

WORLDS OF

JULY 1965 • 50c

IF

**SCIENCE
FICTION**

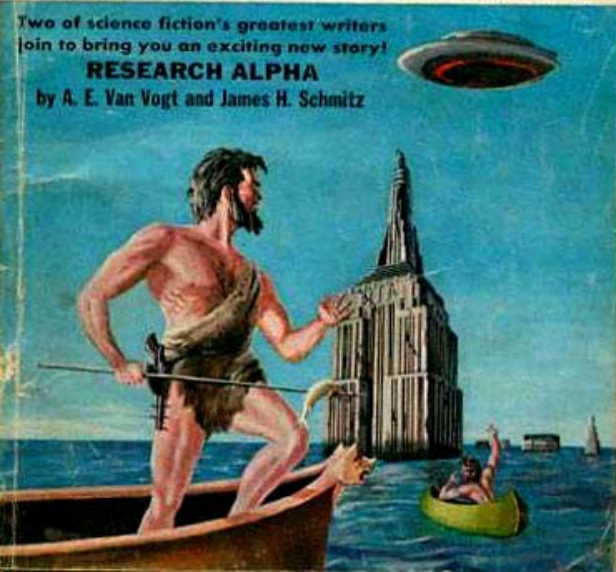
THE LAST EARTHMAN
by Lester del Rey

continuing—
SKYLARK DUQUESNE by
Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.

Two of science fiction's greatest writers
join to bring you an exciting new story!

RESEARCH ALPHA

by A. E. Van Vogt and James H. Schmitz



"Research Alpha"

James Schmitz

with A. E. van Vogt

Published in *If*, Vol. 15, No. 7 (#92, July 1965), with illustrations by Jack Gaughan, though this version is taken from *More Than Superhuman*, Dell: 1971.

Harlan Ellison's *Partners in Wonder* (Ace 1983) contains a letter from van Vogt to Ellison, in which he talks about his experiences collaborating with other writers. It contains one paragraph about James H. Schmitz:

"I jump now about twenty years to my collaboration with James Schmitz on a long novelette titled 'Research Alpha.' Jim is an outliner; something I had never done for myself, to my great distress, when I confronted the world of TV. And so I wrote segments of the story here and there, and on that basis I was able to help in the outline. When that was done, Jim said, 'Now that the outline is done, it doesn't matter who writes it.' I said 'Okay--you write it.' Which he pretty well did--the first draft, that is. Whereupon I rewrote it, adding scenes, etc. Meanwhile, I had dragooned Mayne into typing my draft. It developed that she objected so strongly to certain scenes, she refused to type them. I consulted with Jim, and he agreed to change them to fit in with her objections. I wrote those new versions to her satisfaction, and that was that. All this for an eventual \$630 check from Fred Pohl--he would only pay 3¢ a word for it, and I had to give Mayne half of my half for what she had done on it."

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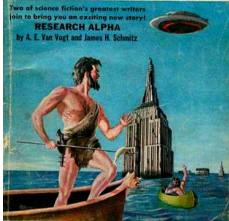
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DELL
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Man vs. Superman!
Spellbinding adventure
by a great S-F writer

A. E. VAN VOGT

**MORE THAN
SUPERHUMAN**



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Barbara Ellington felt the touch as she straightened up from the water cooler. It was the lightest of touches, but quite startling--a momentary, tiny flick of something ice-cold against the muscle of her right arm at the shoulder.

She twisted quickly and rather awkwardly around from the cooler, then stared in confusion at the small well-dressed, bald-headed man who stood a few feet behind her, evidently awaiting his turn for a drink.

"Why, good afternoon, Barbara," he said pleasantly.

Barbara was now feeling embarrassment. "I... " she began incoherently. "I didn't know anyone else was near, Dr. Gloge. I'm finished now!"

She picked up the briefcase she had set against the wall when she stopped for a drink and went on along the bright lit corridor. She was a tall, lean-bodied girl--perhaps a little too tall, but, with her serious face and smooth brown hair, not unattractive. At the moment, her cheeks burned. She knew she walked with wooden, self-conscious stiffness, wondering if Dr. Gloge was peering after her, puzzled by her odd behavior at the water cooler.

"But something *did* touch me," she thought.

At the turn of the corridor, she glanced back. Dr. Gloge had had his drink and was walking off unhurriedly in the opposite direction. Nobody else was in sight.

After she'd turned the corner, Barbara reached up with her left hand and rubbed the area of her upper arm where she had felt that tiny, momentary needle of ice. Had Dr. Gloge been responsible for--well, for whatever it had been? She frowned and shook her head. She'd worked in Gloge's office for two weeks immediately after she'd been employed here. And Dr. Henry Gloge, head of the biology section at

Research Alpha, while invariably polite, even courteous, was a cold, quiet, withdrawn character, completely devoted to his work.

He was not at all the kind of man who would consider it humorous to play a prank on a stenographer.

. . .

And it hadn't, in fact, been a prank.

From Dr. Henry Gloge's point of view, the encounter with Barbara Ellington in the fifth-floor hallway that afternoon had been a very fortunate accident. A few weeks earlier he had selected her to be one of two unwitting subjects for Point Omega Stimulation.

His careful plans had included a visit to her bedroom apartment when she was not there. He had installed equipment that might be of value later in his experiment. And it was not until these preliminaries were accomplished that he had headed for the steno pool, only to find that Barbara had been transferred out of the department.

Gloge dared not risk inquiring about her. For if the experiment had undesirable results, no one must suspect a connection between a lowly typist and himself. And even if it were successful, secrecy might continue to be necessary.

Gloge chafed at the delay. When on the fourth day of his search for her he suddenly recognized her walking along a hallway fifty feet ahead of him, it seemed as if fate was on his side after all.

As the girl paused at a water cooler, he came up behind her. Quickly he made sure that no one else was in view. Then he drew the needle jet gun and aimed it at her shoulder muscles. The gun carried a gaseous compound of the Omega serum, and the only sign of a discharge, when he fired it, was a thin line of mist from the needle end to her skin.

His task then accomplished, Gloge hastily slipped the instrument into the holster inside his coat and buttoned his coat.

. . .

Barbara, still carrying her briefcase, presently came to the offices of John Hammond, special assistant to the president of Research Alpha, which lay on the fifth floor of what was generally considered the most important laboratory complex on Earth. Alex Sloan, the president, was on the floor above.

Barbara paused before the massive black door with Hammond's name on it. She gazed possessively at the words *Scientific Liaison and Investigation* lettered on the panel. Then she took a small key from her briefcase, slipped it into the door lock, and pressed to the right.

The door swung silently back. Barbara stepped through into the outer office, heard the faint click as the door closed behind her.

There was no one in sight. The desk of Helen Wendell, Hammond's secretary, stood across the room with a number of papers on it. The door to the short hall which led to Hammond's private office was open. From it Barbara heard Helen's voice speaking quietly.

Barbara Ellington had been assigned to Hammond--actually, to Helen Wendell--only ten days before. Aside from the salary increase, part of her interest in the position had been the intriguing if somewhat alarming figure of John Hammond himself, and an expectation that she would find herself in the center of the behind-the-scene operations of *Scientific Liaison and Investigation*. In that, she had so far been disappointed.

Barbara walked over to Helen Wendell's desk, took some papers from her briefcase, and was putting them into a basket when her eye caught the name of Dr. Henry Gloge on a note in the adjoining basket. Entirely on impulse--because she had seen the man only minutes before--she bent over the paper.

The note was attached to a report. It was a reminder to Hammond that he was to see Dr. Gloge today at three-thirty in connection with Gloge's Omega project. Barbara glanced automatically at her watch;

it was now five minutes to three.

Unlike most of the material she handled, this item was at least partly understandable. It referred to a biological project: Point Omega Stimulation. Barbara couldn't remember having heard of such a project while she was working under Dr. Gloge. But that was hardly surprising--the biological section was one of the largest in Research Alpha. From what she was reading, the project had to do with "the acceleration of evolutionary processes" in several species of animals, and the only real information in the report seemed to be that a number of test animals had died and been disposed of.

Was the great John Hammond spending his time on this sort of thing?

Disappointed, Barbara put the report back into the basket and went on to her own office.

As she sat down at her desk, Barbara noticed a stack of papers which hadn't been there when she had left on her errand. Attached to them was a note in Helen's large, clear handwriting. The note said:

Barbara,

This came in unexpectedly and must be typed today. It obviously will require several hours of overtime. If you have made special arrangements for the evening, let me know and I'll have a typist sent up from the pool to do this extra work.

Barbara felt an instant ping of possessive jealousy. This was *her* job, *her* office; she definitely did not want some other girl coming in.

Unfortunately, she did have a date. But to keep an intruder from taking her place in John Hammond's office, even if only for a few hours, was the more important matter. That was her instant decision, needing no second thought. But she sat still a moment, biting her lip; for that moment she was a woman considering how to put off a male who had a quick temper and no patience. Then she picked up the

telephone and dialed a number.

For some months now, Barbara had settled her hopes for the future on Vince Strather, a technician in the photo lab. When his voice came on the telephone, she told him what had happened, finished contritely, "I'm afraid I can't get out of it very well, Vince, so soon after starting here."

She could almost feel Vince absorbing the impact of the denial she was communicating; she had discovered quickly in their brief romance that he was trying to move her toward premarital intimacy, a step she was wholly determined not to take.

She was relieved now, when he accepted her explanation. She replaced the receiver, feeling very warm toward him. "I really do love him!" she thought.

It was a few moments later that she suddenly felt dizzy. The feeling was peculiar, not like her usual headaches. She could feel it build up, a giddy, light swirling which seemed both within and without her, as if she were weightless, about to drift out of the chair, turning slowly over and over.

Almost simultaneously, she became aware of a curious exhilaration, a sense of strength and well-being, quite unlike anything she could remember. The sensations continued for perhaps twenty seconds; then they faded and were gone, almost as abruptly as they had come.

Confused and somewhat shaken, Barbara straightened up in her chair. For a moment she considered taking aspirin. But there seemed no reason for that. She didn't feel ill. It even seemed to her that she felt more awake and alert.

She was about to return to her typing when she became aware of a movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked up and saw that John Hammond had paused in the doorway of her little office.

Barbara froze, as she always did in his presence; then slowly she turned to face him.

Hammond stood there, staring at her thoughtfully. He was a man

about six feet tall, with dark brown hair and steel-gray eyes. He seemed to be about forty years old, and he was built like an athlete. Yet it was not his appearance of physical strength but the fine intelligence of his face and eyes that had always impressed her during the ten days since she had been assigned to his office. She thought now, not for the first time: This is what really great people are like.

"Are you all right, Barbara?" Hammond asked. "For a moment, I thought you were going to fall out of your chair."

It was highly disturbing to Barbara to realize that her dizzy spell had been observed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hammond," she murmured shyly. "I must have been daydreaming."

He gazed at her a moment longer, then nodded, turned, and walked off.

II

On leaving Barbara, Gloge went down several floors and stationed himself behind a pile of shipping crates. These were in a passage across from the locked door of the main photo-lab storeroom. On the dot of 3.15, a door farther along the passage opened. A lanky, scowling, redheaded young man wearing a stained white smock over his street clothes, pushing a loaded handtruck ahead of him, appeared and turned down the passage toward Gloge and the laboratory storeroom.

It was the end of the lab shift. Gloge had discovered that one of the regular duties of Vincent Strather, Barbara Ellington's boyfriend, was to return certain materials to the store room at this hour.

Peering through the slats of a crate, Dr. Gloge watched Strather's approach. He was, he realized, much more tense and nervous now than he had been when he had given Barbara the injection. Of himself, Vincent Strather was not the kind of subject Dr. Gloge would

have chosen--the young man was too angry, too bitter. But the fact that he was Barbara's friend and that they spent their spare time together should be useful in the further steps of the experiment--so it seemed to Dr. Gloge.

Sliding his hand under his coat, where the jet gun rested, he moved quickly out into the passage and across it toward Vince Strather... .

Even as he pressed the trigger, he knew his nervousness had betrayed him.

The needle tip of the gun had been too far away from Strather; a foot, almost two feet too far. At that greater distance the jet stream, emerging from the needle at nearly a thousand miles an hour, had time to spread and slow down. It caught Strather high up on the shoulderblade and tugged at his skin as it entered. For Strather, the sensation must have been that of a sharp impact. He jumped and cried out, then stood shuddering, as if in shock--long enough for Gloge to slip the little gun back into its holster and close up his coat.

But that was all. Vince Strather whirled. His hands caught Gloge by the arms, and his angry face glared down into the doctor's.

"You damn jerk!" he shouted. "What did you hit me with just now? Who the hell are you, anyway?"

For a moment Dr. Gloge felt appalled. Then he tried to twist out of Strather's hard grip. "I don't know what you're talking about!" he said breathlessly.

He stopped. He saw that Vince was gazing past his shoulder. The young man's grip relaxed suddenly, and Gloge was able to free himself. He turned and looked behind him. He felt a stunned, incredulous dismay.

