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ASTONISHING

STORIES

APR.



Master Control

THE
SPACE
BEASTS

by CLIFFORD
D. SIMAK

by VINCENT, ASIMOV, KUMMER

Master Control

by Harl Vincent

After our brief diversion into the works of Amelia Reynolds Long, we now return to our primary field of study, the early works of Harl Vincent. As this blog's hypothetical readers are aware, Harl Vincent (1893 - 1968) was the pen name of Harold Vincent Schoepflin, a mechanical engineer who published over seventy stories in the pulp SF magazines between 1928 and 1942. Most of Vincent's stories have never appeared anywhere but the original magazines, and all of them are in the public domain. As part of our effort to revive interest in this forgotten pioneer of the Gernsback Era, the Johnny Pez blog will now attempt to publish Vincent's "Master Control" from the April 1940 issue of Astonishing Stories. This story is the third in a trilogy that began with "Gray Denim" from the December 1930 issue of Astounding Stories and continued with "Power" from the January 1932 issue of Amazing Stories. As always, the story will appear in a blog-friendly multi-part format. And now, without further ado:

Master Control

part 1

Chapter One: Central Control

That any one man, even though he might wear the purple of the upper levels and be most adept among the technics, should learn the secret of Central Control was unthinkable. For nearly two centuries now, tradition had it that Central Control was little less than a God, a being not to be understood nor seen nor communicated with by mere humans, a being of beneficence to the wearers of the purple and of stern unbending discipline and cruelty to those of the mid-level gray. A being, hidden and protected and unapproachable in the ancient dome atop the city, whose will was meted out by the Prime Controls of the upper levels and the lesser Controls in the reaches far beneath, whose favors were for the few and whose harshness for the many. Even the Controls did not know the secret of their Central activating power. Of course the Controls were themselves human beings, though for all the thinking power and independence of will they were permitted they might well have been automatons. They were mere agents of the great Central obeying unquestioningly all orders emanating from that mysterious dome, unquestioningly and rigidly enforcing them.

But one man knew the secret of Central Control. One man alone, the greatest scientist the twenty-fifth century had unwittingly produced, one who, for his ability and accomplishments, had been made chief of the technics of Manhattan, most powerful of all the remaining States of the decadent and nearly depopulated world. Fowler Scott was that man and he was a man who was most careful to hide within his own consciousness the knowledge and the thoughts that went with his discovery of the great secret. Scott's mind was insulated against the thought-probing vibrations that went out from Central and

all the lesser Controls, at least that portion of his mind he wished to conceal. Scott was a man with a very definite purpose in view and he did not propose to fail of that purpose. It was a lofty one and incredible to contemplate.

With the privileges that were his, Scott was able to make frequent visits to the lower levels of the city. And many were the secret explorations he had made of the closed-off and inoperative levels of the millions of robots who had performed all of man's work in the twenty-third century. Many visits he had made to the ancient and long unused centers of learning, the museums and libraries with their dust-covered and moth-eaten relics. Many visits to the mid-levels where the gray-clad human workers had taken the places of the robots and were themselves little better than robots under the production-speeding impulses of the labor Controls. Scott had learned much of history, much concerning the reasons for the deplorable conditions of the present. And he had found the truth, had learned the great secret. He now was formulating plans for the remedy--the only remedy possible. The only hope.

To this end he must have a following and thus he was cautiously and without the knowledge of his intended followers preparing them to join the movement he was building up. In each unit of industry he was choosing a pair of them, choosing carefully as to physical and mental superiority, unsuspectedly educating them for the great work that was to come. He could not fail.

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A lesser man, one Hardy, had come to know there was a quality in himself that was not common to his kind. He knew, and he reveled in this knowledge secretly, schooling his thoughts against the possibility of letting loose any radiation which might apprise his immediate Control of this difference he had discovered and was

assiduously cultivating. Yes, Hardy was different. And in a subtly peculiar and dangerous way. Dangerous to the security of those who controlled the system of slavery in the cowed cities of this world of the twenty-fifth century. Dangerous to the Controls themselves, to the Central Control of Manhattan. And--Hardy had only recently come to this realization himself--dangerous to the Central Controls of all the widely scattered and war-exhausted cities of the entire globe. For Hardy had learned that he could immunize himself against the brain waves that radiated from the mechanisms manipulated by the Controls. He could be an independently functioning individual if and when he chose. In this he believed he was unique.

How he had learned of his own capabilities, he did not know. It had merely become clear to him one day that he was able to shield his own thoughts from his immediate Control. He could think independently and have no fear of the brain-numbing flash that could sweep out from the orb of metal that topped the machines at the end of the long line of gray-clad workers of which he was a part. And from that day he had waited and had craftily planned. They could not know of his thoughts. This knowledge gave him a feeling of power. Latent power he would some day unleash.

Next to him in line a slim girl worked. Her shell-like ear was day by day a more intriguing thing as he viewed it from the corner of his eye, partially covered though it usually was by the soft masses of brown hair that fell in witching wavelets to the girl's shoulders. Mera, she was called, this neighboring automaton whose face he had never been able to study. You were not allowed to turn your head from your work, not able to do so on account of the gripping brain waves which emanated from the Control orb and kept you at the long hours of arduous toil. At least the others could not do so; Hardy had found that he could move his head if he so desired, but was careful to keep his eyes straight front so that his secret might not be discovered.

And when, at the end of the interminable work day, you were released by the Control and permitted to go to your poor dwelling quarters, you were simply too tired even to wish to turn your head, too tired even to wish for human companionship. You submitted meekly to the new Control which took you over; with sagging knees and drooping shoulders you were herded into the grimy, perspiring huddles of humanity that were swept on their homeward way in the tiny tube cars, silent and unthinking. It was only during the long sleeping periods, if wakefulness came, that you were able really to think for yourself. And then only dully, for the poor, ordinary devitalized brain cells had no time to become fully active. All except Hardy—he had learned the secret of outwitting the Controls.

Now as he carefully masked his thoughts from the probing of his day Control, he was furtively admiring that neighboring ear. Somehow it thrilled him and made him wonder what its owner looked like, what sort of a person she would be to know, to talk with, to associate with during the few hours when there was no work to be done. But attractive female workers seldom mated with their own class; they were reserved for the favorites of the Controls, for the few wearers of the purple who cavorted in the upper levels of the city.

Something of Hardy's thoughts must have been communicated to the girl Mera for, suddenly and without warning, she turned swiftly and faced him for the briefest instant. Hardy, as if electrically impelled, had turned full face toward her at precisely the same time. Then both heads once more faced straight forward; both pairs of eyes were intent on the delicate setting of bearing jewels in the instrument parts that came endlessly before them on the traveling belt. The Control had not observed the lapse of the two.

