

Galaxy

JANUARY 1956

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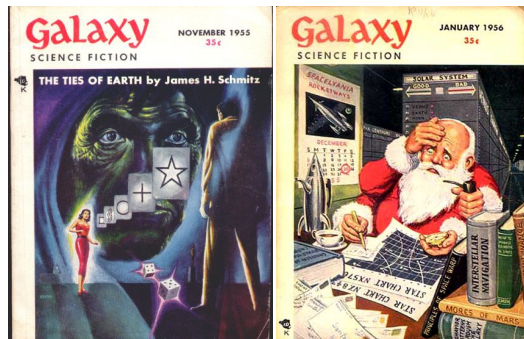
SCIENCE FICTION **The Ties of Earth**



"The Ties of Earth"

James Schmitz

Published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Vol. 11, Nos. 2-3 (November 1955 and January 1956; there was no issue for December 1955 because of a minor change in the publication schedule), with illustrations by Ed Emshwiller, though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



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What was happening to Commager did worse than make no sense--
it made too much sense--but which was true and which was not?

The Hawkes residence lay in a back area of Beverly Hills, south of Wilshire and west of La Brea. It was a big house for that neighborhood, a corner house set back from the street on both sides and screened by trellises, walls and the flanks of a large garage.

"That's the number," Jean Bohart said, "but don't stop. Drive on at least a block... ."

Alan Commager pointed out that there was a parking space right in front of the house.

"I know," Jean agreed nervously, "but if we park there, somebody inside the house would notice us and that would spoil the main purpose of our trip."

"You mean," said Commager as he drove on obediently, "they'll fold the black altar out of sight, drop the remains of the sacrificed virgin through a trap door and hose out the blood, while we're stumbling across the dichondra? I thought we were expected."

"We're not expected till ten thirty," Jean said. "Ira didn't exactly make a point of it, but he mentioned they'd be doing other work till shortly after ten."

"Then I come on with the dice, eh? By the way, I didn't bring any along. Would these Guides keep sordid little items like that around?"

"It isn't going to be a crap game, silly," Jean informed him. "I told you Ira thinks these people can tell whether you were just lucky last week or whether you've developed some sort of special ability. They'll test you--somehow."

Commager looked down at her curiously. Jean was a slim blonde who could look crisp as chilled lettuce after an afternoon of smashing tennis matches followed by an hour of diving practice off the high

board. She wasn't intellectually inclined, but, understandably, Ira Bohart had never seemed to mind that. Neither did Commager. However, she seemed disturbed now.

"Are you beginning to get interested in that sort of thing yourself?" he inquired lightly.

"No," she said. "I'm just worried about that husband of mine. Honestly, Alan, this is as bad a metaphysical binge as he's ever been on! And some of those exercises he was showing me yesterday sort of scared me. If they do something like that tonight, I'd like to know what you think of it."

"It's just somebody else on the trail of the Bohart stocks and bonds, Jeannie. Ira will get disillusioned again before any harm is done. You know that."

"That's what I keep telling myself," Jean agreed unhappily. "But this time--"

Commager shook his head, parked the car and let her out, a block and a half from the Hawkes home. "Did you try any of those exercises yourself?"

"I'm not that loony," Jean said briefly. "Anyway, Ira advised me not to."

They walked back to the house in brooding silence. Between them, they'd seen Ira through a bout of Buddhism and successive experiences with three psychological fringe groups, in relentless pursuit of some form of control of the Higher Mind. After each such period, he would revert for a while to despondent normalcy.

Four years ago, it had seemed rather amusing to Commager, because then it had been Lona Commager and Ira Bohart who went questing after the Inexpressible together, while Alan Commager and Jean Bohart went sea-fishing or skin-diving off Catalina. But then Lona had died and the Inexpressible stopped being a source of amusement. Sometimes Ira bored Commager to death these days.

But he still liked Jean.

• • •

"Why pick on me to expose these rascals anyway?" he asked as they came in sight of the house. "I may have surprised the boys at Las Vegas last week, but I couldn't tell a psychic phenomenon from a ringing in my ears."

She patted his arm. "That may be true, but you do intimidate people," she explained.

"Shucks!" Commager said modestly. It was true, though; he did. "So I'm to sit there and glare at them?"

"That's the idea. Just let them know you see through their little tricks and I'll bet they lose interest in Ira before the evening's out. Of course, you don't have to put it on too thick...."

Their host, Herbert Hawkes, for one, didn't look like a man who'd be easy to intimidate. He was as big as Commager himself and about the same age; an ex-football player, it turned out. He and Commager exchanged crushing hand-grips and soft smiles, as big men will, and released each other with mutual respect.

Ira, who didn't seem any more gaunt and haggard than usual, had appeared a little startled by their entry, possibly because they were early, but more likely, Commager thought, because of a girl who had coiled herself becomingly on the couch very close to Ira.

At first glance, this siren seemed no more than seventeen--a slender, brown-skinned creature in an afternoon dress the exact shade of her skin--but by the time they were being introduced, Commager had added twelve years to her probable age.

She was Ruth MacDonald, she told him, secretary of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach. Had he heard of it? He said it sounded familiar, which was untrue, but it seemed to please

Miss MacDonald.

The only other person present, a fifty-odd, graying teddy-bear of a man with very thick eyebrows, announced he was the Reverend Wilson Knox, president of the Temple of Antique Christianity. The Reverend, Commager realized, was pretty well plastered, though there was no liquor in sight.

Their interests might be unusual, but they hardly seemed sinister. Commager was practically certain he could identify Herbert Hawkes as the owner of one of the biggest downtown automobile agencies--which made him an unlikely sort of man to be a member of a group called the Guides. It was Hawkes' own affair, but it promised to make the evening more interesting than Commager had expected.

"Were we interrupting anything?" he inquired, looking around benevolently.

Ira cleared his throat. "Well, as a matter of fact, Alan, we were conducting a series of experiments with me as the guinea pig at the moment. Rather interesting actually--" He seemed a trifle nervous.

Commager avoided Jean's glance. "Why not just continue?"

"We can't," the Reverend Knox informed him solemnly. "Our high priestess was called to the telephone a few minutes ago. We must wait until she returns."

Ira explained hurriedly, "Mr. Knox is talking about Paylar. She's connected with the new group I'm interested in, the Guides. I suppose Jean told you about that?"

"A little." Commager waved his hand around. "But I thought you people were the Guides."

Hawkes smiled.

Wilson Knox looked startled. "Goodness, no, Mr. Commager! Though as a matter of fact--" he glanced somewhat warily at his two companions--"if someone here were a Guide, that person would be

the only one who knew it! And, of course, Paylar. That's right, isn't it, Ruth?"

Miss MacDonald nodded and looked bored.

Jean said to Ira, "All I really told Alan was that some friends of yours would like to experiment with--well, whatever you think he was using in that crap game last week." She smiled brightly at the group. "Mr. Commager actually won eleven hundred dollars in fifteen minutes of playing!"

"Ah, anybody could if they kept the dice for fifteen minutes," Commager said airily. "Question of mind over matter, you know."

"Eleven hundred dollars? Phenomenal!" Wilson Knox came wide awake. "And may I ask, sir, whether you employ your powers as a professional gambler?"

Commager replied no, that professionally he was a collector, importer, wholesaler and retailer of tropical fish. Which was, as it happened, the truth, but the Reverend looked suspicious.

A door opened then and two other people came in. One was a handsome though sullen-faced young man whose white-blond hair had been trimmed into a butch haircut. He was deeply tanned, wore a tee-shirt, white slacks, sneakers and looked generally as if he would be at home on Muscle Beach.

The other one had to be Paylar: a genuine Guide or, at least, a direct connection to them. She was downright cute in a slender, dark way. She might be in her early twenties... .

But for a moment, as Commager stood up to be introduced, he had the confused impression that jungles and deserts and auroras mirrored in ice-flows had come walking into the room with her.

Well, well, he thought. Along with Hawkes, here was another real personality.

They didn't continue with the experiments on Ira. Wilson Knox

reported Commager's feat in Las Vegas to Paylar, who seemed to know all about it, and then went bumbling on into a series of anecdotes about other dice manipulators he had known or heard about.

Except for the Boharts, the others listened with varying expressions of polite boredom. But Ira seemed genuinely fascinated by the subject and kept glancing at Commager, to see how he was taking it. Jean became argumentative.

"Nobody can really prove that anyone has such abilities," she stated decisively. "Ira's been working around with this sort of thing for years and he's never shown me anything that couldn't have been a coincidence!"

Ira grinned apologetically. Wilson Knox sent a quick glance toward Paylar, who had settled herself in an armchair to Commager's left. The Reverend, Commager thought, seemed both miffed and curiously apprehensive.

Commager's own interest in the group became suddenly more lively.

"There are people in this world today, my dear young lady," Wilson Knox was telling Jean, "who control the Secret Powers of the Universe!"

Jean sighed. "When Ira tells me something like that, I always want to know why we don't hear what these mysterious people are doing."

Wilson Knox glanced at Paylar again. And this time, Commager decided, there was no question about it: the odd little man seemed genuinely alarmed. The bushy eyebrows were working in unconcealed agitation.

"We must consider," he told Jean helplessly, "that such people may have their own reasons for not revealing their abilities."

"Hm," sniffed Jean.

Commager laughed. "Mrs. Bohart has a point there, you know," he

said to Paylar. "I understand the Guides imply they can, at any rate, train people to develop extrasensory abilities. Would you say they can produce some tangible proof for that claim?"

"Sometimes," she said. "With some people." She looked a little tired of the subject, as if it were something she had heard discussed often, as she probably had, so Commager was surprised when she added in the same tone, "I could, I think, produce such proofs very easily for you, Mr. Commager. To your own satisfaction, at least."

As she turned to look at him, her dark elfin face sober and confident, Commager was aware of a sudden stillness in the room. Wilson Knox started what seemed to be a protesting gesture and subsided again. And Jean was frowning, as if she had just discovered an unexpected uncertainty in herself.

"It's a fair offer," Commager acknowledged. "If you're suggesting an experiment, I'll be glad to cooperate."

For a moment, he saw something almost like compassion in the serious young face that studied him. Then Paylar turned to the others. "Would you arrange the lighting in the usual way? Mr. Commager, I should like you to sit here."

It was what they had come here for, Commager thought. Hawkes and the blond young man, whose name was Lex Barthold, went about the room adjusting the lights. Commager had a strong impression that Jean now would just as soon keep the experiment from being carried out, if she could think of a good enough reason.

But the experiment would be a flop anyway. No such half-mystical parlor games had worked on Commager since Lona had died.

In Commager's tropical fish store on Wilshire Boulevard, there were display tanks that were laid out with the casual stateliness of an English park and others that had the formal delicacy of a Chinese garden or that appeared to copy, in fantastic miniature detail, sections of some dreamland salt-water reef. These were the designs of two artistically minded girls who managed the store for Commager and they were often expensively duplicated by artists themselves in the homes of the shop's less talented patrons.

But the tanks that most interested Commager were the big ones in the back of the store, partitioned off from the plate-glass windows and the displays that faced the boulevard. Here fish and plants were bred, raised and stocked without regard for art, and the effect, when you sat down to watch them for a while, was that of being in the center of a secret, green-lit jungle out of which God knew what might presently come soaring, wriggling or crawling at you.

It wasn't a bad way, in Commager's opinion, to pass a few hours at night, when you didn't happen to be in a mood either for sleep or human company. In his case, that might happen once or twice a week, or perhaps less than once a month. When it happened more often, it was time to get organized for another one of those trips that would wind up at some warm and improbable point on the big globe of Earth, where people were waiting to help Commager fill his transport tanks with brightly colored little water-creatures—which, rather surprisingly, provided him with a very good income.

It was a pattern he had followed for most of the second half of his thirty-four years, the only two interruptions having been the second world war and the nineteen months he'd been married to Lona.

It was odd, he thought, that he'd never found anything more important to do with his life than that, but the personal games he could watch people play didn't seem to be even as interesting as the one he'd chosen for himself.

Also, he went on thinking half-seriously, if you got right down to it, probably all the important elements of life were contained right inside the big tank he was observing at the moment, so that if he could

really understand what was going on in there, brightly and stealthily among the green underwater thickets, he might know all that could be known about the entire Universe.

Considered in that light, the tank became as fascinating as a stage play in a foreign language, in which the actors wore the bright masks of magic and played games that weren't so very unlike those being played by human beings. But any real understanding of the purpose of the play, human or otherwise, always had seemed a little beyond Commager's reach.

. . .

He yawned and shifted position in the chair he had pulled up for himself. Perhaps he was simply a bit more stupid than most. But there was a fretting feeling that this game playing, whether on a large scale or a small one, never really led to much, beyond some more of the same. There was, he conceded, a good deal of satisfaction in it for a time, but in the long run, the returns started to diminish.

It seemed that things--in some way Commager couldn't quite fathom--should have been arranged differently.

A car passing on the street outside sent a whisper of sound along the edge of his consciousness. With that came the awareness that it had been some time since he'd last heard a car go by and he found himself wondering suddenly what time of night it was.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Three-thirty. A little startled, he tried to compute how long he had been sitting there.

Then it struck him in a surge of panic that he couldn't remember coming to the store at all!

But, of course, his memory told him, you went with Jean to that house... .

And Paylar had asked him to sit down and... .

What kind of stunt had she pulled on him?

The blackness of terror burst into his consciousness as soon as his thoughts carried him that far--and it wiped out memory. He tried again:

A black explosion. He pushed at it and it retreated a little.

It had been between ten and eleven o'clock. Five hours or so ago. What was the last specific thing he could remember?

. . .

He had been sitting in a chair, his eyes closed, a little amused, a little bored. It had been going on for some time. Paylar, a quiet voice off to his left, was asking him a series of odd questions.

Paylar: But where are you, Mr. Commager?

Commager: (tapping his forehead): Right here! Inside my head.

Paylar: Could you be more specific about that?

Commager (laughing): I'm somewhere between my ears. Or somewhere back of my eyes.

Paylar: How far do you seem to be from the right side of your head? Do you sense the exact distance?

Commager discovered he could sense the exact distance. As a point of awareness, he seemed to be located an inch inside the right side of his skull. Simultaneously, though, he noticed that his left ear was less than an inch and a half away from the same spot--which gave him briefly an odd impression of the general shape of his head!

But he realized then that his attention was shifting around in there, rapidly and imperceptibly. His ears seemed to be now above him,

now below and, for a moment, the top of his skull seemed to have moved at least a yard away.

He laughed. "How am I doing?"

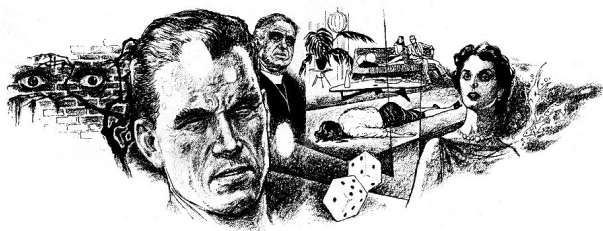
Paylar didn't answer. Instead, she asked him to imagine that he was looking at the wall in front of him.

After a while, that wasn't too difficult; Commager seemed to be seeing the wall clearly enough, with a standing lamp in either corner, where Hawkes had placed them. Next, the voice told him to imagine that the same wall now was only a few inches in front of his face--and then that it suddenly had moved six feet behind him. It gave him an odd feeling of having passed straight through the wall in the moment of shifting it.

"Put it twenty feet in front of you again," she said. "And now twenty feet behind you."

Again the sensation of shifting in space, as if he were swinging back and forth, past and through the wall. Commager had become alert and curious now.

On the third swing, he went straight into the blackness ... with panic howling around him! After that, everything was blotted out.



He couldn't, Commager discovered, close the gap any farther now. Somewhere near eleven o'clock in the evening, he'd gone into that mental blackout with its peculiarly unpleasant side-effects. His next memory might have been twenty minutes ago, when he found himself staring into the miniature underwater forest of the fish tank in his store.

