

Simak, Clifford D - Final Gentleman

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Final Gentleman

Clifford D. Simak

After thirty years and several million words there finally came a day when he couldn't write a line.

There was nothing more to say. He had said it all.

The book, the last of many of them, had been finished weeks ago and would be published soon and there was an emptiness inside of him, a sense of having been completely drained away.

He sat now at the study window, waiting for the man from the news magazine to come, looking out across the wilderness of lawn, with its evergreens and birches and the gayness of the tulips. And he wondered why he cared that he would write no more, for certainly he had said a great deal more than most men in his trade and most of it more to the point than was usual, and cloaked though it was in fictional garb, he'd said it with sincerity and, he hoped, convincingly.

His place in literature was secure and solid. And, perhaps, he thought, this was the way it should be - to stop now at the floodtide of his art rather than to go into his declining years with the sharp tooth of senility nibbling away the bright valor of his work.

And yet there remained the urge to write, an inborn feeling that to fail to write was treachery, although to whom it might be traitorous he had no idea. And there was more to it than that: An injured pride, perhaps, and a sense of panic such as the newly blind must feel.

Although that was foolishness, he told himself. In his thirty years of writing, he had done a lifetime's work. And he'd made a good life of it. Not frivolous or exciting, but surely satisfying.

He glanced around the study and thought how a room must bear the imprint of the man who lives within it - the rows of calf-bound books, the decorous neatness of the massive oaken desk, the mellow carpet on the floor, the old chairs full of comfort, the sense of everything firmly and properly in place.

A knock came. 'Come in.' said Harrington.

The door opened and old Adams stood there, bent shoulders, snow white hair - the perfect picture of the old retainer.

'It's the gentleman from Situation, sir.'

'Fine,' said Harrington. 'will you show him in?'

It wasn't fine - he didn't want to see this man from the magazine. But the arrangements had been made many weeks before and there was nothing now but to go through with it.

The man from the magazine looked more like a businessman than a writer, and Harrington caught himself wondering how such a man could write the curt, penetrating journalistic prose which had made Situation famous.

'John Leonard, sir,' said the man, shaking hands with Harrington.

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'I'm glad to have you here,' said Harrington, falling into his pat pattern of hospitality. 'Won't you take this chair? I feel I know you people down there. I've read your magazine for years. I always read the Harvey column immediately it arrives.'

Leonard laughed a little. 'Harvey,' he said, 'seems to be our best known columnist and greatest attraction. All the visitors want to have a look at him.'

He sat down in the chair Harrington had pointed out.

'Mr. White,' he said, 'sends you his best wishes.'

'That is considerate of him,' said Harrington. 'You must thank him for me. It's been years since I have seen him.'

And thinking back upon it, he recalled that he'd met Preston White only once, all of twenty years ago. The man, he remembered, had made a great impression upon him at the time - a forceful, driving, opinionated man, an exact reflection of the magazine he published.

'A few weeks ago,' said Leonard. 'I talked with another friend of yours. Senator Johnson Enright.'

Harrington nodded. 'I've known the senator for years and have admired him greatly. I suppose you could call it a dissimilar association. The senator and I are not too much alike.'

'He has a deep respect and affection for you.'

'And I for him.' said Harrington. 'But this secretary of state business. I am concerned...'

'Yes?'

'Oh, he's the man for it, all right.' said Harrington. 'or I would suppose he is. He is intellectually honest and he has a strange, hard streak of stubbornness and a rugged constitution, which is what we need. But there are considerations...'

Leonard showed surprise. 'Surely you do not...'

Harrington waved a weary hand. 'No, Mr. Leonard, I am looking at it solely from the viewpoint of a man who has given most of his life to the public service. I know that Johnson must look upon this possibility with something close to dread. There have been times in the recent past when he's been ready to retire, when only his sense of duty has kept him at his post.'

'A man,' said Leonard positively, 'does not turn down a chance to head the state department. Besides, Harvey said last week he would accept the post.'

'Yes, I know,' said Harrington. 'I read it in his column.'

Leonard got down to business. 'I won't impose too much upon your time,' he said. 'I've already done the basic research on you.'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington. 'Take all the time you want. I haven't a single thing to do until this evening, when I have dinner with my mother.'

Leonard's eyebrows raised a bit. 'Your mother is still living?'

'Very spry.' said Harrington, 'for all she's eighty-three. A sort of Whistler's mother. Serene and beautiful.'

'You're lucky. My mother died when I was still quite young.'

'I'm sorry to hear of it,' said Harrington. 'My mother is a gentlewoman to
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her fingertips. You don't find many like her now. I am positive I owe a great deal of what I am to her. Perhaps the thing I'm proudest of is what your book editor, Cedric Madison, wrote about me quite some years ago. I sent a note to thank him at the time and I fully meant to look him up someday, although I never did. I'd like to meet the man.'

'What was it that he said?'

'He said, if I recall correctly, that I was the last surviving gentleman.'

'That's a good line.' Leonard said. 'I'll have to look it up. I think you might like Cedric. He may seem slightly strange at times, but he's a devoted man, like you. He lives in his office, almost day and night.'

Leonard reached into his briefcase and brought out a sheaf of notes, rustling through them until he found the page he wanted.

'We'll do a full-length profile on you,' he told Harrington. 'A cover and an inside spread with pictures. I know a great deal about you, but there still are some questions, a few inconsistencies.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'You know how we operate,' said Leonard. 'We do exhaustive checking to be sure we have the background facts, then we go out and get the human facts. We talk with our subject's boyhood chums, his teachers, all the people who might have something to contribute to a better understanding of the man himself. We visit the places he has lived, pick up the human story, the little anecdotes. It's a demanding job, but we pride ourselves on the way we do it.'

'And rightly so, young man.'

'I went to Wyalusing in Wisconsin,' said the man from the magazine. 'That's where the data said that you were born.'

'A charming place as I remember it,' said Harrington. 'A little town, sandwiched between the river and the hills.'

'Mr. Harrington.'

'Yes?'

'You weren't born there.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'There's no birth record at the county seat. No one remembers you.'

'Some mistake,' said Harrington. 'Or perhaps you're joking.'

'You went to Harvard, Mr. Harrington. Class of 27.'

'That is right. I did.'

'You never married, sir.'

'There was a girl. She died.'

'Her name,' said Leonard, 'was Cornelia Storm.'

'That was her name. The fact's not widely known.'

'We are thorough, Mr. Harrington, in our background work.'

'I don't mind,' said Harrington. 'It's not a thing to hide. It's just not a fact to flaunt.'

'Mr. Harrington.'

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'Yes?'

'It's not wyalusing only. It's all the rest of it. There is no record that you went to Harvard. There never was a girl named Cornelia Storm.'

Harrington came straight out of his chair.

'That is ridiculous!' he shouted. 'What can you mean by it?'

'I'm sorry,' Leonard said. 'Perhaps I could have found a better way of telling you than blurting it all out. Is there anything -'

'Yes, there is,' said Harrington. 'I think you'd better leave.'

'Is there nothing I can do? Anything at all?'

'You've done quite enough,' said Harrington. 'Quite enough, indeed.'

He sat down in the chair again, gripping its arms with his shaking hands, listening to the man go out.

When he heard the front door close, he called to Adams to come in.

'Is there something I can do for you?' asked Adams.

'Yes. You can tell me who I am.'

'Why, sir,' said Adams, plainly puzzled, 'you're Mr. Hollis Harrington.'

'Thank you, Adams,' said Harrington. 'That's who I thought I was!'

Dusk had fallen when he wheeled the car along the familiar street and drew up to the curb in front of the old, white-pillared house set well back from the front of wide, tree-shaded grounds.

He cut the engine and got out, standing for a moment to let the sense of the street soak into him - the correct and orderly, the aristocratic street, a refuge in this age of materialism. Even the cars that moved along it, he told himself, seemed to be aware of the quality of the street, for they went more slowly and more silently than they did on other streets and there was about them a sense of decorum one did not often find in a mechanical contraption.