John Hammond was coming along the passage, gray eyes fastened questioningly upon them. Gloge could only hope desperately that he had not been in sight when the gun was being fired.

Hammond came up and said in a tone of easy authority. "Dr. Gloge, what's going on here?"

"Doctor!" Vince Strather repeated, in a startled voice.

Gloge put puzzled indignation in his tone: "This young man appears to be under the impression that I struck him just now. Needless to say, I did nothing of the kind and don't understand what gave him such an idea."

He looked frowningly back at Strather. Strather's gaze shifted uncertainly between them. He was obviously abashed by John Hammond's presence and Gloge's title, but not yet over his anger.

He said sullenly, "Well, something hit me. At least it felt that way! When I looked around, he was standing there., So I thought he'd done it."

"I was passing you," Dr. Gloge corrected him. "You exclaimed something and I stopped." He shrugged, smiled. "And that's all I did, young man! I certainly had no reason to strike you."

Strather said grudgingly, "I guess I was mistaken."

Dr. Gloge said promptly, "Then let's call it an error and forget it!" He held out his hand.

Strather reached out reluctantly and shook it, then looked at Hammond. When, Hammond remained silent, he turned away in obvious relief, took one of the boxes from the truck, and disappeared into the storeroom with it.

Hammond said, "I was on my way to your office, Doctor, where I expect to have an interview with you in a few minutes on the Omega project. I presume you were heading in that direction."

"Yes, yes." Gloge fell into step beside the bigger man. He was thinking: *Did he see anything?*

His companion gave no sign.

. . .

A few minutes later, as he gazed across the gleaming desk of his private office at John Hammond, Gloge had the uneasy feeling of a criminal confronted by the law. It had always amazed him that this man--Hammond--could make him feel at very least like a small boy.

Yet the discussion that now developed began with a reassuring statement from the bigger man:

"This is a completely informal conversation, Doctor. I am not representing President Sloan at the moment--even less the Board of Regents. That has been deliberately arranged. It will make it possible for both of us to speak quite frankly."

Dr. Gloge said, "Have there been complaints about my work here?"

Hammond nodded. "You can't have remained entirely unaware of it, Doctor. You've been asked to amplify your project reports, make them more detailed and specific, three times within the last two months alone."

Gloge was reluctantly deciding that he would have to tell some of his data.

He said with apparent openness, "My reluctance to communicate has been due to a strictly scientific dilemma. Things were happening in the experiment, but their meaning was not clear to me until very recently."

"There is a feeling," said Hammond in his steady voice, "that your project is failing."

Dr. Gloge said sharply, "The accusation is unworthy!"

Hammond looked at him, said, "No accusations have been made--as yet. That's why I'm here today. You have reported no successes within the past six months, you know."

"Mr. Hammond, there have been many failures. Within the limited framework of the present stages of the project experiments, that is exactly what should be expected."

"Limited in what way?"

"Limited to the lower, less complicated forms of animal life."

"That," said Hammond mildly, "is a limitation you yourself have imposed on the project."

Dr. Gloge agreed. "True. The conclusions I've been able to form at such lower levels have been invaluable. And the fact that the results of the experiments have been almost invariably negative, in the sense that as a usual result the subject animals evolved into nonviable forms, is completely unimportant."

"As a usual result," Hammond repeated. "Then not all of them died quickly?"

Gloge bit his lip. That was not an admission he had intended to make at this initial stage in the discussion.

He said reluctantly, "In a respectable percentage of the cases, the subject animals survived the first injection."

"And the second?"

Gloge hesitated. But there was no turning back. "The survival percentage drops very sharply at that point," he said. "I don't recall the exact figure."

"And the third?"

He was really being forced to make revelations. Dr. Gloge said, "To date, three animals have survived the third injection. All three were of the same species—*Cryptobranchus*."

"The hellbender," said Hammond. "Well! a large salamander... . Now, the third injection, according to your theory, should advance an animal along the evolutionary line stimulated in it to a point which might be reached through half a million years of natural evolution. Would you say such a result was achieved in these three cases?"

Dr. Gloge said, "Since *Cryptobranchus* might be considered with some reason to be a species in which evolutionary development is at a practical standstill, I should say that much more was achieved."

"What were the observable changes?"

Gloge had been bracing himself as he made one admission after another. He was striving to decide exactly when he could start resisting the interrogation.

Now he thought.

He said aloud, trying to appear frank, "Mr. Hammond, I'm beginning to realize that I was in error in not making more positive reports. I can't believe that you are really interested in these superficial accounts. Why not let me summarize my observations for you?"

Hammond's gray eyes were calm and steady. "Go ahead," he said in an even tone.

Gloge outlined his conclusions then. The interesting features were twofold, probably equally important.

One of these was that there remained in all life forms a wide evolutionary choice. For reasons that were not yet clear, the Omega serum stimulated one of these potential developments, and no subsequent stimulation could alter the mutational direction. Most of these developments led to extinction.

"The second feature," said Gloge, "is that the chances for success increase as the life form becomes more highly evolved."

Hammond said, interested, "What you're saying is that when you finally start working with the more active mammals and eventually monkeys, you expect more and better results?"

"I have no doubt about that," said Dr. Gloge firmly.

A secondary aspect--Gloge continued--was that brain areas which controlled the inhibition of simple reflexes often seemed to be the source of new neural growth and of sensory extension. The serum apparently intensified these effort points, increasing their operational flexibility. What went wrong was that all too often such one-sided inhibitory amplification ended in nonsurvival.

However, in *Cryptobranchus*, the roof of the mouth developed small

functional gills. The hide thickened into segmented, horny armor. Short, grooved fangs were acquired, and connected to glands that produced a mild hematoxic venom. The eyes disappeared, but areas in the skin developed sight-level sensitivity to light.

Gloge shrugged, finished: "There were other changes, but these would seem the most dramatic ones."

"They sound sufficiently dramatic," said Hammond. "What happened to the two specimens which were not dissected?"

Dr. Gloge realized that his diversion had not worked. "They were given the fourth injection, of course," he said resignedly.

"The one," Hammond asked, "which was to advance them to a point a million years along the evolutionary line they were following--"

"Or," Dr. Gloge said, "to the peak-point of that evolutionary line. The equating of the four stages of the stimulation process to the passing of specific periods of normal evolutionary development--twenty thousand years, fifty thousand, five hundred thousand, and one million years--is, of course, hypothetical and generalized. My calculations indicate that in many species of which we have knowledge in that area the two points might be approximately the same."

Hammond nodded. "I understand, Doctor. And what happened after your evolved *Cryptobranchus* received the fourth injection?"

"I cannot give you a precise answer to that, Mr. Hammond. In appearance it was a very rapid breakdown of the entire structure. Within two hours, both specimens literally dissolved," Gloge answered tensely.

"In other words," Hammond said, "Point Omega Stimulation directs *Cryptobranchus* and, in fact, every species to which it has been applied into one of the many blind alleys of evolution."

Dr. Gloge said curtly, "So far it has done that."

Hammond was silent; then: "One more point," he said "It's been suggested that you might consider taking on a sufficiently qualified

assistant in this work. Research Alpha probably could obtain Sir Hubert Roland for a project of such interest."

Dr. Gloge said coldly, "With all due respect to Sir Hubert Roland's accomplishments, I would regard him as a meddler here! If the attempt is made to force him on me, I shall resist it."

"Well," Hammond said easily, "let's not make any unalterable decisions at the moment. As I mentioned, this has been a completely informal discussion." He glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid we'll have to terminate it now. Would you have time to see me in my office one week from today at ten o'clock, Doctor? I wish to carry this matter a little further, and that will be my first free time."

Dr. Gloge had difficulty restraining his feeling of triumph. Today was Wednesday. He had selected it as his starting time because he had wanted his subjects to be away from their place of work over the weekend.

Between now and Saturday, he could undoubtedly accomplish the first two injections on the young couple.

By the following Wednesday, the third, perhaps even the fourth shot would have been administered and all strong reactions either taken care of or the experiment terminated.

To cover up his elation, Gloge said in the tone of one making a concession, "As you wish, Mr. Hammond."

III

Dr. Henry Gloge was awake much of the night, vacillating between hopes and fears of what he would find when he went to check on the first results of Point Omega Stimulation in human beings. If they were obviously negative, he would have only one choice.

It could be called murder.

Dr. Gloge approached that subject in a detached, undisturbed frame of mind. He had several times in his work secretly carried on a more advanced experiment while, ostensibly, following the step-by-step scientific method. Thus fortified by special knowledge, he had in the past been able to plan lower-step work with the sometimes intuitive insights gained from his unpublicized private investigation.

The importance of the Omega project to him justified a similar expedient. Objectively considered, in the light of such a goal, the lives of the two young people he had chosen for the experiment were of no value. Their destruction, if it became necessary, would be in the same category as the slaughter of other experimental subjects.

With human beings there was, of course, an element of personal risk involved for himself. It was the realization that troubled him, now that he had made the first injection. Time and again, Dr. Gloge awakened out of a nightmare-riddled half-sleep, to quail anew at the knowledge and to lie sweating with anxiety until he slid back into exhausted slumber.

When four o'clock came, it was almost with relief that he arose, fortified himself with several tablets of a powerful stimulant, made a last check of his preparations, and set out across town toward the house where the Ellington girl had a room. He drove in a black panel truck that he had bought and equipped for his experiment.

He arrived at his destination about a quarter past five. It was a quiet residential street, a tree-lined avenue in one of the older sections of the city, approximately eight miles west of the Research Alpha complex. Two hundred yards from the house, Dr. Gloge pulled the small truck up to the curb on the opposite side of the street and shut off the motor.

For the past week, a miniature audio pickup-recorder, inserted under the bark of a sycamore tree across the street from the house, had been trained on Barbara Ellington's second-floor room, its protruding head cunningly painted to resemble a rusty nail. Dr. Gloge now took the other part of the two-piece instrument from the dashboard compartment of the truck, inserted the plug in his ear, and switched it on.

After perhaps half a minute of twisting the tuning dial back and forth, he felt his face whiten. He had tested the instrument at night on two occasions during the past week. It was quite sensitive enough to pick up the sounds of breathing and even the heartbeat of anyone in the room; and so he knew with absolute certainty that Barbara Ellington's room had no living occupant at this moment.

Quickly, he attached the recording playback mechanism to the little device, turned it back one hour, and put the plug into his ear again.

Almost at once, he relaxed.

Barbara Ellington had been in that room, asleep, an hour ago, breath even and undisturbed, heartbeat strong and slow. Dr. Gloge had listened to similar recordings of too many experimental animals to have the slightest doubt. *This* subject had moved up successfully, unharmed, to the first stage of Point Omega Stimulation!

The impact of his triumph after the ghastly fears of the night was very strong. Dr. Gloge needed several minutes to compose himself. Finally, he was able to move the recorder by ten-minute steps to a point where the Ellington girl obviously was awake and moving about the room. He listened with absorbed fascination, feeling almost able to visualize from moment to moment exactly what she was doing. At one point, she stood still for some seconds and then uttered a low, warm laugh which sent thrills of delight through the listening scientist. Perhaps a minute later, he heard a door being closed. After that, there was only the empty, lifeless silence which had startled him so badly.

. . .

Barbara Ellington had awakened that Thursday morning with a thought she had never had before. It was: "Life doesn't have to be serious!"

She was contemplating this frivolous notion with the beginning of amazement when a second thought came, which she had also never had in her entire previous existence. "What is this mad drive to

enslave myself to a man?"

The thought seemed natural and obviously true. It had no general rejection of men in it. She still—it seemed to her—loved Vince ... but differently.

Thought of Vince brought a smile. She had already noted in one of numerous, quick, darting glances around the room that it was nearly two hours before her usual rising time. The sun was peering through her bedroom window at that almost horizontal angle which, in the past, had seemed to her a horrifying threat that she would be robbed of precious sleep.

Now it struck her: "Why don't I call Vince, and we'll go for a drive before I have to go to work?"

She reached for the phone, then considered and drew back. *Let the poor man sleep a little longer.*

She dressed swiftly, but with more than usual care. When she glanced at the mirror, it occurred to her that she was better-looking than she had realized.

... *Very much better-looking!* she decided an instant later. Intrigued, for a moment amazed, she went up to the mirror, studied the face in it. *Her* face, familiar. But also the face of a radiant stranger. Another awareness came, and the bright, glowing, blue mirror-eyes holding hers seemed to widen.

"I feel twice as alive as I ever have before!"

Surprise ... pleasure ... and suddenly: "Shouldn't I wonder *why*?"

The mirror-face frowned slightly, then laughed at her.

There had been a change, a wonderful one, and the change was not yet complete. There was a sense of shifting deep inside her, of flows of brightness along the edges of her mind. Curiosity had stirred, but it was light, not urgent or anxious. "When I want to know, I *will* know!" Barbara told herself; and, with that, the trace of curiosity was dismissed.

And now."

She glanced once more around the little room. For over a year it had held her, contained her, sheltered her. But she didn't want shelter now. The room couldn't hold her today!

She decided, smiling, "I'll go and wake up Vince."

. . .