He could phone the Bohart apartment, he thought, and find out what actually had happened. Immediately, then, he became aware of an immense reluctance to carry out that notion and he grimaced irritably. It was no time to worry about what the Boharts might think, but he could imagine Jean's sleepy voice, annoyedly asking who was calling at this hour.

And he'd say, "Well, look, I've lost my memory, I'm afraid. A piece of it anyway--"

He shook his head. They'd gone there to show up the Guides, after all! He'd have to work this out by himself. As if in response to his line of thought, the office telephone, up in the front of the store, began ringing sharply.

The unexpected sound jolted Commager into a set of chills. He sat there stiffly, while the ring was repeated four times; and then, because there was really no reason not to answer it, no matter how improbable it was that someone would be calling the store at this time of night, he got up and started toward the telephone down the long aisle of back-store tanks. Here and there, one of the tanks was illuminated by overhead lights, like the one before which he'd been sitting.

At the corner, where he turned from the aisle into the office, something lay in his path.

He almost stepped on it. He stopped in shock.

It was a slender woman, lying half on her side, half on her face, in a

rumpled dress and something like a short white fur jacket.

Her loose hair hid her face.

The telephone kept on shrilling.

Commager dropped to one knee beside the woman, touched her and knew she was dead, turned her over by the shoulders and felt a stickiness on his hands. There was a slanting cut across her throat, black in the shadows.

"Well," a voice inside Commager's head said with insane calm, "if it isn't Miss MacDonald!" He felt no pity for her at the moment and no real alarm, only a vast amazement.

He realized that the telephone had stopped ringing and clusters of thought burst suddenly and coherently into his awareness again. Somebody apparently thought he was here, at three-thirty in the morning--the same somebody might also suspect that Miss MacDonald was here and even in what condition. And the phone could have been dialed quite deliberately at that moment to bring Commager out of the hypnotized or doped trance, or whatever it was that somebody knew he was trapped in.

In which case, they might be wanting him to discover Ruth MacDonald's body at about this time.

It would be better, he thought, not to get tangled up just now in wondering why anyone should want that to happen; or even whether, just possibly, it had been he himself who had cut Miss MacDonald's brown throat.

What mattered was that, at this instant, somebody was expecting him to react as reasonably as a shocked and stunned man could react in such a situation.

The only really reasonable course of action open to him was to call the police promptly--wherefore, if his curiously calm assumption was correct, he would be primarily expected to do just that. It would be much less reasonable, though still not too unlikely, to carry that

ghastly little body far off somewhere and lose it.

Or he could just walk out of here and leave Miss MacDonald on the floor, to be discovered by the store's staff in the morning. That would be a stupid thing to do, but still something that might be expected of a sufficiently dazed and frightened man.

So he wouldn't do any of those things! The hunch was strong in him that the best way to react just now was in a manner unreasonable beyond all calculation.

. . .

He shoved Ruth MacDonald's body aside and flicked on his cigarette lighter. On the floor were gummily smeared spots, but she had bled to death somewhere else before she had been dropped here.

Commager's hands and clothes were clean, so it was very improbable that he had carried her in. The sensible thing, he thought, would be to clean up the few stains on the floor before he left, removing any obvious evidence that Miss MacDonald had been in the store at all.

Wherefore, he didn't bother to do it.

Nor did he waste time wondering whether a half dozen tanks in the back part of the store had been lit when he came in here or not. There was a variety of possible reasons why someone might have left a light on over some of them.

He picked up the slender stiffening body on the floor and carried it to the front door.

The door was unlocked and his Hudson was at the curb. He shifted Miss MacDonald to one arm, locked the store door behind him, then placed her in the back seat of the car.

Even Wilshire Boulevard was a lonely street at this hour, but he saw several sets of headlights coming toward him as he got into the car and started it. As far as he could make out, there hadn't been any blood spilled around inside the Hudson, either.

Twelve minutes later, he drove past the corner house he'd visited with Jean Bohart some time before ten in the evening. There was a light on in one of the rooms upstairs, which distinguished Herbert Hawkes's home from any other house in sight. A few blocks away, a dog began to bark.

Dogs might be a problem, he thought.

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Commager parked the car a few hundred feet away and sat still for perhaps a minute, listening. The dog stopped barking. Headlights crossed an intersection a few blocks ahead of him.

He got out, lifted Miss MacDonald's body out of the car and walked unhurriedly back to the corner house and over the stepping stones of the dichondra lawn to the side of the house. Here was a trellis, with a gate in it, half open.

Commager eased his burden sideways through the gate. In the half-light of early morning, he set Ruth MacDonald down under a bush--which partly concealed her--in about the same position in which he'd found her. He had a moment of pity to spare for her now.

But there was motion inside the house. Commager looked at the door that opened into this side garden. A vague sequence of motions; somebody walking quietly--but without any suggestion of stealth--was coming closer to the door. Commager stepped quietly up to the wall beside the door and flattened himself against the wall.

A key clicked in the lock. The door swung open. A big shape sauntered out.

Commager's fist was cocked and he struck hard, slanting upward, for the side of the neck and the jaw... .

He laid Herbert Hawkes down beside the body of Ruth MacDonald, one big arm draped across her shoulders.

Let the Guides figure that one out, he thought wearily. Not that they wouldn't, of course, but he was going to continue to react unreasonably.

Twenty minutes later, he was in his apartment and sound asleep.

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The bedside phone buzzed waspishly. Commager hung for a moment between two levels of awareness. The blazing excitement of the fight was over, but he still hated to relinquish the wild, cold, clear loneliness of the blue--

The thin droning continued to ram at his eardrums. His eyes opened and he sat up, reaching for the telephone as he glanced at the clock beside it. 8:15.

"Alan? I think it worked! Ira had breakfast and drove off to the office, wrapped in deep thought. You were terrific, simply terrific! Just sitting there like a stone wall--"

Commager blinked, trying to catch up with her. Jean Bohart had an athlete's healthy contempt for lie-a-beds and felt no compunction about jolting them out of their torpor. She probably assumed he'd been up and around for the past two hours.

Then his waking memories suddenly flooded back. He sucked in a shocked breath.

"Eh?" She sounded startled.

"I didn't say anything," he managed. "Go ahead--"

He wouldn't, he realized presently, have to ask Jean any leading questions. There was a nervous tension in her that, on occasion, found its outlet in a burst of one-way conversation and this was such an occasion. The Boharts had left the Hawkes home shortly before twelve, Ira apparently depressed by the negative results of the evening. The Reverend Knox had made a phone call somewhat earlier and had been picked up within a few minutes by an elderly woman who, in Jean's phrasing, looked like a French bulldog.

"I think he was glad to get out of there!" she added.

Commager didn't comment on that. He himself had stayed on with the others. Ruth MacDonald, in Jean's opinion, was making a pretty definite play for him by that time, while Paylar--"What's her last name, anyway?"--had become withdrawn to the point of rudeness after Commager's spectacular lack of reaction to her psychological games.

"I think she knew just what we were doing by then!" Jean's voice held considerable satisfaction. "So did that Hawkes character. Did you know he's the Herbert Hawkes who owned the Hawkes Chrysler Agency on Figueroa? Well, there's something interesting about that--"

Hawkes had sold out his business about eight months before and it was generally known that his reason had been an imminent nervous breakdown. "What do you make of that, Alan?"

Offhand, Commager admitted, he didn't know what to make of it.

Well, Jean interrupted, she was convinced Hawkes had gone the way Ira would have gone if they hadn't stopped him. "Those Guides have him hypnotized or something!" She laughed nervously. "Does it sound as if I'm getting too dramatic about it?"

"No," he said, recalling his last glimpse of Hawkes and his horrid

little companion much too vividly. "He doesn't strike me as acting like a man who's been hypnotized, though. Not that I know much about that sort of thing."

Jean was silent, thinking. "Did anything in particular develop between you and MacDonald?" she asked suddenly. There was a strange sharpness in her tone.

Commager felt himself whiten. "No," he said, "I just went home by and by." He tried for a teasing note. "Were you worrying about it?"

"She's poison, that's all!" Jean said sharply.

. . .

After she hung up, Commager showered, shaved, dressed and breakfasted, with very little awareness of what he was doing. He was in a frame of mind he didn't entirely understand himself; under a flow of decidedly unpleasant speculations was a layer of tingling, almost physical elation which, when he stopped to consider it, appeared a less than intelligent response to his present situation. But the realization didn't seem to affect the feeling.

The feeling vanished abruptly when he dumped the clothes he'd been wearing the night before out of the laundry bag into which he had stuffed them, along with the blanket on which he'd laid Ruth MacDonald's body in the car.

He had handled her with some caution and he couldn't discover marks on any of those articles now that seemed likely to incriminate him. But he had no doubt that a more competent investigation could reveal them.

The odd thing was that he still couldn't get himself to worry about such an investigation. He had no logical basis for his belief that unless he himself announced the murder of the secretary of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach, nobody else was going to take that step. He couldn't even disprove that he hadn't, somewhere

along the line last night, dropped into sheer criminal lunacy.

But, so far, nobody had come pounding at his door to accuse him of murder. And Commager retained the irrationally obstinate conviction that nobody would.

He had an equally strong conviction that he had become the target of the relentless hostility of a group of people, of whose existence he hadn't known until the day before--and that he wouldn't know why until he discovered the reason for his loss of conscious memory in a period during which he had, to Jean Bohart's discerning eyes, showed no noticeable change in behavior.

And, Commager decided finally, he'd better not let the lack of satisfactory conscious evidence for either certainty affect his actions just now.

. . .

He made two appointments by telephone and left the apartment an hour after he'd been wakened. A few minutes later, he was at the store, which would open for business at ten o'clock.

Commager unlocked the door and strolled inside. The store's staff had got there at nine and the floors, he noticed, had been thoroughly mopped. Nobody inquired whether he'd been in during the night, so it seemed he had guessed right in leaving the lights on over the big tanks.

He drove into Los Angeles then, to keep his first appointment, at Dr. Henry L. Warbutt's Psychology Center.

Henry was a stout, white-haired, energetic little man with the dark melancholy eyes of one of the great apes. "Thirty minutes for free is all I can spare, even for orphans," he informed Commager. "But you're welcome to that, so come in and sit down, boy! Cup of tea, eh? What do you hear from the Boharts?"

Commager declined the tea, which was likely to be some nasty kind of disguised health-brew, and stated that the Boharts, when last heard from, had been doing fine. It wasn't his first visit to the Center. Both of his parents had been dead before he was twelve and Henry, who was a relative on his father's side, had been his legal guardian until he came of age.

"I want to find out what you know about a new local organization called the Guides," Commager explained. "They're on the metaphysical side, I'd say, but they seem to be doing some therapy work. They're not listed in the telephone book."

Henry looked slightly disturbed. "If you mean the Guides I'm thinking of, they're not so new. How did you hear about them? Is Ira messing around with that outfit now?"

Commager told him briefly of last night's earlier events, presenting Jean Bohart's version of his own role in them, as if that were the way he recalled it himself.

Henry became interested at that point. "Do you remember just what those exercises were that the woman put you through?"

When Commager had described them, he nodded. "They got those gimmicks from another group. I've used them myself now and then. Not on cash clients, of course, just as an experiment.

"The idea is to divert your attention away from your body-ego, if you know what I mean. No? Well, then--"

He made a steeple of his hands and scowled at his fingertips. "Metaphysically, it's sometimes used as a method to get you out of your physical body." He waved his hands vaguely around. "Off you go into the astral plane or something." He grinned. "Understand now?"

"More or less," Commager said doubtfully. "Did you ever see it happen?"

"Eh? Oh, no! With me, they usually just go to sleep. Or else they get bored and won't react at all, about like you did. There's no

therapeutic value in it that I know of. But probably no harm, either."

"Would you say whether there's any harm in the Guides?"

"Well," said Henry thoughtfully, "they're certainly one of the more interesting groups of our local psychological fauna. Personally, I wouldn't go out of my way to antagonize them. Of course, Ira's such a damn fool, you probably had to do something pretty obvious to discourage him. Fifteen or twenty years ago, the Guides were working principally with drugs, as far as I could make out at the time. I don't know whether this is the same organization or not, but just lately--the last year or so--I've been hearing gossip about them again."

"What kind of gossip?"

"Well, you know a good many of the people who come into this Center for therapy are interested in metaphysics in one way or another," Henry explained. "Some of them have been telling me lately that the Guides are the latest thing in a True Group. And a True Group, in their language, means chiefly that the people in it have some honest-to-goodness supernatural abilities and powers."

He grimaced unhappily. "Another characteristic is that nobody else knows exactly who belongs to a True Group. In that way, your acquaintances seem to be living up to the legend."

Commager said he'd been under the impression that the Guides dealt in parapsychology.

Henry nodded. "Well, they'd use that, too, of course! Depending on the class of client--" He hesitated briefly. "By and large, I'd say the Guides were a very good outfit for fairly normal citizens like you and the Boharts to stay away from."

He'd also heard of the Reverend Wilson Knox and of the Temple of Antique Christianity, though not favorably.

"Knox has a crummy little sect back in one of the Hollywood canyons. They go in for Greek paganism. Strictly a screwball group." He didn't

know anything of the Parapsychological Group of Long Beach. "You can't keep up with all of them."

4

Julius Savage was a lanky, sun-browned hypnotist who'd sometimes gone spear-fishing with Commager. On one such occasion--the last, if Julius had anything to say about it--Commager had been obliged to haul him half-drowned out of a kelp bed and thump him back into consciousness. Which made him the right man right now.

He clasped his hands behind his head, rocked himself back from his desk and looked first interested and then highly dubious, while Commager went on talking.

"You're about as lousy a hypnotic subject as I am myself, Alan!" Julius protested finally. "I tried to put you under twice, remember? Anyway, how about sending you to my tame m.d. for a checkup first? Amnesia isn't anything to-- No?" He considered. "Well, how long ago did this happen?"

The fact that it had happened only the night before reassured him somewhat. So presently Commager was sitting in an armchair being informed that his eyelids were getting heavier and heavier.

An hour later, Julius said discouragedly, "This isn't getting us anywhere and I've got another appointment at two o'clock! How bad do you want that information, Alan?"

"It's a matter of life and death!"

"Oh, hell!" said Julius. He went out of the room and came back with a small bottle, partly filled with a slightly oily, aromatic liquid. "I don't use this often, but--by the way, with the possible exception of last night, did anyone else ever try to hypnotize you?"

"Ira Bohart did, the first time I met him," Commager recalled. "It was at a party. No results."

"We'll make it two spoonfuls," Julius decided.

. . .

Ten minutes later, Commager got into the blackness. The next time he consciously opened his eyes, it was past three in the afternoon. Julius, looking pale and exhausted, stood at the desk watching him. He'd loosened his tie and hung his jacket over the back of a chair. His hair was disheveled.

"Brother!" he remarked. "Well, we got something, Alan. I'll play parts of it back to you." He jerked his head at a gently burbling percolator on a mantel. "Cup of coffee there for you. Better have some."

Commager sipped black coffee, yawned, and took note of the time. Too much of the day already was past, he thought uneasily; he wondered what the Guides had been doing meanwhile. "What happened to your appointments?"

"Canceled them," Julius said, fiddling with the tape recorder. "They'll keep." He glanced around at Commager. "Here's the first thing we got. Chronologically, it seems to fit in at the end of the period you can't remember. Symbolism, but I'm curious. We'll try it first."

Commager listened. After a while, there were pricklings of memory. When Julius stopped the recorder, he remarked, "I had a dream this morning that seems to tie in with that."

"Ah?" Julius looked professionally cautious. "Well, let's hear about it."

