are a lot of even stranger plays, and musicals. But no successful play exists which either contradicts what an audience believes to be reality without offering a pretty solid underpinning of the argument to sustain that contradiction, or which contradicts itself.

Working outside of SF these demands are not so troublesome: the second, in fact, is so much taken for granted that people don't bother to mention it. But in SF the writer is suddenly required to invent relationships between his people, a society for them to live in, and anything else needed, from scratch.

The Broadway New Wave seems to know no science, to begin with; more, it seems to harbor a general belief that conscious logic is not a useful tool. (This also seems true of the SF New Wave, and has many of the same results there.) These qualifications, if that's what they are, provide the writers with a handy shortcut to a number of dead ends: inventing societies that contain self-contradictions, for instance. (On Ithaca, I haven't had room or strength to mention until now, everyone is entirely free; they keep on saying so, and the authors clearly mean me to believe that. But the most noticeable thing about the society is that everyone takes orders at all times and on every subject, without serious demur, from one single man, referred to as the Ithacans' leader.)

There are other dead ends, of course. New Wave authors keep falling into the unamiable habit of | making statements without adequate defense (or, indeed, without any defense at all, as in "Via Ga-lactica," throughout) which affront the audience's sense of reality--and which, therefore, no audience will accept. (Dumping garbage into the stratosphere? A low-gravity asteroid with Earth-normal atmosphere and temperatures, the living surface always faced away from the Earth? And I flatly cannot tell you how much more stuff like this there was.) What an audience perceives as self-contradictory, what it has not been persuaded to accept, it dislikes; and it should.

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So the New Wave SF, on Broadway, falls flat. In books, even in movies, it has an arguable place: God knows enough people have argued it. On Broadway it simply does not; except in the millionth case (an author lucky enough, or knowing enough despite the notions of the New Wave, to convince his audience), a straight-play SF appearance on Broadway is going to fail.

Of course a non-New-Wave writer might make it. The odds against it are-immense: there are not that many non-New-Wave writers on Broadway arid there are not that many plays produced per season.

And an SF writer, trying to crack Broadway, is against even bigger odds. All the same... If it happened, I think the SF writer whose (original) play I would most quickly buy a ticket for is Robert Heinlein (closely followed by Ward Moore, Walter Miller and Fred Pohl). And I'd love to see an SF play by, say, Robert Anderson.

But it is not going to happen. The ignorance', and the disregard for logic, of the New Wave, on Broadway and in SF, have by all odds stranded that good, straight SF play not only somewhere twenty thousand years into the furniture, but flat, gasping and thoroughly

doomed, right up there on the beach.

Martyr

The martyr (as distinguished from the person who is surprised to find himself giving his life for a cause) is very nearly the only person who is thoroughly convinced of death, both before and after dying.

--The Public Notes of Isidor Norm

The Secretary of Defense said, because he was essentially a simple man, just three simple words: "You are insane."

The President of the United States, on the other hand, was an elected official and therefore accustomed to tempering his words to the shorn. He used a good many more words. "You have gone entirely out of your mind," he said, "and you belong in the bughouse with all the other bugs, and nuts, and kooks."

Everett Carson, who had gone to the Secretary of Defense directly from a reasonably lengthy time of contemplation in a quiet pew of his parish church, and who planned to return there, for a few minutes at least, after leaving the President, said just the same thing to each man: "Well, sir, we live in strange times."

"Damned strange," the President said, looking around the Oval Office with the opaque resignation which seems to descend on all Presidents in that room, after a year or so. "I mean--well, I mean very strange times," he said.

But, damn it, the President thought behind his mask, it wasn't easy to think of Carson as an Associate Secretary and a responsible career officer over at State. It wasn't that he acted like some sort of preacher, not exactly--and if he looked like one (the long lean sort), a good many State Department men seemed to run to that type. But...

well, the President, and most of official Washington, had always had the uncomfortable feeling (which was perfectly correct) that this man Carson wasn't satisfied with trundling off to church on Sunday morning and taking care of the matter of religion as normally as that.

There had always been the suspicion that Carson might be found in a church at any time at all: Wednesday afternoon, for instance, or some perfectly ordinary Friday.

"Don't moderate your language in deference to me, sir," Carson was saying. "I've heard worse, you know. At the Crystal Palace, for one thing--the limited-level space-armaments conference. And--"

"Nevertheless," the President said irritably, "this proposition of yours is idiotic. Insane." He made a sweeping gesture with one hand. "Ridiculous."