She rang Vince's doorbell five times before she heard him stirring inside. Then his voice called harshly, thickly, "*Who* is that?"

Barbara laughed. "It's me!"

"Good God!"

The lock clicked back and the door opened. Vince stood staring at her with bloodshot eyes. He'd pulled a robe on over his pajamas, his bony face was flushed and his red hair tangled.

"What are you doing up at this hour?" he demanded as Barbara stepped past him into the apartment "It's half-past five!"

"It's a wonderful morning. I couldn't stay in bed. I thought I'd get you to go for a drive with me before I went to work."

Vince pulled the door shut, blinked at her incredulously. "Go for a drive!" he repeated.

Barbara asked, "Aren't you feeling well, Vince? You look almost as if you're running a fever."

Vince shook his head. "I don't feel feverish, but I sure don't feel well, either. I don't know what's the matter. Come on and sit down. Want some coffee?"

"Not especially. I'll make some for you, if you like."

"Nah, don't bother. I'm sort of nauseated right now." Vince sat down

on the couch of the little living room, fished cigarettes and matches from a pocket of his robe, lit a cigarette, and grimaced. "That doesn't taste too good either!" He scowled at Barbara. "Something pretty damn funny happened yesterday! And I'm not sure--"

He hesitated.

"Not sure of what, Vince?"

"That that isn't why I'm feeling this way." Vince paused again, shook his head, muttered, "Sounds crazy, I guess. You know that Dr. Gloge you worked for once?"

It seemed to Barbara as if whole sections of her mind lit up in brilliance at that instant. She heard Vince start to tell his story. But--except for John Hammond's intervention--it was something she already knew.

Part of a much bigger story... .

She thought: *Why, that impudent little man! What a wild, wonderful, terrific thing to do!*

Excitement raced through her. The paper she had seen lying on Helen Wendell's desk flashed into her mind, every word sharp and distinct--and not only the words!

Now she *understood*. What they meant, what they implied, the possibilities concealed behind them--for herself, for Vince.

Another feeling awoke. Sharp wariness.

There was danger somewhere here! John Hammond ... Helen ... the hundreds of little impressions she'd received all suddenly flowed together into a picture clear but puzzling--of something supranormal, she decided, amazed.

Who were they? What were they doing? In a dozen different ways, they didn't really *fit* in an organization like Research Alpha. But they had virtually complete control.

Not that it mattered immediately. Yet she was certain of one thing.

They were opposed to what Dr. Gloge was attempting through Point Omega Stimulation, would stop it if they could.

"But they can't!" she told herself. What Dr. Gloge had begun was right. She could feel the rightness of it like a song of triumph in every aspect of her being. She would have to make sure that it wasn't stopped at this point.

But she would need to be careful--and act quickly! It was incredibly bad luck that John Hammond had arrived almost while Dr. Gloge was giving Vince his first shot.

"Do you think I should report it?" Vince asked.

"You'd look a little foolish if it turned out that you were coming down with the flu, wouldn't you?" Barbara said lightly.

"Yeah." He sounded hesitant.

"What does it feel like, aside from the nausea?"

Vince described his symptoms. Not unlike her own--and she'd had a few bad moments before she went to sleep last night. Vince was going through an initial reaction period more prolonged and somewhat more severe than hers.

She was aware of a fond impulse to reassure him. But she decided it would be unwise to tell him what she knew. Until he came out of his physical distress, such information might disturb him dangerously.

She said urgently, "Look, you don't have to go to work until tonight. So the best thing for you is to get a few more hours of sleep. If you start feeling worse, and would like me to take you to a doctor, give me a call and I'll come and get you. Otherwise, I'll phone at ten."

Vince agreed immediately. "I'm really awfully groggy. That's a big part of it. I'll just stretch out on the couch instead of going back to bed."

When Barbara left a few minutes later, her thoughts quickly turned away from Vince. She began to consider various methods she might use to approach Dr. Gloge this very day.

. . .

Gloge reached the street where Vincent Strather lived and was looking for a parking place, when suddenly he saw Barbara Ellington emerge from the area of the apartment building and start across the street ahead of him.

The girl was perhaps a hundred yards away. Dr. Gloge braked the panel truck hastily, pulled it in to the curb, rolled up behind another car parked there and stopped. He sat there, breathing hard at the narrow margin by which he had avoided being seen.

Barbara had hesitated, glancing in the direction of the approaching truck, but now she was continuing across the street. Watching her swift, lithe stride, the proudly erect carriage of her body--comparing that picture with the frozen awkwardness he had observed in all her movements the day before--Dr. Gloge felt his last doubts resolve.

It was in the human species that Point Omega Stimulation would achieve its purpose.

His only regret now was that he had not arrived even as much as ten minutes earlier. The girl obviously had come to see Strather, had been with him until now. If he had found them together, examination on a comparison basis could have been made of them simultaneously... .

The thought did not in the least diminish the tingling excitement that filled him as he watched Barbara's brown car pull out into the street and move away. He waited until her car was out of sight, then drove the truck down to the alley beside the apartment building and turned in to it. His intention was to give Strather a careful physical examination.

A few minutes later Dr. Gloge watched a pointer in the small instrument he was holding drop to the zero mark on the dial. Pulling off the respirator clamped over his mouth and nose, he stood looking down at the body of Vincent Strather sprawled on the living-room couch.

Vincent Strather's appearance was much less satisfactory than he had expected. Of course, the young man's reddened face and bloodshot eyes might be due to the paralyzing gas Dr. Gloge had released into the apartment as he edged open the back door. But there were other signs of disturbance: tension, distended blood vessels, skin discoloration. By comparison with Barbara Ellington's vigor and high spirits, Strather looked drab and unimpressive.

Nevertheless, he had survived the first shot.

Gloge straightened, studied the motionless figure again, then went about the apartment quietly closing the window he had opened exactly one minute after releasing the instantly effective gas. The gas had dissipated now. When its effect on Strather wore off an hour or so from now, there would be nothing to tell the subject that anything had occurred here after Barbara Ellington had left.

Tomorrow he would return and give Strather the second shot.

As he locked the back door behind him and walked over to the panel truck, Dr. Gloge decided that he would have to come back and check both his subjects that night.

He felt extremely confident. It seemed to him that before anyone found out that it had been started, the Point Omega Stimulation experiment on human beings would have run its course.

IV

Hammond heard the bell sound as he was shaving in the bathroom of his living quarters, which were located behind his office. He paused, then deliberately put down his razor and activated a hidden microphone in the wall.

"Yes, John?" Helen's voice came.

"Who came in?"

"Why--only Barbara." She sounded surprised. "What makes you ask?"

"The life-range indicator just now registered an over-six read."

"On *Barbara!*" Helen sounded incredulous.

"On somebody," said Hammond. "Better have Special Servicing check the indicator out. Nobody else came in?"

"No."

"Well--check it." He broke the connection and finished shaving.

The buzzer sounded in Barbara's office a little later--the signal that she was to report with her notebook to Hammond's office. She went, curious, wondering if he would notice any change in her. Much more important was her own desire to take a closer look at this strange, powerful man who was her boss.

She walked into Hammond's office and was about to sit in the chair he motioned her to, when something in his manner warned her. Barbara made an apologetic gesture.

"Oh, Mr. Hammond--excuse me a moment."

She hurried out of the office and down the hall to the washroom. The moment she was inside; she closed her eyes and mentally relived her exact feelings at the instant she had sensed--whatever it was.

Not Hammond at all, she realized. It was the chair that had given forth some kind of energy flow. Eyes still closed, she strove to perceive what within herself had been affected. There seemed to be an exact spot in her brain that responded each time she reviewed the moment she had started to sit down.

She couldn't decide what the response was. But she thought "I don't have to let it be affected now that I know."

Relieved, she returned to Hammond's office, seated herself in the chair, and smiled at Hammond where he sat behind his great,

gleaming, mahogany desk.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm ready now."

. . .

During the half-hour that followed, she took shorthand with a tiny portion of her mind, and with the rest fought off a steady, progressively more aware battle against the energy pressure that flowed up at her in rhythmic waves from the chair.

She had by now decided it was a nerve center that reacted to hypnotic suggestion, and so when Hammond said suddenly, "Close your eyes, Barbara!" she complied at once.

"Raise your right hand!" he commanded.

Up came her right hand, with the pen in it.

He told her to place it back in her lap; and then swiftly put her through several tests—which she recognized as being of a more important kind.

What interested her even more was that she could let the center respond and monitor the parts of the body that he named—without losing control. So that when he commanded her hand to be numb and suddenly reached over and stuck a needle into it, she felt no sensation; and so she did not react.

Hammond seemed satisfied. After normalizing the feeling in her hand, he commanded: "In just a moment, I'm going to tell you to forget the tests we've just been doing, but you will remain completely under my control and answer truthfully any questions I ask you. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Hammond."

"Very well, forget everything we've done and said since I first asked you to close your eyes. When the memory has completely faded, open your eyes."

Barbara waited about ten seconds. She was thinking: "What roused his suspicions so quickly? And why would he care?" She suppressed an excited conviction that she was about to discover something of the secret life that went on in this office. She had never heard of a hypnotizing chair.

She opened her eyes.

She swayed—an act—then caught herself. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Hammond,"

Hammond's gray eyes regarded her with deceptive friendliness. "You seem to be having problems this morning, Barbara."

"I really feel very well," Barbara protested.

"If there's anything in your life that has changed recently," he said quietly, "I want you to confide in me."

That was the beginning of an intensive questioning into her past history. Barbara answered freely. Apparently Hammond was finally convinced, for he presently politely thanked her for the conversation and sent her off to type the letters he had dictated.

As she sat at her desk a few minutes later, Barbara glanced up through the glass, and saw Helen Wendell walking along the hall toward. Hammond's office, disappear into it.

. . .

Hammond greeted Helen: "All the time I talked to Barbara, the life-range indicator showed eight-four, above the hypnotizable range. And she told me nothing."

"How is it registering for me?" Helen asked.

He glanced down at his right to the instrument in an open desk drawer.

"Your usual eleven-three."

"And you?"

"My twelve-point-seven."

"Perhaps only the middle ranges are out of order," Helen said, and added, "Special Servicing will make their check after daytime office hours. All right?"

Hammond hesitated, then agreed that there seemed to be no reason for breaking the rules of caution by which they operated.

During the lunch hour Barbara experienced a brief return of the dizziness. But she was alert now to the possibilities. Instead of simply letting it happen, she tried to be aware of every nuance of the feeling.

There was a--shifting--taking place inside her.

She sensed a flow of energy particles from various points in her body to other points. A specific spot in her brain seemed to be monitoring the flow.

When the pulsations ceased--as abruptly as they had started--she thought: "That was more change taking place. I grew in some way in that minute."

She sat very still there in the restaurant, striving to evaluate what had changed. But she couldn't decide.

Nonetheless, she was content. Her impulse had been to seek out Dr. Gloge sometime during the day in the hope that he would be wanting to give her a second injection. That ended. Obviously, all the changes from the first shot had not yet taken place.

She returned to *Scientific Liaison and Investigation*.

The bell sound, as Barbara entered, caused Hammond to glance at the indicator. He stared at it for a long moment, then buzzed Helen Wendell.

"Barbara now reads nine-point-two!" he said softly.

Helen came to the door of his office. "You mean her reading has gone up?" She smiled. "Well, that settles it. It is the instrument."

"What makes you say that?" Hammond seemed strangely unsure.

"In all my experience," Helen said, "I've never seen anyone change for the better. There's the slow drop as they grow older, but--" She stopped.

The strong face was relaxing. Yet after a moment Hammond said, "Still--we never take chances, so I think I'll keep her with me tonight. Do you mind?"

"It's a nuisance," she said, "but all right."

"I'll give her the conditioning that overwhelms twelve point-oh and higher. She'll never know what hit her."

V

It was shortly after dark when Dr. Henry Gloge parked his black van near Barbara's home. He promptly turned in on the audio device attached to the tree and adjusted the volume for pickup.

After thirty seconds of silence, he began to frown. "Not again!" he thought; then, wearily, "Well, maybe she's over at her boyfriend's."

He started the motor and presently drew up at the curb opposite Strather's apartment. A quick check established that the lanky redhead was there--but alone.

The young man was awake and in an angry state. As Gloge listened in, Vince savagely picked up the phone and dialed what must have been Barbara's number, for presently he slammed the receiver down and muttered, "Doesn't she know I've got to go to work tonight? Where can that girl be?"

That, in rising alarm, was a question which Gloge asked himself as the evening wore on. He returned to the vicinity of Barbara's boardinghouse. Until eleven p.m. the phone in room rang periodically, testifying Vince's concern.

When it had not rung for an hour, Gloge presumed that Strather had gone off to night duty. It was not a fact that could be left to surmise. He drove back to Vince's apartment. No sounds came from it. Gloge accordingly returned to the street where Barbara lived.

He was tired now, so he rigged up an alarm system that would buzz him if Barbara entered her room; then, wearily, he crawled onto the cot in the back of the van and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

• • •

Earlier, as Barbara sat in her office a few minutes before closing time, she swayed and almost blacked out.