Commager hesitated. The dream seemed irrelevant and rather childish, like a fairy tale. He'd been flying around in a great open space, he began at last. And he'd been wondering why nobody else

was up there with him, but he hadn't felt particularly concerned about it. Then a hawk came swooping at him, trying to knock him out of the air.

There was a long leash attached to the hawk's leg and Commager noticed that, far down below, a number of people were holding the leash and watching the battle. "That explained why there wasn't anyone else around, you see. When anyone tried it, they simply sent a hawk up after him."

"Hm!" said Julius. "Recognize the people?"

"No--" Commager checked himself and laughed. "Of course, it just struck me! Hawkes was the name of one of the people I met last night! That explains the dream!"

Julius nodded doubtfully. "Possibly. How did it continue?"

. . .

As Commager recalled it, there hadn't been much more to it. He couldn't damage the hawk and the hawk couldn't bring him down; finally it disappeared. Then he'd been up there alone ... and then he'd been wakened by the telephone.

Julius tapped the desk with the eraser end of a pencil, looking thoughtful. "Well--" he sighed. He turned to the recorder. "Let's try another part of this now, Alan. The central part. Incidentally, we didn't get into what you were actually doing last night. These are your subjective impressions and they aren't necessarily an immediately recognizable reflection of real events, past or present. You understand that?"

Commager said he did. But he felt a stab of sharp apprehension. He was reasonably certain that whatever Julius heard or guessed in his office remained a private matter. But his own line of action had been based on the solid personal conviction that, whatever had happened last night, it hadn't been he who had killed Ruth MacDonald.

In view of the hypnotist's careful and almost formal phrasing, Commager was, for a few moments at least, not quite so sure about that.

There were a bad few moments... .

Then the recorder was turning again.

. . .

"What do you make of it?" Julius asked. "It will help me formulate my own opinion."

Commager shrugged. He still felt shaken, after the intermittent waves of grief, rage and remorse that had pounded through him while a section of the tape rewound itself again--with a vividness and immediacy that dazed him, but still seemed rather unaccountable. After all, that had been over and done with almost four years ago!

"It's fairly obvious to me," he said reluctantly. At least his voice sounded steady enough. "A few months before my wife died, I'd begun to get interested in the esp experiments she was playing around with. You remember Lona was almost as bad that way as Ira Bohart."

He managed a brief, careful grin. "It annoyed me at first, but, of course, I didn't let her know. I thought she'd drop it soon enough. When she didn't, I decided I'd experiment on the quiet by myself. Actually, I was after information I could use to convince Lona she was wasting her time with that sort of thing--and then she'd have more time to spare for the kind of fun and games I was interested in."

Julius smiled faintly and nodded.

"I started making lists of coincidences," Commager explained. "Occasions when I'd tell myself Lona would be home at six, say, and she'd actually show up about that time. Or I'd decide what dress

she'd select to wear next morning--"

"Predictions, generally?" Julius drew a precise little circle on the desk blotter with his pencil and studied it critically.

"Yes. Or I'd put the idea into her head that she wanted to talk about some particular thing with me--and sometimes she would!" Commager smiled. "I was also, you see, keeping a list of the times these little experiments didn't work out, and they often didn't, at first. So that, when I told Lona about it finally, it would be obvious that the coincidences had been just that."

He hesitated. "I still think they were just that. But one day, it struck me I'd accumulated too many coincidences lately. It shook me."

"Did it stop your experimentation?" Julius remained intent on his art work.

"A few days later, it did," Commager said. He discovered suddenly that he was sweating. "Lona phoned me that afternoon that she was driving down to the beach to pick me up. After she hung up, I had a sudden positive feeling that if she drove her car that afternoon, she'd get killed! I almost called her back. But I decided I wasn't going to turn into another Ira Bohart. As of then, I was quitting all this esp business and so was Lona! When she got there, I'd tell her--"

The sweat was running down his face now. "Well, you know that part of it. Lona had a heart attack while driving, the doctors thought, and crashed and got killed." He paused again, because his voice had begun to shake. "I don't know why that got on there"--he nodded at the recorder--"except that night was the first time since that I felt, even for a minute, that something might be going on that couldn't be explained in a perfectly normal way!"

"That," inquired Julius, "was while you were going through that peculiar set of exercises you were describing, wasn't it? Alan, how long ago has it been, exactly, since your wife died?"

"Not quite four years." Commager drove back a surge of impatience. "I suppose I've felt guilty enough about it ever since. But right now,

Julius, I'm interested in finding out why I lost a few hours of memory last night and how to restore them. Are we getting any closer to that?"

"I think we are. Can you be at this office at 10 a.m. two days from tomorrow? That's Thursday morning."

"Why should I come here then?"

Julius shrugged. "Because that's the earliest appointment I could make for you with Dr. Ciardi. I phoned him just before you woke up. He's a friend of mine and an excellent psychiatrist, Alan. We do a lot of work together."

Commager said in angry amazement, "Damn you, Julius! I told you I didn't want anyone else to know about this!"

"I know," Julius admitted unhappily. "We've been fairly good friends for about eight years now, haven't we? We've been in and out of each other's homes and met each other's acquaintances, right?"

Commager's fingertips drummed on his right knee. He was still furious. "So what?"

"So hell, Alan! What you were telling me just now never happened! Your wife wasn't killed in an auto accident four years ago because, four years ago, you didn't have a wife! To the best of my knowledge, you've never been married!"

5

Commager had a rather early dinner at Tilford's. A mirror lined the entire wall on the opposite side of the room; now and then, he glanced at himself. For a sort of lunatic, he thought, the big, sun-tanned man sitting there looked remarkably calm and healthy.

He was still amazed, above all, at the apparent instantaneousness with which he had realized that what Julius had blurted out was true. He could picture Lona in a hundred different ways, very vividly, but he couldn't actually recall having ever mentioned her to anybody else. And he couldn't now remember a single time when he and she and any other person had been together.

It was almost as if the entire episode of Lona had been a story somebody had told him, illustrated out of his own imaginings. And now, in a few hours, the story was beginning to fade out. Specific scenes had dropped almost beyond the reach of memory. The image of Lona herself started to blur.

• • •

His immediate reaction had been an odd mixture of shocked self-disgust and profound relief, threaded with the feeling that actually he'd always known, without being consciously aware of it, that there wasn't any real Lona.

Even the emotions he'd felt while listening to the tape recorder were a part of the fabrication; almost at the instant of realization, they began to break away from him. Like the sudden shattering of a hard shell of alien matter, Commager thought, which he'd been dragging around, rather like a hermit-crab, under the pretense that it was a natural part of himself. The self-disgust became even more pronounced at that comparison.

But whatever his original motives had been for imposing that monstrous construction upon his mind, Commager couldn't see any further connection between it and the events of the past night.

Apparently he had thrust himself into a period of amnesia to avoid the full impact of an artificial set of emotions. In that period, there had been a very real and very unpleasant occurrence--a murder.

His main reason now for remaining convinced that he hadn't been

the murderer was that the evening papers carried no indication that the body of Ruth MacDonald had been found.

Which certainly indicated guilt on the part of those who must have found her.

He could afford to wait until Thursday, Commager decided, to go digging after the causes of his delusion under Dr. Ciardi's guidance. But he probably couldn't afford to wait at all to find out what the Guides--he still had to assume it was the Guides--were preparing for him next.

And perhaps the best way to find out would be, quite simply, to ask.

He finished his dinner, walked up the street to a telephone booth and dialed the number of Herbert Hawkes's home. A man's voice informed him presently that it was the Hawkes residence, Lex Barthold speaking.

That, Commager recalled, was the name of the blond young man who had been an untalkative member of the party last night. He gave his own name and said he was trying to contact Miss Paylar--a piece of information which produced a silence of several seconds at the other end. But when Barthold spoke again, he sounded unshaken.

"Paylar isn't in at the moment. Shall I take your message, Mr. Commager?"

Commager said no, he'd try again, and hung up. Now that, he reflected, walking back to his car, seemed to be an interesting sort of household!

For the first time since leaving Julius's office, he wasn't too displeased with himself. If he saw Paylar alone, he might, as far as appearances went, be taking an interest in the well-being of Ira Bohart or, reasonably enough, in Paylar herself.

And things could start developing from that point.

Of course, she might avoid letting him see her alone. In any case, his

call would give them something new to consider.

He drove to the beach and turned south toward San Diego. A half hour later, he parked before the cabin where, among bulkier items of fishing gear, he kept a 45-caliber revolver. He put that in the glove compartment of the car and started back to town.

. . .

The telephone rang a few minutes after he reached his apartment.

"I've called you twice in the last hour," Paylar said. "I understand you want to speak to me."

"I do," said Commager. "Do you happen to have the evening free?"

She laughed. "I've arranged to have it free. You can meet me at your aquarium store, Mr. Commager."

"Eh?" he said stupidly.

"At your store." Her voice still sounded amused. "You see, I may have a business proposition for you."

Then the line went dead.

Commager swore and hung up. When he turned into Wilshire Boulevard not very many minutes later, he saw a long gray car, vague under the street lights, move away from the curb a hundred feet or so beyond his store and drive off. There was no sign of Paylar.

He parked and followed the car thoughtfully with his eyes. Then he got out. The store was locked, the interior dark. But in back of the office, behind the partition, was a shimmering of light.

He thought of the gun in his car. There had been one murder. It seemed a little early for another one.

He unlocked the door and locked it again behind him. This time, there were no bodies lying around the aisles. But at the back of the store, standing before a lighted fish tank and looking into it, Paylar was waiting for him.

He didn't ask her how she got in. It seemed a theatrical gesture, a boasting indication that his affairs could be easily invaded from without. Aside from that, the darkened store undoubtedly was a nice place for an ambush. Commager wondered briefly why he didn't feel more concerned about that and realized then that he was enormously angry. An ambush might have been a relief.

"Did you find out much about us today?" Paylar asked.

"Not enough," he admitted. "Perhaps you can tell me more."

"That's why I'm here."

Commager looked at her skeptically. She was wearing a black sweater and slacks that appeared wine-colored in the inadequate light from the big tank. A small, finely shaped body and a small, vivid face. The mouth smiled soberly; black eyes gleamed like an animal's as she turned her head toward him.

"We're an organization," she said, "that operates against the development of parapsychological abilities in human beings... "

Oddly enough, it made sense and he found himself believing her. Then he laughed. "Do you object to my winning a crap game?"

Paylar said seriously, "We don't object to that. But you're not stopping there, Mr. Commager."

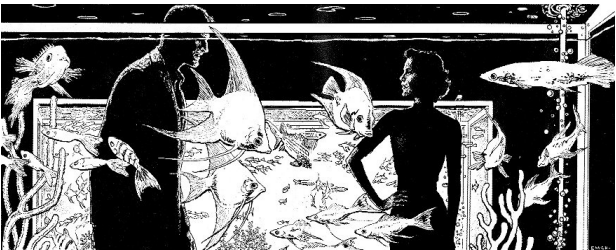
Again there was an instant of inner agreement; an elation and anxiety. Commager hesitated, startled by his reaction. He said, "I'm not aware of any ambition along that line."

She shook her head. "I don't think you're being quite truthful. But it doesn't really matter how aware you are of it just now. The last

twenty-four hours have indicated clearly that you can't be checked by any ordinary methods." She frowned. "The possibility had been foreseen--and so we hit you with everything that was immediately available, Mr. Commager. I was sure it was enough."

Commager felt a little bewildered. "Enough for what?"

"Why, almost anybody else would have done something sensible--and then refused to ever budge out of the everyday world again, even in his thoughts. Instead, you turned around and started to smoke us out--which, incidentally, saved you for the moment from an even more unnerving experience!"



. . .

Commager stared at her, appalled. That final comment had no present meaning for him, but she obviously was speaking about a murder of which she, at the very least, had known at the time. She considered it mildly amusing that it had back-fired on them!

He said harshly, "I'd enjoy breaking your neck. But I suspect that you're a little crazy."

She shrugged, smiling. "The trouble is that you're not going to go on thinking that, Mr. Commager. If you did, we could safely disregard you."

He looked down at his hands. "So what are you going to do?"

"There are others who say you can be stopped. It's certain you won't like their methods, though I'm not entirely sure they will be effective. I came here tonight to offer you an alternative."

"Go ahead and offer it."

"You can join us," she said.

Commager gave a short laugh of sheer astonishment. "Now why should I want to do that?"

"In the end," Paylar said soberly, "you may have very little choice. But there's another reason. You've been trying, all your life, to bring your abilities into your consciousness and under your control."

He shook his head. "If you mean wild talents, I haven't done anything of the sort."

"Unfortunately," she said, "you won't remain unaware of that trend in yourself very much longer. And, if you cooperate with us, we can and will help you to do just that. But we can't let you continue by yourself, without safeguards. You're too likely to be successful, you see. Those wild talents can become extremely wild!"

"You know," he said, almost good-humoredly, "I think you really believe what you say. But as far as I'm concerned, you're a group of criminal lunatics without any more secret ability than I have myself."

"That," Paylar replied undisturbed, "is precisely what we're afraid of. For the time being, though, we can use our abilities in ways that you cannot. What happened while you were doing those exercises last night, Mr. Commager?"

He looked at her and then away. "I got rather bored."

Paylar laughed. "You're lying! Exercises of that kind provide very convincing illusions, and very little else, for people who are hungry for

illusion. But since you have an ability, it took no more than a word to bring it into action. That was when we knew you had to be stopped. However, I'm afraid you're still turning down my offer."

"You read my mind that time, lady! I'd turn you over to the police, too, if I thought it would do any good."

"It wouldn't," she assured him. Her head tilted a moment, with soft grace, into an attitude of listening. "I think my car is coming back for me. I'll leave that offer open, Mr. Commager--in case you survive long enough now to accept it."

He grinned. "You shouldn't frighten me like that."

"I've frightened you a little, but not nearly enough. But there is more than one way to shake a man to his senses--or out of them--so perhaps we can still change your mind. Would you let me out the front door now?"

Lights slid over the ceiling above her as she spoke, and the long gray car, its engine throbbing, stood at the curb when they came out. Paylar turned at the car door.

"You know where I'm staying," she said, looking up at him, "if you want to find me."

Commager nodded.

She smiled and then the door opened for her and light briefly filled the interior of the car.

Seconds later, he stood staring after it as it fled down the street. She'd been right about there being more than one way of shaking a man out of his senses.

The driver of the car--the very much alive driver--had been Ruth MacDonald!

Under what wasn't quite a full moon tonight, the Bay would have looked artificial if it hadn't been so huge. A savage, wild place, incongruous in this area with the slow thump and swirl and thunder of the tide.

A mile to the south was a cluster of cottages down near the water's edge. Commager's cabin was as close as anything could have been built to the flank of the big northern drop-off. He could look down at the sharp turn of the highway below him or out at the Bay. Nobody yet had tried to build on the rocky rises of ground behind him.

Without ordinary distractions, it was a good place for a few hours of painstaking reorientation. He wasn't exactly frightened, Commager told himself. But when he had recognized Ruth MacDonald, a wave of unreason inside him had seemed to rise to meet and merge with the greater wave of unreason rolling in from a shadow-world without. For that moment, the rules of reality had flickered out of existence.

An instant later, he'd had them solidly re-established. He was now simply a man who knew something had happened that he couldn't begin to explain rationally. It was a much more acceptable situation, since it included the obvious explanation of irrationality.

On Thursday morning, he could tell Dr. Ciardi, "Look, Doc, I'm having hallucinations. The last one was a honey. I thought I was carrying a dead woman all over town! What do we do about it?"

And they'd do whatever was done in such circumstances and it would be a sane, normal, active life for Alan Commager forever after—with a woman more or less like Jean Bohart to live it with, which would keep out the shadowy Lonas. With everything, in fact, that didn't fit into that kind of life, that belonged to the shadow-worlds, as completely obliterated and forgotten as they could become.

Commager wondered what made that picture look so unsatisfactory.