"If I may, sir," Carson began, and, when the President nodded, went on: "What have we got to lose?"

"Five kids," the President said, in a voice his TV audience would not have recognized. "Five young, suburban, well-brought-up children, average age sixteen, are in possession of an armed atomic bomb.

That silly magazine--the one that published the mechanics of a Molotov cocktail a few years back, during the riots!--ran a technical breakdown on the things a few issues back. 'America's Shame: Death at a Fingertip.' Something like that." Carson made a sympathetic noise. "And now these--kids," the President went on, "are established in a cabin outside the Denver suburbs, and, thanks to the miracle of live-remote TV spy-eyes, have told the world that they are going to set the thing off--it's quite powerful enough to wipe half of Colorado off the map, you know--unless we agree to their terms."

"Yes, sir," Carson said, evenly, but still sympathetically. "And their terms would mean anarchy: the destruction of the rule of law--"

"Which is the only alternative to cutting your neighbor's throat when you happen to disagree with him," the President put in.

"Quite," Carson said. "The destruction of the rule of law, the destruction of this country and this society... as we both clearly see. And, since we cannot agree to any such terms, and cannot allow them to kill four to seven million people--or even take the chance of their doing so--we must come up with something else."

"Brilliant," the President said hopelessly. "A brilliant analysis. The dissection of the obvious... oh, damn it, Carson--"

"And we have come up with nothing else to do," Carson said, in the same even voice. "Sending a plane up and destroying the cabin and our--blackmailers--is impossible: the TV coverage there would call us murderers, at the least; and, at worst, we might just set the bomb off as well. Dropping a gas grenade, knocking them out and recovering the bomb is open to the same objections... the TV coverage would be merciless, sir. 'Unwilling even to discuss national goals with these brave youths...You know the sort of thing."

"I'm afraid I do," the President said. "And the freedom of the press..."

"Yes, sir," Carson said. "There just isn't any way to shut off the spy-eyes--not without a nationwide uprising. And the uprising could as well be touched off by coverage calling us murderers, or secretive, warlike men who cruelly brush aside the earnest voice of youth in order to continue our stockpiling of..."

"Stop that," the President said. "It sounds too familiar. Good Lord, Carson: do they really think we like killing people?"

"I wouldn't know, sir," Carson said. "I have never been able fully to understand such minds. But they exist--and in sufficient numbers so that one such act, carried by TV, would set off an uprising..."

The President nodded. "I know," he said. "And if we agree to negotiate, and then go in--barring TV for the actual negotiations, which they'll stand for--and gas the kids, get the bomb... why, the kids will speak up later. And if they're not around to speak up... Carson, every alternative is horrible. Everything we have to do is horrible--and none of it will even work."

"Exactly, sir," Carson said. "Therefore, since we must do something, and can't think of anything effective to do, I repeat: what have we got to lose?"

"Send you to negotiate with them? Actually negotiate? With five children? Now, Carson--"

Carson shrugged. The Oval Office had always had a strange feeling of closeness for him, as if he and its other occupant were locked in together, permanently. He dismissed the feeling, as irrelevant to the business at hand. "First, we must recover the bomb with the full agreement of the children," he said.

"After recovery, TV will interview them: that much is plain." The President nodded. "And, too... there are very few adults in this world," Carson said. "I think that I have met four in my lifetime; and I do not count myself, not in modesty but on rather a long acquaintance. My wife might qualify... In any case,"

he said a bit more sharply, "age is certainly not a controlling factor. I have spent a good many negotiating sessions with children, Mr. President."

"Wordplay--"

"With respect: no, sir," Carson said. "Fact."

"And you think these negotiations of yours might--might--"

"Might remove at least this threat to the Republic and the world," Carson said. "And remove it entirely. Yes, sir, I do. Leaving us, of course, to deal with all the others."

"But the others--China, Czechoslovakia, the United Nations, Taiwan, pollution, the balance of payments--the others are normal, Carson. This--"

"I agree, sir," Carson said. "This is a trifle odd. Which is why I broke channels to present my idea.

Unless there is a better operation now about to mount--"

"Nothing," the President said. "Nothing. You'd think the CIA, or Defense, or somebody--maybe HEW, for all I know--would have come up with a plan. But--"

"I'm afraid," Carson said, very gently, "that they tend to have the wrong approach to this sort of thing."