Greatly alarmed, she emerged from her office and reported the feeling to Helen Wendell. She did not question the logic of seeking the help of Hammond's blonde aide.

The secretary was sympathetic, and promptly took her in to John Hammond. By this time Barbara had experienced several more brief blackouts. So she was grateful when Hammond unlocked the door behind his desk, led her through a luxurious living room, and into what he called the "spare bedroom."

She undressed, slipped under the sheets, and promptly went to sleep. Thus, subtly, she was captured.

During the evening, Hammond and Helen Wendell took turns looking in on her.

At midnight the Special Servicing expert reported that the life-range indicator was working properly, and he himself checked the body of the sleeping girl. "I get nine-two," he said. "Who is she? New arrival?"

The silence that greeted his remark abruptly startled him. "You" mean she's an Earther?"

"At least," said Helen Wendell after the man had departed, "there's been no further change."

Hammond said, "Too bad she's above the hypnotizable stage. Mere conditioning is actually a sorry substitute for what we need here--truth."

"What are you going to do?"

Hammond did not make up his mind about that until after daybreak.

"Since nine-two is no real threat to us," he said then, "we merely return to routine and keep aware that maybe somebody is doing something that we don't know about. Perhaps we might even use a little esp on her occasionally."

"Here--at Alpha?"

Hammond stared thoughtfully at his beautiful aide. Normally, he trusted her reactions in such matters.

She must have sensed what he was thinking, for she said quickly, "The last time we used extended perception, about eighteen hundred Earthers tuned in on us. Of course, they thought of it merely as their imagination, but some of them compared notes. It was talked about for weeks, and some awfully important things were close to being revealed."

"We-I-I-I, okay, let's be aware of her then."

"All right. On that basis I'll wake her up."

. . .

As soon as she was in her office, Barbara phoned Vince. There was no answer. Which was not surprising. If he had worked the night shift, he would be dead to the world. She hung up and checked with the

photo lab, and was much relieved when the night work list showed that Vince had signed in and out.

As she sat at her desk that morning, Barbara felt extremely grateful to Hammond and his secretary for having been so helpful to her. But she was also slightly guilty. She suspected that she had been affected again by the injection that Gloge had given her.

It was disconcerting to have been so *strongly* affected. "But I feel all right now!" she thought as she typed away at the pile of work Helen Wendell had put in her basket. Yet her mind was astir with plans. At ten o'clock Helen sent her out with the usual morning briefcase full of memos and reports.

Elsewhere--

Gloge had awakened shortly after seven. Still no Barbara. Baffled, he shaved with his electric razor, drove to a nearby business thoroughfare, and ate breakfast.

He next went back to the street where Strather lived. A quick check established that the man was home. Gloge triggered his second charge of gas and a few minutes later was in the apartment.

The young man had changed again to his pajamas, and he lay stretched out once more on the settee in his living room. If anything, the angry expression on his face was more pronounced.

Gloge, needle in hand, hesitated. He was not happy with this subject. Yet he realized that there was no turning back at this stage. Without further pause, holding the point almost against Strather's body, he squeezed the trigger.

There was no visible reaction.

As he headed for his office, at Research Alpha, Gloge's thought was on the girl. Her absence was unfortunate. He had hoped to inject the serum into his two subjects at approximately the same time. Evidently that was not going to happen.

A few minutes after he returned to his office, Dr. Gloge's phone rang. His door was open, and he heard his secretary answer. The woman looked up over the receiver.

"It's for you, Doctor. That girl who worked here for a while--Barbara Ellington."

The shock that went through Gloge must have shown as disapproval, for the woman said hastily, "Shall I tell her you're not in?"

Gloge quivered with uncertainty. "No." He paused; then, "I'll take the call in here."

When he heard the clear, bell-like voice of the girl, Dr. Gloge felt tensely ready for anything.

"What is it, Barbara?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to bring some papers over to you," her voice trilled in its alive, vital way. "I'm to give them to you only, so I wanted to make sure you would be there."

... *Opportunity!*

It seemed to Gloge that he couldn't have asked for a more favorable turn. His other subject would now come to his office, where he could fire the second injection into her and deal personally with any reaction.

As it developed, there was no reaction that he could detect. She had turned away after delivering the papers to him, and that was when he fired the needle gun. It was a perfect shot. The girl neither jumped nor swung about; she simply kept going toward the door, opened it, and went through.

Barbara did not return to Hammond's office. She expected a strong physiological disturbance from the second injection, and she wanted to be in the privacy of her own room when it happened. It had cost her an effort not to react in front of Gloge.

So she stayed in her bedroom, waited as long as she thought wise, and then phoned and told Helen Wendell that she was not well.

Helen said sympathetically, "Well, I suppose it was to be expected after the bad night you had."

Barbara answered quickly, "I began to have dizzy spells and nausea. I panicked and rushed home."

"You're home now?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell Mr. Hammond."

Barbara hung up, unhappy with those final words. But there was no way to stop his learning about her condition. She had a feeling she was in danger of losing her job. And it was too soon. Later, after the experiment, it wouldn't matter, she thought uneasily.

Perhaps she, had better take the "normal" precautions of an employee. "After all," she thought, "I probably show symptoms." She called her doctor and made an appointment for the following day. Barbara replaced the receiver, feeling a strange glee. "I ought to be in foul shape by tomorrow," she thought, "from the second injection."

• • •

What Hammond did when he returned to his office late that afternoon was to sit in thought for a while after Helen reported to him Barbara's situation.

Then: "It doesn't add up. Helen. I should have asked you before. Have you examined her file?"

The blonde young woman smiled gravely. "I can tell you everything that's in it, right from the top of my head. After all, I security-checked her. What do you want to know?"

"You mean there's nothing?"

"Nothing that I could find."

Hammond hesitated no longer. He was accustomed to trusting Helen Wendell. Abruptly he threw up his hands. "All right. She's got the whole weekend to be sick in. Call me when she comes in to work again. Did that report arrive from New Brasilia?"

"It was sent to Manila Center."

"Are you serious? Let me talk to Ramón. There must be a reason!" Quickly he was absorbed in his new tasks.

. . .

Barbara slept. When she awakened, her clock said twelve after seven.

It was daylight, early morning. She found that out in a sensational fashion. She went outside and looked ... without moving from the bed!

There she was lying in her bedroom; and there she was out in the street.

Simultaneously.

Involuntarily, she held her breath. Slowly, the outside scene faded, and she was back in the bed, wholly indoors.

With a gasp, she started breathing again.

By cautious experimentation, she discovered that her perception extended about a hundred yards.

And that was all she learned. Something in her brain acted like an invisible eye stalk that could reach through walls and bring back visual images to the light-interpretation centers. The ability remained completely stable.

Presently she became aware that a small black van was parked down the street and that Dr. Gloge was in it. She realized that he had an instrument with an earplug with which he seemed to be listening in on her.

His face was intent, his small eyes narrowed. Something of the determination of this little bald-headed scientist seeped through to her, and Barbara suddenly felt uneasy. She sensed remorselessness, an impersonal quality that was entirely different from her own lighthearted participation in his experiment. To Gloge--she realized suddenly--his subjects were like inanimate objects.

In human terms the viciousness of it was infinite.

As she continued to perceive him, Gloge shut off his instruments, started the motor of his car, and drove off.

Since Vince was again on the night shift, presumably Gloge was heading home.

She phoned Vince's apartment to make sure; when there was no answer, she called the photo lab.

"No, Strather didn't come in last night," the administrative assistant of that department told her.

Barbara replaced the receiver unhappily, recalling that Vince had not responded well to the first shot. She suspected the biologist had given him his second shot also, and that he was not responding favorably to it either.

She dressed and drove over to his apartment. As she came near, she could see him inside, so when he showed no sign of replying to her ring, she let herself in with her key--and found him on the living-room couch, tossing and turning. He looked feverish. She felt his forehead; it was dry and hot to the touch.

He stirred and opened his eyes, looked up with his sick brown eyes into her bright blue ones. She thought unhappily: "I'm so well and he's so ill. What can be wrong?"

Aloud, anxiously, she said, "You need a doctor, Vince. What's the name of that man who gave you a checkup last year?"

"I'll be all right," he mumbled. He sank back to sleep.

Sitting there on the settee beside him, Barbara felt something in her lungs. Her instant, amazed thought was: "Gas!" But she was too slow.

She must have blacked out instantly, because her next awareness was of lying on the floor, and of Gloge bending over her.

The scientist was calm, efficient, seemed satisfied. Barbara caught his thought: "She'll be all right."

She realized that he was stepping past her to Vince.

"Hmmm!" Gloge seemed critical and unhappy. "Still not good. Let's see if tranquilizer will help him."

He made the injection, then straightened, and there was a strange, hard thought in his mind: "By Monday night, it'll be time for the third injection, and I'll have to decide what to do."

So clear was the thought that came from him, it was almost as if he spoke aloud. What his thought said was that he intended to kill them both, if either failed to develop as he desired.

Shocked, Barbara held herself very still: and at that moment an entirely different growth process occurred in her.

It began with a veritable flood of suppressed information suddenly rising to the surface of her mind.

... About the reality of what people were like the dupes, the malingerers, and the weaklings on the one hand, and, on the other, the angry and the distorted, the worldly wise and the cynics. She recognized that there were well-meaning people in the world who

were strong, but she was more aware of the destructive at this instant ... by the million, the swindlers and betrayers—all self-justified, she saw now. But she realized also that they had misread their own bitter experiences. Because they were greedy and lustful and had lost their fear of punishment, earthly or unearthly; because they resented being thwarted in their slightest whim; because--



A forgotten scene flashed into her mind from her own past, of a minor executive in her first job, who had fired her when she refused to come up to his apartment.

All her life she had been taught, and she had tried not to be aware of such things. But now, at some level of neural computation, she permitted all *that* data to be calculated into the mainstream of her awareness.

The process was still going on a few minutes later when Gloge departed as silently as he had come.

Alter he had left, Barbara tried to get up and was surprised that she could not even open her eyes. The realization that her body was still unconscious presently enthralled her.

What a marvelous ability!

As time passed, it began to be disconcerting. She thought "I'm really quite helpless." It was early afternoon before she was finally able to move. She got up, subdued and thoughtful, warmed a can of soup for Vince and herself, and forced him to drink it from a cup.

Immediately after, he stretched out again on the couch and fell asleep. Barbara left the apartment to keep her appointment with her own doctor.

As she drove, she could feel a stirring inside her. More change? She decided it was. Perhaps there would be many such between now and Monday. Yet her intuition was that she would not be able to dominate this situation with the changes from the first and second shots only.

"Somehow," she thought, "I've got to get that third shot."

VII

At noon Monday, after he had dictated some letters to a girl from the steno pool, Hammond came out of his office.

"What's the word from Nine-two?"

Helen looked up with her flashing smile. "Barbara?"

"Yes."

"Her doctor called in this morning at her request. He said he saw her Saturday. She appears to have a mild temperature, is subject to dizzy spells and a variety of unmentionable ailments like diarrhea. However, there's one unexpected thing, the doctor said--evidently his own comment. Interested?"

"Of course."

"He said that in his opinion Barbara has had a major personality change since he last checked her about a year ago."

Hammond shook his head slowly. "Merely confirms our own observation. Well, keep me in touch."

But about four o'clock, when the long-distance screen was finally silent, he buzzed Helen Wendell. "I can't get that girl out of my mind. It's premonition-level stuff, so I can't ignore it. Phone Barbara."

She called to him a minute later: "Sorry, there's no answer."

"Bring her file to me," said Hammond. "I've got to assure myself I'm not missing something in this unusual matter."

As he scanned the typed pages a few minutes later, he came presently to the photograph of Vince Strather. He uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" Helen asked.

He told her what had happened the previous week between Dr. Gloge and Vince Strather.

He finished, "Of course, I didn't connect Barbara with that young man. But this is his picture. Get Gloge's file."

. . .

"Apparently the change started when his sister died two months ago," Helen Wendell said presently. "One of those sudden and dangerous shifts in personal motivation." She added ruefully, "I should have watched him on that. The death of a near relative has often proved important."

She was seated in the main room of Hammond's living quarters at Research Alpha. The door of Hammond's private office behind them was closed. Across the room a large wall safe had been opened, revealing a wide double row of thin, metal-bound files. Two of the files--Henry Gloge's and Barbara Ellington's--lay on the table before Helen. Hammond stood beside her.

He said now, "What about that trip he made back east early in the month?"

"He spent three days in his hometown, purportedly to make arrangements to sell his sister's and his property there. They had a house, complete with private laboratory, untenanted, on the grounds of an old farm. The perfect location for unsupervised experimentation. On primates? Not likely. They're not easy to obtain secretly, and except for the smaller gibbons, they should make potentially quite dangerous subjects for Dr. Gloge's project. So it must be humans he planned to work on."

Hammond nodded.

There was an almost sick expression on his face.

The woman looked up at him. "You seem very anxious. Presumably, Barbara and Vince have now had two injections each. That will take them to fifty thousand years from now on some level. It doesn't seem desperately serious to me."