But that revealing instant had Hardy's heart beating like an electric hammer. Not only was the girl breathtaking in her soft beauty, not only were the dark fringes of her lashes the longest and most

startling Hardy had ever seen, not only were those eyes at the same time the bluest conceivable and her lips the reddest, but Mera was like himself. She, too, could think for herself; she, too, was capable of shielding or of projecting her own independent thoughts. Distinctly there had come to his mind from hers a gesture of friendliness. They had for one flashing moment been en rapport. It was inconceivable, soul-stirring. Hardy no longer felt the oppression his former isolation had brought.

As his fingers worked with nimble sureness with the tiny drilled sapphires under the magnifying glass before him a number was distinctly impressed on his consciousness. Over and over it was repeated. 26-23-208. 26-23-208. Mera--communicating with him mentally! It was a place of meeting, twenty-sixth level, twenty-third crossway, group 208. Hardy was to see her there tonight. New life surged through him as the siren shrieked for the change of Control.

Fowler Scott's plans were beginning to materialize.

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In the silent darkness of a huge unused room of the old Synthetic Food Company a tiny spot of light glowed for a moment on strange uncouth mechanical forms and then blinked out. There was the faint snap of a switch and the gentle hum of machinery starting up. The light flicked on again, this time revealing two giant figures that stood erect like two men about to engage in combat. Two robots, thick with the dust of ages, had come to life. A soft chuckle issued from lips in the unseen face behind the circle of light.

"Go to it," a voice whispered with suppressed glee. "Let's see what you can do to one another."

There was the clank of metal on metal. The two dim figures struck out

like live boxers in the upper closed-circle theatres where the ennui of the leisured class was supposedly relieved. Wavering shadows of the fighting figures loomed large and spookily on the ceiling above.

"Alley-oo!" the sardonic human voice chuckled. "Sock him, Rusty. Sock him, old dust-in-the-face."

There was a tinkle of crashing glass as the eye lens of one of the battling monsters crumpled inward. The rasping metallic voice of the mechanical creature was raised in protest.

"Okay," said the man who could not be seen. "You'll do, the two of you. Back to your places."

With heavy measured tread, the robots stalked to a long line of similar figures and stiffly sat among them. The sound of their motors died down. The light snapped out.

Another link in Scott's chain was forged.

* * *

On the extreme ground level of the city where half human derelicts skulk among the shadowy ruins of the ancient public squares and where only an occasional robot police patrol clanks along a deserted corridor, Pinky Collins hobbled painfully into the half light of the lone sunglo lamp that still burned high in the ceiling arch of Cooper Square. Pinky had found nothing to eat in many days; he was faint with hunger, desperate.

There was a dim illumination away in the back of one of the shabby old shops that still remained to the district. Pinky looked cautiously to the left and right, then hobbled stealthily to the grimy front of the place. He tried the door and it yielded to his shivering touch.

Here in the nether regions where forgotten men and women eked out a precarious existence, shut off as they were by twenty or more levels from the mid-city area and by nearly a hundred from the wearers of the purple, crime was dealt with swiftly and effectively by the few robots needed. There were no courts, no magistrates, no juries. Swift death at the steel hands of the robots was the reward of the transgressor. The last remnants of the shiftless lower class were being speedily reduced in number until soon the ground level would no longer contain a human being.

As Pinky's hand reached in through the shop door, fingers of steel closed on his wrist. Pinky stifled a scream of terror. But these steel fingers did not crush as he had anticipated; they simply tugged at his arm. He wheeled to stare into the crystal eye lenses of one of his traditional enemies. His jaw sagged as a toneless, measured voice came from the resonance chamber beneath.

This was not the usual rasping voice of authority.

"Want something to eat, Pinky?" it asked.

"Garn! Wot yer doin'--kiddin me before bustin' me open?"

"No. Come along and you'll eat."

"Garn!" Pinky's jaw sagged still lower and he stared at the lenses of eyes. They did not glow with the accustomed fierce red but with a soft violet that was somehow reassuring. "Cripes! Yuh mean it!"

The robot cackled; it was almost a human sound of laughter. "Of course I mean it. Come along." The steel fingers relaxed; the seven foot monster stood waiting.

And Pinky trotted along trustingly as the robot strode off slowly into the shadows. How could Pinky know that a man named Fowler Scott

had reached even into this region of the lost ones with the long range searching of a mind that was set on a new era for all of Mankind?

part 2

Chapter Two: The Man in Purple

There was something strange, something furtive in the meeting that night of Hardy and Mera. Something so exciting as to bring a deep flush to the smooth cheeks of the girl and an unnatural brightness to the eyes of the man. They met in the shadows of the deserted twenty-sixth level at the entrance of long-closed group 208. Hardy had seen but a single robot policeman since leaving the lift at this level and that one motionless, the activating power having been shut off. Something mysterious was behind this, but something extraordinarily exhilarating.

"Mera," breathed the man. "You did then tell me this number."

The girl's blue eyes widened. "I?" Her flush deepened as understanding came. "I thought you had told me."

It was Hardy's turn to stare. He saw that a light was inside the supposedly unused group 208 and that several other couples were stealing along the disused corridor toward where they stood. "Someone else," he said finally, "told us both to come. What do you think?"

"It must be," the girl agreed. "It's sort of eerie, isn't it?"

"Yes. Sorry?"

"Oh, no," breathlessly, "I've hoped for something like this--ever since--"

"Since what?" Hardy hung on her words.

"Since I knew. Oh, I can't explain, but you and I are--different."

"Yes. But others seem to be different as well. See how many are here."

It was true, what he had said. Their eyes followed the movements of two couples who had gone inside; they saw a number of others there in seats that could be made out in the dim light. Couples, all couples. What had drawn them together?

"Shall we go in?" asked the girl.

"By all means." Hardy placed a hand under Mera's elbow, thrilled to the softness and warmth of the rounded forearm.

They sat, then, a little apart from the others, frankly appraising each other in the soft light.

Mera was first to speak. The throaty richness of her low voice was like a caress. "Whatever this is about," she breathed, "it is nice just to sit here and think and dream. To dream of impossible things and to know that someone else understands."

"Yes." Hardy said nothing further for a moment. Then: "But do we really understand? Why should you and I, of all those in the meter works, come to this knowledge? What is it that we have, anyway? Certainly nothing that has been taught to us."

"I wonder." The girl was thoughtful for a long space, then suddenly grasped Hardy's hand as naturally as would a child. "Look," she whispered. "Someone is mounting the platform."

It was true. A lone man, tall, commanding of presence, his broad shoulders slightly stooped, his thick hair gleaming silvery, was stepping purposefully across the dust-laden flooring that once had

known the dancing feet of mid-level entertainers.