It struck him suddenly that, according to Paylar, this was exactly how the Guides had expected him to react as soon as her little games had steered him into a bout of amnesia and hallucinations. They'd wanted, she'd said, in approximately those words, to put him in a frame of mind that would make him refuse to ever budge out of the safe, everyday world again, even in his thoughts.

Commager grimaced. But they'd become convinced then that he wasn't going to do it!

He might do it all the same, he thought. But the reason it couldn't be a completely satisfactory solution was growing clear. One couldn't discount the probability that there was a little more to the shadow-worlds than lunacy and shadow. Perhaps only a very little more and perhaps not. But if he avoided looking at what was there, he would never find out.

And then he realized that he wasn't going to avoid looking at it, hadn't really been seriously considering it. He swore at himself, because avoidance did seem still the simple and rational solution, providing one could be satisfied with it.

He couldn't be satisfied with it and that was that. He could see now that if an organization such as Paylar had described the Guides to be existed, and if it were composed, at least in part, of people who really had developed an understanding and working knowledge of the possibilities of psi, it would be in a uniquely favorable position to control and check the development of similar abilities in others.

Its connections and its influence would be primarily with the psychological fringe groups here and with their analogs elsewhere; and the people who were drawn to such groups would be those who were dissatisfied with or incompetent in normal lines of activity, and had become abnormally interested in compensating for their lack of other achievement by investigating the shadowy, vague, ego-bolstering promise of psi.

And people frightened by the threat of total war, driven into a search for psychic refuge by the prospect of physical destruction.

In either case, because they were uncertain, less than normally capable people, they could be controlled without too much difficulty--and carefully diverted then, in groups or as individuals, from the thing they were seeking and might stumble upon.

The exercises she'd demonstrated to him, Paylar had said, were designed primarily to provide convincing illusions for those who were hungry for illusion.

She and her associates, Commager realized, might feel it was necessary. They might know just enough to be afraid of what such knowledge could lead to. If it were possible to encourage a pair of dice to bounce and spin in just the right pattern to win for you, it might, for example, also be possible to send a few buildings bouncing and spinning through a city! Of course, nobody ever seemed to have done it, but that might be due precisely to the existence of some controlling agency, such as the Guides claimed to be.

For a while, Commager regarded the possibility of accepting Paylar's invitation to join her group--and, a few seconds later, he knew he wasn't going to do that either.

However determined he might be to proceed with a painstaking and thorough investigation of this field of possibilities now, there was still a feeling of something completely preposterous about the entire business.

He could accept the fact that he had been shaken up mentally to the point where he might qualify without too much difficulty for the nearest insane asylum. But he wasn't ready to admit to anybody just yet that he, a grown man, was taking the matter of psi very seriously.

It was something you could try out for yourself, just as an experiment, behind locked doors and with the windows shaded.

So Commager locked the front door to his cabin and tried it out.

The telegram which had been shoved under his apartment door during the night gave a Hollywood telephone number and urgently requested him to call it. It was signed by Elaine Lovelock. So far as Commager could remember, Elaine was no one he knew. When he dialed the number, nobody answered.

He'd try to reach her again before he left for the store, he decided. It was eight-thirty now; he'd just got in from the Bay. The chances were somebody's deluxe fifty-gallon tropical fish tank had started to leak on the living room carpet, and it hadn't occurred to them immediately that this was what pails and pots were for.

He sat down to write a few notes on last night's experiment.

Nothing very striking had happened; he suspected he'd simply fallen asleep after the first forty minutes or so. But if he kept notes, something like a recognizable pattern might develop.

Item: The "Lona complex" hadn't bothered him much. It was beginning to feel like something that had happened to somebody else a long time ago. So perhaps the emotions connected with it hadn't been triggered by Paylar's exercises, as Julius seemed to assume. Or else, since he no longer believed in it, it was on its way out as a complex—he hoped.

Item: With his eyes closed, he could imagine very easily that he was looking through the wall of the room into another section of the cabin; also that he had moved there in person, as a form of awareness. In fact, he had roamed happily all around the Bay area for about ten minutes. For the present, that proved only that he had a much more vivid imagination than he'd thought—though whoever created Lona could be assumed to have considerable hidden talent along that line!

Item: When he'd tried to "read" specific pages of a closed book lying on a table near him, he had failed completely.

Item: He had run suddenly—he might have been asleep by then—into successive waves of unexplained panic, which brought him upright in his chair with his pulse hammering wildly.

Item: The panic had faded out of reach the instant he began to investigate it and he hadn't been able to recall it.

Item: Either shortly before or after that event, he'd had for a while the sensation of being the target of stealthy and malevolent observation. He had made an attempt to "locate" the observer and gained the impression that the other one unhurriedly withdrew.

Item: Briefly, he'd had a feeling of floating up near the ceiling of the room, watching his own body sitting in the armchair with its eyes closed. This had rocked him hard enough to awaken him again and he had concluded the experiments.

Item: After waking up, he hadn't found or imagined he'd found Ruth MacDonald or anybody else lying around the cabin, murdered or otherwise. He'd checked.

And that about summed it up, Commager decided. Not very positive results, but he was determined to continue the experiments.

He suspected Julius would feel very dubious about all this; but Julius wasn't going to be informed.

He himself was in a remarkably cheerful mood this morning.

• • •

Mrs. Lovelock had a magnificent, musical voice, rather deep for a woman.

"I'm so glad you called again, Mr. Commager," she said. "I was away on an unavoidable errand. Dr. Knox needs to see you immediately. How soon can you be here?"

"Dr. Knox?" Commager repeated. "Do you mean the Reverend Wilson Knox?"

"That is correct. Do you have the address of our Temple?"

Commager said he didn't. There was no immediate reason to add that he hadn't the slightest intention of going there, either. "What did he want to see me about?"

Mrs. Lovelock hesitated. "I couldn't explain it satisfactorily by telephone, Mr. Commager." A trace of anxiety came into her voice. "But it's quite urgent!"

Commager said he was sorry; he had a very full business day ahead of him—which was true—so, unless he could get some indication of what this was all about—

The melodious voice told him quaveringly, "Dr. Knox had a serious heart attack last night. He needs your help!"

Commager scowled. She sounded as off-beat as the rest of them and he had an urgent impulse to hang up.

He said instead, "I don't quite see how I could be of much help under those circumstances. I'm not a doctor, you know."

"I do know that, Mr. Commager," Mrs. Lovelock replied. "I also know that you haven't been acquainted with Dr. Knox for more than a few days. But I assure you that you may be saving a human life by coming out here immediately! And that is all I can tell you now—"

She stopped short, sounding as if she were about to burst into tears.

What she said didn't make sense. Also Commager hadn't liked the Reverend Knox, quite aside from the company he kept. But he could, he supposed resignedly, afford to waste a few more hours now.

"What was that address?" he asked, trying not to sound too ungracious about it.

• • •

On the way over, he had time to wonder whether this mightn't be part of some new little game the Guides wanted to play with him. He was inclined to discount Paylar's threats--psychologically, he suspected, they'd already tried everything they could do to him--and they didn't look like people who would resort readily to physical violence, though Hawkes could be an exception there.

When Commager came in sight of the Temple of Antique Christianity, physical violence suddenly looked a little more likely. He stopped a moment to consider the place.

It was in a back canyon beyond Laurel; the last quarter-mile had been a private road. A tall iron gate blocked the road at this point, opening into a walled court with a small building to the right. A sign over a door in the building indicated that this was the office.

Some distance back, looming over the walls of the court and a few intervening trees, was another structure, an old white building in the Spanish style, the size of a small hotel.

It looked like the right kind of setting for the kind of screwball cult Henry Warbutt had described. Depending on who was around, it also looked like a rather good place for murder or mayhem.

Should he just stroll in carelessly like a big, brave, athletic man? Or should he be a dirty coward and get his revolver out of the glove compartment? It was bound to make an unsightly bulge in any of his jacket pockets--

He decided to be a dirty coward.

The gate was locked, but the lock clicked open a few seconds after Commager pushed a buzzer button beside it. The only visible way into the area was through the office door, so he went inside.

A pallid young man and a dark, intense-looking young woman sat at desks across the room from the door. The young man told Commager he was expected and went to a side door of the office with him, from where he pointed to an entrance into the big building, on the other end of what he called the grove.

"Mrs. Lovelock is waiting for you there," he said and went back to his desk.

The grove had the reflective and well-preserved air of a section of an exclusive cemetery, with just enough trees growing around to justify its name. There was a large, square lawn in the center, and a large, chaste bronze statue stood at each corner of the lawn, gazing upon it.

Back among trees to the left was a flat, raised platform, apparently faced with gray and black marble, but otherwise featureless. Commager had just gone past this when he realized that somebody had been watching him from the top of the platform as he passed.

That, at any rate, was the feeling he got. He hadn't actually seen anyone, and when he looked back, there was nobody there. But the feeling not only had been a definite and certain one—it resumed the instant he started walking on again. This time, he didn't look back.

Before he'd gone a dozen more steps, he knew, too, just when he'd experienced that exact sensation before. It was the previous night, while he was doing his parapsychological experiments at the Bay and had suddenly felt that he was under secret and unfriendly scrutiny.

He laughed at himself, but the impression remained a remarkably vivid one. And before he reached the entrance to the main building

which the young man in the office had indicated to him, he had time for the thought that playing with the imagination, as he was doing, might leave one eventually on very shaky ground.

Then he was there, looking into a long hallway, and Mrs. Lovelock's fine, deep voice greeted him before he caught sight of her.

"I'm so glad you could come, Mr. Commager!" she said.

She was standing in the door of a room that opened on the hall to the left, and Commager was a trifle startled by her appearance. He had expected a large handsome woman of about thirty, to match the voice. But Mrs. Lovelock was not only huge; she was shockingly ugly and probably almost twice the age he'd estimated. She wore a white uniform, so Commager asked whether she was Wilson Knox's nurse.

"I've been a registered nurse for nearly forty years, Mr. Commager," the beautiful voice told him. "At present, I'm attending Dr. Knox. Would you come in here, please?"

He followed her into the room and she closed the door behind them. Her big, gray face, Commager decided, looked both worried and very angry.

"The reason I wasn't more open with you over the telephone," she told him, "was that I was certain you wouldn't have taken the trouble to drive out here if I had been. And I couldn't have blamed you! Won't you sit down, please?"

Commager took a chair and said he was afraid he didn't understand.

Mrs. Lovelock nodded. "I shall give you the facts. Dr. Knox had a very severe heart attack at around two o'clock this morning. I have been a member of his congregation for twenty-four years, and I arrived with a doctor shortly afterward. Dr. Knox is resting comfortably now, but he is very anxious to see you. I must let him tell you why, Mr. Commager. But I should like to prepare you for what you will hear--"

Mrs. Lovelock stared gloomily at the carpet for a moment and then her face twisted briefly into a grimace of pure rage.

"Wilson--Dr. Knox--is a harmless old fool!" she told Commager savagely. "This Antique Christianity he worked out never hurt anybody. They prayed to Pan and they had their dances and chants. And there was the Oracle and he read out of the Book of Pan... ."

"I don't know anything about Dr. Knox's activities," Commager said, not too politely.

She had thick, reddened, capable hands and they were locked together now on her lap, the fingers twisting slowly against one another, as if she were trying to break something between them.

"I was the Oracle, you see," she explained. "I knew it was foolish, but I'd sit up there on the dais in the smoke, with a veil over my head, and I'd say whatever I happened to think of. But this year, Wilson brought in that Ruth MacDonald--you know her, he said."

"I've met the lady," Commager admitted. "I wouldn't say I know her."

"She became the Oracle! And then she began to change everything! I told Wilson he was quite right to resist that. There are things, Mr. Commager, that a good Christian simply must not do!"

Which, Commager felt, was a remarkable statement, under the circumstances. Mrs. Lovelock came ponderously to her feet.

"Dr. Knox will tell you what remains to be told," she added rather primly. "And, of course, you cannot stay too long. Will you follow me now, please?"

. . .

The Reverend didn't look as if he were in too bad a condition, Commager thought when he saw him first. He was lying in a hospital bed which had been raised high enough to let him gaze down at the grove out of a window of his second-story room.

After he'd talked a few moments, Commager felt the man was delirious and he thought briefly of calling back Mrs. Lovelock or the other nurse who had been with Wilson Knox when they came in. But those two undoubtedly had been able to judge for themselves whether they should remain with the Reverend or not.

"Why should they want to kill you?" Commager asked. Knox had been speaking of the Guides and then had started to weep; now he blew his nose on a piece of tissue and made a groping motion for Commager's hand, which Commager withdrew in time.

"It was merely a matter of business as far as I was concerned, Mr. Commager. I certainly had no intention of blocking any activities of the Guides. In fact, I should prefer not to know about them. But when Miss MacDonald, who was employed by the Temple, upset our members, I protested to her, sir! Isn't that understandable?"

"Entirely," Commager agreed carefully. "What did Miss MacDonald do to upset them?"

"She predicted two of the congregation would die before the end of the year," Wilson Knox said shakily. "It caused a great deal of alarm. Many of our wealthier clients withdrew from the Temple at once. It is a considerable financial loss!"

The Reverend appeared rational enough on that point. Commager inquired, "Is Miss MacDonald one of the Guides, Dr. Knox?"

"It's not for me to say." Knox gave him a suddenly wary look. "When she spoke to me by telephone last night, I asked whether I had offended anyone. I was, of course, greatly distressed!" His expression changed back to one of profound self-pity. "But she repeated only that it had become necessary for me to die this week and hung up."

It seemed an odd way at that for the Temple's new Oracle to have phrased her prediction, Commager thought. He regarded Dr. Knox without much sympathy. "So now you want me to simply tell her not to hurt you, eh?"

"It would be better, Mr. Commager," Knox suggested, "if you addressed yourself directly to the young woman called Paylar." He reached for his visitor's hand again. "I place myself under your protection, sir. I know you won't refuse it!"

Which was almost precisely what he had said as soon as the nurses left the room, and the reason Commager had believed the patient was in a state of delirium. Now it seemed more probable that he was merely badly mistaken.

Commager decided not to ask why it would be better to speak to Paylar. At any direct question concerning the Guides, the Reverend became evasive. He said instead, "What made you decide I could protect you, Dr. Knox?"

Knox looked downright crafty. "I have made no inquiries about you, sir, and I do not intend to. I am a simple man whose life has been devoted to providing a measure of beauty and solace for his fellow human beings. In a modest way, of course. I have never pried into the Greater Mysteries!"

He seemed to expect approval for that, so Commager nodded gravely.

"I speak only of what I saw," Wilson Knox continued. "On Sunday night, I saw them attempt to bring you directly under their sway. Forgive me for saying, sir, that they do not do this with an ordinary person! I also saw them fail and I knew they were frightened. Nevertheless, you were not destroyed."

He tapped Commager's hand significantly. "That, sir, was enough for me. I do not attempt to pry—I have merely placed myself under your protection!"

You bet Commager had problem!

He could smash the conspiracy and not escape alive ...

or capitulate to it and lose his mind!

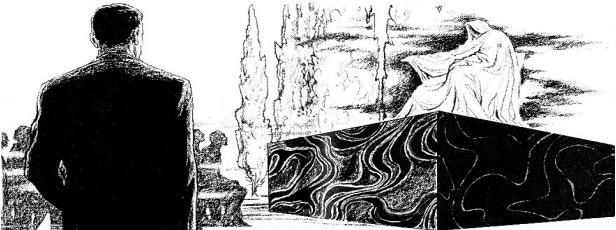
7

A man with Secret Powers, a man who could tell the Guides to go jump in the Pacific, might take a passing interest in the gimmicks of an organization like the Temple of Antique Christianity. So on his way out through the grove, Commager had turned aside to get a closer look at the dais.

He assumed, at least, that the gray and black marble platform was what Mrs. Lovelock had referred to as the seat of the Oracle, since nothing else around seemed suitable for the purpose.