The man smiled tautly. "Don't forget that we're dealing with one of the seed races."

"Yes--but only fifty thousand years so far."

He stared at her sympathetically. "You and I," he said, "are still far down on the ladder. So it's hard for us to conceive of the evolutionary potential of the genus *Homo galacticus*."

She laughed. "I'm content with my lowly lot--"

"Good conditioning," he murmured.

"--but I'm willing to accept your analysis. What do you intend to do with Gloge?"

Hammond straightened decisively. "This experiment on humans has to be stopped at once. Call Ames and have him put special security men at every exit. For the next hour, don't let Gloge out of this building. And if Vince or Barbara try to enter the complex, tell him to hold them. When you've done that, start canceling my appointments

for the rest of the day and evening."

He disappeared into his bedroom, came out presently dressed for the street.

Helen Wendell greeted him with: "I called Ames, and says 'Check!' But I also phoned Gloge's office. He left about an hour ago, his secretary says."

Hammond said quickly, "Sound a standby alert. Tell Ames to throw a guard around the homes of both of those young people!"

"You're going where?"

"First Barbara, then Vince. I only hope I'm in time."

A look must have come into Helen's face, because he smiled tensely and said, "Your expression says I'm getting too involved."

The beautiful blonde woman smiled with understanding, said, "Every day on this planet thousands of people are murdered, hundreds of thousands are robbed, and countless minor acts of violence occur. People are struck, choked, yelled at, degraded, cheated—I could go on. If we ever opened ourselves to that, we'd shrivel away."

"I kind of like Barbara," Hammond confessed.

Helen was calm. "So do I. What do you think is happening?"

"As I see it, Gloge gave them the first injection last Wednesday and the second on Friday. That means the third one should be given today. That I've got to stop."

He departed hastily.



Gloge had become nervous. As Monday wore on, he kept thinking of his two specimens; and what bothered him was that he did not have them under observation on this last day.

What a ridiculous situation, he told himself. The greatest experiment in human history—and no scientific person watching it through to a conclusion of the key second injection.

There was another feeling, also.

Fear!

He couldn't help but remember the young man. It seemed to Gloge that he had seen too many animals show in their fashion the symptoms he had observed in Vince. Failure to respond well to the

serum, the signs of internal malaise, the sick appearance, the struggle of the cells visibly reflecting defeat in the efforts and chemistry at the surface of the skin.

And there was--he had to admit it--a further anxiety. Many of the unsuccessful animal specimens had developed tough fight-back characteristics. It would be wise to be prepared for emergencies of that nature.

He thought grimly: "No use fooling myself. I'd better drop everything and take another look at those two."

That was when he left his office.

He took it for granted that Barbara was all right. So he drove to Vince's apartment, and first checked with his audio pickups to make sure he was there and alone.

He detected at once movements; the sound of labored breathing, an occasional squeak of the springs of the couch. These noises came screeching through the hypersensitive receiver, but Gloge had the volume on them turned down so that they were not actually painful in his ears.

Gloge's spirits had already dropped even more, for the sounds he was hearing confirmed his fears.

Suddenly, all the justified scientific attitude that had motivated him until now came hard against the reality of the failure that was here.

By his previous reasoning, he would now have to kill Vince.

And that meant, of course, that he would also have to dispose of Barbara.

His state of funk yielded, after what must have been many minutes, to a strictly scientific thought: Mere sounds were not enough data for so basic a decision, it seemed to him.

He felt intense disappointment.

Now he must go and make his decision from an actual meeting with

Vince. It would be improper to dispose of his two human subjects without a face-to-face interrogation.

. . .

As Gloge climbed out of his car and headed for the apartment building, Vince had a dream.

He dreamed that the man--what was his name?--Gloge, with whom he had quarreled a few days before in the corridor at Research Alpha, was coming here to his apartment, with the intention of killing him. At some deep of his being, anger began. But he did not awaken.

The dream--product of his own disturbed, strange evolutionary development--continued.

From some vantage point, he watched Gloge approach his back door. He felt no surprise when the small bald-headed man produced a key. Tense with fear, Vince watched as Gloge stealthily inserted the key into the lock, slowly turned it, and quietly opened the door.

At that point, Vince's body was impelled by his extreme anxiety to defensive action. Millions of tiny, shining, cream-colored energy bundles were emitted by his nervous system. They resembled very, short straight lines. And they passed through the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen, and they struck Gloge.

Great masses of the energy units unerringly sought out nerve ends in Gloge's body and darted in their scintillating fashion up to the man's brain.

The energy units were not the result of conscious analytical thought. They were brought into being solely by fright, and carried pressor messages. They pushed at Gloge mentally, urging him to leave, to go back to where he had come from.

Dr. Gloge came to his senses with a start. He was back in his van. He remembered running in precipitant flight. He had a vague recollection of complete panic.

He sat now, trembling, breathing hard, trying to recover from the most disgraceful act of fear that he had ever experienced, in his whole life.

And he knew that he had to go back.

Twice more, the sleeping Vince emitted enough energy bundles to compel Gloge to run. Each time the power available was less and Gloge retreated a shorter distance before stopping and forcing himself to go back again to the apartment.

On Gloge's fourth approach, the brain mechanism in Vince was able to manufacture only a small energy discharge. Gloge felt the fear rise in him, but he fought it--successfully.

He moved silently across the kitchen floor toward the door of the living room.

He still did not realize that the sleeping body and he had fought a battle--which he had now won.

Moments later, Gloge looked down at the exhausted form of his male subject. The sleeping body had perspired excessively. It trembled and moaned, and, as Gloge watched, jerked fitfully.

Unmistakably--Gloge decided--a failed experiment.

He wasted no time. He had come prepared. He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, carefully slipped one over Vince's farthest-away arm, and softly clicked it shut.

He lifted the arm as carefully toward the other wrist and clicked that handcuff on also.

Gloge next successfully tied Vince's legs together, and then lashed together the hands and feet.

The victim continued his restless, feverish sleep.

Gloge brought out a gag. As he had anticipated, forcing it into the closed mouth was more disturbing. Under him, the body grew rigid.

Wild eyes flicked open and glared up at him.

In a single, convulsive effort, Vince tried to bring up his arms and simultaneously struggled to get to his feet.

But Gloge had done his preliminary work well. The victim's intense effort subsided. Dr. Gloge realized that his control of this situation was complete. He removed the gag and said: "What I want to know is, how do you feel?"

The half-crazy, rage-filled eyes snapped with the impulse to violence. Vince cursed in a shrill voice. He kept this up for several minutes. Then he seemed to realize something.

"Y-you did something to me last week."

Gloge nodded. "I injected you twice with a serum designed to accelerate cellular evolution, and I've come here to find out how you are."

His gray eyes were steady; his bald head gleamed in the reflection of the light he had turned on. His face was serious. "Why not tell me exactly how you feel?" he asked earnestly.

This time Vince's cursing subsided after about a minute. He lay, then, staring at his captor, and something about the pale, tense face of the scientist must have convinced him. "I feel--awful," he said uneasily.

"Exactly how?" Gloge persisted.

Slowly, by dint of determined questioning, he drew from his reluctant victim the fact that he felt weak, exhausted, and numb.

It was the fateful combination that had so often shown in the animals; and Gloge knew that it was decisive.

Without another word, he bent down and started to force the gag into Vince's mouth. Vince twisted, wriggled, turned his head, and several times tried to bite. But inexorably Gloge pushed the gag all the way into the other's mouth and knotted it firmly behind his head.

He now went outside and drove the van into the driveway opposite the back door of Vince's apartment. Wrapping the young man's body in a blanket, he carried him boldly outside and into the van.

A few minutes later he was heading for the home of one of his subordinates. The man was on loan to an eastern laboratory, and his house and yard were unoccupied.

If he had paused, if he had stopped moving, if he had even taken his foot off the accelerator, Gloge might have faltered in his grisly plan. But his only slowdown was when he finally brought the car to a stop at his destination. And that, in its real meaning, was a continuation of the plan.

Its final moments.



Laboriously, he dragged the gagged, handcuffed, and bound Vince across the sidewalk, through a gate, and over to the deep end of the swimming pool. And still without pausing, he shoved the tense body over the edge and into the water.

He straightened from his terrible act, stood there gasping for breath, exhausted, watching the trail of bubbles that roiled the dark surface. Abruptly terrified that he might be seen, he turned and staggered away.

As he half-fell, half-crawled into his car, the first opposing thought came, as much a feeling of horror as an idea: "My God, what have I done?"

But there was no opposing motion in that reaction. He did not go back. Instead, he sat there, bracing to the realization that a few feet away a man was still in process of drowning.

When there was no longer any doubt, when the subject of his experiment was by all laws of life dead, Gloge sighed and stirred. There was no turning back. One gone, one to go.

Next--the girl!

From a phone booth a few blocks away, Gloge dialed Barbara Ellington's boardinghouse. The voice of an elderly woman answered and told him Barbara had gone out.

The voice added, "She certainly is a popular girl today."

Gloge said uneasily, "How do you mean?"

"Several men came by a little while ago and asked for her, but of course I had to tell them also that she wasn't here."

A sharp fear struck through Gloge. "Did they give their names?" he asked.

"A Mr. Hammond," was the reply.

"*Hammond!*" The chill of that froze Gloge. "Thank you," he gulped, and hung up.

He returned shakily to his car, torn between two impulses. He had intended to return after dark to the pool, fish Vince's body out of it, take off all the bindings, and dispose of it. He had a strong feeling now that he should do that at once. On the other hand, he had a desperate conviction that he must return to his office and remove the rest of the serum from the safe there.

That last suddenly seemed the more important thing to do, and the safest at this hour. The sun had gone down below the western hills, but the sky was still bright blue. The dying day had too much light in it for the gruesome task of getting rid of a dead body.

IX

At ten minutes past seven, Dr. Gloge unlocked the door that led directly from the corridor to his office in the biology section of Research Alpha. He went in, closed the door behind him, walked quickly around the big, bare desk in the center of the room, and stooped down to unlock the desk drawer where he kept a key to one of the safes.

"Good evening, Dr. Gloge," a woman's voice said behind him.

For an instant Dr. Gloge seemed unable to move. The words, the tone, sent an electrifying hope through him. He could scarcely believe his luck: that the second person he had to dispose of had come to where he could best deal with her.

He straightened slowly, turned around.

Barbara Ellington stood in the open door to the adjoining library, watching him, face serious and alert.

At no time in what followed did Gloge have any other *conscious* awareness than that this was Barbara Ellington.

But the very instant that he saw the girl, at some depth of his being

neural readjustments took place. Millions of them. And from that instant, subconsciously, she was his dead sister. But she was not dead anymore. She was reassuringly alive in the person of Barbara.

A look passed between them. It was one of complete understanding. It occurred to Gloge that it was scientifically wrong to kill this successful victim. He even had a feeling that she was on his side and would cooperate with him. He suppressed a fleeting impulse to pretend not to know why she was here.

He said matter-of-factly, "How did you get in?"

"Through the specimen room."

"Did any of the night workers see you?"

"No." Barbara smiled slightly.

Gloge was examining her with quick evaluative look. He noted the way she stood, almost motionless, but lightly and strongly balanced--a pose of contained, absolutely prepared energy. He saw in her eyes bright, quick intelligence.

The thought came to him: *Nothing quite like this was ever on Earth before!*

Barbara said suddenly, "You took a long chance on us, didn't you?"

The words that burst from Dr. Gloge surprised him: "I had to do it."

"Yes; I know." Again she spoke matter-of-factly, moved forward into the room. Dr. Gloge felt a surge of alarm, a sharp, cold prickling of the skin. But she turned from him to the left, and he watched silently as she sat down in a chair against the wall and placed the brown purse she carried on the armrest of the chair. She spoke first.

"You must give me the third injection of the serum immediately," she told him. "I'll watch you do it. Then I'll take the instrument and a supply of the serum to Vince. He--"

She paused, blue eyes kindling with abrupt comprehension as she studied Dr. Gloge's expression. "So you've drowned him!" she said.

She sat there, thoughtful; then: "He's not dead. I sense him to be still alive. Now, what is the instrument you use? You must still have it with you."

"I do," Dr. Gloge admitted hoarsely. "But," he went on quickly, "it is advisable to wait till morning before administering the third shot. The chances of a further favorable development would be increased by doing it. And you must stay here! Nobody should see you as you are. There should be tests ... you will tell me... ."

He halted, realizing he was stammering. Barbara's eyes hadn't turned from his face. And in the same way that her knowledge of Vince's fate had not disturbed him--somehow, he took it for granted that she realized and appreciated why and what he had done--so now her expression reassured him.

She said quietly, "Dr. Gloge, there are several things you don't understand. I know I can assimilate the serum. So give me the shot--and the serum--at once."

Barbara Ellington arose and started over toward him. She said nothing, and her face revealed no emotion, but his next awareness was of holding the jet gun out to her on his open palm as she came up.

"There's only one charge left."

She took the gun from his palm without touching him, turned it over, studied it, laid it back in his hand. "Where is your supply of the serum?"

Dr. Gloge nodded at the entrance to the library behind her. "The larger of the two safes in there."