He faced the small assemblage, probably forty or fifty couples now being scattered throughout the large auditorium. "I am Fowler Scott," he said simply, in opening.

Which meant exactly nothing to Hardy and the girl at his side. Yet there was something that went with the man's words, something good and powerful and somehow familiar, that had them at instant attention.

Even though the man did wear the purple jacket and trunks of the upper levels.

* * *

"Friends," he went on after a pause. "There is no need of going into the reason you all found this place at the appointed time. All of you here are aware of the change in yourselves that has been taking place during the past three years. All of you know you have acquired a new ability, a power not granted to your associates in the various walks of life you occupy. You have, so far, used this new power wisely. And it is sufficient to tell you that it is I who have brought about this change--for a purpose. I trust there is no objection."

A pattering of approving exclamations swept softly through the hall as the man waited expectantly.

"Good," he said with the ghost of a smile. "Now as to my reasons for doing this: It is to take over control of what is left of our civilization from the Controls, to give mankind an opportunity to re-establish itself and again to become free, prosperous and happy. To prevent its complete extinction."

Gasps of surprise at this unheard of temerity could be heard in the small gathering.

"And from what has happened to each and every one of you here, you should realize that this can be done," the speaker continued calmly. Then, warming to his subject: "Five hundred years ago, in the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century, our world went mad. In population we were most powerful, in the exercise of good judgment woefully weak. Our ancestors submitted to the rule of what were called dictators, men with the lust for power and conquest ingrained in their natures. A series of devastating wars that nearly depopulated the globe followed. The land was blasted and rendered sterile, the vast cities destroyed, the march of progress stayed. For nearly a century we returned to a state of savagery.

"Then science began anew to forge ahead. For two centuries it progressed until there rose the new City-States all over the world. With the land no longer productive, everything we ate and wore became synthetic. Life naturally went to the cities, leaving the wastelands between entirely depopulated. By the middle of the twenty-third century great advances had been made. Manhattan, then called New York, was, as it is today, completely closed in, with its own pure atmosphere and artificial sunlight. It was prosperous, housing fifty million humans in its more than twenty mile length of structure which rears to a maximum of a hundred levels, as you know. There were eleven similar structures in what was known as United North America, New York being the largest of all. In the rest of the world were almost fifty more such mechanized City-States. The world was at peace, its governments supposedly democratic. Its total population had been restored to twentieth century strength, though it was now localized in the few huge centers of habitation.

"But avarice again came to the fore. Vast fortunes had been accumulated in the hands of the few. These few became plutocratic

rulers who were, if anything, worse than the dictators. The population was dividing into three widely differing classes, those above who wore the purple, those of the mid-level gray, and the outcasts below. And there were the robots, outnumbering the humans two to one. Those of the purple deteriorated mentally, physically and morally. The preponderant wearers of the gray became sullen and discontented. Again war broke out, a series of civil wars that swept the City-States of the world and continued for more than a century. The plutocrats were destroyed, the robots became idle, the middle and lower classes were so reduced in number that the cities became what we are today, great empty shells with a few levels occupied and all remaining humans in the hands of the Controls. A few of the cities were wiped out entirely so that now but forty-three remain. And the population was cut to hardly more than five percent of what had been its maximum. It is even less today and growing smaller rapidly. In Manhattan today there are considerably less than two million humans. A hundred million robots lie idle in the fully mechanized levels. A few who remain of the purple, for some reason still humored by the Prime Controls and this humoring tolerated by the Central Control, loll lazily in the upper levels while those of the gray are made to work far beyond their physical power under the driving forces of the lesser Controls. We die young and we are not permitted often to propagate. Mankind is doomed to extinction unless there is a change, a radical change."

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Fowler Scott paused dramatically. Then his voice rose determinedly: "We, you and I, are going to bring about that radical change. We shall take over the control of the cities temporarily. We shall restore freedom and sanity to the masses. Through our activities the land shall be reclaimed so that no one may go hungry. Production--speeded, controlled labor will become a thing of the past. The Controls themselves are to go, the Central even."

At this last a solemn hush fell over the little assemblage. It was sacrilege this man had spoken. Not a pair of humans in the hall but anticipated an immediate bolt from the arches above to strike them down. But nothing happened; confidence surged back.

"And you," Scott went on, "you whom I have chosen are to take the places of the Centrals in the various cities. I have deliberately selected couples whom I have considered suitably mated, a couple for each of the forty-three scattered States. I shall continue your education until the Great Day, which is not so far distant. Have I your approval?"

A buzz of excited conversation rose confusedly. Each paired-off couple, men and girl, was conducting its own private discussion of the amazing scheme. No immediate decision seemed to be forthcoming.

Far back in the shadows of the auditorium, wondering dully what it was all about, slouched Pinky Collins. He too had been summoned, alone. But Pinky's stomach was full; he would have agreed to anything now.

Scott's voice rose once more and his audience fell silent. "If there is any question as to my choice of mates, let me say this: there is nothing to force any couple of you to wed. It is only that I feel that a man and woman are necessary to replace each Central Control, a male and female viewpoint working together as one. You may continue in your single state if you so desire. No one will force you to take any action you do not wish to take; you will be free-thinking units once the domination of the Controls is definitely removed. Are there any objections or questions?"

Mera was gazing up at Hardy starry-eyed. The thing was so big, so

seemingly impossible of accomplishment that these two were speechless. Something else had come to them as well, something personally as big as what this Fowler Scott had proposed. And in their minds each looked ahead down a long vista in which it seemed they must travel always upward together, hand in hand.

They paid little attention to the discussion that followed; they felt secure in the new sense of power which had come to them and in the future that seemed about to open, content to wait for the Great Day and trust in this man who had given them so much.

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In the rear of the auditorium, Pinky Collins waited, an inconspicuous blot against a pillar, merging into the shadows that were everywhere cast by the dim light. His ferret eyes were very bright as he saw the couples leaving arm in arm, always paired off as they had arrived, all chatting in animated tones, some gay, some solemnly impressed. Pinky was waiting for Fowler Scott. An unthinking, clanking mechanical man had fed him and had told him to be here. He still was not over the shock of the experience.

"Oh, here you are." The tall, stooped gray-haired man in purple was approaching him.

Pinky slunk further into the shadowy gloom. There was something queer about all this. "Garn!" he said huskily. "Yuh ain't lookin' fer me, mister."

"Oh, yes I am, Pinky. Come with me."

More frightened of these deserted corridors of the unused level than of his accustomed haunts, utterly mystified by this strange call from a man of the purple, utterly terrified at the prospect of being whisked to

the top of the city in one of the high speed lifts, Pinky was yet under a compelling influence that somehow came from this man who had spoken so strangely and forcefully to this queer group of gray-coats. Though he had but dimly understood, though he had not the faintest idea as to what he was heading into, he still had a feeling that he was to be part and parcel of some mighty upset in conditions.