He turned from the street and went up the walk, smelling in the dusk the awakening life of gardens in the springtime, and he wished that it were light for Henry, his mother's gardener, was quite famous for his tulips.

As he walked along the path, with the garden scent, he felt the strange sense of urgency and of panic drop away from him, for the street and house were in themselves assurances that everything was exactly as it should be.

He mounted the brick steps and went across the porch and reached out his hand for the knocker on the door.

There was a light in the sitting room and he knew his mother would be there, waiting for him to arrive, but that it would be Tilda, hurrying from the kitchen, who would answer to his knock, for his mother did not move about as briskly as she had.

He knocked and waited and as he waited he remembered the happy days he'd spent in this house before he'd gone to Harvard, when his father still was living. Some of the old families still lived here, but he'd not seen them for years, for on his visits lately he'd scarcely stirred outdoors, but sat for hours talking with his mother.

The door opened, and it was not Tilda in her rustling skirts and her white
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starched collar, but an utter stranger.

'Good evening,' he said. 'You must be a neighbor.'

'I live here.' said the woman.

'I can't be mistaken,' said Harrington. 'This is the residence of Mrs. Jennings Harrington.'

'I'm sorry,' said the woman. 'I do not know the name. What was the address you were looking for?'

'2034 Summit Drive.'

'That's the number,' said the woman, 'but Harrington - I know of no Harringtons. We've lived here fifteen years and there's never been a Harrington in the neighborhood.'

'Madam,' Harrington said, sharply, 'this is most serious -'

The woman closed the door.

He stood on the porch for long moments after she had closed the door, once reaching out his hand to clang the knocker again, then withdrawing it. Finally he went back to the street.

He stood beside the car, looking at the house, trying to catch in it some unfamiliarity - but it was familiar. It was the house to which he'd come for years to see his mother; it was the house in which he'd spent his youth.

He opened the car door and slid beneath the wheel. He had trouble getting the key out of his pocket and his hand was shaking so that it took a long time for him to insert it in the ignition lock.

He twisted the key and the engine started. He did not, however, drive off immediately, but sat gripping the wheel. He kept staring at the house and his mind hurled back the fact again and yet again that strangers had lived behind its walls for more than fifteen years.

Where, then, were his mother and her faithful Tilda? Where, then, was Henry, who was a hand at tulips? Where the many evenings he had spent in that very house? Where the conversations in the sitting room, with the birch and maple burning in the fireplace and the cat asleep upon the hearth?

There was a pattern, he was reminded - a deadly pattern - in all that had ever happened to him; in the way that he had lived, in the books that he had written, in the attachments he had had and, perhaps, more important, the ones he had not had. There was a haunting quality that had lurked behind the scenes, just out of sight, for years, and there had been many times he'd been aware of it and wondered at it and tried to lay his fingers on it - but never a time when he'd ever been quite so acutely aware of it as this very moment.

It was, he knew, this haunted factor in his life which kept him steady now, which kept him from storming up the walk again to hammer at the door and demand to see his mother.

He saw that he had stopped shaking, and he closed the window and put the car in gear.

He turned left at the next corner and began to climb, street after street.

He reached the cemetery in ten minutes' time and parked the car. He found the topcoat in the rear seat and put it on. For a moment, he stood beside the car and looked down across the town, to where the river flowed between the hills.

This, he told himself, at least is real, the river and the town. This no one could take away from him, or the books upon the shelf.

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He let himself into the cemetery by the postern gate and followed the path unerringly in the uncertain light of a sickle moon.

The stone was there and the shape of it unchanged; it was a shape, he told himself, that was burned into his heart. He knelt before it and put out his hands and laid them on it and felt the moss and lichens that had grown there and they were familiar, too!

'Cornelia,' he said. 'You are still here, Cornelia.'

He fumbled in his pocket for a pack of matches and lit three of them before the fourth blazed up in a steady flame. He cupped the blaze between his hands and held it close against the stone.

A name was graven there.

It was not Cornelia Storm.

Senator Johnson Enright reached out and lifted the decanter.

'No thanks,' said Harrington. 'This one is all I wish. I just dropped by to say hello. I'll be going in a minute.'

He looked around the room in which they sat and now he was sure of it - sure of the thing that he had come to find. The study was not the same as he had remembered it. Some of the bright was gone, some of the glory vanished. It was faded at the edges and it seemed slightly out of focus and the moose head above the mantle was somehow just a little shabby, instead of grand and notable.

'You come too seldom,' said the senator, 'even when you know that you are always welcome. Especially tonight. The family are all out and I'm a troubled man.'

'This business of the state department?'

Enright nodded. 'That is it exactly. I told the President, yes, I would take it if he could find no one else. I almost pleaded with him to find another man.'

'You could not tell him no?'

'I tried to,' said the senator. 'I did my best to tell him. I, who never in my life have been at a loss for words. And I couldn't do it. Because I was too proud. Because through the years I have built up in me a certain pride of service that I cannot turn my back upon.'

The senator sat sprawling in his chair and Harrington saw that there was no change in him, as there had been in the room within which they sat. He was the same as ever - the iron-gray unruly mop of hair, the woodchopper face, the snaggle teeth, the hunched shoulders of a grizzly.

'You realize, of course,' said Enright, 'that I have been one of your most faithful readers.'

'I know,' said Harrington. 'I am proud of it.'

'You have a fiendish ability,' said the senator, 'to string words together with fishhooks hidden in them. They fasten into you and they won't let loose and you go around remembering them for days.'

He lifted up his glass and drank.

'I've never told you this before,' he said. 'I don't know if I should, but I suppose I'd better. In one of your books you said that the hallmark of destiny might rest upon one man. If that man failed, you said, the world might well be lost.'

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'I think I did say that. I have a feeling...'

'You're sure,' asked the senator, reaching for the brandy, 'that you won't have more of this?'

'No, thanks,' said Harrington.

And suddenly he was thinking of another time and place where he'd once gone drinking and there had been a shadow in the corner that had talked with him - and it was the first time he'd ever thought of that. It was something, it seemed, that had never happened, that could not remotely have happened to Hollis Harrington. It was a happening that he would not - could not - accept, and yet there it lay cold and naked in his brain.

'I was going to tell you,' said the senator, 'about that line on destiny. A most peculiar circumstance, I think you will agree. You know, of course, that one time I had decided to retire.'

'I remember it,' said Harrington. 'I recall I told you that you should.'

'It was at that time,' said the senator, 'that I read that paragraph of yours. I had written out a statement announcing my retirement at the completion of my term and intended in the morning to give it to the press. Then I read that line and asked myself what if I were that very man you were writing of. Not, of course, that I actually thought I was.'

Harrington stirred uneasily. 'I don't know what to say. You place too great a responsibility upon me.'

'I did not retire,' said the senator. 'I tore up the statement.'

They sat quietly for a moment, staring at the fire flaming on the hearth.

'And now,' said Enright, 'there is this other thing.'

'I wish that I could help,' said Harrington, almost desperately. 'I wish that I could find the proper words to say. But I can't, because I'm at the end myself. I am written out. There's nothing left inside me.'

And that was not, he knew, what he had wished to say. _I came here to tell you that someone else has been living in my mother's house for more than fifteen years, that the name on Cornelia's headstone is not Cornelia's name. I came here to see if this room had changed and it has changed. It has lost some of its old baronial magic..._

But he could not say it. There was no way to say it. Even to so close a friend as the senator it was impossible.

'Hollis, I am sorry,' said the senator.

It was all insane, thought Harrington. He was Hollis Harrington. He had been born in Wisconsin. He was a graduate of Harvard and - what was it Cedric Madison had called him - the last surviving gentleman.

His life had been correct to the last detail, his house correct, his writing most artistically correct - the result of good breeding to the fingertips.

Perhaps just slightly too correct. Too correct for this world of 1962, which had sloughed off the final vestige of the old punctilio.