The President stared. "The--" he began, and stopped, and tried again. "To this sort of--"

"Exactly," Carson said. "A pattern does exist. And I suggest, as gently as I may, that we hurry this a bit. They've given us, you know, a deadline."

"I know," the President said. "It's down to forty-two hours now, from sixty. Forty-two hours...

Carson, there isn't anything that can be done in forty-two hours!"

"I should rather like to try," Carson said gently. "Mountainview, their nearest suburb, not yet having a full heliport of its own--if I might emplane to Denver at once, with Mr. Suessman, and proceed from there with two cars and chauffeurs--"

"And that's another thing," the President said. "There are hundreds of experienced men, Carson.

You've seen them come and go for--what is it, thirty years?" He waved a hand, forbidding reply. "But this Suessman... well, I ran a check. Had Combined Records do it, rush-star-rush. He came into State three years ago. Wanting, the form says, 'to serve his country'; not many of those left, or at any rate not many who'll admit it. But before that he spent four years with Actors' Studio. A few off-off-Broadway parts, nothing special... a drama student, Carson. A drama student! No negotiating experience--basically a clerk..." The President shut his eyes. "Carson," he said softly, "will you tell me one thing?"

"If I can," Carson said, "certainly, sir."

"Why this one?" the President said. "Why Suessman?"

Carson took a breath. "Well," he said, "for one thing, he was never much of a success as an actor, sir. Never even appeared on television; he won't be recognized."

"I suppose that makes sense. But--"

"And for the other," Carson said, as the President opened his eyes, hoping, apparently, that all was now to be made clear, "he's never seen Denver, sir. Or any of the country out there. I think he'll rather

like it; I know that I do."

Long training among hecklers prevented a Presidential explosion. After a time he said: "Now, really--" and felt proud of his moderation.

"We're running short of time," Carson said. "If your security precautions have been tightened, and the technical matters--"

"Damn right," the President said. "I mean: certainly. Certainly. No drone flying to Colorado Springs is going to get off the ground again without six checkovers. Or sixteen. If there'd been a pilot... well, we might have had a dead pilot as well, I suppose. But the idiotic luck of the thing... the crash, these kids finding the cushioned bomb in the wreckage... for God's sake... I mean: for Heaven's sake--"

"God," Carson said with a perfectly straight face, "is quite acceptable."

"Idiotic... I thought the coast of Spain, years ago, had been the last of it. But it is not going to happen again. Believe you me," the President said, in a voice that sounded, briefly, very much like that of his native Ohio.

"Good. I'm glad of that," Carson said, meaning it, of course, quite sincerely. "Then all that remains--"

"Is your trip," the President said. "I suppose so. I suppose so... I don't know what else can be done, I don't know... Carson, there's nothing else left. You understand that, don't you?" He looked into the spare, pale face always diplomatically bland but never less than competent in appearance. "Of course you do," he said. "Certainly. Anyhow... well, Carson, I hope you do. I have to: it's the only hope we have, any of us."

The five (three male, two female, though the point of sex was quite

irrelevant) were waiting in what they called their "conference room," after having tried "clubhouse" with a less dramatic effect. It had been their choice for a meeting, an abandoned shack in rocky country some five miles beyond the posh-suburban outskirts of Mountainview. Carson had taken some care to reassure his associate on one point, at least. "They won't shoot. Not at once, at any rate. They're negotiating with the entire U.S.

Government, as equals. They should rather like the feeling of power that provides; our hope is that they continue to like it for just long enough." Suessman showed no signs of nervousness as he came to the opened door, and Carson hoped that he had done, outwardly, at least as well.

The tallest of the men, who seemed to be the spokesman and who had been the most heavily featured on spy-eye TV coverage, stood in the open doorway and looked the two men up and down.

Carson: long, lean, fifty-odd. Suess-man: middle-sized, middle-thirtied, middling-bald. Behind them two automobiles waited, and the chauffeurs stood, as Carson had insisted, at an easy attention in the broiling afternoon sun. The area had the temperature and the general feeling of a large oven.

The leader of the group of rebels spoke first, without moving. "We got the bomb inside here," he said flatly. His Western accent, not quite a twang, was, Carson thought, rather attractive. "No false moves, now, because we know how to set it off--and we will! One touch, and we all go up--and a fair piece of Colorado with us."