"Yer th' boss, mister," he said finally, and unhesitatingly followed the man who was Fowler Scott.

part 3

Chapter Three: Prison Break

Hardy slept but poorly after the meeting. So engrossed had he been in the girl Mera that the enormity of what Scott had been doing and was proposing did not strike him fully until the sunglo illumination of his sleeping quarters had been snapped off and he was composed for sleep. A new train of thought then began to form in his mind, a train of thought that was increasingly more complex as he alternately dozed and awakened to remembrance of where he had left off in the thinking. He knew that a great change had come over him during the past three years, as undoubtedly it had in the case of every one of those forty-three couples. He did not remember much of his life up to the time when the change had started to set in; he had before that been too completely under the continuous spell of the Controls. He hadn't understood nor cared greatly in those dim days; he had merely lived on his days and nights in stolid submission along with the rest of the mid-level slaves. Now all that was changed. And by a man of the purple who obviously had something not possessed by the Controls themselves.

It had always seemed before that the Controls were malignant human beings. Now, through the revelations that had come to him and in the releasing of his own mental capacity, he had come to know that the lesser Controls were as much controlled as were their own charges. It was the machines at which they sat which stupefied the minds and speeded up the physical capacity of the workers. The men and women who were called Controls were merely the manipulators of the machines; they in turn were under orders from the Prime Controls, the Prime Controls under the mysterious being known as Central. Hardy and Mera were supposed to get to the point

of displacing one of the Central Controls--somewhere as yet not specified. It was incredible. And yet the man Scott had so far demonstrated his own powers; Hardy believed implicitly that he could do as he promised. But to what end? And what dangers and hardships were to be met in the doing?

The others at the meeting had seemed enthusiastic when they left. It had been settled; there were no serious objectors, no questions that had not been answered satisfactorily by Scott. And the promise had been made that immediate results would be forthcoming. Hardy became more and more excited over the prospect and less and less inclined to sleep as the night wore on. When the sunglo illumination came to signify that it was what they called morning, he was in and out of his bath and into his clothes with far more than his usual alacrity.

Mera was on his mind now above all else.

* * *

When he arrived at his seat before the long conveyor he looked down at the assembly line Control at the end with new insight into what it stood for. And he was actually sympathetic with the human being who sat at the innumerable check-back lamps and indicators and buttons that he faced. There was the quick, shrill blast that signified the start of the working day, the tingling of the brain impulses that penetrated Hardy's consciousness but were immediately thrown off. He kept his eyes front, though he sensed as never before the nearness of Mera at his side. His fingers began to fly, enormously enlarged, exceedingly swift and capable as seen through the glass. At least the Control was operative as far as speeding up his muscular action was concerned.

New ideas were crowding in upon him; he carefully shielded off his

thoughts from the Control. How he was able to do this he did not know; he only knew it was so, and knew that somehow, from somewhere in the upper regions, Scott was doing it all. Continued exposition there was in his consciousness of conditions as they existed in Manhattan and in the rest of the world, continued propounding of remedies possible of application, continued reviewing of facts of history which had led up to these injustices and intolerable situations which were constantly growing worse.

So lost was he in contemplation of what was coming through to him that he did not notice a stir at his side. Not until it had become a veritable disturbance. And then he did something that was hitherto unheard of on the assembly line. He turned abruptly in his seat to face two officers of the upper-level guard who had raised Mera to her feet. Not another worker on the line had observed or stirred. Amazement at what he saw froze for an instant on Hardy's face as he staggered under the impact of a numbing brain wave that swept down from the Control. But almost immediately, with the power which had come to him, he shook it off. The orb of the Control flashed spiteful violet again and again but to no avail.

"Hardy, help me!" Mera was begging him. "Do something. They want to take me away."

One of the guards grabbed her arm roughly. "We are taking you away, my pretty," he corrected her. "And better not make any trouble or it will be harder for you in the end. You ought to consider yourself lucky."

The second guard clamped big fingers on her wrist and she cried out in fear and pain. Then was when Hardy went into action. He lashed out with both fists in blind fury. One, two, in professional boxer's style. And with the weight and power of an unusually vigorous body for a mid-level worker. The guard went down and stayed there. And the

other one had released Mera and was coming for Hardy. The Control orb flashed frantically. And then there was the shrill whistle that called the robot police.

Hardy had no very clear idea of just what happened immediately after that. He only knew that again and again he felt the satisfaction of burying his knuckles in yielding flesh or of bones crushing or cracking under his blows. Both guards were on the floor when the reinforcements came in. There were other guards then and--robots! Steel fingers wrapped around his windpipe, a jointed steel arm encircled his own arms, crushing them to his sides and rendering his frantic struggling futile. Mera, he could see, was being hustled off by new guards of the purple. He tried desperately to cry out but could not for the closing off of his breath. His senses reeled, swirling many-hued sunbursts danced before his eyes. Abruptly he knew no more.

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When consciousness returned in intermittent flashes of agony that finally crystallized into one long-drawn throb of torture, Hardy found that he lay prone on a metal floor and in utter darkness. Each effort to swallow seemed to drive multiple-edged knives into the membranes of his throat; each effort at serious thinking set up racking vibrations in his tormented brain cells. An attempt to sit up brought a sense of swaying dizziness and nausea that caused him to slump back to the floor.

He lay for a long time suffering such exquisite mental and bodily pain as he had never known a human could endure. Uppermost in his tortured mind was the thought of Mera, helpless in the hands of the upper-level guards. Mera calling out to him for the help he was unable to give her. Hardy knew what this meant; he knew she had been chosen by the Prime Controls for one of the purple clad libertines of the top areas. As his physical pains abated, his mental

upset increased. There must be a way to get control of the situation; where was the help of Fowler Scott in this crisis? Or had the Controls gotten to him as well? Was the entire plan to fail?

Eventually Hardy was able to sit up in the darkness; after that he rose groggily to his feet and managed to totter to the near wall of his prison. He felt gingerly over the vertical metal surfaces, edging from corner to corner until he had determined that he was in a doorless and seamless room not more than ten feet on a side. At least no doors nor seams were encountered by his searching fingertips. The darkness was so intense that it was a tangible thing, seeming to bear down on him like a thick, soupy fluid. The air was stifling, malodorous. Hardy knew he was in one of the dungeons of the Prime Controls.

The silence was complete, even the gentle thrum of the mid-level shops being absent. That is how he knew he was in the upper regions; the industrial centers and the power radiating center were too far removed for a sound or a sense of vibration to reach him.

And then the utter soundlessness was broken by a faint noise that was like the crumpling of tissue paper being thrust through an opening. A whispered voice suddenly was in Hardy's ears.