He was Hollis Harrington, last surviving gentleman, famous writer, romantic figure in the literary world - and written out, wrung dry of all emotion, empty of anything to say since he had finally said all that he was capable of saying.

He rose slowly from his chair.

'I must be going, Johnson. I've stayed longer than I should.'

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'There is something else,' said the senator. 'Something I've always meant to ask you. Nothing to do with this matter of myself. I've meant to ask you many times, but felt perhaps I shouldn't, that it might somehow...'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington. 'I'll answer if I can.'

'One of your early books,' said the senator _'A Bone to Gnaw'_, I think.'

'That,' said Harrington, 'was many years ago.'

'This central character,' said the senator. 'This Neanderthaler that you wrote about. You made him seem so human.'

Harrington nodded. 'That is right. That is what he was. He was a human being. Just because he lived a hundred thousand years ago -'

'Of course.' said the senator. 'You are entirely right. But you had him down so well. All your other characters have been sophisticates, people of the world. I have often wondered how you could write so convincingly of that kind of man - an almost mindless savage.'

'Not mindless,' said Harrington. 'Not really savage. A product of his times. I lived with him for a long time, Johnson, before I wrote about him. I tried to put myself into his situation, think as he did, guess his viewpoint. I knew his fears and triumphs. There were times, I sometimes think, that I was close to being him.'

Enright nodded solemnly. 'I can well believe that. You really must be going? You're sure about that drink?'

'I'm sorry. Johnson. I have a long way to drive.'

The senator heaved himself out of the chair and walked with him to the door.

'We'll talk again,' he said, 'and soon. About this writing business. I can't believe you're at the end of it.'

'Maybe not,' said Harrington. 'It may all come back.'

But he only said this to satisfy the senator. He knew there was no chance that it would come back.

They said good-night and Harrington went trudging down the walk. And that was wrong - in all his life, he'd never truded before.

His car was parked just opposite the gate and he stopped beside it, staring in astonishment, for it was not his car.

His had been an expensive, dignified model, and this one was not only one of the less expensive kinds, but noticeably decrepit.

And yet it was familiar in a vague and tantalizing way.

And here it was again, but with a difference this time, for in this instance he was on the verge of accepting unreality.

He opened the door and climbed into the seat. He reached into his pocket and found the key and fumbled for the ignition lock. He found it in the dark and the key clicked into it. He twisted, and the engine started.

Something came struggling up from the mist inside his brain. He could feel it struggle and he knew what it was. It was Hollis Harrington, final gentleman.

He sat there for a moment and in that moment he was neither final gentleman nor the man who sat in the ancient car, but a younger man and a far-off man who was drunk and miserable.

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He sat in a booth in the farthest, darkest corner of some unknown establishment that was filled with noise and smell and in a corner of the booth that was even darker than the corner where he sat was another one, who talked.

He tried to see the stranger's face, but it either was too dark or there was no face to see. And all the time the faceless stranger talked.

There were papers on the table, a fragmented manuscript, and he knew it was no good and he tried to tell the stranger how it was no good and how he wished it might be good, but his tongue was thick and his throat was choked.

He couldn't frame the words to say it, but he felt it inside himself - the terrible, screaming need of putting down on paper the conviction and belief that shouted for expression.

And he heard clearly only one thing that the stranger said.

'I am willing,' said the stranger, 'to make a deal with you.'

And that was all there was. There was no more to remember.

And there it stood - that ancient, fearsome thing - an isolated remembrance from some former life, an incident without a past or future and no connection with him.

The night suddenly was chilly and he shivered in the chill. He put the car in gear and pulled out from the curb and drove slowly down the street.

He drove for half an hour or more and he was still shivering from the chilly night. A cup of coffee, he thought, might warm him and he pulled the car up to the curb in front of an all-night quick-and-greasy. And realized with some astonishment that he could not be more than a mile or two from home.

There was no one in the place except a shabby blonde who lounged behind the corner, listening to a radio.

He climbed up on a stool.

'Coffee, please,' he said and while he waited for her to fill the cup he glanced about the place. It was clean and cozy with the cigarette machines and the rack of magazines lined against the wall.

The blonde set the cup down in front of him.

'Anything else?' she asked, but he didn't answer, for his eye had caught a line of printing across the front of one of the more lurid magazines.

'Is that all?' asked the blonde again.

'I guess so,' said Harrington. 'I guess that's all I want.'

He didn't look at her; he was still staring at the magazine.

Across the front of it ran the glaring lines:

THE ENCHANTED WORLD OF
HOLLIS HARRINGTON!

Cautiously he slid off the stool and stalked the magazine. He reached out quickly and snatched it from the rack before it could elude him. For he had the feeling, until he had it safely in his hand, that the magazine would be like all the rest of it, crazy and unreal. He took it back to the counter and laid it down and stared at the cover and the line stayed there. It did not change; it did not go away. He extended his thumb and rubbed the printed words and they

were real enough.

He thumbed swiftly through the magazine and found the article and staring out at him was a face he knew to be his own, although it was not the kind of face he had imagined he would have - it was a somewhat younger, darker face that tended to untidiness, and beneath that face was another face that was without doubt a face of great distinction. And the caption that ran between them asked a question: _Which one of these men is really Hollis Harrington?_

There was as well a picture of a house that he recognized in all its ramshackleness and below it another picture of the same house, but highly idealized, gleaming with white paint and surrounded by neatly tended grounds - a house with character.

He did not bother with the reading of the caption that ran between the houses. He knew what it would say.

And the text of the article itself:

Is Hollis Harrington really more than a man? Is he in actuality the man he thinks he is, a man he has created out of his own mind, a man who moves in an incredibly enchanted world of good living and good manners? Or is this attitude no more than a carefully cultivated pose, an exceptional piece of perfect showmanship? Or could it be that to write in the manner that he does, to turn out the sleekly tailored, thoughtful, often significant prose that he has been writing for more than thirty years, it is necessary that he create for himself another life than the one he really lives, that he has forced himself to accept this strange internal world of his and believe in it as a condition to his continued writing.

A hand came out and spread itself across the page so he could not read and he looked up quickly. It was the hand of the waitress and he saw there was a shining in her eyes that was very close to tears.

'Mr. Harrington.' she said. 'Please, Mr. Harrington. Please don't read it, sir.'

'But, miss...'

'I told Harry that he shouldn't let them put in that magazine. I told him he should hide it. But he said you never came in here except on Saturdays.'

'You mean,' asked Harrington, 'that I've been here before?'

'Almost every Saturday,' she told him, surprised. 'Every Saturday for years. You like our cherry pie. You always have a piece of our cherry pie.'

'Yes, of course,' he said.

But, actually, he had no inkling of this place, unless, good God, he thought, unless he had been pretending all the time that it was some other place, some goldplated eatery of very great distinction.

But it was impossible, he told himself, to pretend as big as that. For a little while, perhaps, but not for thirty years. No man alone could do it unless he had some help.

'I had forgotten,' he told the waitress. 'I'm somewhat upset tonight. I wonder if you have a piece of that cherry pie.'

'Of course,' the waitress said.

She took the pie off the shelf and cut a wedge and slid it on the plate. She put the plate down in front of him and laid a fork beside it.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Harrington,' she said. 'I'm sorry I didn't hide the

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magazine. You must pay no attention to it - or to anything. Not to any of the things that people say or what other people write. All of us around here are so proud of you.'

She leaned across the counter toward him.

'You mustn't mind,' she said. 'You are too big to mind.'

'I don't believe I do,' said Hollis Harrington.

And that was the solemn truth, for he was too numb to care. There was in him nothing but a vast wonderment that filled his being so there was room for nothing else.

'I am willing,' the stranger in the corner of the booth had told him many years ago. 'I am willing to make a deal with you.'

But of the deal he had no recollection, no hint of terms or of the purpose of it, although possibly he could guess.

He had written for all of thirty years and he had been well paid for it - not in cash and honor and acclaim alone - but in something else as well. In a great white house standing on a hill with a wilderness of grounds, with an old retainer out of a picture book, with a whistler's mother, with a romantic bittersweetness tied to a gravestone symbol.