"Which would hardly do you a great deal of good," Carson said mildly. The leader (twenty-two, local-college graduate, no military history, no police history, no declared formal religion) gave him a flat-eyed stare.

"You're scared," he said. "Look: the people know what we've got here. Thanks to the TV. And if this bomb goes off, the people will rise. You know that, mister. A real rising, too--more than your shaky establishment can stand. Which you also know."

"I see," Carson said. The cars and chauffeurs waited, baking, as everyone else did except the four children inside the cabin. "Martyrs, then. Martyrs for your cause."

"Right on," the leader said. "Martyrs. Because we are not afraid to go. You have to understand that, mister: we are not afraid to go. Not if the people rise behind us. We'll be remembered, mister; we'll go down in the books, and in the stories. Later. When the establishment is gone at last--"

"I'm sure," Carson murmured politely. "May we come inside? I'll permit our drivers inside their cars, then, quite out of anyone's way, I assure you. They would appreciate the air-conditioning, and I'm sure that your conference room is cooler inside than out."

"Comfort," the leader said, and grinned, with the enormously attractive force of a very few of the insane. "Big comfort. That's what you all live for, isn't it--you big people?"

Carson knew that each of the five had come from a home in the twenty-to-thirty-thousand-dollar income bracket, and consequently from a life-style more opulent than either chauffeur's, or Suessman's.

Carson himself drew a somewhat higher salary, but tithing with his church, and a few other such matters, brought him nearer Suessman's level than that of the rebels. He said, of course, nothing whatever; and after ten seconds had passed, the leader said: "All right, sure. Go ahead. What do we care?"

Carson nodded to the chauffeurs. He and Suessman stepped past the leader and into the cabin.

Already in the dimly-lit cabin were three chairs, two candles, four human beings, and a heavy-looking sphere which shone rather dully in the light. A good many gadgets seemed to be growing out of the thing, and Carson found himself wondering idly just how a thing like that worked. Terribly complex, of course... probably beyond anything he could understand...

The door shut, neither quietly nor with a slam. The musty, cool air inside seemed to thicken. The leader, standing against the door, said: "All right. Now you're here. Now we negotiate--in private for now. You asked for that, and it's all right with us: if we don't show up again, or if this little baby goes off--why, then, everybody will know what it means. Isn't that right, mister?"

"Exactly," Carson said.

"Now," the leader said comfortably, "here we all are. Let it out. What is it you think you have?"

Twenty minutes later, Carson said: "I take it, then, that you are determined to be martyrs, if that will best aid your cause?"

"Take it," one of the girls said abruptly, "and you know what you can do with it. Sure: we're set for that. Nobody searched you coming in here, did they? What harm can you do? Either the bomb goes, or we do--or we get what we want. This talk isn't worth spit. You just remember there isn't much time left."

"Not much," one of the others said. "Better get out of ground zero, big people."

"Because--"

"When she blows--"

"It'll be too late, mister, too late, too late--"

"Too late," the leader said. "We told you what we want. Now: do we get it?"

Spoiled children, Carson thought (not for the first time during a negotiation): spoiled brats. Aloud, he said: "Nothing I say can change your minds about this?"

"Nothing," the girl said. The others murmured what seemed to be agreement. The leader said: "Nothing at all. Talk is "cheap, mister--too cheap."

"I agree," Carson said. Before anyone could move, he had drawn his revolver and shot Suessman cleanly through the junction of neck and shoulder--one of the faster and bloodier of the absolute-fatal targets.

"And that, of course, ended it," he said ten hours later.

"Insane," the President said. "Entirely insane. We'll do what we can for them--"

Carson shook his head. "I shouldn't call them insane, sir," he said. "Just--unprepared. When they saw Suessman fall, quite bloodily, twitching his life away--"

"He will be all right, won't he?" the President said.

"Of course," Carson said. "Acting and makeup, mostly; though I understand he will need attention for shock, and for burns from the wadding of the blank with which I shot him. I'm afraid my aim is a bit rusty, sir--not enough practice time these days, really--and I came

uncomfortably close. For which I am--truly--extremely sorry."

The President snorted. "Don't be silly," he said. "Good as new in a week... but... Carson, I don't understand. You shot your assistant. You pointed the gun--one gun--at the others. And they let you walk over to the bomb and pick it up?"