"Where are yuh, boss?" it came startlingly from out of the gloom. It was like no voice Hardy had ever heard, harsh, crackling and uncouth, yet more than welcome.

"Here," he whispered back. "Who are you?"

A hand touched his own then, a cold and clammy and bony hand. But it was something to which to cling. His confidence, unaccountably, came surging back.

"Pinky," said the voice. "Scott sent me. We're goin' outta here."

The hand was drawing him toward one of the walls. "But how?" he objected.

"Damfino, but yuh'll see. C'mon."

There was a slight sensation of resistance as if a draft of air had opposed their progress. And then they were in the lighted corridor outside. They had passed through the metal wall. Amazed, Hardy turned to look at his queer companion. There was no one with him! And still that clawed hand was in his own. He looked down and choked back the startled cry that rose to his lips. His own hand was not there; neither was his arm nor any part of his body he would ordinarily have seen. He pulled away from the uncanny grip and was immediately visible.

"Here, boss--quick," came the mysterious voice of his invisible companion. "Grab me flipper--quick. Somebody comin'."

Again that cold hand was in his own; once more he was an invisible entity. Something in that weird contact... something. But Hardy did not now stop to reason out the why and wherefore of the astounding thing he was experiencing. Two robot guards were coming down the passage. He and his companion passed on through them and were on their way. At least there was some satisfaction in knowing that they had robots as his guards, not humans. The humans had some respect for his physical prowess; they knew he was safe in the hands of the metal men. Or they thought they knew.

* * *

Still invisible, he followed the guiding hand of his mysterious liberator. They dropped a dozen levels in a lift and got off in an

unused corridor. They ran through winding passages in utter darkness, even the illumination having been discontinued here. His companion seemed to know the way, seemed to be able to see in the dark. At length they were against a metal wall that was there and yet somehow only partly solid to the touch.

"Shove," said the invisible man who had called himself Pinky.

Hardy shoved and was through the wall, blinking in brilliant sunglo. Before him stood Fowler Scott.

"Good work, Pinky," he approved. A machine behind him flashed blue light and Pinky materialized as a wizened, nondescript little man with the wondering eyes of a five-year-old child.

"Tanks, boss," he said in a frightened voice, and scurried off.

Looking down, Hardy saw that his own substantiality had been restored. "How do you do it?" he could not help blurting out.

Scott smiled. "It is merely a matter of altered rates of vibration," he explained. "All material existence is vibratory, as are all forces. Each sub-atomic particle of your body has its definite rate of vibration as does that of any perceptible solid. The human senses, sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell, are capable only of distinguishing substances in a certain narrow range of vibratory characteristics. I merely alter the perceptible vibrational rates to higher or lower than are within the range of the human senses. You then become invisible, or absent to the touch, or soundless, or a combination of these, depending on the rate to which I shift the oscillatory attributes. It is very simple."

"Very," Hardy said drily. "Anyway, I appreciate what you've done. And now about Mera."

"Yes--Mera." Fowler Scott was suddenly very solemn. "Something

has gone wrong," he admitted. "Something has gone very wrong. Mera is but one of eight of my chosen ones--all females--who have been abducted. Central Control has in some way learned too much. How, I can not understand. I thought the shielding of brain wave forms was impenetrable."

A swift feeling of panic came to Hardy. "You--you mean that our--your plan must fail?"

"No-o, not necessarily. But there will be difficulties I had not anticipated. I am glad this happened in time to warn us of danger."

"Glad? What about Mera?" demanded Hardy. Then, as a shamefaced afterthought: "And the other women?"

"Something must be done, shall be done--immediately. It is good, Hardy, that I brought you here. I have long probed your intellect and know that you can be a worthy assistant here. And I fear I shall need one who can absorb all of the details I shall necessarily have to impart."

There was something ominous in Scott's statement, an indication of a fear that had newly come to the scientist. A doubt, not a serious one as yet, perhaps, but forming. "I'll do anything possible to help," Hardy told him.

"Good." Scott became animated once more. "First off, of course, I must acquaint you with the apparatus in this secret laboratory of mine. In this apparatus lies the crux of the entire situation, the hope of mankind. You must understand it all soon--now."

"How about Mera?" persisted the younger man.

Scott eyed him keenly. "So you care about her. It is well. At least in

your case I did not err in my choice. Well, we shall see what can be done about Mera. Again I say, all depends upon my apparatus."

The scientist turned to a door that led into his inner sanctum and Hardy saw beyond him a great room that was crammed with intricate machines and festooned with cables and gleaming threadlike filaments. His heart sank; he could never master the workings of these formidable assemblies.

part 4

Chapter Four: The Master Control

"You'll master them," Scott averred in a quiet voice, having read Hardy's mind. "But not without mechanical aid. It is strange, that with the force of mind the most powerful of all the forces in the universe man has not learned as yet how to use his power to the utmost without the assistance of matter. All of which is to become clear to you when you have acquired a little more knowledge."

The scientist took from a cabinet two caplike contrivances, one of which he handed to Hardy. "Here," he said, "put this on. Through the medium of these we can reach complete rapport. It is necessary now as never before in human history."

Hardy fitted the contrivance of flexible metal banding and spring fingers and mysterious coils, condensers and whatnot over his head and buckled its strap beneath his chin. Immediately a sense of unlimited capacity for absorbing knowledge took over in his mind. He looked at Scott, who was smiling, and Scott's thoughts became his thoughts; the scientist's vast storehouse of information was at his command.

He was led first to a long desklike affair that was somewhat similar to one of those before which sat the lesser Controls but infinitely more complicated in its multiplicity of indicating lights, tiny relays, vision screens and operating buttons. Many of the tiny lights were flickering through swiftly changing shades of what seemed to be the uniform basic color, blue. Others flamed red and suddenly went out. Relays clicked incessantly as waves of new color swept the endless banks of indicators above them. Hardy knew suddenly that the life of the city of Manhattan was before him. This board he was facing

pictured the activities of the thousands of Controls of the nearly two million inhabitants.

Scott indicated a separate small panel of the assembly on which were indicating lights and relays in pairs, each pair consisting of one white and one red bulb. There were forty-three pairs. This panel represented the individuals the scientist had chosen for the great work he had outlined to them in the meeting of the previous night. Some of the lights were out, but only one complete pair. That was Hardy and Mera. There were seven other lights out, all of them white. These were the other women who had been abducted. Scott did not have to tell him by word of mouth; the knowledge simply flowed in as he observed these things.

There were relays corresponding to the lights, rows of buttons underneath. The meaning and use of each of these became apparent after but a moment of consideration. Such had been the material adjuncts to Scott's mind force. Their mysteries now were unfolding in Hardy's own mind, a vast store of knowledge.