Standing before it, he pictured her sitting up there in the night, veiled, a vast, featureless bulk, announcing whatever came into her mind in that stunning voice, and he could see that Wilson Knox's congregation might well have listened in pop-eyed fascination. Ruth MacDonald couldn't have been nearly as impressive.

Perhaps that was why she had started passing out death sentences.



. . .

Down on Sunset, he parked his car at the curb and remained in it, watching the traffic, while he tried to digest the information he had received—if you could call it information.

Wilson Knox and Mrs. Lovelock appeared to be people who had fabricated so much fantastic garbage for the clients of the Temple that they had no judgment left to resist the fabrications of others.

Commager's parting from Mrs. Lovelock had given him the impression that the huge woman also was sullenly afraid, though she hid it much better than the Reverend had. It could be simply that she felt her own position in the Temple would be lost if Knox died; but he thought that in her case, too, it was a more personal fear, of the Guides, or even of himself—

And he'd practically promised both of them to put in a word with Paylar to protect that revolting little man!

However, the Reverend's heart attack, at least, probably had been a real enough thing. And if Ruth MacDonald actually had telephoned a prediction of death to him earlier in the night, there was some cause for intervention. The practice of frightening people into their graves was something that anyone could reasonably insist should be stopped.

And that, of course, brought up the question of how he expected to stop it.

And the question, once more, of just what that odd group of people--who indicated they were the Guides or associated with them--was after.

Ruth MacDonald's activities concerning the Temple of Antique Christianity hardly seemed to lie on the lofty, idealistic level he'd been almost willing to ascribe to them in theory, even if he disliked their methods. She was a brassy, modern young witch, Commager thought, using the old witchcraft tools of fear and suggestion out of equally old motives of material gain and prestige.

But one couldn't account for Hawkes as simply as that, because Hawkes had had money and prestige.

Commager knew least of all about Paylar, except for the young man called Lex Barthold, whose connection with the others wasn't clear. The impression of Paylar was still mainly that she had a physical personality that would be hard to match if you liked them slender, dark and mysterious, and with a self-assurance that wasn't aggressive like Ruth MacDonald's, but that might be a great deal more difficult to crack. Among the three he'd had to deal with, she seemed to be the leader, though that wasn't necessarily true.

He found himself walking slowly down the street toward a phone booth.

Let's make a game of it, he thought. Assume that what Paylar had said and what the Reverend had suspected was true--at least in the Guides' own opinion--that he had turned out to be exceptionally tough material for their psychological gimmicks. That he had, in fact, abilities he didn't yet know about himself, but which, even in a latent state, were sufficient to have got the Opposition all hot and worried!

Even if the Guides only believed that--if they, like Knox and his mountainous registered nurse, had played around so long on the fringes of reality that they were as badly confused now as the people

they'd been misleading--his intervention should still be effective. Particularly if he informed Mrs. Lovelock, with the proper degree of impressiveness, that he'd passed on the word.

A little play-acting didn't seem too much effort to put out to save a human life. Even a life like Wilson Knox's... .

This time, it was Paylar who answered the telephone.

"You've disappointed me a little, Mr. Commager," she said. "When I first heard your voice, I was certain you were going to invite me out to dine and dance."

Commager assured her that this had been his primary purpose--and as soon as he'd said it, he began to wonder whether it wasn't true. But business came first, he added.

"Well, as to the business," Paylar told him demurely, "I'm not necessarily in control of Ruth's activities, you know. I hadn't been informed that the Reverend Knox was ill." She paused a moment. "I'll tell Ruth she isn't to frighten your friend again. Will that be satisfactory, Mr. Commager?"

"Why, yes, it is," Commager said and found himself flushing. Somehow, in her easy acceptance of his intervention, she'd managed to make him feel like a child whose fanciful notions were being humored by an adult. He put the idea aside, to be investigated later. "Now about where to have dinner--"

Paylar said she'd prefer to let him surprise her. "But I have a condition," she added pleasantly. "There'll be no shop-talk tonight!"

Putting him on the defensive again, Commager thought ruefully. He told her shop-talk had been far from his mind and would eight o'clock be about right?

It would be about right, she agreed. And then, arriving at the store finally, some fifteen minutes later, he found Jean Bohart waiting in his office.

"Hi, Alan," she greeted him gloomily. "You're taking me to lunch. Okay?"

In one way and another, Commager felt, Tuesday simply didn't look like a good day for business.

. . .

"I'm in a mood today," Jean announced. She picked without enthusiasm at a grapefruit and watercress salad. "But you're not talking to me, either!"

"I was thinking," Commager said, "that I was glad you didn't look like a certain lady I met this morning. What's the mood about?"

She hesitated. "I'm making my mind up about something. I'll tell you tomorrow. Who was the lady? Someone I know?"

"I doubt it. A Mrs. Lovelock."

"I don't know any Lovelocks. What's the matter with her looks?"

"Fat," Commager explained.

"Well," Jean said glumly, "I'm not that."

She was, in fact, in spite of her downcast expression, a model of crisp attractiveness as usual. A white sharkskin suit, with a lavender veil gathered lightly at her throat, plus a trim white hat to one side of a blonde head--neat, alert and healthy-looking as an airline hostess, Commager thought approvingly.

Jean mightn't care for the comparison, though, so he didn't tell her. And he wasn't going to press her about the mood. At the rare moments that she became reserved, probing made her sullen. Probably something to do with Ira again.

"I called off the Taylors for tomorrow," she told him suddenly, with

some traces of embarrassment, "so we could talk. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," Commager said hesitantly. Then it struck him suddenly: they'd had a date for an all-day fishing party Wednesday, Jean and he and the Taylor couple. He'd forgotten completely!

"That's all right then," Jean said, looking down at her plate. She still seemed curiously shy and Commager realized that this was no ordinary problem. "Will you sleep at your cabin tonight?"

"Sure," he said, concerned—he was very fond of Jean. His sleeping at the cabin was the usual arrangement on such occasions; he'd have everything ready there for the day before anyone else arrived and then they'd be off to an early start.

"I'll be there tomorrow at eight," said Jean. She gave him a quick, unhappy smile. "I love you, Alan—you never ask questions when you shouldn't!"

. . .

So he had two dates at eight now, twelve hours apart. If it hadn't been for the attendant problems, Commager decided, his social life might have looked exceptionally well-rounded at the moment to almost anybody.

But he didn't seem to be doing a very good job of keeping clear of attendant problems. It had struck him for the first time, while they were lunching, that Jean Bohart might easily have been the prototype of the figment of Lona. There were obvious general similarities, and the dissimilarities might have been his own expression of the real-life fact that Jean was Ira's wife.

But he felt himself moving into a mentally foggy area at that point. There had been occasional light love-making between them, too light to really count; but Jean certainly had remained emotionally absorbed with Ira, though she tended to regard him superficially with

a kind of fond exasperation.

Commager didn't really know how he felt about Jean, except that he liked her more than any one else he could think of. There was a warning awareness that if he tried to push any deeper into that particular fog right now, he might get himself emotionally snagged again.

It didn't seem advisable to become emotionally snagged. There were still too many other doubtful issues floating around.

One of the other issues resolved itself—in a way—very shortly, with the ringing of the office telephone.

It was Elaine Lovelock once more.

"Mr. Commager," she said, "about the matter we were discussing--"

He began to tell her he had spoken to Paylar, but she interrupted him: "Dr. Knox died an hour ago!"

. . .

Some thirty minutes later, the first hot jolt of pain drove down from the center of Commager's throat to a point under the end of his breast-bone.

If it hadn't been so damned pat, he thought, he might have yelled for a doctor. The sensations were thoroughly convincing.

There was a section at the back of the store devoted to the experimental breeding of fish that were priced high enough to make such domestic arrangements worthwhile and exceptionally delicate in their requirements for propagation. The section had a door that could be locked, to avoid disturbances. Commager went in and locked it.

In the swampy, hot-house atmosphere, he leaned against one of the

tank racks, breathing carefully. The pain was still there, much less substantial than it had been in the first few moments, but still a vertical, hard cramping inside his chest. It had shocked him--it did yet--but he was not nearly so much alarmed as angry.

The anger raged against himself--he was doing this! The suggestion to do it might have been implanted, but the response wasn't an enemy from outside, a phantom-tiger pressing cold, steely claws down through his chest. It was a self-generated thing that used his own muscles, his own nerves, his own brain--

It tightened suddenly again. Steel-hard, chilling pain, along with a bitter, black, strangling nausea in his throat. "I'm doing it!" he thought.

The clamping agony was part of himself; he had created it, structured it, was holding it there now.



. . .

And so he relaxed it again. Not easily, because the other side of himself, the hidden, unaware, responsive side was being stubborn

about this! It knew it was supposed to die now, and it did its determined best.

But degree by degree, he relaxed the cramping, the tightness, and then suddenly felt it dissolve completely.

Commager stood, his legs spread apart, swaying a little drunkenly. Sweat ran from his body. His head remained cocked to the right as if listening, sensing, while he breathed in long, harsh gasps that slowed gradually.

It was gone.

And now, he thought, let's really test this thing! Let's produce it again.

That wasn't easy either, because he kept cringing in fear of its return.

But he produced it.

And, this time, it wasn't too hard to let it go, let it dissolve again.

He brought it up briefly once more, a single sharp stab--and washed it away.

And that, he thought, was enough of that kind of game. He'd proved his point!

He stripped off his shirt and hosed cold water over his head and shoulders and arms. He dabbed himself with a towel, put his wet shirt back on, combed his hair and went back to the office.

Sitting there, he thought of an old gag about a moronic wrestler who, practicing holds and grips all by himself, broke off his left foot and remarked admiringly, "Jeez, boss, nobody but me could have done that to me, huh?"

Which more or less covered what had happened. And now that he had made that quite clear, it seemed safe to wonder whether just possibly there mightn't have been some direct, immediate prompting from outside--something that told him to go ahead and break himself

apart, just as the wrestler had done.

Though there needn't have been anything as direct as a telepathic suggestion. It could also have been done, quite as purposefully, by inducing the disturbed leaders of the Temple of Antique Christianity to bring their plight to his attention. By letting him become thoroughly aware of the shadowy, superstitious possibilities in the situation, opening his mind to them and their implications--and then hammering the suggestion home with the simple, indisputable fact of Wilson Knox's death.

If someone was clever enough to know Alan Commager a little better than he'd known himself so far--and had motive enough not to mind killing somebody else in order to soften him up--it could have been done in just that way. And Paylar had told him openly that the motive existed.

Commager decided that that was how it had been done; though now he didn't mind considering the possibility of a telepathic suggestion either. They might try something else, but he was quite sure that the kind of trick they had tried--whichever way it had been done--wouldn't work at all another time. They needed his cooperation for that, and he wasn't giving them any.

And still, aside from the fact that Wilson Knox had been threatened, nothing at all had occurred openly.

The anger in him remained. He couldn't bring himself to feel really sorry for Knox, or for Elaine Lovelock either. They were destructive mental parasites who'd had the bad luck to run into what might be simply a more efficient parasite of the same breed. In spite of their protests, they hadn't been any less ruthless with the people they controlled.

He could recognize that. But the anger stayed with him, a smoldering and dangerous thing, a little ugly. Basically, Commager knew, he was still angry with himself. For reasons still unknown, he had developed an area of soft rot in his thoughts and emotions; and he was reasonably convinced that, without that much to start on, the

proddings and nibblings of--parasites--couldn't have had any effect. To have reduced himself to the level of becoming vulnerable to them seemed an intolerably indecent failing, like a filthy disease.

But anger, however honestly directed where it belongs, wants to strike outward.

. . .

For a parasite or whatever else she might be, Paylar looked flatteringly beautiful in a sheath of silver and black--and he didn't get a significant word out of her all evening.

Commager hadn't tried to talk shop, but he had expected that she would. However, in that respect, it might have been simply another interesting, enjoyable but not too extraordinary night out.

In other respects, it wasn't. He didn't forget at any time that here was someone who probably shared the responsibility for what he was now rather certain had been a deliberate murder. In retrospect, her promise to tell Ruth MacDonald not to frighten Knox any more hadn't meant anything, since Knox by then had been as good as dead.

The odd thing--made much odder, of course, by the other probability that he himself had been the actual target of that killing--was that, as far as Paylar was concerned, he seemed unable to feel any convincing moral indignation about the event. It was puzzling enough so that, under and around their pleasant but unimportant conversation, he was mainly engaged in hunting for the cause of that lack of feeling.

Her physical attractiveness seemed involved in it somehow. Not as a justification for murder; he wasn't even so sure this evening that he liked Paylar physically. He felt the attraction, but there was also a trace of something not very far from revulsion in his involuntary response to it. It wasn't too obvious; but she might have almost an excess of quiet vitality, a warmth and slender, soft earthiness that

seemed almost more animal than human.

That thought-line collapsed suddenly. Rather, it struck Commager, as if he'd been about to become aware of something he wasn't yet prepared to see.

He suddenly laughed, and Paylar's short black eyebrows lifted questioningly.

"I just worked something out, Mabel!" he explained. He'd asked her earlier what her full name was, and she had told him gravely it was Mabel Jones, and that she used Paylar for business purposes only. He didn't believe her, but, for the evening, they had settled cosily on Mabel and Alan.

"The thing that's different about you," he went on, "is that you don't have a soul. So, of course, you don't have a human conscience either." He considered a moment. It seemed, at any rate, to reflect almost exactly how he felt about her. A cat, say, was attractive, pleasant to see and to touch; and one didn't blame a cat for the squawking bird it had killed that afternoon. One didn't fairly blame a cat either if, to avenge some mysterious offense, it lashed out with a taloned paw at oneself. He developed the notion to Paylar as well as he could without violating the rule against shop-talk.

The cat-woman seemed neither amused nor annoyed at his description of her. She listened attentively and then said, "You could still join us, Alan--"

"Lady," said Commager, astonished, "there are any number of less disagreeable suggestions you could have made at this hour!" He added, "Leaving out everything else, I don't like the company you keep."

Paylar shrugged naked tanned shoulders. Then her gaze went past him and froze briefly.

"What's the matter?" he inquired.

She looked back at him with a rueful smile. "I'm afraid you're going to

see a little more of my company now," she remarked. "What time of night is it, Alan?"

Commager checked. It was just past midnight, he told her, so it wasn't surprising that this and that should have started crawling out of the woodwork. He turned his head.

"Hello, Oracle!" he said cordially. "What do you see in the tea leaves for me?"

Ruth MacDonald looked a little out of place here in a neat gray business suit. For a moment, she had also looked uncomfortably like a resurrected corpse to Commager, but she was alive enough.

She glanced at him. "I see your death," she said unsmilingly.

Commager told her that she appeared to be in a rut, but wouldn't she sit down and have a drink? The ice-faced young siren didn't share Paylar's immunity in his mind--she made his flesh crawl; she was something that should be stepped on!

Paylar stood up. "You're fools," she said to Ruth MacDonald without passion. She turned to Commager. "Alan, I should have told you I intended to drive back with Ruth--"

It was a lie, he thought, but he didn't mind. The expression of implacable hostility on Ruth MacDonald's face had been gratifying--Paylar's friends were becoming really unhappy about him!

The gray car stood almost at the far end of the dark parking lot where he had left his own. He walked them up to it and wished them both good night with some solemnity. "You, too, Miss MacDonald!" he said, which gained him another brief glance and nothing more. Then he stepped aside to let them back out.

. . .

When he stopped moving, there was no particular psychic ability

required to guess what was pushing against the back of his spine. "We're taking the next car," Herbert Hawkes' voice announced gently behind him. "And I'm sure we can count on you to act reasonably this time, Mr. Commager."

It was rather neat, at that. The gray car was moving slowly away, racing its engine. If there had been anyone in sight at the moment--but there wasn't--a back-fire wouldn't have created any particular excitement.