But now the job was done and the pay had stopped and the make-believe had ended.

The pay had stopped and the delusions that were a part of it were gone. The glory and the tinsel had been stripped out of his mind. No longer could he see an old and battered car as a sleek, glossy machine. Now, once again, he could read aright the graving on a stone. And the dream of a whistler's mother had vanished from his brain - but had been once so firmly planted that on this very evening he actually had driven to a house and an address that was a duplicate of the one imprinted on his imagination.

He had seen everything, he realized, overlain by a grandeur and a lustre out of story books.

But was it possible, he wondered. Could it be made to work? Could a man in all sanity play a game of make-believe for thirty years on end? Or might he be insane?

He considered it calmly and it seemed unlikely, for no insanity could have written as he had written; that he had written what he thought he had was proved by the senator's remarks tonight.

So the rest had been make-believe; it could be nothing else. Make-believe with help from that faceless being, whoever he might be, who had made a deal with him that night so long ago.

Although, he thought, it might not take much help. The propensity to kid one's self was strong in the human race. Children were good at it; they became in all reality all the things they pretended that they were. And there were many adults who made themselves believe the things they thought they should believe or the things they merely wanted to believe for their peace of mind.

Surely, he told himself, it would be no great step from this kind of pretending to a sum total of pretending.

'Mr. Harrington,' asked the waitress, 'don't you like your pie?'

'Certainly,' said Harrington, picking up the fork and cutting off a bite.

So pretending was the pay, the ability to pretend without conscious effort a

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private world in which he moved alone. And perhaps it was even more than that - perhaps it was a prior condition to his writing as he did, the exact kind of world and life in which it had been calculated, by whatever means, he would do his best.

And the purpose of it?

He had no idea what the purpose was.

Unless, of course, the body of his work was a purpose in itself.

The music in the radio cut off and a solemn voice said:

'We interrupt our program to bring you a bulletin. The Associated Press has just reported that the White House has named Senator Johnson Enright as secretary of state. And now, we continue with our music....'

Harrington paused with a bite of pie poised on the fork, halfway to his mouth.

'The hallmark of destiny,' he quoted, 'may rest upon one man!'

'What was that you said, Mr. Harrington?'

'Nothing. Nothing, miss. Just something I remembered. It's really not important.'

Although, of course, it was.

How many other people in the world, he wondered, might have read a certain line out of one of his books? How many other lives might have been influenced in some manner from the reading of a phrase that he had written?

And had he had help in the writing of those lines? Did he have actual talent or had he merely written the thoughts that lay in other minds? Had he had help in writing as well as in pretending? Might that be the reason now he felt so written out?

But however that might be, it was all over now. He had done the job and he had been fired. And the firing of him had been as efficient and as thorough as one might well expect - all the mumbo-jumbo had been run in competent reverse, beginning with the man from the magazine this morning. Now here he sat, a humdrum human being perched upon a stool, eating cherry pie.

How many other humdrum humans might have sat, as he sat now, in how many ages past, released from their dream-life as he had been released, trying with no better luck than he was having to figure out what had hit them? How many others, even now, might still be living out a life of make-believe as he had lived for thirty years until this very day?

For it was ridiculous, he realized, to suppose he was the only one. There would be no point in simply running a one-man make-believe.

How many eccentric geniuses had been, perhaps, neither geniuses nor eccentric until they, too, had sat in some darkened corner with a faceless being and listened to his offer?

Suppose - just suppose - that the only purpose in his thirty years had been that Senator Johnson Enright should not retire from public life and thus remain available to head the state department now? Why, and to whom, could it be so important that one particular man got one certain post? And was it important enough to justify the use of one man's life to achieve another's end?

Somewhere, Harrington told himself, there had to be a clue. Somewhere back along the tangled skein of those thirty years there must be certain signposts which would point the way to the man or thing or organization, whatever it might be.

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He felt dull anger stirring in him, a formless, senseless, almost hopeless anger that had no direction and no focal point.

A man came in the door and took a stool one removed from Harrington.

'Hi, Gladys,' he bellowed.

Then he noticed Harrington and smote him on the back. 'Hi, there, pal,' he trumpeted. 'Your name's in the paper.'

'Quiet down, Joe,' said Gladys. 'What is it you want?'

'Gimme a hunk of apple pie and a cuppa coffee.'

The man, Harrington saw, was big and hairy. He wore a Teamsters badge.

'You said something about my name being in the paper.'

Joe slapped down a folded paper.

'Right there on the front page. The story there with your picture in it.'

He pointed a grease-stained finger.

'Hot off the press,' he yelled and burst into gales of laughter.

'Thanks,' said Harrington.

'Well, go ahead and read it,' Joe urged boisterously. 'Or ain't you interested.'

'Definitely,' said Harrington.

The headline said:

NOTED AUTHOR WILL RETIRE

'So you're quitting,' blared the driver. 'Can't say I blame you, pal. How many books you written?'

'Fourteen,' said Harrington.

'Gladys, can you imagine that! Fourteen books! I ain't even read that many books in my entire life...'

'Shut up, Joe,' said Gladys, banging down the pie and coffee.

The story said:

Hollis Harrington, author of See My Empty House, _which won him the Nobel prize, will retire from the writing field with the publication of his latest work_, Come Back, My Soul.

The announcement will be made in this week's issue of Situation Magazine, _under the byline of Cedric Madison, book editor.

Harrington feels, Madison writes, that he has finally, in his forthcoming book, rounded out the thesis which he commenced some thirty years and thirteen books ago..._

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Harrington's hand closed convulsively upon the paper, crumpling it.

'Wassa matter, pal?'

'Not a thing,' said Harrington.

'This Madison is a jerk,' said Joe. 'You can't believe a thing he says. He is full of...'

'He's right,' said Harrington. 'I'm afraid he's right.' But how could he have known? He asked himself. How could Cedric Madison, that queer, devoted man who practically lived in his tangled office, writing there his endless stream of competent literary criticism, have known a thing like this? Especially, Harrington told himself, since he himself had not been sure of it until this very morning.

'Don't you like your pie?' asked Joe. 'And your coffee's getting cold.'

'Leave him alone,' said Gladys, fiercely. 'I'll warm up his coffee.'

Harrington said to Joe: 'would you mind if I took this paper?'

'Sure not, pal. I'm through with it. Sports is all I read.'

'Thanks,' said Harrington. 'I have a man to see.'

The lobby of the Situation building was empty and sparkling - the bright, efficient sparkle that was the trademark of the magazine and the men who made it.

The 1-foot globe, encased in its circular glass shield, spun slowly and majestically, with the time-zone clocks ranged around its base and with the keyed-in world situation markers flashing on its surface.

Harrington stopped just inside the door and glanced around, bewildered and disturbed by the brightness and the glitter. Slowly he oriented himself. Over there the elevators and beside them the floor directory board. There the information counter, now unoccupied, and just beyond it the door that was marked:

HARVEY
Visiting Hours
9 to 5 on Week Days

Harrington crossed to the directory and stood there, craning his neck, searching for the name. And found it.

CEDRIC MADISON... 317

He turned from the board and pressed the button for the elevator.

On the third floor the elevator stopped and he got out of it and to his right was the newsroom and to his left a line of offices flanking along hall.

He turned to the left and 317 was the third one down. The door was open and he stepped inside. A man sat behind a desk stacked high with books, while other books were piled helter-skelter on the floor, and still others bulged the shelves upon the walls.

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'Mr. Madison?' asked Harrington and the man looked up from the book that he was reading.

And suddenly Harrington was back again in that smoky, shadowed booth where long ago he'd bargained with the faceless being - but no longer faceless. He knew by the aura of the man and the sense of him, the impelling force of personality, the disquieting, obscene feeling that was a kind of psychic spoor.

'Why, Harrington!' cried the faceless man, who now had taken on a face. 'How nice that you dropped in! It's incredible that the two of us...'