Her head had turned in the direction he indicated. Now she remained still for a moment, gaze remote, lips parted, in an attitude of intent listening; then she looked back at him.

"Give me the injection," she told him "Some men are coming."

Dr. Gloge lifted the gun, put the point against her shoulder, pulled the trigger. Barbara drew her breath in sharply, took the gun from him,

opened her purse, dropped the gun inside, and snapped the purse shut. Her eyes shifted to the office door.

"Listen!" she said.

After a moment, Dr. Gloge heard footsteps coming along the narrow corridor from the main laboratory.

"Who is it?" he asked anxiously.

"Hammond," she said. "Three other men."

Dr. Gloge made a stifled sound of despair. "We've got to get away. He mustn't find either of us here. Quick--through there." He waved toward the library.

Barbara shook her head. "This place is surrounded. All passages are guarded." She frowned. "Hammond must think he has all the evidence he needs against you--but don't help him in any way! Admit nothing! let's see what I can do with my--"

As she spoke, she moved back to the chair on which she had been sitting. She settled into it, her face composed. "Maybe I can handle him," she said confidently.

The footsteps had reached the door. There came a knock.

Gloge glanced at Barbara. His thoughts whirling. She nodded, smiled.

"Come in!" Dr. Gloge said harshly, too loudly.

Hammond entered the room. "Why, Mr. Hammond!" Barbara exclaimed. Her face was flushed; she looked embarrassed and confused.

Hammond had stopped, as he caught sight of her. He sensed a mental probing. His brain put up a barrier, and the probing ceased.

Their eyes met; and there was a flicker of consternation in hers. Hammond smiled ironically. Then he said in a steely voice: "Stay where you are, Barbara. I'll talk to you later." His voice went up.

Come on in, Ames!" he called.

There was threat in his tone; and Dr. Gloge sent a quick, desperate, appealing glance at Barbara. She gave him an uncertain smile. The look of earnest, fumbling innocence with which she had greeted Hammond had left her face, leaving it resigned but alert.

Hammond gave no sign of being aware of the change.

"Ames," he said to the first of the three men who came in through the library from the specimen room--Dr. Gloge recognized Wesley Ames, the chief of Research Alpha's security staff--"this is Barbara Ellington. Take charge of that handbag she's holding. Allow no one to enter this office. Miss Ellington is not to leave and is not to be permitted to touch any object in this room. She is to stay in that chair until I return with Dr. Gloge."

Wesley Ames nodded. "Understood, Mr. Hammond!" He glanced at his men, one of whom went to the office door and locked it, while Ames turned to Barbara. She handed him her purse without comment.

"Doctor, come with me," Hammond said curtly. Dr. Gloge followed him into the library. Hammond closed the door behind him.

"Where's Vince?" he said in an inexorable voice.

"Really, Mr. Hammond," Gloge protested. "I don't--"

Hammond stepped toward him abruptly. The movement seemed a threat. Dr. Gloge cringed, expecting to be manhandled. Instead, the bigger man firmly caught his arm and pressed a tiny metal object against his bare wrist.

"Tell me where Vince is!" Hammond commanded.

Gloge parted his lips to deny any knowledge of Barbara's boyfriend. Instead, the confession of what he had done poured forth from him. As he realized what he was admitting, Gloge tried desperately to stop himself from talking. He had already divined that the metal touching his skin was some kind of a hypnotic device, and so he tried to pull his arm from Hammond's grasp.

It was a vain effort.

"How long ago did you drown him?" Hammond asked.

"About an hour ago," said Dr. Gloge hopelessly.

At that instant shouts came from the adjoining office. The door was pulled open. Wesley Ames stood there, ashen faced.

"Mr. Hammond—she's gone!"

Hammond darted past him into the office. Dr. Gloge hurried after, legs trembling. As he reached the door, Hammond already was coming back into the office with one of the security men from the hall on the other side. Ames and the other man stood in the center of the office, looking about with stupefied expressions.

Hammond dosed the door, said to Ames, "Quickly, now! What happened?"

Ames threw his hands up in a gesture of furious frustration.

"Mr. Hammond, I don't know. We were watching her. She was there in the chair; then she was *not* there, that's all. He"—he indicated one of the men—"was standing with his back to the door. When we saw she was gone, he was sitting on the floor next to the door! The door was open. We ran into the hall, but she wasn't there. Then I called you."

"How long had you been watching her?" Hammond asked.

"How long?" Ames gave him a dazed look. "I had just taken my mother down the hall to the elevator--"

He stopped, blinked. "Mr. Hammond, what am I saying? My mother's been dead for eight years!"

Hammond said softly, "So that's her little trick. She reached to that deep of the heart where the pure, unsullied dead are enshrined. And I thought she was only trying to read my mind!"

He broke off, said in a clear, commanding voice: "Wake up Ames!

You three have been gone from the world for a couple of minutes. Don't worry about how Miss Ellington did it. Get her description to the exits. If she's seen approaching by a guard, tell him to keep her at a distance at gun point."

As the three hurried from the office, he indicated a chair to Dr. Gloge. Gloge sat down, senses swimming, as Hammond took a pencil-shaped device from his pocket, pressed it, and stood waiting.

On the fifth floor of the Research Alpha complex, Helen Wendell picked up the small private phone at the side of her desk, said, "Go ahead, John."

"Switch all defense and trap screens on immediately!" Hammond's voice told her. "Gloge's drowned Strather--as an experimental failure. But the other one's awake and functioning. It's hard to know what she'll do next, but she may find it necessary to get to my office as a way of getting out of this building fast."

Helen pressed a button. "Not this way she won't!" she said. "The screens are on."

X

Outside, it grew darker on that tense Monday night.

At eight-eighteen, Helen Wendell again picked up the small phone purring at the side of her desk in the Research Alpha complex, glanced over at the closed office door, and said into the receiver, "Go ahead, John."

"I'm here at the pool," John Hammond's voice told her. "We've just fished his body out. Helen, the fellow is alive. Some reflex prevented any intake of water. But we'll need an oxygen tent."

Helen's left hand reached for another telephone. "You want the ambulance?" she asked, starting to dial.

"Yes. You have the street number. Tell them to pull up at the side gate. We have to act swiftly."

"Police uniforms, also?" Helen asked.

"Yes. But tell them to stay in the cab unless needed. We're out of sight, behind a high fence. And it's dark. I'll come back with them. Has Barbara been apprehended?"

"No," Helen said.

"I really didn't expect she would be," Hammond said. "I'll question the guards when I get there."

• • •

Barbara had allowed Ames to escort her to the nearest elevator, while she continued to have him think that she was his mother.

Once in the elevator, she pushed the up-button and came out presently on the roof. As she had already perceived, a helicopter was scheduled to take off. And though she was not an authorized passenger, the pilot took her along believing her to be his girl friend. Her sudden arrival seemed perfectly logical to him.

A little later, he set her down on the roof of another building. And that, also, seemed the most natural act to him, her reason for going there obvious.

He flew off and promptly forgot the episode.

The hasty landing was an urgent necessity for Barbara. She could feel the new injection beginning to work. So in her scanning of the buildings flitting by below, she perceived one in which the upper floors were unoccupied.

"I'll try to make it down to some office," she thought. But she didn't get beyond the top floor. She actually began to stagger as she went down the first steps from the roof. And there was no mistaking the out-of-control state of her body. To her left, a door opened into a

warehouse-like loft. She weaved through it, closed it behind her, and bolted it. Then she half-lowered herself, half-fell to the floor.

During that evening and night she never quite lost consciousness. Blackout was no longer possible for her. But she could feel her body changing, changing, changing--

The energy flows inside her took on a different meaning. They were separate from her. Presently they would be controllable again, but in another fashion entirely.

Something of Barbara seemed to disappear with that awareness.

"I'm still me!" the entity thought as it lay there on the floor. "Flesh, feeling, desire--"

But she had the distinct realization that "me" even in these early stages of the five-hundred-thousand-year transformations was me plus.

Exactly how the self was becoming something more was not yet clear.

The slow night dragged by.

XI

Tuesday.

Shortly before noon, Helen Wendell came along the hallway that led from John Hammond's quarters to the main office. Hammond was sitting at the far side of her desk. He glanced up at her as she approached.

"How are the patients?" he asked.

"Gloge is role-perfect," Helen said. "I even allowed him to spend part of the morning talking to his assistants here. He's already had two

conversations by Telstar with Sir Hubert about his new task overseas. I've put him to sleep again, but he's available. When did you come in?"

"Just now. How's Strather?"

Helen tapped the recorder. "I checked with the md machine on him twenty minutes ago," she said. "It gave me its opinion in detail. I took it all down. Do you want to hear it?"

"Sum it up for me."

Helen pursed her lips; then: "The md verifies that he didn't swallow any water, that some newly developed brain mechanism shut off breathing and kept him in a state of suspended animation. Vince himself has no conscious memory of the experience, so it was evidently a survival act of the lower brain.md reports other developments are taking place in Vince, regards them as freakish in nature. It's too soon to tell whether or not he can survive a third injection. He's under sedation."

Hammond looked dissatisfied. "All right," he said after a moment "What else do you have for me?"

"A number of transmitter messages," Helen said.

"About Gloge?"

"Yes. New Brasilia and Manila agree with you that there are too many chances of a revealing slip-up if Dr. Gloge remains at Research Alpha any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"You said Gloge is role-perfect."

Helen nodded. "At the moment. But he is a highly recalcitrant subject, and naturally I can't give him the kind of final conditioning he'd get at Paris center. That's where they want him. The courier, Arnold, will take him aboard the Paris-jet at five-ten tonight."

"No!" Hammond shook his head. "That's too early! Gloge is our bait to catch Barbara. His experiments indicate that she won't be able to function until sometime this evening. I calculate that somewhere

around nine o'clock will be a good time to let Gloge out from behind the defense screens."

Helen was silent a moment, then said, "There seems to be a general feeling, John, that you're overestimating the possibilities of any really dangerous evolutionary developments in Barbara Ellington."

Hammond smiled tautly. "I've seen her. They haven't. Mind you, for all I know, she may be dead or dying of the effects of the third shot by now. But if she's capable of coming, I think she'll come. She'll want that fourth injection. She may start anytime looking for the man who can produce the serum for her."

. . .

By Tuesday a new awareness had come to Barbara.

She had developed brain mechanisms that could do things with space--do them on an automatic level, without her conscious mind knowing what, or how. Fantastic things... .



As she lay there, a new nerve center in her brain reached out and scanned a volume of space 500 light-years in diameter. It touched and comprehended clouds of neutral hydrogen and bright young o-type stars, measured the swing of binaries, took a census of comets and ice asteroids. Far out in the constellation of Ophiuchus a blue-

white giant was going nova, and the new, strange linkage in Barbara's mind observed its frantic heaving of spheres of radiant gas. A black dwarf emitted its last spray of infrared light and sank into the radiationless pit of dead star.

Barbara's mind encompassed it all, and reached farther ... reached out effortlessly until it touched a specific Something ... and withdrew.

Brimming with ecstasy, Barbara cried out in her mind, *What did I touch?*

She knew it had been something the brain mechanism was programmed to search for. But no conscious perception was involved. All she could be sure of was that the nerve center seemed satisfied, and ceased its scanning.

But she sensed, in an intensely happy way, that it remained aware of What it had contacted.

She was still savoring the joy a while later when she became aware that the shifting energy flows inside her had resumed.

Gradually, then, she permitted her body and mind to sink into a receptive state.

Midsummer heat built up over the city throughout the day. In the locked room on the vacant top floor of the multistoried building three miles from Research Alpha, the heat grew stifling as the sun shifted overhead, began to beat in through closed, unshaded windows. Barbara, curled on her side on the dusty floor, did not move. Now and then she uttered a moaning sound. Sweat ran from her for a long, long time, as the heat increased; then the skin of her face dried and turned dirty white. She made no more sounds. Even a close study would not have been able to prove that she still breathed.

By four o'clock the sunblaze had shifted past the windows, and the locked room lay in shadows. But it was another hour before the temperature in it gradually began to drop. About six, the curled figure moved for the first time.

She straightened her legs slowly, then, with a sudden convulsive motion, rolled over on her back, lay flat, arms flung loosely to the

sides.

The right half of her face was smeared grotesquely with thick dust caked in drying sweat. She breathed—lay quiet again. Several minutes later, her eyelids lifted. The eyes were a deep, brilliant blue, seemed oddly awake and alert, though they remained unfocused and did not shift about the room. After a while, the lids slowly closed and remained closed.

The day darkened; the city's lights awoke. The empty warehouse stood silent. More than an hour passed before the figure in the room on the top floor moved again. This time, it was motion of a different order. She rose suddenly and quickly to her feet, went to the nearest window, and stood looking out through the dirt-stained glass.

The towering Research Alpha complex was a glow of white light to the west. The watcher's eyes turned toward it... .

A second of time went by. Then the mind that directed the eyes moved on an entirely new level of extended perception.