"I'm a reasonable man," Commager said meekly. "Good evening, Mr. Barthold. I'm to take one of the back seats, I suppose?"

"That's what we had in mind," Hawkes admitted.

They might or might not be amateurs at this kind of thing, but they didn't seem to be making any obvious mistakes. Lex Barthold was driving, and Commager sat in the seat behind him. Hawkes sat beside Barthold, half-turned toward Commager. The gun he held pointed at Commager's chest lay along the top of the back-rest. From outside, if anyone happened to glance in, it would look as if the two of them were engaged in conversation.

Commager thought wistfully of his own gun, stacked uselessly away in his car. This was what came of starting to think in terms of modern witchcraft! One overlooked the simple solutions.

"I was wondering," he suggested, "what would happen if we passed a patrol-car."

Hawkes shrugged very slightly. "You might try praying that we do, Commager!"

Whether the possibility was bothering him or not, the big man didn't look happy. And there was a set tension about the way Lex Barthold drove which indicated an equal lack of enjoyment there. Witchcraft addicts themselves, they might feel that physical mayhem, if that was what they were contemplating, was a little out of their normal lines of activity.

Otherwise, they had brawn enough for almost any kind of mayhem, and while one needn't assume immediately that the trip was to wind up with outright murder, their attitude wasn't reassuring.

Meanwhile, he had been fascinated by the discovery that Hawkes sported a large, discolored bruise at the exact points of his neck and jaw where Commager had thought his fist had landed early Monday morning. Those "hallucinations" hadn't been entirely illusory, after all!

However, that made it a little harder again to understand what actually could have happened that night. Commager's thoughts started darting off after rather improbable explanations, such as the possibility of Ruth MacDonald's having a twin sister or a close double who had been sacrificed then--much as Knox had been--as part of the plot to drive Alan Commager out of his mind or into his grave. He shook his head. It just didn't seem very likely.

The one thing he could be sure of right now was that Hawkes, who mightn't be the most genial of men at best, hadn't appreciated that sneak punch.

They didn't pass any patrol-cars....

8

He killed Herbert Hawkes not a quarter of a mile away from his own Bayside cabin. The location wasn't accidental. Once they were past the point of possible interference, with the last fifty yards of a twisting, precipitous goat-path down to the Bay behind Commager and a gun still in front of him, Hawkes took time out to explain.

"We're counting on your being found," he said, "and this is your own backyard, so to speak. You've gone fishing now and then from that spot down there, Commager. Tonight, being a little liquored up, you decided to go for a swim. Or you slipped and fell from all the way up

here and died instantly."

Commager looked at the gun. "With a couple of bullets in me?"

"I don't think it will come to that." Both of them, in spite of Hawkes's bland analysis of the situation, were still as nervous, Commager suspected, as a couple of cats in a strange cellar. "But if it does--well, you ran into a couple of rough characters out here, and they shot you and threw you in! Of course, we'd prefer to avoid that kind of complication."

He paused as if expecting some comment. They both stood about eight feet away, looking at Commager.

The Moon was low over the Bay, but it was big, and there was plenty of light for close-range shooting. This was a lumpy shelf of rock, not more than twenty by twenty feet, long and wide; the path dropped off to the right of it to another smaller shelf and ended presently at the water's edge, where there was a wet patch of sand when the tide was out.

The only way up from here was the path they'd come down by, and the two stood in front of that. He couldn't read Barthold's expression just now, but Hawkes was savagely tense--a big man physically confident of himself, mentally prepared for murder, but still oddly unsure and--expectant!

The explanation struck Commager suddenly: they were wondering whether he wasn't going to produce some witchcraft trick of his own in this emergency. It was such an odd shifting of their original roles that it startled a snort of rather hysterical mirth from him; and Hawkes, in the process of handing the gun to Barthold, tried to jerk it back, and then Commager moved.

He didn't move toward Hawkes but toward Barthold, who seemed to have a better hold on the gun. They might have thought he was after it, too, because Hawkes let go and swung too hastily at him, as Barthold took a step back. Commager slammed a fist into Barthold's body, swung him around between Hawkes and himself, and struck

hard again. The gun didn't even go off.

He had no more time then for Barthold, because Hawkes rammed into him with disconcerting solidness and speed. In an instant, it was like fighting a baboon, all nails and muscles and smashing fists and feet. The top of Hawkes's skull butted his mouth like a rock. Commager hit him in the back of the neck, was free for a moment and hit again. Hawkes stepped back, straightening slightly, and Commager followed and struck once more, in the side. Then Hawkes disappeared.

It was as sudden as that. Realization that he was stumbling on the edge of the rock shelf himself came together with a glimpse of the thundering white commotion of surf almost vertically beneath him--a good hundred and fifty feet down.

With a terrible trembling still in his muscles, he scrambled six feet back on the shelf and glared wildly around for Lex Barthold. But his mind refused to turn away from the thought of how shockingly close he had come to going over with Hawkes; so a number of seconds passed before he grasped the fact that Barthold also was nowhere in sight.

. . .

Commager's breathing had slowed gradually, while he stared warily up the trail to the left. The noise of the water would have covered any sounds of either stealthy withdrawal or approach; but since Barthold seemed to have preferred to take himself and the gun out of the fight, it was unlikely he would be back.

On the other hand, there were a number of points on that path where he could wait for Commager to come within easy range, while he remained out of immediate physical reach himself.

To the right, the trail led down. Commager glanced in that direction again and, this time, saw the gun where it had dropped into the loose

shale of the shelf.

Lex Barthold was lying on his back among the boulders of the next shelf down, his legs higher than his head, the upper part of his body twisted slightly to one side. He had fallen only nine feet or so, but he wasn't moving. They looked at each other for a moment; then Commager safetied the gun and put it in his pocket. He went on down.

"Hawkes went over the edge," he said, still rather dazed. "What happened to you?"

Barthold grunted. "Broke my back." He cursed Commager briefly. "But you're a dead man, too, Commager."

"Neither of us is dead yet," Commager told him. He felt physically heavy, cold and tired. He hesitated and added, "I'm going to go and get help for you."

Barthold shook his head slowly. "You won't get back up there alive. We've made sure of you this time... ." He sounded matter-of-factly certain of it, and if he felt any concern about what would happen now to himself, there was no trace of it in his voice.

Commager stared down at him for a moment wondering, and then looked around.

Surf crashed rhythmically below them; the Moon seemed to be sliding fast through clouds far out over the Bay. Overhead, the broken, sloping cliffs might conceal anything or anybody. The feeling came strongly to him then that in this savage and lonely place anything could happen without affecting the human world at all or being noticed by it.

The night-lit earth seemed to shift slowly and giddily about him and then steadied again, as if he had, just then, drifted far beyond the boundaries of the reality he knew and were now somewhere else, in an area that followed laws of its own, if it followed any laws at all.

When he looked at Barthold again, he no longer felt the paradoxical

human desire to find help for a man who had tried to kill him and whom he had nearly killed. He could talk in Barthold's own terms.

He bent over him. "What makes you so sure your friends have got me?"

Barthold gave him a mocking glance, but he didn't answer.

They weren't certain, Commager thought, straightening up. They were just hoping again! That something was preparing against him was an impression he'd gained himself, almost like the physical sensation of a hostile stirring and shifting in the air and the rocks about him, a secretive gathering of power. But they weren't certain!

"I think," he said slowly, "that I'll walk away from here when I feel like it." He paused, and added deliberately, "You people might last longer if you didn't try to play rough, Barthold. Except, of course, with someone like Wilson Knox."

Barthold spoke with difficulty. "The reason you're still alive is that Paylar and I were the only ones who would believe you were a natural of the new mind. The first one here in twenty-three years--" His breath seemed to catch; his face twisted into a grimace of pain. "But tonight they all know that ordinary controls won't work on you, Commager! That's what makes it too late for you."

Commager hesitated. He said gently, "When did you and Paylar discover I was a natural of the new mind?"

"Sunday night, of course!" Barthold was plainly anxious now to keep him here. He hurried on, "The mistake was made five years ago. You should have been destroyed then, before you had learned anything, not placed under control!"

Commager's eyes widened slightly. Until that statement, he had given only a fraction of conscious attention to what Barthold was saying, the greater part of his mind alert to catch those wispy, not-quite-physical indications that something unhealthy was brewing nearby in the night. But five years ago!

Paylar made me an offer to join your group," he pointed out. "Wouldn't that have been satisfactory?"

Barthold stared up at him. His mouth worked, but for a few seconds he made no audible reply.

"Don't wait!" he said with startling, savage intensity. "Now, or... ." The words thickened and slurred into angry, incomprehensible mutterings. The eyelids closed.

Commager bent down and prodded Barthold's shoulder with a forefinger. The man might be dying--those last words hadn't sounded as if they were addressed to him--but there were things he had to know now. "What are you, Barthold? Aren't you a natural, too?"

Barthold's eyes opened and rolled toward him, but remained unpleasantly unfocused. "Old mind--" the thick voice mumbled. And then clearly, "You're a fool, Commager! You didn't really know anything! If the others--"

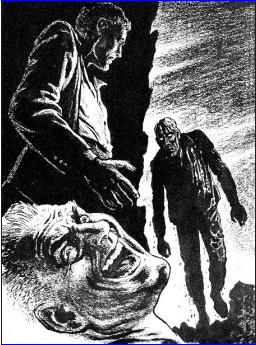
The eyes closed again.

Old mind... .That still told him nothing. "Are the others of the old mind?"

Barthold grinned tiredly. "Why don't you ask Hawkes?"

There was a sound behind Commager like the sloshing of water in the bottom of a boat. Then he had spun around and was on his feet, his hair bristling.

. . .



Hawkes stood swaying in the moonlight, twenty feet away. Water ran from his clothes to the rocks among which he stood. Water had smeared his hair down over his face. And the left side of his head looked horribly flattened.

He took a step forward, and then came on in a swaying rush.

For a long instant of time, Commager only stared. Hawkes was dead; quite obviously, even now as he moved, he was dead--so he hadn't come climbing back up the rocks out of the sweeping tug of the waves! He--

He was gone.

Commager walked over to the point where he had seen Hawkes. The rocks were dry. He went back to Barthold, his lips still stiff with horror.

"Tell me what this was!" he said hoarsely. "Or I'll kill you now!"

Barthold was still grinning, his eyes open and wickedly alert. "A picture I let you look at--but, you see, you learn too fast! You're a

natural. You wouldn't believe a picture now, and the old mind couldn't do anything else to you. But there are others working for us--and now--"

There was a rumbling and a grinding and a rushing sound overhead. Commager leaped back, his eyes darting up. He heard Lex Barthold screaming.

The whole upper cliff-side was moving, sliding downward. A gray-black, turning, almost vertical wave of broken rock dropping toward them... .

9

"People like us," Jean Bohart remarked, with an air of moody discovery, "are really pretty lucky!"

Commager went "Hm?" drowsily. Then he lifted his head to look at her. She stood beside the *Sweet Susan's* lashed wheel, shaded blue eyes gazing at him from under the brim of her yachting cap, hands clasped behind her. "What brought that to mind?" he inquired.

"I was thinking about my troubles," she said. "Then I started thinking they weren't really so bad! Comparatively--"

She was keeping her voice light. Commager sat up from where he'd stretched himself out beside the cabin, gathering his thoughts back out of the aimless diffusion of sleep. "Ready to talk about your troubles now?"

Jean shook her head. "Not yet." She frowned. "There's something about them I want to figure out by myself first--and I'm not quite done." The frown vanished. "If you've finished your nap, you might look around and see what a grand morning it is! That's what I meant by being lucky."

They were off Dana Point, he saw, so he'd slept a full hour since Jean had taken them out of the Newport Beach harbor. The *Sweet Susan* was running smoothly southward, through the Pacific's long smooth swells. Now that he was sitting up, the wind streamed cool about his head and neck and shoulders.

He said, "Yes, I guess we're lucky."

Jean grinned. "And since I've got you awake, I'll catch a nap myself! Not that I spent the night boozing and brawling."

Commager smiled at her. "Any time you feel like putting in a night like that, give me a ring."

Superficially, in her white slacks and thin sweater, Jean Bohart looked fresh as a daisy; only the tautness about her mouth and a controlled rigidity in the way she stood suggested that the "trouble" might be close to a complete emotional disaster.

He'd thought earlier that he would have liked to get out of this jaunt if he could; now he felt guilty and a little alarmed.

. . .

He moved over near the wheel while she lay down on the bench, pulling a pillow under her head and settling back with the cap-brim down over her eyes. He could tell that the muscles of the slim straight body weren't actually going to relax. But she would pretend now to be asleep and Commager let his thoughts shift away from Jean, promising himself to give her his full attention as soon as she was ready to talk.

There were a few problems of his own to be considered, though at the moment he had the sense of a truce, a lull. Last night, he had shaken the Guides badly; he had killed two of their members. But there were at least three left, and he hadn't crippled their power to act.

The truce, if it was that, was due in part to their fear of his reaction and in part to an entirely different kind of restraint--a restraint which he believed was self-imposed.

The reason he believed it was that he was now aware of being under a similar restraint himself. He thought he knew why it was an inescapable limitation, but impersonally he could agree with Paylar's opinion that, from the Guides' point of view, he should have been destroyed as soon as they became aware of him.

Left to himself--if in curiosity he had begun to investigate psi--he would have discovered the limitation quickly enough and abided by it. Even so, it appeared to permit an enormously extended range of effective activity. And Barthold had implied a conflict between an "old mind" and a "new mind."

It sounded like an esoteric classification of varying degrees of human psi potential--an ascendant individual "new mind" threatening the entrenched and experienced but more limited older group, which compensated for its limitation by bringing functioning members of the "new mind" under its control or repressing or diverting their developing abilities.

He, apparently, was a "natural of the new mind." He couldn't be permanently controlled. To the older group he represented an intolerable threat.

. . .

Some one, last night, had thrown a few thousand tons of stone at him! And he had deflected that missile from its course. Not by very much, but just enough to keep it clear of the frantically scrambling figure of himself, scuttling up the cliff path like a scared beetle.

He had done it--how?

Trying to restructure the action, Commager knew that the process

itself hadn't been a conscious one. But it had been symbolized in his awareness by a cluster of pictures that took in the whole event simultaneously.

A visualization of himself and the long thundering of the rocks, the sideward distortion of their line of fall, and a final picture again of himself as he reached the top of the cliff unharmed.

It had all been there, in a momentary, timeless swirling of possibilities against the background of rock and shadow, the tilted, turning sky and moonlight glittering on racing waters.

Then, in an instant, the pattern had been set, decided on; and the event solidified into reality with the final thudding crash. Barthold lay buried under the rocks and perhaps, down in the water, the body of Hawkes also had been caught and covered.

He hadn't tried to save Barthold. Instead, automatically, he had flung out another kind of awareness, a flashing search for the mind that had struck at him. And he had been prepared, in a way he couldn't have described now, to strike back.

He "found" three of them; the one who had acted and two who merely observed. Almost, not quite, he knew where they were. But they were alert. It was as if something, barely glimpsed, had been flicked out of his sight, leaving a lifeless black emptiness for him to grope through if he chose.

Commager didn't choose to do any blind groping. He wasn't sure enough of himself for that.

The limitation that he--and, apparently, they--didn't dare to violate had to do with the preservation of appearances. It was a line of thought he didn't want to follow too far just now. But it seemed that the reality he knew and lived in was a framework of appearances, tough and durable normally but capable of being distorted into possibly chaotic variations.

The penalty seemed to be that to the degree one distorted the framework, he remained distorted himself. The smooth flow of

appearances was quickly re-established, but the miracle-worker found himself left somehow outside. Commager suspected that he stayed outside.

He suspected also that a really significant distortion of appearances would thrust the life and mind that caused it so far out that, for all practical purposes, it ceased to exist.