Time stood still as knowledge increased. The tiny lights, the myriads of clicking relays, the activating buttons drifted out of Hardy's vision. He was probing the sum total of man's knowledge through endless ages; he floated on a tide of brain waves that swept him ever nearer to a shore where was to be found solid ground and understanding of all things. Back and forth he was swept, now to understanding of the ancient science of Mu, now to the lost science of only three centuries back.

He knew now that man's intellectual force is comparable to all other forces in that it, too, is vibratory. He learned to identify and classify the differing vibratory characteristics. He understood gravity, the "cold magnetic force" of the Motherland of a thousand centuries gone; he understood how the touch of Pinky's hand had

communicated to himself the vibratory essential of invisibility, how the atoms of his own body had been enabled to pass through and between the atoms comprising solid metal walls without collisions of the particles.

* * *

It became clear to him that life as it now existed on earth was futile and entirely aimless, that its ramifications were utterly dependent on the whims of beings who had no soul and no conscience. His mind was for a long time unequal to the grasping of the real reason for this, as ages of hereditary belief had to be overcome. He groped in the knowledge that in no city of earth were there contented human beings, groped for the reason. There was no logical pattern to any of it, no logical goal toward which human beings might be supposed to aspire. In the upper levels a few effeminate men and empty-headed, vainglorious women idled away their lives in the lax power of the Prime Controls. In the mid-level virile men and women, kept physically fit for their labors by the lesser Controls and speeded to twice their normal capacity during working hours, burned up their bodies in a few short years after attaining maturity. In the lower levels were the outcasts, left entirely to their own resources with the exception of the few robot police who kept them from invading the upper levels and dealt summarily with them if they encroached upon one another among themselves.

There was the rigidly controlled birth rate in the mid-levels and the taking of infants from their parents for rearing and education as the Controls would have it. There was the uncontrolled death rate exceeding the meagre birth rate alarmingly. No disease there was, to be sure, for disease had been conquered. But the unnaturally overworked bodies just wore out and stopped ticking.

No reason could be assigned for any of this except... it came to

Hardy in a flash of enlightenment that it was all the mad plan of Central Control. Manhattan was only a laboratory in which Central Control experimented with his human guinea pigs. He was merely playing with human life, letting those of the purple play around with their baser emotions and himself observing the effects and reactions. Working those of the gray to their early deaths merely to keep the city functioning and to observe their reactions. Allowing those of the lowest levels to shift for themselves, allowing them to starve and to live in complete ignorance and utter misery in order that he might tabulate the results of an experiment. Closing up dozens of levels of robots who might have done the work and left a life of comparative ease which might have been made highly profitable physically and intellectually for the humans.

Why? Why should a being the masses had been taught to look upon as a God conduct such an inhuman experiment and continue it down through the centuries?

Why? This knowledge came to Hardy finally: because Central Control was not a man but a machine. A machine that could think for itself, functioning entirely without human manipulation or emotion. A machine, hating mankind because of its lack of soul and of love and of any of the human emotions excepting hatred. A machine which was the product of a mad scientist of the twenty-third century whose secret had died with him and had only now been discovered by Fowler Scott. A devilish contrivance which, in the dark century, had been able to duplicate itself forty-two times and, with its counterparts, take over all remaining City-States of the globe.

* * *

But this machine that perched atop Manhattan had been unable to control its duplicates for they were exact duplicates and it thus had no features of superiority over them. The forty-three cities had

remained independent hellholes of misery, hatcheries of a civilization only kept alive at all for purposes of fiendish experimentation. A civilization dying out but not too rapidly to suit the machines. Perhaps there would at some distant date come a time when the Central Controls would permit the propagation of a new line for even more cruel and barbarous purposes. Unless someone would come along who could control the Centrals.

Hardy drifted out from his sea of thoughts and saw the scientist smiling and nodding in satisfaction. "Your last question," said the scientist, "is answered in the mechanism before you."

The intricate contrivances of the desklike assembly swam clearly now into Hardy's vision. He grasped its many ramifications as one amazing, thought-overwhelming whole. "The Master Control," he gasped. "Master of the Centrals; Master of the world."

"Precisely," Scott agreed. "But it, unlike the Centrals, has no mind of its own. For the work that is to be accomplished it must be manipulated by human hands and controlled by a human mind. Do you see the responsibility that devolves upon the mind that is to do this? And upon yours and other minds which are to take over the other Centrals?"

As the scientist said this, Hardy saw for the first time that his eyes were red-rimmed and haunted. The man was afraid, afraid of this great responsibility. And who could blame him?

"Anything would be preferable to things as they are," the younger man told him.

"I suppose so," sighed Scott. And Hardy saw suddenly that the man was very old and weighed down with care and anxiety. He pointed a shaky forefinger at a small synchronous motor that perched on a

bracket. "But one adjustment remains to be made," he said, "and I dare not make it till all of you are here. Now eight are missing. We must wait."

Hardy started guiltily. Mera! How much time had been lost! She must be rescued from her captors. He would never forgive himself if... "Wait!" he exclaimed. "We must get Mera--now!"

The haunted look intensified in the old man's eyes. "Yes, and the rest of them," he intoned. Then, raising his voice: "Pinky!"

Before the echoes of his voice had ceased reverberating from the metal walls of the huge laboratory, the twisted little man of the lowest levels was in the room with them.

* * *

Scott moved to the machine from which the blue light had flashed to restore visibility before. It flashed again and bathed the shriveled form of Pinky in its eerie radiance. Waveringly, he disappeared from view.

"I want you to go to level ninety-nine, crossway eighty-six, group four nought five and see if you can get to the eight young ladies in gray that I told you of. Bring them here one at a time."

"Yer the boss, mister," came out of nowhere. There was a faint crumpling as of tissue being crammed through an opening. Pinky was gone.

Scott crossed to the desklike switchboard and fiddled with a series of buttons. Hardy knew at once that these were on the panel that was segregated for effect on Central Control. Nothing happened. Scott moved to the small synchronous motor he had previously indicated. He manipulated a switch at its base and it whirled into life. Over it

was a circular dial on which a pointer began to rotate slowly; with his new-found knowledge, Hardy knew this to be a synchronoscope. Scott intended to synchronize this motor with the activating motor at Central Control. He was not going to wait!

The pointer of the synchronoscope rotated clockwise as the motor picked up speed, turning ever faster. Then, as the motor settled down to constant speed, Scott carefully adjusted the speed changer. The moving pointer slowed down, commenced rotating in the counterclockwise direction. Ever so cautiously, the scientist reversed the speed changer. The pointer hesitated, returned slowly to the vertical, swayed past and then returned. Scott threw in the synchronizing switch, whereupon there was a confused clicking of the tiny relays on the Central Control panel and a lighting of its multitudinous indicators.