'Yes, isn't it,' said Harrington.

He scarcely knew he said it. It was, he realized, an automatic thing to say, a putting up of hands to guard against a blow, a pure and simple defense mechanism.

Madison was on his feet now and coming around the desk to greet him, and if he could have turned and run, Harrington would have fled. But he couldn't run; he was struck and frozen; he could make no move at all beyond the automatic ones of austere politeness that had been drilled into him through thirty years of simulated aristocratic living.

He could feel his face, all stiff and dry with the urbane deadpan that he had affected - and he was grateful for it, for he knew that it would never do to show in any way that he had recognized the man.

'It's incredible that the two of us have never met,' said Madison, 'I've read so much of what you've written and liked so much everything I've read.'

'It's good of you to say so,' said the urbane, unruffled part of Harrington, putting out his hand. 'The fault we have never met is entirely mine. I do not get around as much as I really should.'

He felt Madison's hand inside his own and closed his fingers on it in a sense of half-revulsion, for the hand was dry and cold and very like a claw. The man was vulture-like - the tight, dessicated skin drawn tight across the death-head face, the piercing, restless eyes, the utter lack of hair, the knife-like slash of mouth.

'You must sit down,' said Madison, 'and spend some time with me. There are so many things we have to talk about.'

There was just one empty chair; all the others overflowed with books. Harrington sat down in it stiffly, his mouth still dry with fear.

Madison scurried back behind the desk and hunched forward in his chair.

'You look just like your pictures,' he declared.

Harrington shrugged. 'I have a good photographer - my publisher insists.'

He could feel himself slowly coming back to life, recovering from the numbness, the two of him flowing back together into the single man.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'that you have the advantage of me there. I cannot recall I've ever seen your picture.'

Madison waved a waggish finger at him. 'I am anonymous,' he said. 'Surely you must know all editors are faceless. They must not intrude themselves upon the public consciousness.'

'That's a fallacy, no doubt,' Harrington declared, 'but since you seem to value it so much, I will not challenge you.'

And he felt a twinge of panic - the remark about editorial facelessness seemed too pat to be coincidental.

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'And now that you've finally come to see me,' Madison was saying, 'I fear it may be in regard to an item in the morning papers.'

'As a matter of fact,' Harrington said smoothly, 'that is why I'm here.'

'I hope you're not too angry.'

Harrington shook his head. 'Not at all. In fact, I came to thank you for your help in making up my mind. I had considered it, you see. It was something I told myself I should do, but...'

'But you were worried about an implied responsibility. To your public, perhaps; perhaps even to yourself.'

'Writers seldom quit,' said Harrington, 'At least not voluntarily. It didn't seem quite cricket.'

'But it was obvious,' protested Madison. 'It seemed so appropriate a thing for you to do, so proper and so called-for, that I could not resist. I confess I may have wished somewhat to influence you. You've tied up so beautifully what you set out to say so many years ago in this last book of yours that it would be a shame to spoil it by attempting to say more. It would be different, of course, if you had need of money from continued writing, but your royalties-'

'Mr. Madison, what would you have done if I had protested?'

'Why, then,' said Madison, 'I would have made the most abject apology in the public prints. I would have set it all aright in the best manner possible.'

He got up from the desk and scabbled at a pile of books stacked atop a chair.

'I have a review copy of your latest book right here,' he said. 'There are a few things in it I'd like to chat about with you...'

He's a clue, thought Harrington, watching him scabble through the books - but that was all he was. There was more, Harrington was sure, to this business, whatever it might be, than Cedric Madison.

He must get out of here, he knew, as quickly as he could, and yet it must be done in such a manner as not to arouse suspicion. And while he remained, he sternly warned himself, he must play his part as the accomplished man of letters, the final gentleman.

'Ah, here it is!' cried Madison in triumph.

He scurried to the desk, with the book clutched in his hand.

He leafed through it rapidly.

Now, here, in chapter six, you said...'

The moon was setting when Harrington drove through the massive gates and up the curving driveway to the white and stately house perched upon its hill.

He got out of the car and mounted the broad stone steps that ran up to the house. When he reached the top, he halted to gaze down the moon-shadowed slope of grass and tulips, whitened birch and darkened evergreen, and he thought it was the sort of thing a man should see more often - a breathless moment of haunting beauty snatched from the cycle that curved from birth to death.

He stood there, proudly, gazing down the slope, letting the moonlit beauty, the etching of the night soak into his soul.

This, he told himself, was one of those incalculable moments of experience

which one could not anticipate, or afterwards be able to evaluate or analyze.

He heard the front door open and slowly turned around.

Old Adams stood in the doorway, his figure outlined by the night lamp on the table in the hall. His snow-white hair was ruffled, standing like a halo round his head, and one frail hand was clutched against his chest, holding together the ragged dressing gown he wore.

'You are late, sir,' said Adams. 'We were growing a bit disturbed.'

'I am sorry,' said Harrington. 'I was considerably delayed.'

He mounted the stoop and Adams stood aside as he went through the door.

'You're sure that everything's all right, sir?'

'Oh, quite all right,' said Harrington. 'I called on Cedric Madison down at Situation. He proved a charming chap.'

'If it's all right with you, sir. I'll go back to bed. Knowing you are safely in, I can get some sleep.'

'It's quite all right,' said Harrington. 'Thanks for waiting up.'

He stood at the study door and watched Adams trudge slowly up the stairs, then went into the study, turning on the lights.

The place closed in around him with the old familiarity, with the smell of comfort and the sense of being home, and he stood gazing at the rows of calf-bound books, and the ordered desk, the old and home-like chairs, the worn, mellow carpet.

He shrugged out of his topcoat and tossed it on a chair and became aware of the folded paper bulging in his jacket pocket.

Puzzled, he pulled it out and held it in front of him and the headline hit him in the face:

The room changed, a swift and subtle changing. No longer the ordered sanctuary, but a simple workroom for a writing man. No longer the calf-bound volumes in all their elegance upon the shelves, but untidy rows of tattered, dog-eared books. And the carpet was neither worn nor mellow; it was utilitarian and almost brand new.

'My God!' gasped Harrington, almost prayerfully.

He could feel the perspiration breaking out along his forehead and his hands suddenly were shaking and his knees like water.

For he had changed as well as the room had changed; the room had changed because of the change in him.

He was no longer the final gentleman, but that other, more real person he had been this evening. He was himself again; had been jerked back to himself again, he knew, by the headlines in the paper.

He glanced around the room and knew that it finally was right, that all its starkness was real, that this had been the way the room had always been, even when he had made it into something more romantic.

He had found himself this very evening after thirty years and then - he sweat as he thought about it - and then he had lost himself again, easily and without knowing it, without a twitch of strangeness.

He had gone to see Cedric Madison, with this very paper clutched within his hands, had gone without a clear purpose - almost, he told himself, as if he were being harried there. And he had been harried for too long. He had been harried

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into seeing a room different than it was; he had been made to read a myth-haunted name upon a strange gravestone; he had been deluded into thinking that he had supper often with his mother who had long been dead; he had been forced to imagine that a common quick-and-greasy was a famous eatery - and, of course, much more than that.

It was humiliating to think upon, but there was more than mere humiliation - there was a method and a purpose and now it was important, most immediately important, to learn that method and that purpose.

He dropped the paper on the floor and went to the liquor cabinet and got a bottle and a glass. He sloshed liquor in the glass and gulped it.

You had to find a place to start, he told himself, and you worked along from there - and Cedric Madison was a starting point, although he was not the whole of it. No more, perhaps, than a single clue, but at least a starting point.

He had gone to see Cedric Madison and the two of them had sat and talked much longer than he planned, and somewhere in that talk he'd slid smoothly back into the final gentleman.

He tried to drive his mind and memory along the pathway of those hours, seeking for some break, hunting for the moment he had changed, but there was nothing. It ironed out flat and smooth.