He wasn't tempted to test the theory. Its apparent proof was that reality, by and large, did remain intact, while those who played around too consistently with even minor infringements notoriously failed to thrive.

To let a pair of dice briefly defy the laws of chance probably did no harm to anyone, but when you aimed and launched the side of a cliff as a missile of murder, you were very careful that the result was a rock-slide and not a miracle!

You didn't--ever--disturb the world of reality... .

. . .

What he had to fear from them, if they broke the truce, was the ambush, the thing done secretly under the appearance of a natural series of events. It left an unpleasantly large number of possibilities open, but until something new happened, he couldn't know that they weren't ready to call it a draw. So far, his spontaneous reactions had been entirely effective; the obvious damage was all on the other side.

But since the damage wasn't all obvious, he had no present intention of forcing a showdown. "Natural" or not, he might be either not quite good enough at that kind of game, or much too good.

But meanwhile-- Commager looked thoughtfully at Jean Bohart. She had fallen asleep finally, but she wasn't sleeping comfortably. Her mouth moved fretfully, and she made small whimpering sounds from

time to time, almost like a puppy that is dreaming badly. If he'd become a miracle-worker on a small scale, Commager thought, if he'd already pushed himself to some degree beyond the normal limits of reality, he might as well get some use out of what he couldn't undo.

Looking at her, it wasn't too difficult to imagine the rigidities and tensions that kept Jean from finding any real physical rest. Nor--a step farther--was it hard to get a picture of her emotional disturbances shaping themselves into a scurrying and shifting dream-torment.

Carefully, Commager took hold of the two concepts. He waited until he could no longer be quite sure whether it was he or Jean who was really experiencing these things; and then, as he had done yesterday with the pain in his own body, he let dreams and tensions ebb away and cease to be.

In spite of everything else that had happened, he was still amazed, a few moments later, to realize that his experiment in therapy had been a complete success.

10

Clear blue bowl of the sky above. Black-blue choppy water of the Pacific all about.

The *Sweet Susan* drifted, throttled down and almost stationary. Near the kelp beds two miles to the south, eight other boats gradually changed their relative positions. In the north-east, toward which the *Sweet Susan* slowly moved, the dark jaws of the Bay opened out, still too far off to make out the scars of last night's rock-slide.

Jean had slept steadily for over an hour, and Commager had two lines trailing under superficial observation. Not even a mackerel had

taken any interest so far, which probably wasn't due to the sinister influence of the Guides, but to the fact that the deep drop outside the Bay simply wasn't a very good fishing area.

Unconcerned about that, he'd been sitting there for some while, in a drowsy, sun-bright daydream composed of an awareness of physical well-being, his odd certainty that the truce still held, and enjoyment of the coincidence that the Sun was getting hotter to the exact degree that the breeze got brisker in compensation. For the hour, under such circumstances, the life of an unambitious, healthy animal seemed to be about as much as anybody reasonably could ask for.

He came out of it with a sort of frightened start. He had heard Jean stirring on the bench behind him. Now she yawned, just audibly, and sat up, and he knew she was looking at him.

Commager couldn't have said what kept him from turning his head. There was a momentary questioning alarm in him, which stiffened into cold watchfulness as Jean got up and went into the cabin. There had been another little shift in the values of reality while he was off-guard, he thought. Something was a shade wrong again, a shade otherwise than it had been an hour or so ago. But he didn't yet know what it was.

. . .

In a minute or so Jean came out again, and he guessed she'd changed into her swimsuit. He heard her come up behind him, and then a pair of smooth arms were laid lightly across his shoulders and a voice, from a point a little above and behind his head, inquired, "Had any luck, Alan? The Sun got a bit too hot for me."

It shocked him completely because it was Lona who touched him and spoke.

It was also, of course, Jean Bohart--and there was no longer any question that she'd served as the model for his imaginary woman. It

had been out of just such scraps of illusion as this--voice sounds and touches, distorted seconds in time--that he'd built up that self-deception.

How he had been reached in the first place to get him started on the construction was something he couldn't yet recall, but the purpose was also completely obvious.

Five years ago, Lex Barthold had said, they'd taken him under control.

To divert a mind from a direction you didn't want it to follow, you gave it a delusion to stare at.

You drenched the delusion in violently unpleasant emotions, which kept the mind from any closer investigation of the disturbance--

Apparently, they'd expected the treatment to be effective for the rest of his lifetime. But when Ira reported on the minor sensation Commager had created in a Las Vegas club, they'd come alert to the fact that his developing psi abilities hadn't been permanently stunted. And then a majority of them had been afraid to attempt to kill a "natural."

Unconsciously, he'd resisted the next maneuver--drastic as it had been--to throw him into a delusive tizzy.

Then he'd begun to strike back at them.

It wasn't really surprising, he thought, that they'd become a little desperate. And they might have known of that dice game before Ira told them about it. Ira had been their means of contacting him directly.

As Jean had been the means of keeping the primary delusion reinforced and alive.

. . .

"No luck, so far!" he told her, somewhat carefully. The momentary shock of recognition had faded, but some of the feeling he'd wasted on the delusion seemed to have transferred itself back to the model now! It didn't really surprise him, and it wasn't an unpleasant sensation; but, for a moment, at least, he didn't want it to show in his voice. "Did you get caught up on your sleep?"

It might have showed in his voice, because she moved away from him and leaned over the side of the boat, looking at the lines. "Uh-huh," she said casually. "I feel fine now. Better than I have in a long time, as a matter of fact."

Commager regarded her speculatively. The easy grace of her body confirmed what she said; the tensions were gone. He patted himself mentally on the back. Commager the Healer!

"Alan?"

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm leaving Ira." Her face flushed a little. "To be more exact about it, Ira's leaving me! For that MacDonald woman you met Sunday!"

Commager said softly that he'd be damned. His thoughts were racing as she went on, "He told me yesterday morning. It jolted my vanity, all right! But the funny thing is, you know, that as soon as I got over that, I found I actually didn't care. It was really a relief. Isn't that funny?"

He didn't think it was funny. It was a little too pat.

"For five years," she said, turning to face him, "I thought I loved that guy. And now I find I never did!" She shook her head. "I don't get it, Alan. How can anyone be so crazy?"

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

She stared at him for a moment, looking appealing, hurt and lovely. If he put his hand out to her now, she'd be in his arms.

"I'm going to Florida for a few months. Ira can settle it any way he wants to."

So that was the way it had been, Commager thought in astounded fury. He was the one they'd wanted to hold down, but it wasn't only his life they'd twisted and distorted to do it. They'd used Jean just as ruthlessly. And, perhaps, Ira--

For five years, he could have had his imaginary woman. She'd been within his reach in reality.

And, now that delusions were not working so well any more, they threw the reality at him!

Only now it was a little too late. He'd changed too far to be able to accept their gift.

"Jean," he said.

"Yes, Alan?"

"You're going to stop thinking for a while now," he told her gently. "You're going to just stand there for a while and not be aware of anything that happens."

A puzzled frown formed on her face as he started to speak, but it smoothed out again, and then she went on looking placidly at him. Perhaps her eyes had dulled a trifle.

. . .

This time, it didn't surprise Commager at all. Out beyond the *Sweet Susan*, he saw something like a faint haze beginning to shape itself over the moving surface of the water. He grinned a little.

Slowly and deliberately, he framed the cold thought in his mind: Do what you can for yourselves! The truce is over!

Their response was an instantaneous one. A long swell rose up behind the *Sweet Susan*, lifted the boat, passing beneath it, and dropped it again. The *Sweet Susan* was still rising as Commager picked up Jean Bohart and set her down beside the bench near the wheel; and it slapped down in a smash of spray as he cut the lashings of the wheel with the emergency knife and pulled out the throttle.

He glanced around. The haze was a thick fog about them, brilliant white against the blue of the sky overhead, while they ran through its wet, gray shade. The boat shuddered sideways behind the big swell, water roiling about it. Suddenly, with a kind of horror, Commager understood what was there.

He had seen pictures of it, or rather of a part of it, cast up on the coast years before: a house-sized chunk of rotten, oddly coarse-grained flesh, hurriedly disposed of and never identified. The drifted remnant of a nameless phenomenon of the Pacific deeps.

The phenomenon itself was underneath them now!

Still too far down to have done more than briefly convulse the surface as it turned, it was rising toward the boat. A thing of icy, incredible pressures, it was disrupted and dying as it rose, incapable of understanding the impulse that had forced it from the dark ocean up toward the coast hours before. But it was certain that, in the bright glare above it, it would find and destroy the cause of its pain.

So it came up with blind, hideous swiftness; and Commager discovered that rushing bulk could not be simply turned away from them as he had turned the rocks. It was driven by its own sick and terrible purpose. Neither could he reach the minds that guided it. This time, they were alertly on guard.

With seconds to spare then, he turned the boat.

In the fog to their left, the sea opened in a thundering series of crashes and settled again. Water smashed into the boat as it danced and drove raggedly away, and before it had gone very far it

was lifted once more on a thrust of water from below.

The thing from the sea had followed, and it was terribly close! So close that the flickering dull glow of a mind as primitive as the monstrous body itself rose up in Commager's awareness.

He caught at it.

What he drove into the glow was like an insistence on its destruction. It seemed to blaze up in brief, white fury and then went black... .

The *Sweet Susan* drove on through a curiously disturbed sea, surrounded by dissipating wisps of what might or might not have been an ordinary patch of fog. Probably, no one on any of the distant fishing boats even noticed that minor phenomenon.

A half-mile away, the water roiled once more; and that was all. The Pacific had gone back to its normal behavior.

11

It was sunset on the Bay, and Paylar was talking, at least most of the time. Sometimes Commager listened and sometimes he didn't.

It was a fairy-tale situation, he thought, somewhat amused at himself. Because he could feel the mood of it very strongly, a childlike one, a mood of enchantment around him and of terror along the fringes of the enchantment. Terror that was in part past, and in part still to come.

Far below the slope where they sat, sun-fires gleamed in the dark, moving waters, like fire shining out of the heart of a black jewel. Down there, as was not inappropriate near the end of a fairy tale, two of the bad ones lay dead and buried, unless one of them had been taken away by the water.

Much farther out, miles out, the body of a defeated dragon bumped slowly along the sea-bottom, back to the deeps, nibbled at, tugged at, pulled and turned by armies of hungry fish.

A blonde and beautiful princess was halfway to the far land of flowers called Florida by now, flying through the night skies, and released at last from an evil enchantment. She might still wonder at how oddly she'd acted the past few years, but she'd begun to look forward to new and exciting activities--and she was rapidly forgetting Alan Commager in the process.

It had been the only way to arrange it, because this was a trap of magic Jean had no business being in, and she'd been in it only because of him. He'd got himself the other one, the dark, beautiful, wicked witch, to keep company instead.

So Paylar talked of magical things, and he listened, pleasantly fascinated and willing for an hour to believe anything she told him. Earth turned under them, vast and ponderous, away from the Sun and into the night, a big, convincing stage background to what she was talking about.

. . .

All Earth life, she said, was a single entity, growing and developing from this great globe, and its conscious thinking processes went on mainly in that part of it that was human. Which was fine, she explained, while all humans were still Old Mind, as they had been at first, because they were aware of Earth and cared for it, knowing they were a part of it, and that it all belonged together. But then New Mind humans came along, as a natural development. They could think a little better than the others, but they were no longer aware of being a part of Earth life and didn't care about anything much but themselves, since they considered themselves to be individuals.

It didn't matter too much. They were still influenced by the purpose and patterns of Earth life, and had practically no conscious defenses

against what seemed to them to be obscure motivations of their own. And there were always enough Old Mind people around who knew what was going on to direct the rather directionless New Minders patiently back to the old patterns, so that in the long run things tended to keep moving along much as they always had done.

It began to matter when New Minders developed a conscious interest in what was now called psi. That was an Earth life ability which had its purpose in keeping the patterns intact; and only the New Mind, which had intelligence without responsibility, was capable of using psi individualistically and destructively.

In most periods of time, the New Mind was kept from investigating psi seriously by its superstitious dread of phenomena it couldn't rationalize. But when it did get interested--

In the Old Mind, adherence to the Earth life pattern was so complete that dangerous psi abilities simply didn't develop.

"So you see," she said, "we need New Mind psi to control New Mind psi."

. . .

Commager said he'd come to understand that finally. And also that they were able to keep control of the people they used by the fact that psi abilities tended to be as deadly to their possessor as to anyone else, when employed without careful restraint. "At best, I imagine there's a high turnover rate in the New Mind section of an organization like the Guides."

"There is," she agreed coolly. "Particularly since we select the ones that are potentially the most dangerous as recruits. The ones most hungry for power. Ruth, for example, is not likely to live out another year."

Privately and thoughtfully, Commager confirmed that opinion. "Doesn't that unusual mortality attract attention?" he inquired. It

seemed a little tactless, but he added, "What about Hawkes and Barthold, for example? Aren't they going to be officially missed?"

"Hawkes was known to be nearly psychopathic," Paylar replied. "whatever happened to him will surprise no one officially. And no one but ourselves knew anything about Lex."

She had showed, Commager thought, an appalling indifference to the fate of her late companions. He studied her for a moment with interested distaste. "You know," he remarked then, "I don't feel any very strong urges for power myself. How does that fit in with your story?"

She shrugged. "A natural is always unpredictable. You have a blend of Old Mind and New Mind qualities, Alan, that might have made you extremely useful to us. But since you didn't choose to be useful, we can't take a chance on you."

He let that pass. "Where do people like you and Barthold come from?" he inquired curiously. "How did you get involved in this kind of thing?"

. . .

She herself came, she said, from a mountain village in northern Italy. Its name was as unimportant as her own. As for the role she was playing, in part she'd been instructed in it, and in part she'd known instinctively what she had to do. She smiled at him. "But none of that is going to concern you very much longer, Alan!"

She sounded unpleasantly certain about it. Although he thought he could foretell quite precisely what was going to happen tonight, Commager felt a little shaken. He suggested, "What would happen if people like myself were just left to do as they pleased?"

"Earth would go insane," she said calmly. The extravagance of the statement jolted him again, but he could see the analogue. The Old

Mind was full of fears, too--the fear of chaos.

"That offer you made me to become one of the Guides--was that a trap, or was it meant sincerely?"

Her face abruptly became cautious and alert. "It was meant sincerely."

"How could you have trusted me?"

She said evasively, "There was a great deal you could have learned from us. You have discovered some of the things you can do by yourself, but you realize the dangers of uninstructed experimentation."

He looked at her, remembering the limitations of Old Mind and that, because of them, there couldn't be any real compromise. He didn't doubt they would have showed him what was safe to do and of use to them; but the only circumstances under which they really could trust him would be to have him so befuddled that he'd be almost completely dependent on their assistance and advice. So they would also have showed him things that were very much less than safe--for him.

He thought that Herbert Hawkes had followed that road almost to the end before he died, and that Ruth MacDonald was rather far advanced on it by now. Those two had been merely greedy and power-hungry people, utilizing talents which were more expensive than they'd been allowed to guess. Lex and Paylar had been the only leaders among the ones he'd met of that group.

He didn't bother to repeat his question; but Paylar said suddenly, "Why did you bring me out here this evening, Alan?"

"I thought I might find what was left of the Guides at Hawkes' place," Commager said. "I was a little annoyed, frankly, both because of something that happened today, and because of something that was done a while ago to somebody else. I was going to tell you to stop playing games around me and people I happen to like--or else!"

He grinned at her. "Of course, I realized you weren't going to risk a showdown right in the middle of town. It could get a little too spectacular. But since you were conveniently waiting alone there for me, I brought you out here."

"Supposing," Paylar said, "that we don't choose to accept a showdown here either?"

"Lady," he told her, "if it looks as if nothing is going to be settled, there are experiments I can start on with you that should have you yelling very quickly for help to any Guides remaining in the area. As I figure it, you see, a New Mind natural might be able to control an Old Mind expert very much as you intended to control me."