"We're in touch now, Hardy," he exclaimed exultantly. "All is ready. And with you here, I need not wait. The other cities can follow when I have returned the eight and brought the rest. We can go ahead now--in Manhattan."

"But Mera--how about her?" objected the younger man.

"Don't you see? It's quicker this way. Pinky may take some time bringing them all in. This way we take control of--everything. We can take over the Prime Controls and order them all released--instantly."

The fires of relentless purpose were in the old man's eyes. He depressed a series of buttons--the series. And there came a flash from the board that struck him down! A voice from nowhere that laughed in a raucous mechanical tone. Central Control had not been caught napping. Swiftly Hardy bent over Scott's crumpled form. The man was unconscious but breathing. Evidently his wall insulation here, while not entirely effective, had been sufficiently so to lessen greatly

the force of the bolt hurled by Central Control. Intuitively, Hardy knew what to do; in an instant he was at the switch of the synchronous motor and had opened it. Relays clicked off, the lights on the panel snuffed out, the whine of the motor ran down the scale as its speed decreased.

"Here's one of 'em," came the voice of Pinky from out of the air.

Hardy saw that the scientist was stretched out in a comfortable position, then ran to the machine of the blue light and turned it on.

Pinky and one thoroughly frightened, white-faced girl in gray stood hand in hand before him. The girl was not Mera.

* * *

"What's wrong with the boss?" asked Pinky, staring at the prone figure of the scientist.

"Shock," tersely answered Hardy. "Did you see the others?"

"What others?"--blankly.

"The other seven girls."

"Uh--yeh. They're all there--where he said. Only, two of 'em's already gettin' spliced."

"Spliced? You mean married?" Hardy's voice rose.

"Yeh, that's it."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Naw." Pinky moved toward where Scott lay.

The girl, overcoming her fear, spoke up.

"They were Doris and Mera," she said quickly.

"Pinky!" Hardy had the little man by the arm. "We're going back to stop that--quick, you hear?" He dragged Pinky to the machine of the blue light. "Turn this off when we vanish, he told the girl, "and look after Scott while we're gone."

"All--all--right." The girl, still pale and shaken, nodded.

But his instructions regarding the machine had been unnecessary; he found he could shut it off himself after the blue light had flashed them into the vibrating invisibility.

part 5

Chapter Five: The End of Control

In the rotunda of the cubicle group to which the girls from below had been taken was a Mating Control where the empty ceremony of marriage and the impressing of the brain waves that bound two humans, male and female, until such time as the Controls desired to dissolve the union was performed. Before the orb of this Control two couples were standing with bowed heads when Pinky and Hardy entered. The orb was sputtering purple. The girls, Hardy noted in a glance, were backed up by two of the top-level guards each. And one of the girls was Mera.

Hardy leaped to the side of the dull-eyed human at the keyboard of the Control. His powerful invisible fingers wrenched the man's hands from the keys. Dazed, the fellow staggered from his seat just in time to receive Hardy's well-planted uppercut on the point of his jaw. He slumped down with a shuddering moan. The ceremony was over before it had well begun.

And then Hardy saw a terrifying thing. A painful tingling was creeping over his body. He saw his hands materializing, faintly blue in phantom outline. But materializing. Central Control somehow had learned much regarding Scott's activities and was taking measures to circumvent them! Leaping over the Control, Hardy reached for Mera.

Pandemonium broke loose in the place. Hardy struck down one of Mera's guards with no compunction. The fellow's eyes were bulging from his head when the phantom fist swung toward him. Other guards were rushing in. Little Pinky was battling desperately to get the other girl away. And the guards, taken aback by the visions of

ghostly beings, were not quick enough to take advantage of the superiority of numbers which was theirs.

"Hardy!" Mera, wide-eyed with wonder, had recognized him. "So you came at last. But how--"

Momentarily, he and Pinky were becoming more fully creatures of flesh and blood. The guards recovered from their temporary panic. But the two men battled like fiends incarnate; they toppled them like tenpins. Little Pinky knew how to handle himself in a rough and tumble. Even the girls helped. They reached the door to the corridor, flinging off the last of the guards. The general alarm shrilled as they wheeled into a side passage. They were in the lift then; its door slid closed and it sank rapidly. For the time being they were safe.

Mera sagged in Hardy's arms. "Oh, I'm so glad," she whispered.

"Glad! It's a miracle." Hardy held her close and, as her face turned up to his, crushed the waiting lips with his own.

"Here y'are, Hardy," drily coughed Pinky.

The lift stopped; its door opened. The wizened little man from the lower regions was grinning broadly, as was the girl Doris. Pinky's grin was fading, though; he was regaining his invisibility. Central Control had lost track of them. Hardy's flagging hope revived. He was himself fading from sight.

"Oh, Hardy, I-I don't like it," Mera whimpered as they sped along the corridor. "You--you disappearing this way."

Clinging tightly to her hand to reassure her, he laughed indulgently. "You're the same way," he told her.

She stifled a little cry of horror when she saw that what he had said

was so. The contact of his hand had set up the same vibrations in her own structure. They were four invisible creatures now running along in the gloom of the corridor, then plunging into the darkness of the unlighted side passage.

* * *

And it was a good thing tht the invisibility had returned. They found that Fowler Scott still lay insensible when they had oozed through the metal wall into his laboratory. The girl they had left behind with him would not kave known how to open the door.

"How is he?" asked Hardy anxiously as he snapped on the machine of the blue light to restore them to normal. He hugged Mera to him as she melted into view.

"Still breathing," said the girl. "But I can't bring him around."

"Oh, Hardy--what happened? gasped Mera.

Explaining swiftly, Hardy dashed to the Master Control. A quick survey of its many panels told him that the city was being turned upside down in the search for them. Lights were blinking through the spectrum, relays were clicking. At this rate it would not be long before their hideaway would be discovered. It was an emergency Scott should be able to attend to himself.

"See what you can do for him, Pinky," snapped Hardy. "And get that cap on his head." He pointed to one of the contrivances through which Scott had transmitted to his mind so much needed information. Perhaps, even with the conscious mind inoperative, the old scientist might be able to guide him.

Hardy donned the other cap while Mera gazed at him in astonishment. "Are you going to let him lie here and do nothing about

it?" she demanded.

"You girls and Pinky can look after him," the suddenly authoritative voice of Hardy snapped out. "I've important work to do here." Already he was in rapport with a portion of Scott's brain; intelligence was coming through to him by way of the caps.

Mera sniffed contemptuously. "You'd rather fool with that machine than help an injured man--our leader, at that."