But somewhere he had changed, or more likely had been changed, back into the masquerade that had been forced upon him long years in the past.

And what would be the motive of that masquerade? what would be the reason in changing a man's life, or, more probably, the lives of many men?

A sort of welfare endeavor, perhaps. A matter of rampant do-goodism, an expression of the itch to interfere in other people's lives.

Or was there here a conscious, well-planned effort to change the course of world events, so to alter the destiny of mankind as to bring about some specific end-result? That would mean that whoever, or whatever, was responsible possessed a sure method of predicting the future, and the ability to pick out the key factors in the present which must be changed in order effectively to change that future in the desired direction.

From where it stood upon the desk the phone snarled viciously.

He swung around in terror, frightened at the sound. The phone snarled a second time.

He strode to the desk and answered. It was the senator.

'Good,' said the senator. 'I did not get you up.'

'No. I was just getting ready to turn in.'

'You heard the news, of course.'

'On the radio,' said Harrington.

'The White House called...'

'And you had to take it.'

'Yes, of course, but then...'

There was a gulping, breathing sound at the other end as if the senator were on the verge of strangling.

'What's the matter, Johnson? what is going -'

'Then,' said the senator, 'I had a visitor.'

Harrington waited.

'Preston White,' said the senator. 'You know him, of course.'

'Yes. The publisher of Situation.'

'He was conspiratorial,' said the senator. 'And a shade dramatic. He talked in whispers and very confidentially. As if the two of us were in some sort of deal.'

'But what -'

'He offered me,' said the senator, almost strangling with rare, 'the exclusive use of Harvey -'

Harrington interrupted, without knowing why - almost as if he feared to let the senator go on.

'You know,' he said, 'I can remember many years ago - I was just a lad - when Harvey was installed down in the Situation office.'

And he was surprised at how well he could remember it - the great hurrah of fanfare. Although at that time, he recalled, no one had put too much credence in the matter, for Situation was then notorious for its circulation stunts. But it was different now. Almost everyone read the Harvey column and even in the most learned of circles it was quoted as authority.

'Harvey!' spat the senator. 'A geared-up calculator! A mechanical predictor!'

And that was it, Harrington thought wildly. That was the very thing for which he had been groping!

For Harvey was a predictor. He predicted every week and the magazine ran a column of the predictions he spewed out.

'White was most persuasive,' said the senator. 'He was very buddy-buddy. He placed Harvey at my complete disposal. He said that he would let me see all the predictions that he made immediately he made them and that he'd withhold from publication any that I wished.'

'It might be a help, at that,' said Harrington.

For Harvey was good. Of that there was no question. Week after week he called the shots exactly, right straight down the line.

'I'll have none of it!' yelled the senator. 'I'll have no part of Harvey. He is the worst thing that could have happened so far as public opinion is concerned. The human race is entirely capable, in its own good judgment, of accepting or rejecting the predictions of any human pundit. But our technological society has developed a conditioning factor that accepts the infallibility of machines. It would seem to me that Situation, in using an analytical computer, humanized by the name of Harvey, to predict the trend of world events, is deliberately preying upon public gullibility. And I'll have no part of it. I will not be tarred with -'

'I knew white was for you,' said Harrington. 'I knew he favored your appointment, but -'

'Preston white,' said the senator, 'is a dangerous man. Any powerful man is a dangerous man, and in our time the man who is in a position to mold public opinion is the most powerful of them all. I can't afford to be associated with him in any way at all. Here I stand, a man of some forty years of service, without, thank God, a single smudge upon me. What would happen to me if someone came along and pegged this man white - but good? How would I stand then?'

'They almost had him pegged.' said Harrington, 'that time years ago when the
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congressional committee investigated him. As I remember, much of the testimony at that time had to do with Harvey.'

'Hollis,' said the senator. 'I don't know why I trouble you. I don't know why I phoned you. Just to blow off steam, I guess.'

'I am glad you did,' said Harrington. 'What do you intend to do?'

'I don't know,' said the senator. 'I threw white out, of course, so my hands theoretically are clean, but it's all gone sour on me. I have a vile taste in my mouth.'

'Sleep on it,' said Harrington. 'You'll know better in the morning.'

'Thanks, Hollis, I think I will,' said the senator. 'Good night.'

Harrington put up the phone and stood stiff beside the desk.

For now it all was crystal clear. Now he knew without a doubt exactly who it was that had wanted Enright in the state department.

It was precisely the kind of thing, he thought, one could expect of white.

He could not imagine how it had been done - but if there had been a way to do it, white would have been the one to ferret out that way.

He'd engineered it so that Enright, by reading a line out of a book, had stayed in public life until the proper time had come for him to head the state department.

And how many other men, how many other situations, stood as they did tonight because of the vast schemings of one Preston White?

He saw the paper on the floor and picked it up and looked at the headline, then threw it down again.

They had tried to get rid of him, he thought, and it would have been all right if he'd just wandered off like an old horse turned out to pasture, abandoned and forgotten. Perhaps all the others had done exactly that. But in getting rid of him, in getting rid of anyone, they must have been aware of a certain danger. The only safe and foolproof way would have been to keep him on, to let him go on living as the final gentleman until his dying day.

Why had they not done that? Was it possible, for example, that there were limitations on the project, that the operation, whatever its purpose, had a load capacity that was now crammed to its very limit? So that, before they could take on someone else, they must get rid of him?

If that were true, it very well could be there was a spot here where they were vulnerable.

And yet another thing, a vague remembrance from that congressional hearing of some years ago - a sentence and a picture carried in the papers at the time. The picture of a very puzzled man, one of the top technicians who had assembled Harvey, sitting in the witness chair and saying:

'But, senator, I tell you no analytical computer can be anywhere near as good as they claim Harvey is.'

And it might mean something and it might not. Harrington told himself, but it was something to remember, it was a hope to which to cling.

Most astonishing, he thought placidly, how a mere machine could take the place of thinking man. He had commented on that before, with some asperity, in one of his books - he could not recall which one. As Cedric Madison had said this very evening...

He caught himself in time.

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In some dim corner of his brain an alarm was ringing, and he dived for the folded paper he had tossed onto the floor.

He found it, and the headline screamed at him and the books lost their calf-bound elegance and the carpeting regained its harsh newness, and he was himself once more.

He knelt, sobbing, on the floor, the paper clutched in a shaky hand.

No change, he thought, no warning!

And a crumpled paper the only shield he had.

But a powerful shield, he thought.

Try it again! he screamed at Harvey. _Go ahead and try!_

Harvey didn't try.

It had _been_ Harvey. And, he told himself, of course he didn't know.

Defenseless, he thought, except for a folded paper with a headline set in 18 point caps.

Defenseless, with a story that no one would believe even if he told it to them.

Defenseless, with thirty years of eccentricity to make his every act suspect.

He searched his mind for help and there was no help. The police would not believe him and he had few friends to help, for in thirty years he had made few friends.

There was the senator - but the senator had troubles of his own.

And there was something else - there was a certain weapon that could be used against him. Harvey only had to wait until he went to sleep. For if he went to sleep, there was no doubt he'd wake the final gentleman and more than likely then remain the final gentleman, even more firmly the final gentleman than he'd ever been before. For if they got him now, they'd never let him go.

He wondered, somewhat vaguely, why he should fight against it so. The last thirty years had not been so bad; the way they had been passed would not be a bad way, he admitted. being honest with himself, to live out the years that he had left in him.

But the thought revolted him as an insult to his very humanness. He had a right to be himself, perhaps even an obligation to remain himself, and he felt a deep-banked anger at the arrogance that would make him someone else.

The issue was straightly drawn, he knew. Two facts were crystal clear: whatever he did, he must do himself; he must expect no help. And he must do it now before he needed sleep.

He clambered to his feet, with the paper in his hand, squared his shoulders and turned toward the door. But at the door he halted, for a sudden, terrible truth had occurred to him.

Once he left the house and went out into the darkness, he would be without his shield. In the darkness the paper would be worthless since he would not be able to read the headline.