Night-shift activities in the research complex were not essentially different from those of the day; but there were fewer people around as the awareness that was Barbara drifted along familiar, lighted hallways, about corners, dropped suddenly to a sublevel which contained the biology section. Here she flicked through the main laboratory and up a narrow corridor, pausing before the door to Dr. Glöge's office.

She moved through the door, paused in the dark and silent office, then moved on into the library. She remained a minute or two above the big safe in a corner of the library. Then she knew.

The safe was empty--and trapped.

The awareness flicked out of the library, shifted to the fifth floor of the complex, drifted toward a great black door showing the words: *Scientific Liaison and Investigation*. She stopped before it.

Minutes passed as she slowly and carefully scanned the outer walls of John Hammond's offices and living quarters. Here was something new ... something that seemed very dangerous. Within the walls and

doors, above the ceiling, below the flooring of this section, strange energies curled and crawled like twisting smoke.

She could not pass through that barrier.

But though she could not enter, her perceptions might, to some extent.

She must avoid, she decided, both the front entry door and the secret elevator which led directly to Hammond's living quarters in the rear of the section. As the most obvious points for an intruder to consider, they were also the most formidably shielded.

She shifted back along the hall to a point some twenty feet away from the massive black door, well back from the wall between her and the front office. She waited. Gradually a picture began to form... .

This was an unfamiliar room, the inner office of the section. There was no one in it, nothing of interest except a closed door across from the one which opened on the corridor.

The inner office disappeared ... and what came next was no picture, but a surge of savage, demanding hunger.

Startled, shocked, already feeling the pull that in a moment would hurl her into the murderous barriers about the section, the searching awareness instantly broke the thread of visual perception, went inactive to allow herself to stabilize.

Nevertheless, she now knew where the serum was--in a strongroom of Hammond's quarters, heavily screened, seemingly inaccessible.

Perception cautiously opened again. Another section of the living quarters appeared, hazy with hostile energies. The other--the male counterpart--was here. Alive.

Here, but helpless. Here, but unconscious, in a cage of dark force which permitted no more than barest identification by the searcher. She was very glad he had been rescued.

Minutes later, she knew there was no one else in Hammond's locked quarters. She withdrew visual perception from there, and let the

picture of the main office develop. The blurred image of a woman--Helen Wendell--now seemed to be speaking into an instrument connected with the apparatus before her.

A second band of perception opened, and voices became indistinctly audible.

Ganin Arnold, the New Brasilia courier, was making his final call from the city jetport, nine miles south of the Research Alpha complex.

"The doors are being secured," he said. He was speaking into a disguised microphone clamped over his mouth and nose, which had the appearance of the tranquilizing respirators many of the other jet passengers were using now in the last moments before lift-off. Even to anyone within inches of him, his voice would have remained completely inaudible. In John Hammond's office, it emerged clearly from the device on Helen Wendell's desk.

"Lift-off for the nonstop jet to Paris," Arnold went on, "will follow"--he glanced at the watch on his wrist--"in two minutes and thirty seconds. All passengers and every member of the crew have passed at least once through the measurement radius. Nothing which may have preceded or followed myself and our biologist aboard registers life-energy levels significantly above the standard Earther range--that is, of course, below six.

"To sum it up, we definitely are *not* being accompanied to Paris by any abnormally high human evolutionary form. Dr. Gloge's behavior has been excellent. His tranquilizer has begun to take effect, and he is showing signs of drowsiness. Undoubtedly, he will sleep soundly throughout the trip."

Arnold paused, apparently waiting for comment. When there was none, he resumed, "As soon as the lift-field goes on, communication by this means, of course, will be impossible. Since nothing is likely to go wrong from this moment on, I suggest, if it's satisfactory to Mr. Hammond, that I end my report now."

Helen Wendell's voice, seeming to speak from a point just within the left side of the courier's skull, told him pleasantly, "Mr. Hammond prefers you to remain alert and available for final instructions until the

lift has begun."

XII

In the locked room on the top floor of the empty warehouse a few miles east of Research Alpha, the woman-shape standing at the window stirred suddenly out of the tranced immobility it had maintained for the past minutes. The head lifted, gaze sweeping the softly glowing night sky above the city. A hand moved, touching the thick windowpane probingly. The glass fell away like a big drop of melting ice.

Dust swirled as cool air rushed in.

Barbara waited, then moved closer to the opening.

Her gaze swung to the west again, remained there. She listened. The myriad noises of the city were clear and distinct now. Overlying them was a thin fountain of skysound as, every thirty seconds--at this hour--a jet lifted vertically from the city port, cut in its engines, and vanished up into the night with a whistling shriek. Her head shifted quickly, briefly following the changing pattern of the sound. Then it steadied.

Her gaze rose slowly, slanting to the north, following a moving, distant point in the night, eyes narrowed with intentness.

. . .

On board the Paris jet which had left the city port a few minutes before, Dr. Henry Gloge now had a very curious experience. Drowsily, almost on the verge of sleep, he had been contemplating the pleasant significance of his assignment today to Sir Hubert Roland's Paris project. Suddenly, then, there was a sensation of coming partly awake.

He gazed around him with a rising sense of alarm, looking first of all at his seat companion.

The fellow was big, heavily built. He looked like a police detective, and Gloge knew that the man was his guard. The curious thing was that he was slumped back in the seat, head lolling forward, eyes closed ... typical indications of a tranquilizer stupor.

Gloge thought: "Why is he asleep?" He had a strong conviction that it was he who should be unconscious. There was a clear memory of a device—an instrument totally unfamiliar to him—which the Wendell woman had used to implant a complete, compelling set of delusions in his mind. He had come willingly aboard the jet. And he had, at the suggestion of his guard, inhaled enough tranquilizing gas from the seat respirator to have kept him somnolent until the jet touched down in Paris.

Instead, minutes later, he had come awake, the delusions of the day slipping from his mind!

There must be an explanation for these apparently contradictory events.

The thought ended. A feeling of blankness held him for a moment. Then came a churning wave of terror.

Somewhere a voice had said: "Yes, Dr. Gloge--there *is* an explanation for this!"

Slowly, against his every inclination, but completely unable to withstand the impulse, Dr. Gloge turned, looked back. There was someone in the seat behind him.

For an instant, it seemed to be a complete stranger. Then the eyes opened. They fixed on him, glowing brilliant demon-blue, even in the muted light of the jet.

The woman spoke, and it was the voice of Barbara Ellington. "We have a problem, Dr. Gloge. There seems to be a group of extraterrestrials on this planet, and I still do not have any clear idea of what they are doing here. That's our immediate task--to find out."

• • •

You are *where*?" Helen Wendell said sharply.

Her hand flicked to the right, snapped a switch. A small view-screen on the right side of the desk lit up. She said: "John—quick!"

In the inner office, John Hammond turned, saw the lit screen on the desk behind him. An instant later he was listening to the words tumbling hoarsely from the telephone speaker on his left. He said to Helen's tense pale profile in the screen to the right, "Where is he?"

"At the Des Moines jetport! The Paris jet put down for emergency repairs. Now nobody seems to understand just what was wrong with it or what repairs are needed. But the passengers have been disembarked, are to be transferred to another jet. Arnold's in a state of confusion and shock. Listen to him!"

"—there was a woman with him," the courier's voice babbled. "At the time, I thought it was one of the passengers who had come off the jet with us. Now I'm not sure. But I simply stood there and watched the two of them walk out of the hall together. It never occurred to me to ask myself why this woman was with Gloge, or to stop them, or even to wonder where they were going... ."

Hammond twisted a dial, dimming the voice. He spoke to Helen Wendell. "When did the jet come down?"

"From what Arnold said first," Helen told him, "it must have been over half an hour ago! As he puts it, it didn't occur to him to call us about it until now."

"*Half an hour!*" Hammond came to his feet. "Helen, drop everything you're doing! I want an off-planet observer sitting on this, within minutes."

She gave him a startled look. "What are you expecting?"

"I don't know what to expect."

She hesitated, began: "The Wardens... ."

"Whatever can be done here," Hammond said, "I can do myself. I don't need anyone else for that. The defense screens on the northern side will go off for exactly forty seconds. Now move!" He snapped off the screen, reached under the desk, threw over another switch.

In the main office, Helen Wendell stared at the blank screen for a moment. Then she jumped to her feet, ran across the room to the entry door, pulled it open, and slipped out into the hall. The door swung shut behind her.

Some moments later, John Hammond entered the room behind his private office where Vincent Strather lay enclosed by a trap screen. Hammond went to the wall, turned the trap controls there halfway to the off point.

The screen faded into smoky near-invisibility, and he stared for a few seconds at the shape stretched out on the couch within it. He asked aloud. "There have been no further internal changes?"

"None within the past two hours," the md machine's voice said from the wall.

"This form is viable?"

"Yes."

"He would awaken if I released the screen?"

"Yes. Immediately."

Hammond was silent a moment, then asked, "You have calculated the effects of a fourth injection of the serum?"

"Yes," the machine said from the wall.

"In general, what are they?"

"In general," the machine said, "there would be pronounced changes, and at an again greatly accelerated rate. The evolutionary trend remains the same, but would be very much advanced. The

resultant form would stabilize within twenty minutes. It would again be a viable one."

Hammond turned the trap-screen controls full over to the left. The screen darkened once more into a dense, concealing shroud.

It was too soon to make the decision to give the fourth shot. Perhaps--mercifully--it would be avoided altogether.

XIII

At half-past ten, the long-distance signal sounded from the telephone screen. Hammond glanced around from the portable control box on the desk, simultaneously pressed the answer button and the stud which would leave him unseen if the caller's instrument was equipped with a view-screen, and said, "Go ahead!"

The screen remained dark, but somebody made a gasping sound of relief. "*Mr. Hammond!*" It was a reedy, quavering voice, but it was distinctly the voice of Dr. Gloge.

There were two sharp clicks from one of the instruments lying on the desk--a signal from Helen Wendell, in the observer boat standing off Earth, that she was recording the conversation.

"Where are you, Doctor?"

"Mr. Hammond ... something terrible ... that creature ... Barbara Ellington--"

"She took you off the jet, I know," Hammond said, "Where are you now?"

"My home--in Pennsylvania."

"She went there with you?"

"Yes. There was nothing I could do."

"Of course not," Hammond said. "She's gone now?"

"I don't know where she is. I took the chance of phoning. Mr. Hammond, there was something I didn't know, didn't remember. But *she* knew. I... ."

"You had some Omega serum in that farm laboratory?" Hammond asked.

"I didn't think of it as that." Dr. Gloge's voice told him. "It was an earlier experimental variant—one with impurities which produce a dangerously erratic reaction. I was under the impression I had destroyed my entire stock. But this being knew better! It brought me here, forced me to give it what was left of the serum. The quantity was small--"

"But enough for a standard fourth shot of the series?" Hammond said.

"Yes, yes, it was sufficient for the fourth injection."

"And she has now taken it as an injection?"

Dr. Gloge hesitated; then he said, "Yes. However, there is reason to hope that instead of impelling the evolutionary process in what I now regard as a monstrous creature on to its next stage, the imperfect serum will result in its prompt destruction."

"Perhaps," said Hammond. "But almost since you first launched Barbara Ellington into this process, she appears to have been aware of what was possible to her. I can't believe she's made a mistake now."

"I... ." Dr. Gloge paused again, went on. "Mr. Hammond, I realize the enormity of what I've done. If, in any way, I can help avert the worst consequences, I shall cooperate to the fullest extent. I--"

There was a sharp click as the connection was broken; a pause, then Helen Wendell's voice whispered into Hammond's ear, "Do you think Barbara let him make that call, then cut him off?"

"Of course."

Helen made no further comment, simply waited; and presently, softly, Hammond continued: "I think she wants us to know that she's coming here."

"I think she's there now," said Helen. "Good-bye."

XIV

John Hammond glanced at the control box on the desk and saw the flickering indicators. He also saw a wholly unexpected reaction: a condition of nonenergy that actually canceled energy.

"Helen," he said. "This woman has gone up somewhere out of our reach! What you're seeing is energy trying to maintain itself against antienergy. I received recognition drilling on such things, but I've never seen it before in an actual situation."

Helen Wendell, eyes fixed on a duplicate check screen in the distant observer boat, did not reply. A shifting electronic storm was blazing through the check-screen indicators; it showed that the defensive forces enclosing Hammond's office and living quarters were coming under a swiftly varying pattern of attack ... presently that they were being tested almost to the limit.

It held that way for over a minute--every reading almost impossibly high, barely shifting.

"John Hammond!" the desktop said softly to Hammond.

He jerked slightly away, eyes flicking down to it.

"John Hammond!" the chair whispered beside him.

"John Hammond!"

"John Hammond!"

"John Hammond!"

"John Hammond... ."

His name sprang at him from every part of the office, in a swirling, encircling pattern. Because of his special supervisory position, Hammond knew the pattern and its danger. It had never been considered probable, but nevertheless *they* had taken the possibility into account, and so he had outside power available to deal with this emergency.

He looked hurriedly about on the desk for an instrument he had laid down among the others there. For an instant he seemed unable to recognize it, and there was an icy touch of panic. Then he realized he already held it in his hand. He ran a knob up along its side with his thumb, locked it into place, laid the instrument back on the desk.