"Not exactly, sir," Carson said. "They let me walk over to it and guard it until the chauffeurs could come in--signaled by intercom in my jacket, of course--and pick it up. It was much heavier than anything I ought to lift, sir: my doctor has been quite emphatic on the subject in recent years. Prudence therefore dictated--"

"Yes, yes," the President said impatiently. "But, damn it, Carson: why? There they were, five of them.

Willing to be killed. Willing to set that thing off. They said so; they went on saying so."

"Quite," Carson said. "That was what I had counted on; that, and the fact that none of the five practiced any formal religion."

"That none of the--what?"

Carson sighed. "Religion, sir," he said, "perhaps especially Christianity, though it would be difficult to justify such a claim--religion teaches us to contemplate death. It does other things, too. But it does that, sir: it teaches us to become familiar with death, to accept it; to know it, sir, in short, in every detail."

The President shut his eyes, waited, opened them. "Well," he said. "Perhaps... perhaps it does. But I don't see--"

"Most people under, perhaps, twenty-two," Carson said, "have never seen truly violent death. I except some members of the military--

perhaps the one in ninety who has any actual experience of front-line warfare, and also the medical corps, and so forth--and of course I except, as well, residents of those poor and hopeless neighborhoods we might as well call ghettos until some other word is available.

And I except a few others. But the average suburban person of sixteen, eighteen, nineteen, even twenty simply has never seen violent death. He has seen carefully expurgated TV versions, perhaps, on news broadcasts or some especially enthusiastic shows; he has seen a Hollywood version in the movies. But the fact... no."

The President nodded. "Agreed. Well?"

"They cannot conceive of death," Carson said, "or at least of such an unpleasant, violent and painful death as a revolver provides. Or a plane crash... sir, if the plane carrying the bomb had killed a man in its crash, the situation would not have arisen; violent and distasteful death would have been seen and recognized by these children. But it was not; a life was saved therefore."

"At the cost of your ingenuity," the President said.

Carson shrugged. "At the cost of asking me to--or, rather, forcing me to request permission to--do my job," he said. "Nothing more. Certainly a lesser cost. But to continue... these children are encouraged by the society we live in to ignore death and to think of a sort of eternal life--even an eternal youth. The advertisements, for instance; even more, such catchwords as `never trust anyone over thirty' ... well, all this is obvious." He paused and went on in the same calm voice he had begun with, many hours before. "They were faced with the actuality of that death. With no experience and no familiarity to draw on, they--froze, perhaps. Retreated. It was not something

with which they were prepared to deal.

Words--martyr, execution, death--come easily to the mind, sir. The facts for which they stand come to the mind with difficulty, if at all. The loose, the constant talk of martyrdom told me that these children had no faintest conception of the fact; the fact is not spoken of so carelessly, sir."

The President nodded again. "So you faced them with the fact," he said.

"Exactly," Carson said. "I had no wish to injure anyone, and with current techniques an actor could be used. But, if necessary, sir, I should have been quite willing to act as their--ah--example. Without makeup, or blank wadding."

"I believe you would," the President said. "I believe you would--be a martyr, in fact."

"Perhaps," Carson said. "At any rate, I keep in practice with my revolver when I can: riots occur, and if threatened I intend to protect my wife and my children, whether my own death is involved or not. At least, sir, I hope that would be my attitude."

"A rare one," the President said, and Carson shook his head.

"Not at all, sir," he said. "Suessman, for instance: he faced identical risks. All that is required is--not Christianity--but the ability to accept and to realize not only the concept but the fact of violent death. It is helpful, sir, to have that ability provided and confirmed by a formal religious structure. If, for instance, one of those five had been a formally--a truly--religious person, for instance..." His voice trailed away.

"Yes?" the President said.

"It occurs to me, sir," Carson said, "that a truly religious person might have done what I did not...

and what I begin, sir, to regret having left undone."

"Regret?" the President said. "Come now, man: you've disarmed that pack of idiotic rebels, you've saved your country--possibly the world--"

"Yes, sir," Carson said. "All of that, sir, and all of it quite necessary." He paused for a long minute.

"But... a truly religious person, sir," he went on, "might not have returned the bomb to Colorado Springs after all."

"But--"

Carson went On as if he had heard nothing--nothing except the voice he had always tried to hear, and thought he heard at that second, the voice that spoke, quite silently, within.

"A truly religious person," he said, "might, very simply, have destroyed the damned thing."