He glanced at his watch and it was just after three. There were still three hours of darkness and he couldn't wait three hours.

He needed time, he thought. He must somehow buy some time. within the next

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few hours he must in some way manage to smash or disable Harvey. And while that, he admitted to himself, might not be the whole answer, it would give him time.

He stood beside the door and the thought came to him that he might be wrong - that it might not be Harvey or Madison or White. He had put it all together in his mind and now he'd managed to convince himself. He might, he realized, have hypnotized himself almost as effectively as Harvey or someone else had hypnotized him thirty years ago.

Although probably it had not been hypnotism.

But whatever it might be, he realized, it was a bootless thing to try to thresh out now. There were more immediate problems that badly needed solving.

First of all he must devise some other sort of shield. Defenseless, he'd never reach the door of the Situation lobby.

Association, he thought - some sort of association - some way of reminding himself of who and what he was. Like a string around his finger, like a jingle in his brain.

The study door came open and old Adams stood there, clutching his ragged robe together.

'I heard someone talking, sir.'

'It was I.' said Harrington. 'On the telephone.'

'I thought, perhaps,' said Adams, 'someone had dropped in. Although it's an unearthly time of night for anyone to call.'

Harrington stood silent, looking at old Adams, and he felt some of his grimness leave him - for Adams was the same. Adams had not changed. He was the only thing of truth in the entire pattern.

'If you will pardon me,' said Adams, 'your shirt tail's hanging out.'

'Thanks,' said Harrington. 'I hadn't noticed. Thanks for telling me.'

'Perhaps you had better get on to bed, sir. It is rather late.'

'I will,' said Harrington, 'in just another minute.' He listened to the shuffling of old Adams' slippers going down the hall and began tucking in his shirt tail.

And suddenly it struck him: shirt tails - they'd be better than a string!

For anyone would wonder, even the final gentleman would wonder, why his shirt tails had a knot in them.

He stuffed the paper in his jacket pocket and tugged the shirt tails entirely free. He had to loosen several buttons before there was cloth enough to make a satisfactory knot.

He made it good and hard, a square knot so it wouldn't slip, and tight enough so that it would have to be untied before he took off the shirt.

And he composed a silly line that went with the knotted shirt tails:

I tie this knot because I'm not the final gentleman.

He went out of the house and down the steps and around the house to the shack where the garden tools were kept.

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He lighted matches until he found the maul that he was looking for. With it in his hand, he went back to the car.

And all the time he kept repeating to himself the line:

I tie this knot, because I'm not the final gentleman.

The _situation_ lobby was as brilliant as he remembered it and as silent and deserted and he headed for the door that said HARVEY on it.

He had expected that it would be locked, but it wasn't, and he went through it and closed it carefully behind him.

He was on a narrow catwalk that ran in a circle, with the wall behind him and the railing out in front. And down in the pit circled by the catwalk was something that could be only Harvey.

Hello, son, it said, or seemed to say, inside his brain.

Hello, son. I'm glad that you've come home again.

He stepped forward to the railing eagerly and leaned the maul against it and gripped the railing with both hands to stare down into the pit, enveloped in the feel of father-love that welled up from the thing that squatted in the pit - the old pipe-tweed coat-grizzled whisker love he'd forgotten long ago.

A lump came in his throat and tears smarted in his eyes and he forgot the barren street outside and all the lonely years.

The love kept welling up - the love and understanding and the faint amusement that he should have expected anything but love from an entity to which he had been tied so intimately for all of thirty years.

You did a good job, son. I am proud of you. I'm glad that you've come home to me again.

He leaned across the railing, yearning toward the father squatting in the pit, and one of the rails caught against the knotted shirt tail and shoved it hard against his belly.

Reflexes clicked within his brain and he said, almost automatically: _I tie this knot because I'm not_

And then he was saying it consciously and with fervor, like a single chant.

I tie this knot because I'm not the final gentleman.

I tie this knot because I'm not...

He was shouting now and the sweat streamed down his face and he fought like a drunken man to push back from the railing, and still he was conscious of the father, not insistent, not demanding, but somewhat hurt and puzzled by this ingratitude.

Harrington's hand slipped from the top rail and the fingers touched the handle of the maul and seized and closed upon it and lifted it from the floor to throw.

But even as he lifted it, the door catch snicked behind him and he swung around.

Cedric Madison stood just inside the door and his death-head face wore a look of utter calm.

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'Get him off my back!' yelled Harrington. 'Make him let loose of me or I will let you have it.'

And was surprised to find that he meant every word of it, that a man as mild as he could find it in his heart to kill another man without a second thought.

'All right,' said Madison, and the father-love was gone and the world stood cold and hard and empty, with just the two of them standing face to face.

'I'm sorry that this happened, Harrington. You are the first...'

'You took a chance,' said Harrington. 'You tried to turn me loose. What did you expect I would do - moon around and wonder what had happened to me?'

'We'll take you back again. It was a pleasant life. You can live it out,'

'I have no doubt you would. You and white and all the rest of -'

Madison sighed, a very patient sigh. 'Leave white out of this,' he said. 'The poor fool thinks that Harvey...'

He stopped what he meant to say and chuckled.

'Believe me, Harrington, it's a slick and foolproof setup. It is even better than the oracle at Delphi.'

He was sure of himself, so sure that it sent a thrill of apprehension deep through Harrington, a sense of being trapped, of being backed into a corner from which he never could escape.

They had him cold, he thought, between the two of them - Madison in front and Harvey at his rear. Any second now Harvey would throw another punch at him and despite all that he had said, despite the maul he gripped, despite the knotted shirt tails and the silly rhyme, he had grave doubts that he could fight it off.

'I am astonished that you are surprised,' Madison was saying smoothly. 'For Harvey has been in fact a father to you for all these many years, or the next thing to a father, maybe better than a father. You've been closer to him, day and night, than you've ever been to any other creature. He has watched over you and watched out for you and guided you at times and the relationship between the two of you has been more real than you can ever guess.'

'But why?' asked Harrington and he was seeking furiously for some way out of this, for some defense that might be more substantial than a knotted shirt.

'I do not know how to say this so you will believe it,' Madison told him earnestly, 'but the father-feeling was no trick at all. You are closer at this moment to Harvey and perhaps even to myself than you can ever be to any other being. No one could work with you as long as Harvey worked with you without forming deep attachments. He, and I, have no thought but good for you. Won't you let us prove it?'

Harrington remained silent, but he was wavering - even when he knew that he should not waver. For what Madison had said seemed to make some sense.

'The world,' said Madison, 'is cold and merciless. It has no pity for you. You've not built a warm and pleasant world and now that you see it as it is no doubt you are repelled by it. There is no reason you should remain in it. We can give you back the world you've known. We can give you security and comfort. Surely you would be happy then. You can gain nothing by remaining as you are. There is no disloyalty to the human race in going back to this world you love. Now you can neither hurt nor harm the race. Your work is done...'

'No!' cried Harrington.

Madison shook his head. 'Your race is a queer one, Harrington.'

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'My race!' yelled Harrington. 'You talk as if -'

'There is greatness in you,' said Madison, 'but you must be pushed to bring it out. You must be cheered and coddled, you must be placed in danger, you must be given problems. You are like so many children. It is my duty, Harrington, my sworn, solemn duty to bring out the greatness in you. And I will not allow you nor anyone to stand against the duty.'

And the truth was there, screaming through the dark, dread corridors of belated recognition. It had been there all the time, Harrington told himself, and he should have seen it.

He swung up the maul in a simple reflex action, as a gesture of horror and revulsion, and he heard his screaming voice as if it were some other voice and not his own at all:

'Why, damn you, you aren't even human!'

And as he brought the maul up in its arc and forward, Madison was weaving to one side so that the maul would miss, and his face and hands were changing and his body, too - although changing was perhaps not the word for it. It was a relaxing, rather, as if the body and the face and hands that had been Madison were flowing back again into their normal mould after being held and imprisoned into human shape. The human clothes he wore ripped apart with the pressure of the change and hung on him in tatters.