She went a little white. "That could be true. But you can't hope to survive a showdown, Alan!"

He spread his hands. "Why not? Logically, at least, I don't think there are very many of you left." He was almost certain he knew of one who hadn't openly played a part as yet, but he didn't intend to mention that name at the moment. "It wouldn't take more than a handful of developed New Mind psis to control an area like this. And you wouldn't want more than a handful around or you couldn't be sure of controlling them."

She nodded. "That's also true, of course. But you're still at a hopeless disadvantage, Alan. We--the Old Mind knows exactly how this situation can be resolved in our favor, if we're prepared to lose a few more of our controlled psis... ."

"The psis mightn't feel quite so calm about it," Commager pointed out. He hesitated. "Though I suppose you might have them believing by now that I'm out to eat them!"

"They've been led to consider you a deadly threat to their existence," Paylar agreed with a touch of complacency. "They'll take any risk that's required, in particular since they won't understand the full extent of the risk. And that isn't all, Alan. You're not the first New Mind natural we've dealt with, you know. If anything goes seriously wrong in

this area, Old Mind all over the Earth will be aware of it."

• • •

He frowned doubtfully at her, because he'd been wondering about that. And then he let the thought come deliberately into the foreground of his consciousness that he would prefer to reach an agreement, if it could be done. The Guides' ability to grasp what was going on in his mind seemed to be a very hazy one; but in a moment, though Paylar's expression didn't change, he was certain she had picked up that intentional piece of information.

She said, with a slow smile, "How much do you remember of your parents, Alan?"

He stared at her in surprise. "Not very much. They both died when I was young. Why?"

She persisted, "Do you recall your mother at all?"

"No," he admitted warily. "She divorced my father about two years after I was born. I stayed with him and never saw her again. I understand she died about three years later."

"And your father?" she asked him insistently.

Commager gestured patiently toward the Bay. "My father drowned out there on a fishing trip when I was eleven. I remember him well enough, actually. Afterward I was raised by a guardian. Do you mind telling me what these questions are about?"

"Your father," she said, "was of the Old Mind, Alan. So he must have known what you might develop into almost since your birth."

• • •

Oddly enough, he found, he was immediately willing to accept that as valid information. "Why didn't he do something about his shocking little offspring?" he inquired.

"Apparently," Paylar said calmly, "he did. If he hadn't died, your special abilities might have been blocked away so completely that they would never have come to your attention—or brought you to our attention. As it was, what he did to check you was simply not sufficient."

Commager considered the possibility, and again it seemed that that was what had occurred. It was too long ago to arouse any particular emotion in him. He said absently, watching her, "What's all this supposed to prove, Paylar?"

"That we're not trying to control you out of malice. It seems as necessary to us now as it did to your father then."

He shrugged. "That makes no difference, you know. If more control is all you have to offer, I'm afraid we'll go right on disagreeing."

Paylar nodded. Then she just sat there, apparently unconcerned, apparently satisfied with what had been said and with things as they were, until Commager added suddenly, "I get the notion that you've just informed your little pals it's time for direct action. Correct?"

"Two of them are on their way here." She gave him her slight smile. "When they arrive, we'll see what occurs, Alan. Would you like me to show you some pictures meanwhile?"

"Pictures?" He stared at her and laughed. He was baffled and, for the moment, furious. He could, as she must realize and as he had once threatened to do, break her slim neck in one hand. The indications were that he could break her mind as easily if he exerted himself in that direction. But she seemed completely unconcerned about either possibility.

Her smile widened. "I caught that," she remarked. "You were really broadcasting, Alan! You won't try to hurt me—you're really incapable of it—unless you become very frightened. And you're almost sure you

can handle all three of us anyway, so you're not yet afraid... ."

And in that, for once, she might have given him more information than she knew. Because he had sensed there had been three of them involved, two actively and one as an observer, in the last two attempts against him. Paylar, he guessed, had been the observer--supervisor might be the better term.

If those three were the only Guides that remained active locally, she was quite right: he was convinced he could handle them. And if, as seemed likely, they were going to leave him no choice about it, he would.

What Old Mind elsewhere might think or do would be another matter then. He wasn't at all sure that he couldn't handle that problem also. Another piece of information Paylar had given him in the last minute or so was that sudden flares of emotion made him "legible" to those who had her own level of ability.

He would avoid such emotional outbursts in future.

"What kind of pictures did you intend to show me?" he inquired.

"You think I'm trying to trap you," she accused him.

"Aren't you?" Commager asked, surprised.

"Of course. But only by showing you what Earth-life really is like--while there is still time."

"Well," he said agreeably, "go ahead... ."

. . .

So he sat there in the dark between sunset and moonrise and watched pictures, though that wasn't quite what they were. At first, it seemed as if time were flowing around him; the Moon would be overhead briefly and gone again, while the planes of the ground

nearby shifted and changed. That, he thought, was to get him used to the process, condition him a little. The trickeries would come next.

But when they came, they weren't really trickery. He was simply, Commager decided, being shown life as Old Mind knew it and as, in a way, it was; though he himself had never thought to take quite so dramatic and vivid a view of it. Laughing and crying, thundering and singing, Earth life drifted past in terrors and delights, flows of brightness and piercing sound and of blackest silence and night.

At last, through all that tumult of light and fragrance and emotion, he began to grow aware of what to Old Mind, at least, was primarily there: the driving, powerful, unconscious but tremendous purpose. Earth dying and living, near-eternal... .

In his mind, he found himself agreeing that it was a true picture of life and a good one.

He was a traitor to that life, Old Mind whispered to him. Earth needed him and had created him to help hold back the night and the cold forever! But the tiny, individual selfishness of the New Mind broke away from the flow of life and denied it.

So, in the end, all would die together--

The flow slowed. Into it crept the cold and the dark--a chill awareness of the approaching frozen and meaningless immobility of chaos.

It wasn't till then that Commager reached out carefully and altered the pictures a trifle. It had been a good show, he thought, though overly dramatic; and Paylar had timed the paralyzing emergence of chaos very nicely. The two for whom he'd been waiting had just reached the turnoff from the highway.

The headlights of the car glided swiftly down the Bay Road, as he brought his awareness back hurriedly to his immediate surroundings to check on the physical condition of his companion. She sat upright a few feet away from him, her legs crossed under her, her hands dropped laxly into her lap, while the black animal eyes stared in blind horror at the frozen picture of chaos.

She would keep, he decided. And he wasn't really worried about the other two ... Ira Bohart and Ruth MacDonald.

He reached out for them, and as they flashed savagely back at him, he drew away, out of time, into the space that was open to New Mind only, where they would have to follow if they wanted to touch him.

They followed instantly, with a furious lust for destruction which wasn't unexpected but which shocked him nevertheless. They came like daggers of thought, completely reckless, and if they succeeded in touching him in the same way he had touched the sea-thing, the struggle would be over in an instant.

It became obvious immediately that he could prevent them from doing it, which--since he was a stronger, more fully developed specimen of their own class--was only to be expected. What concerned him was their utter lack of consideration for their own survival. The car they were in hadn't stopped moving; in less than half a minute now it would be approaching the sharp curve above the Bay.

He had counted on the driver's attention being forced away from him momentarily, either to stop the car or to manipulate it safely around the curve; in that instant, he would bring the other one under his control as completely as he had trapped Paylar, and he would then be free to deal at his leisure with the driver.



. . .

Individually, any one of the Guides was weaker than a New Mind natural; it had looked as simple as that. He wanted to save what was left of the group, to operate through them very much as Old Mind had been doing, but with a very different purpose.

The two who attacked should be withdrawing by now, dismayed at not having found him paralyzed by Paylar's "pictures," as they must have expected. They might be waiting for her to come to their assistance in some other manner, not knowing that she was no longer even aware of the struggle. However, within seconds the need of controlling the car would become urgent enough to settle the issue—

In an instant, he felt himself drawn down, blinded and smothered, in the grasp of a completely new antagonist! It was not so much the awareness of power immensely beyond that of the Guides that stunned him; it was a certainty that this new contact was a basically horrible and intolerable thing. In the fractional moment of time that everything in him was straining simply to escape from it, the New

Minders drove through their attack.

Pain was exploding everywhere through his being, as he wrenched himself free. Death had moved suddenly very close! Because the third opponent wasn't Paylar, never had been Paylar. He had miscalculated—and so there had been one he'd overlooked.

Now they had met, he knew he wasn't capable of handling this third opponent and the two New Minds together.

Then without warning the New Minds vanished out of his awareness, like twin gleams of light switched off. Seconds later, from somewhere far out on the edge of his consciousness, as if someone else were thinking it, the explanation came: The car! They weren't able to stop the car!

With that, the last of them drove at him again; and for a moment he was swept down into its surging emotions, into a black wave of rage and terror, heavy and clinging. But he was not unprepared for it now, and he struck at the center of its life with deadly purpose, his own terrors driving him. Something like a long, thin screaming rose in his mind... .

In that moment, complete understanding came.

As in a dream scene, he was looking down into the yard of the Temple of Antique Christianity. It was night-time now; and on the dais he'd investigated the day before, a bulky, shapeless figure twisted and shook under a robelike cloth which covered it completely.

The screaming ended abruptly, and the shape lay still.

13

Commager sat up dizzily. He discovered first that he was incredibly

drenched with sweat, and that Paylar still sat in an unchanged position, as she stared at the thing he'd set before her mind to fix her attention. Down on the Bay Road, there was a faint shouting.

He stood up shakily and walked forward till he could look down to the point where the road curved sharply to the left to parallel the Bay. The shouting had come from there. A few people were moving about, two of them with flashlights. Intermittently, in their beams, he could see the white, smashed guard railings.

A brief, violent shuddering overcame him, and he went back to where Paylar sat, trying to organize his thoughts. The reason for her confident expectance of his defeat was obvious now.

The unsuspected opponent--the gross shape that had kicked about and died on the dais, the woman he'd known as Mrs. Lovelock--had been another New Mind natural. Or, rather, what had become of a New Mind natural after what probably had been decades of Old Mind control. But that part wasn't the worst of it.

I met her and talked to her! he thought in a flash of grief and horror. But I couldn't guess--

He drove the thought from his mind. If he wanted to go on living--and he realized with a flicker almost of surprise that he very much did--he had other work to complete tonight. A kind of work that he'd considered in advance as carefully as the rest of it--

And this time, he thought grimly, he'd better not discover later that he'd miscalculated any details.

He sat down and rolled over on his side in the exact place and position in which he'd been lying before. Almost the last thing he saw was the sudden jerky motion of Paylar's body, as he dissolved the visual fixation he'd caught her attention in. Then, as she turned her head quickly to look at him, he closed his eyes.

When Commager's mind resumed conscious control of his body, there was a cloudy sky overhead and a cool gray wetness in the air. Paylar stood nearby, looking thoughtfully down at him. He looked back at her without speaking. The terrifying conviction of final failure settled slowly and dismally on him.

"You can wake up fully now," she told him. "It's nearly morning."

He nodded and sat up.

"What I shall tell you," her voice went on, "are things you will comprehend and know to be true. But consciously you will forget them again as soon as I tell you to forget. You understand?"

Commager nodded again.

"Very well," she said. "Somewhere inside you something is listening to what I am saying; and I'm really speaking now to that part of you--inside. Here and tonight, Alan, you very nearly won, though of course you could not have won in the final issue. But you must understand now, consciously and unconsciously, that you have been completely defeated! Otherwise, you would not stop struggling until you had destroyed yourself--as thoroughly as another one very like yourself, whom you met tonight, did years ago!"

She paused. "You know, of course, that the New Mind natural you killed tonight was your mother. We counted on the shock of that discovery to paralyze you emotionally, if all else failed. When it happened, for the few seconds during which the shock was completely effective, I was released by others of the Old Mind from the trap in which you had caught me."

She smiled. "That was a clever trap, Alan! Though if it hadn't been so clever, we might not have needed to sacrifice your mother. In those few seconds, you see, I planted a single, simple compulsion into your mind--that when you pretended afterward to become unconscious--as it appeared you were planning to do to deceive the Old Mind--your consciousness actually would blank out."

• • •

He tried to remember. Something like that had occurred. He had intended to act as if the struggle with the New Minders had exhausted him to the point where it was possible for Paylar to take him under complete control, since only in that way could he be safe from continuing Old Mind hostility. But then--

He had no awareness of what had happened in the hours that followed till now.

"You see?" Paylar nodded. There was a trace of compassion, almost of regret, in her expression. "Believe me, Alan, never in our knowledge has a functioning human mind been so completely trapped as you are now. I have been working steadily on you for the past six hours, and even now it would be impossible for you to detect the manner in which you are limited. But within minutes, you will simply forget the fact that any limitations have been imposed on you, and so you will remain free of the internal conflicts that destroyed your mother."

She paused. "And here is a final proof for you, Alan, of why this was necessary for us. You recalled that your father drowned in this Bay when you were a child. But as yet you seem to have blocked out of your memory the exact manner in which he died--"

Her voice changed, grew cold and impersonal. "Let that memory come up now, Alan!"

• • •

The memory came. With it came memory of the shocking conflict of emotion that had caused him to bury the events of that day long ago. But it aroused no emotional response in him now. It had been a member of an alien, hostile species he had compelled to thrust itself

down into the water, until the air exploded from its lungs and it sank away and drowned ... of the same hostile species as the one talking to him now.

"Yes," she said. "You drowned him, Alan, when you first became aware of the mental controls he had imposed on you. And then you forced yourself to forget, because your human conditioning made the memory intolerable. But you aren't truly human, you see. You are an evolutionary mistake that might destroy the life of all Earth if left unchecked!"

She concluded, "It has taken all these years to trap you again, under conditions that would permit us to impose controls that no living mind, even in theory, could break. But the efforts and the risks have been well worthwhile to Old Mind. For, you see, we can use your abilities now to make sure there will be no trouble from others of your kind for many years to come. And we can, as the need arises, direct you to condition others of your kind exactly as you have been conditioned... . But now"--a flat, impersonal command drove at him again through her voice--"forget what I have told you! All of it!"

And, consciously, the mind of Commager forgot.

. . .

He had done, he thought, as he watched his body stand up and follow the woman up the path to his cabin, a superbly complete job of it.

What identity might be remained an intriguing problem for future research, though perhaps not one that he himself would solve. For practical purposes, at any rate, the identity of Alan Commager was no longer absorbed by the consciousness that rose from and operated through his brain and body.

And that was the only kind of consciousness Old Mind knew about. He was hidden from Paylar's species now because he had gone,

and would remain permanently, beyond the limits of their understanding.

He directed an order to the body's mind, and the body stumbled obediently, not knowing why it had stumbled. Paylar turned and caught its arm, almost solicitously, steadying it.

"You'll feel all right again after a few hours rest, Alan," she told it soothingly.

Species as alien almost as a cat or a slender, pretty monkey, but with talents and purposes of her own, Paylar was, he thought, an excellent specimen of the second highest development of Earth evolution.

He reached very carefully now through the controls he had imposed on her consciousness to the core of her being, and explained gently to her what he had done.

For a few seconds, he encountered terror and resistance, but resignation came then, and finally understanding and a kind of contentment.

She would help him faithfully against Old Mind now, though she would never be aware of doing it.

And that, he thought, was really all for the moment. The next step, the development of New Mind psi in others, was an unhurried, long-term project. In all the area within his range, Old Mind control had stifled or distorted whatever promise originally had been present.

But the abilities were ever-recurring. And here and there, as he became aware of them now, their possessors would be contacted, carefully instructed and shielded against Old Mind spies. Until they had developed sufficiently to take care of themselves and of others. Until there were enough of them.

Enough to step into the role for which they had been evolved--and which the lower mind had been utterly unable to comprehend. To act as the matured new consciousness of the giant Earth life organism.