A rasping came from it. Not only a sound, but a vibration, a rough, hard shuddering of the nerves. The voice-ghosts sank to a whisper, flowed from the room. Helen Wendell's tiny, distant voice stabbed at Hammond's ear like a needle; "The check screen! She's leaving!" *Hopefully.*

"You're certain?"

"Not really." Alarm whipped at him through Helen's voice. "What does *your* screen show?"

"A subjective blur at the moment. It's clearing."

"What happened?"

"I think she felt above us, and so she took it for granted that she could walk all over us. Accordingly, she's just had the surprise of her brief existence as a subgalactic superwoman. She didn't realize we represent the Great Ones."

"Is she damaged?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. She's learned too much. But ... details later." Hammond blinked at the check screen, swung around toward the

door of the adjoining room, pulled it open.

"Administer the final injection to the subject!" he said sharply into the room. "Acknowledge!"

"The fourth and final injection of the Omega Stimulation series will be administered to the subject," the machine replied.

"Immediately!"

"Immediately."

Helen's voice reached Hammond again as he drew the door shut and came back to the desk. "At moments," she said, "the antienergies were holding the ninety-six point of overload. Within four of the theoretical limit. Did she get to you at the energy balance?"

"Very nearly," Hammond told her. "A very high-energy, pseudo-hypno trick that didn't quite work. And she'll be back. I still have something she wants!"

On his desk, the telephone screen blurred. When he turned it on, the voice of Dr. Gloge sounded in his ears.

"We were cut off earlier, Mr. Hammond." The biologist's voice was strongly even and controlled.

"What happened?" Hammond asked warily.

"Mr. Hammond, I have finally analyzed what evolution really is. The universe is a spectrum. It needs energies in motion at all levels. This is why those at the higher levels do not interfere directly with individual activities at the lower. But this is also why they are concerned when a race reaches the point where it can begin to manipulate large forces."

Hammond said steadily, "Barbara, if the purpose of this call is to find out if I'll let you in, yes, I will."

A pause, then a click. Then there was a tiny, momentary flickering in one of the check-screen indicators. Then, in a different section, another.

"What's happening?" Helen asked tautly.

Hammond said, "She's coming through the screens, with my permission."

"Do you think it's a trick?"

"In a way. For some reason, she hasn't let herself reach that theoretical, final million-year point on Dr. Gloge's evolutionary scale. That may come a little later."

"And you're actually letting her in, believing that?"

"Of course." Helen did not answer him.

A minute went past in silence. Hammond shifted so that he faced the door, moved a few steps away from the control box and the desk, and stood waiting.

A small light burned red in a corner of the check screen. Something had come into the main office.

The heavy silence continued for some seconds. Then, on the hard flooring at the far end of the corridor, Hammond heard footsteps.

He couldn't have said what he had been expecting ... but certainly nothing so commonplace as the sound of a woman's high-heeled shoes coming briskly toward the inner office.

She appeared in the doorway, stopped there, looking at him. Hammond said nothing. All outer indications were that this was the Barbara Ellington he had seen sitting in a chair in Dr. Gloge's office the night before. Nothing had changed either in her looks or in her clothing; even the brown purse she held in one hand seemed the same. Except for the air of radiant vitality, the alertness of her stance, the keen intelligence in her face, this also was, in fact, the awkward, over-anxious, lean girl who had worked in the outer officer for less than two weeks.

And therefore, Hammond thought it was a phantom! Not a delusion; he was protected now against any attempt to tamper with his mind in that manner by barriers which would break only if he died. The shape standing in the door was real. The instruments recorded it. But it was a shape created for this meeting—not that of Barbara Ellington as she was at this hour.

He was unsure of her intention in assuming it. Perhaps it was designed to throw him off guard.

She came into the room, smiling faintly, and glanced about. Hammond knew then that he hadn't been mistaken. Something had come in with her ... something oppressive, spine tingling; a sense of heat, a sense of power.

The curiously brilliant, blue eyes turned toward him; and the smile deepened.

"I'm going to have to test why you're still here," she said carelessly. "So defend yourself!"

There was no sound; but a cloud of white light filled the air between them, enveloping them; faded; flared silently; faded again. Both stood unmoving, each watching the other. Nothing in the office had changed.

"Excellent!" the woman said. "The mystery behind you begins to reveal itself. I know the quality of your race now, John Hammond. *Your* science could never control the order of energies that are shielding you mentally and physically here! There should be other indications then that in extreme necessity you are permitted to employ devices created by beings greater than yourself—devices which you do not yourself understand. And where would such devices be found at the moment? ... Over there, I believe!"

She turned toward the door of the adjoining room, took three steps, and halted. A rose-glowing haze had appeared before the door and the surrounding sections of wall and flooring.

"Yes," she said. "That comes from the same source! And here—"

She turned, moved quickly toward the control box on the desk, checked again. A rose haze also enveloped the box now.

"The three points you must consider vital here!" she said, nodding. "Yourself, the being in that room, and the controls of the section. You may safeguard these at the expense of revealing a secret you would otherwise least want to reveal. Now I think it is time for us to exchange information."

She came back to Hammond, stopped before him.

"I discovered suddenly, John Hammond, that your kind are not native of Earth. You are superior to Earth's humanity, but not sufficiently superior to explain why you are here. You have an organization on this world. But it is a curious organization. It does not appear to serve the purposes of conqueror or exploiter... . But let's leave it at that. Don't try to explain it. It doesn't matter. You are to release the human male who was to have received the series of serum injections with me. You and the other members of your race stationed here will then remove yourselves promptly from this planet. We have no further use for you."

Hammond shook his head. "We might be forced off the planet," he said. "but that would make Earth an active danger spot. The Great Galactics whom I represent do have servant races who carry out military assignments for them. It would not be to your advantage if such a race were to occupy or quarantine Earth, to make sure that the seedling race here continues to receive the necessary degree of supervision."

"John Hammond," the woman-shape said, "whether the Great Galactics send military servants to Earth or come here themselves is a matter that does not concern me in the least. It would be very unwise of them to do either. Within hours from now, the Omega serum will be available in limitless quantities. Within days, every man, woman, and child of Earth will have gone through the full evolutionary sequence. Do you think Earth's new humanity could still be supervised by any other race?"

"The Omega serum will never be used again," Hammond said. "I'll show you why... ."

Hammond turned, went to the control box on the desk. The rose haze faded before him, appeared behind him again. He threw a switch, and the haze vanished. He turned away from the controls. "The energy fields that kept you out of that room are being shut off," he said. "In a moment, the door will open. So see for yourself--the barriers are off."

Except for the blazing blue of the eyes, her face was a cold mask. Hammond thought she must already know what was there. But she turned, went to the open door, and stood looking into the room. Hammond moved to the side of the desk where he could look past her... .

The energy trap enclosing the couch in the room had vanished. The dark thing on the couch was just sitting up. It shook its head dazedly, rolled over, and came up on all fours.

Its huge, dull-black eyes stared at them for an instant; then it straightened, rose to its full height... .

To a full height of twenty-two inches! It swayed unsteadily on the couch--a hairy little figure with a wide-mouthed, huge-eyed goblin head.

Its eyes blinked in vague recognition. The mouth opened. It cried in a thin, bleating voice: "Bar-ba-ra!"

XV

The woman wheeled, turning away. She did not look back at the grotesque little figure. But a faint smile touched her lips as she gazed at Hammond. "All right," she said, "there goes my last tie with Earth. I accept what you said. I gather that the Omega serum is a unique development and that it hasn't shown up elsewhere in the galaxy."

"That is not a literal truth," said Hammond.

She nodded toward the adjoining room. "Then perhaps you can tell me what went wrong."

Hammond told her Gloge's twofold theory: that at this stage of man's evolution many possibilities remained for evolvement, and that apparently the serum stimulated one of these and thereafter was bound by natural law to follow that line of development.

As he talked, he was watching her, and he was thinking: "This problem isn't resolved. How are we going to deal with *her*?"

He sensed an almost incredible strength, an actual, palpable force. It poured from her in a steady stream of power.

He continued tensely: "The Great Galactics, when planting their seed on a new planet, have never interfered with the basic characteristics of the various races that live there. They interject selected bundles of their own genes by grafting into thousands of men and women on every continent. As the generations go by, these bundles intermix by chance with those that are native to the people of the planet. Apparently, the Omega serum stimulates one of these mixtures and carries it forward to whatever it is capable of, which, because of the singularity factor, usually leads to a dead end."

"The singularity factor--?" Her words were a question.

Men, Hammond explained, were born of the union of a man and a woman. No one person carried more than a portion of mankind's genes. As time passed, the interaction and inter relation of all the genes occurred; the race progressed because billions of chance intermixings of different bundles took place. In Vince, one such bundle had been stirred, been whipped up to its ultimate point by repeated Omega Stimulation--but evidently that particular bundle had strictly limited possibilities, as would always be the case when a single person was bred, so to speak, with himself--the singularity factor.

And that was what had happened to Vince and herself. They were products of the most fantastic inbreeding ever attempted--life surviving through one line, a link of incest carried to some ultimate sterility, fantastic, interesting, freakish.

"You are wrong," said the woman-shape softly. "I am not a freak. So what has happened here is even more improbable than I have realized. In myself, it was the galactic seedling bundle of genes that was stimulated. Now, I understand what it was I contacted out in space. One of them. And he let me. He understood instantly."

She added, "One more question, John Hammond. Omega is an unusual term. What does it mean?"

"... When man becomes one with the ultimate, that is Point Omega."

It seemed to Hammond that, even as he finished speaking, she was growing remote, withdrawing from him. Or was it that it was he who was withdrawing? Not only from her, but from everything--drifting away, not in any spatial sense, but, in some curious fashion, away from the reality of the entire universe? The brief thought came that this should be an alarming and disturbing experience. Then the thought itself was forgotten.

"There is something occurring," her voice was telling him. "In the small thing behind the door, the Omega evolutionary process is completed, in its fashion. In me, it is not completed--not quite.

"But it is being completed now... ."

. . .

He was nowhere and nothing. New word impressions, new thought impressions, came suddenly and swept through him like the patter of rain.

The impressions took form. It was later in time. He seemed to be standing in the small room next to his office, looking down at the lanky, redheaded young man sitting groggily on the edge of the couch holding his head.

"Coming out of it, Vince?" Hammond asked.

Vincent Strather glanced uncertainly up at him, ran his hand over the jagged rent in the sleeve of his jacket.

"I guess so, Mr. Hammond," he muttered. "I ... what happened?"

"You went for a drive tonight," Hammond told him, "with a girl named Barbara Ellington. You'd both been drinking. She was driving ... driving too fast. The car went off a highway embankment, turned over several times. Witnesses dragged you to safety minutes before the car burst into flames. The girl was dead. They didn't attempt to save her body. When the police informed me of the accident, I had you brought here to Research Alpha."

As he spoke, he had the stunning realization that everything he was saying was true. The accident *had* happened late that evening, in exactly that manner.

"Well... ." Vince began. He broke off, sighed, shook his head. "Barbara was an odd girl. A wild one! I was pretty fond of her once, Mr. Hammond. Lately, I've been trying to break off with her."

Hammond received the impression that much more had happened. Automatically, he looked back through the open door as the private telephone in the inner office signaled. "Excuse me," he said to Vince.

As he flicked on the instrument, Helen Wendell's face appeared on the phone screen. She gave him a brief smile, asked, "How is Strather?"

Hammond didn't reply at once. He looked at her, feeling cold, eerie crawlings over his scalp. Helen was seated at her desk in the outer office. She was not in a spaceboat standing off the planet.

He heard himself say, "He's all right. There is very little emotional shock... . How about you?"

"I'm disturbed by Barbara's death," Helen admitted. "But now I have Dr. Gloge on the phone. He's quite anxious to talk to you."

Hammond said, "All right, Put him on."

"Mr. Hammond," Dr. Gloge's voice said a moment later, "this is in connection with the Point Omega Stimulation project. I've been going

over all my notes and conclusions on these experiments, and I'm convinced that once you understand the extraordinary dangers which might result if the details of my experiments became known, you will agree that the project should be closed out and my records referring to it destroyed at once."

After switching off the phone, he remained for a while at the desk.

. . .

So that part of the problem also had been solved! The last traces of the Omega serum were being wiped out, would soon linger only in his mind.

And for how long there? Perhaps no more than two or three hours, John Hammond decided. The memory pictures were paling; he had a feeling that sections of them already had vanished. And there was an odd, trembling uncertainty about what was left ... thin, colored mind-canvas being tugged by a wind which presently would carry it off.

He had no objections, Hammond told himself. He had seen one of the Great Ones, and it was not a memory that it was good for a lesser being to have.

Somehow, it hurt to be so much less.

He must have slept. For he awoke suddenly. He felt vaguely bewildered, for no reason that he could imagine.

Helen came in, smiling. "Don't you think it's time we closed up for the night? You're working too long hours again."

"You're right," Hammond nodded.

He got up and went into the room next to the office to tell Vincent Strather he was free to go home.