"You don't understand... you..." Hardy gave it up; there was too much to be done in too big a hurry to try and explain. You couldn't explain to a woman anyway; you just had to wait until she could see for herself. He bent to the task ahead of him.

From Scott's frantic thought waves he knew that the old scientist was dying. There was nothing anyone could do for him. But there was much to be done to save the rest of them and to make possible the carrying out of the great plan.

* * *

Hardy played on the buttons of the Master Control as a musician plays on the keys of an electric organ. One by one he paralyzed the lesser Controls. This was the first step in the necessary sequence, Scott's thoughts were telling him. These were not emanations from the scientist's subconscious he was getting; they were from the conscious. The man's vocal cords, muscles and nervous system were paralyzed, that was all. And they'd never be restored. But he might yet live to see his dream come true, his thoughts exulted. Only a little while.

The vision screens were picturing panics indescribable. This was necessary as a first step, too. With their Controls inoperative, the

workers in gray were stampeding the lower levels, fighting, trampling one another to get to the transportation lanes. With the transportation Controls likewise inoperative, their panic increased. Mob fear possessed them. It could not be helped. The Prime Controls were next. Scenes in the upper levels were even more confusing than below. And here men and women lost all sense of decency, became savage animal things fighting indiscriminately. There were no scenes in the lower levels at all. This was why Scott had sent for Pinky. In lieu of Controls, Pinky was to be the one to carry the precepts of the new era to the lower regions. Scott would yet live to convey this part of the plan in its entirety, he telepathed. Ideas were flooding in so rapidly now to Hardy's mind that he could only store many of them away for future reference. The immediate present demanded his every attention.

He had started the synchronous motor anew now, was bringing it up to speed. It was synchronized with Central Control! Mechanically, Hardy went to the panel where Scott had been stricken down. Numbers were coming through to his mind now, complicated combinations of many buttons that must be pressed in exactly correct sequence. The thoughts from the scientist's weakening brain were growing fainter. He had made an error originally; Hardy could not, must not do so. The combinations were being set up less rapidly now on the panel under his fingers; only a few numbers remained. Hardy looked anxiously at the group around Scott. Mera and Doris were weeping. The other girl had gone for more water; Pinky was chafing the scientist's wrists. The final numbers came through. Something about the robots... not yet, though....

But wait, came Scott's dying thought flash. You must.... There was no more. The old man's career was ended. And now upon the broad shoulders of young Hardy rested the future of mankind. He had become the Master Control. He looked once at the cold, white face of Mera that raised up towards him. There was nothing but

antagonism in her set look. Scott had died under her fingers and Hardy had not helped.

Doggedly he turned to the panels. Dozens of numbers danced in his brain. He tore off the cap from his head and tossed it to the floor. There was a mathematical formula involved in setting up these last numbers. It had come through to him and he had stored it away. But now he could not seem to extract it from the pigeonhole into which it had so hastily been thrust. Sweat ran down into his eyes. The vision screen lighted above him, showing a vast assemblage of intricate machinery surmounted by a huge sphere in which there was pulsating light of many colors. The Central Control. The machine with a brain. It had a definite line on them at last. A formula sang through Hardy's consciousness; the formula. He depressed the remaining buttons.

There was a brilliant flash and a terrific thump as if the very space about him had been warped violently. He was flung away from the board, tingling from head to foot with a million stinging, penetrating agonies. But on the vision screen before him he saw smoke arise from that sphere of many colors; it puffed out of existence in a flash that dwarfed to insignificance the one that had struck here. Central Control was blasted out of the picture in that instant.

And then Hardy flung himself at the Master Control board with all the fury of a madman. He was Master Control now; his was the mind that would take things in hand and bring order out of chaos. He had not expected or wanted the job but now that it had been thrust upon him he would take care of it. And take care of it well.

* * *

Behind him three girls were sobbing softly. Pinky's crackling voice was trying clumsily to comfort them. But Hardy didn't hear what they

were saying; he was intent upon his indicating lights and vision screens; he was driving himself to the task before him. Pigeonhole after pigeonhole of his brain he was exploring and bringing to light their newly acquired secrets. And, as he worked with the problem confronting him, it did not occur to him that a great measure of common sense was necessary to the leavening of the mass of intelligence Scott had kneaded into his brain.

One by one the Prime Controls were flicked back into operation but were left with open orders to restore some degree of sanity to their charges without the use of damaging force or any form of punishment. The lesser Controls followed. Labor and Transportation were resumed under the same binding instructions that there be no reprisals nor punishments. The small number of robot police throughout the inhabited levels were shut off from their radiated power. You couldn't trust the mechanical men, even when their orders had been explicit.

He had not noticed that Mera had risen to her feet and was at his elbow. "So," she remarked scathingly in his ear, "you have been charged with the lust for power. You have destroyed Central Control and now are doing as you please about things. You, who had such high ideals."

Hardy deigned no reply. In fact he was too busy to reply. But his heart was heavy within him. What mattered the rest of this if he had lost Mera? He continued doggedly with the work of restoring order. It was so urgently necessary. And he started up the panel of Scott's chosen following; one by one they were being called by the automatic telepathing mechanisms. They would soon start to gather in this place.

Behind him, Mera was watching the vision screens, watching his flying fingers. She could not help but see that he was bringing order

out of chaos, that things in the city were returning gradually to normal. She was blinding herself to these things in the belief that he was setting himself up as a new Central Control. She would have to readjust her mind to a new order of things before she would fully understand. Of course, she had not been lucky enough to have the advantage Hardy had had of the individual teaching of the real Master.

"Just like one of the ancient dictators," she was saying cuttingly.

"Garn!" Pinky's voice spoke up. "Yuh must be dumb, lady. I seen it all; I heard it all. I wuz here, not you. Scott done it, not him. And this guy's goin' on just like Scott figgured. He's all right wit me, lady. Oughta be all right with you, too."

* * *

The pictures in some of the screens were blurring a little later as, one by one, Hardy got the various groups in order and the automatic controls were set. Soon Master Control would take care of itself for the time being. Soon he might get some rest. In couples, Scott's chosen following had been coming in; the scientist's body had already been removed to his former living quarters on Hardy's instructions. All was going as it should. All excepting the situation between Mera and himself.

"Hardy." A meek voice was raised at his side. Mera was looking up at him with tears in her round blue eyes. "Hardy, I'm a little fool. Pinky told me. And I've watched; I see it all now and know what you're doing. I—I'm sorry. And I want to help, Hardy. Will you forgive me and—take me back?"

"I shouldn't," he growled, eying her sternly. Then, as his eyes wandered about the laboratory and saw that they were alone, he slid

down from his seat and swept her yielding form into his arms. "But I will."

You couldn't for long remain angry with Mera.

THE END

(borrowed from Johnny Pez blog <http://johnnypez9.blogspot.com/>)