He was bigger, or he seemed to be, as if he had been forced to compress his bigness to conform to human standards, but he was humanoid and there was no essential change in his skull-like face beyond its taking on a faintly greenish cast.

The maul clanged to the floor and skidded on the steel face of the catwalk and the thing that had been Madison was slouching forward with the alien sureness in it. And from Harvey poured a storm of anger and frustration - a father's storming anger at a naughty child which must now stand in punishment. And the punishment was death, for no naughty child must bar the great and solemn duty of a sworn and dedicated task. In that storming fury, even as it rocked his mind, Harrington sensed an essential oneness between machine and alien, as if the two moved and thought in unison.

And there was a snarling and a coughing sound of anger and Harrington found himself moving toward the alien thing with his fingers spread and his muscles tensed for the seizing and the rending of this enemy from the darkness that extended out beyond the cave. He was shambling forward on bowed and sturdy legs and there was fear deep-rooted in his mind, a terrible, shriveling fear that drove him to his work. But above and beyond that fear there was as well the knowledge of the strength within his own brute body.

For a moment he was aghast at the realization that the snarling and the coughing was coming from himself and that the foam of fighting anger was dripping from his jaws. Then he was aghast no longer, for he knew with surety who he was and all that he might have been or might ever have thought was submerged and swept away in sheer bestiality and the driving urge to kill.

His hands reached out and caught the alien flesh and tore at it and broke it and ripped it from the bones, and in the wild, black job of killing scarcely felt or noticed the raking of the other's talons or the stabbing of the beak.

There was a screaming somewhere, a piercing sound of pain and agony from some other place, and the job was done.

Harrington crouched above the body that lay upon the floor and wondered at the growling sounds which still rumbled in his throat.

He stood erect and held out his hands and in the dim light saw that they were stained with sticky red, while from the pit he heard Harvey's screams dwindle into moaning.

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He staggered forward to the railing and looked down into the pit and streams of some dark and stringy substance were pouring out of every crack and joint of Harvey - as if the life and intelligence were draining out of him.

And somewhere a voice (a voice?) was saying: You fool! Now look at what you've done! _What will happen to you now?_

'We'll get along,' said Harrington, not the final gentleman, nor yet Neanderthaler.

There was a gash along one arm and the blood was oozing out and soaking the fabric of his torn coat and one side of his face was wet and sticky, but he was all right,

We kept you on the road, said the dying voice, now faint and far away. _We kept you on it for so many ages..._

Yes, thought Harrington. Yes, my friend, you're right. Once the Delphian oracle and how many cons before that?

And clever - once an oracle and in this day an analytical computer. And where in the years between - in monastery? in palace? in some counting house?

Although, perhaps, the operation need not have been continuous. Perhaps it was only necessary at certain crisis points.

And what the actual purpose? To guide the toddling footsteps of humanity, make man think as they wanted him to think? Or to shape humanity to the purpose of an alien race? And what the shape of human culture if there had been no interference?

And he, himself, he wondered - was he the summer-up, the man who had been used to write the final verdict of the centuries of patterning? Not in his words, of course, but in the words of these other two - the one down in the pit, the other on this catwalk. Or were there two of them? Might there have been only one? Was it possible, he wondered, that they were the same - the one of them no more than an extension of the other? For when Madison had died, so had Harvey.

'The trouble with you, friend,' he said to the thing lying on the floor. 'was that you were too close to human in many ways yourself. You got too confident and you made mistakes.'

And the worst mistake of all had been when they'd allowed him to write a Neanderthaler into that early story.

He walked slowly toward the door and stopped at it for a moment to look back at the twisted form that lay huddled on the floor. They'd find it in an hour or two and think at first, perhaps, that it was Madison. Then they'd note the changes and know that it could not be Madison. And they'd be puzzled people, especially since Madison himself would have disappeared. They'd wonder, too, what had happened to Harvey, who'd never work again. And they'd find the maul!

The maul! Good God, he thought. I almost left the maul! He turned back and picked it up and his mind was churning with the fear of what might have happened had he left it there. For his fingerprints would be all over it and the police would have come around to find out what he knew.

And his fingerprints would be on the railing too, he thought. He'd have to wipe them off.

He took out his handkerchief and began to wipe the railing, wondering as he did it why he went to all the trouble, for there would be no guilt associated with this thing he'd done.

No guilt! he asked himself.

How could he be sure?

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Had Madison been a villain or a benefactor?

There was no way, he knew, that anyone could be sure.

Not yet, at least. Not so shortly after. And now perhaps there'd never be any way to know. For the human race had been set so firmly in the track that had been engineered for it, it might never deviate. For the rest of his days he'd wonder about the rightness and the wrongness of this deed he'd done.

He'd watch for signs and portents. He'd wonder if every piece of disturbing news he read might have been averted by this alien that now lay upon the floor. He'd come fighting out of sleep at night, chased by nightmares of an idiot doom that his hand had brought about.

He finished polishing the railing and walked to the door. He polished the knob most carefully and shut the door behind him. And, as a final gesture, he untied the shirt tails.

There was no one in the lobby and no one in the street, and he stood looking up and down the street in the pale cold light of morning.

He cringed against it - against the morning light and against this street that was a symbol of the world. For there seemed to him to be a crying in the street, a crying of his guilt.

There was a way, he knew, that he could forget all this - could wipe it from his mind and leave it all behind him. There was a path that even at this hour led to comfort and security and even, yes, to smugness, and he was tempted by it. For there was no reason that he shouldn't. There was no point in not doing it. No one except himself stood either to gain or to lose.

But he shook his head stubbornly, as if to scare the thought away.

He shifted the maul from one hand to the other and stepped out to cross the street. He reached the car and opened the back door and threw the maul in on the floor.

And he stood there, empty-handed now, and felt the silence beating in long rolls, like relentless surf pounding through his head.

He put up his hands to keep his head from bursting and he felt a terrible weakness in him. He knew it was reaction - nerves suddenly letting go after being taut too long.

Then the stifling silence was no more than an overriding quietness. He dropped his hands.

A car was coming down the street, and he watched it as it parked across from him a short distance up the street.

From it came the shrilling voice of a radio tuned high:

'... In his note to the President, refusing the appointment, Enright said that after some soul-searching he was convinced it would be better for the country and the world if he did not accept the post. In Washington, foreign policy observers and the diplomatic corps are reported in a dither. What, after all, they ask, could soul-searching have to do with the state department?

'And here is another piece of news this morning that is likewise difficult to assess. Peking announces a reshuffling of its government, with known moderates taking over. While it is too early yet to say, the shift could result in a complete reversal of Red China's policies-'

The radio shut off abruptly and the man got from the car. He slammed the door behind him and went striding down the street.

Harrington opened the front door and climbed behind the wheel. He had the strangest sense that he had forgotten something. He tried to remember what it

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was, but it was gone entirely.

He sat with his hands clutched upon the wheel and he felt a little shiver running through his body. Like a shiver of relief, although he could not imagine why he should feel relief.

Perhaps over that news about Enright. he told himself. For it was very good news. Not that Enright was the wrong man for the post, for he surely was the right one. But there came a time when a man had the right and duty to be himself entirely.

And the human race, he told himself, had that same right.

And the shift of government in China was a most amazing thing. As if, he thought, evil geniuses throughout the world might be disappearing with the coming of the dawn.

And there was something about geniuses, he told himself, that he should remember. Something about how a genius came about.

But he could not recall it.

He rolled down the window of the car and sniffed the brisk, fresh breeze of morning. Sniffing it, he consciously straightened his body and lifted up his chin. A man should do a thing like this more often, he told himself contentedly. There was something in the beginning of a day that sharpened up one's soul.

He put the car in gear and wheeled it out into the street.

Too bad about Madison, he thought. He was really, after all, a very decent fellow.

Hollis Harrington, final gentleman, drove down the morning street.