event. A large, brightly shining sign featured the front of the gunshop, which had been so miraculously conjured out of nothingness; and the sign constituted the first evidence that the entire scene was nothing but a masterly illusion. For from whichever angle one gazed at it, one seemed to be staring straight at the words, which read:

FINE WEAPONS THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS IS THE RIGHT TO BE FREE

The window display was made up of an assortment of rather curiously shaped guns, rifles as well as small arms; and a glowing sign in the window stated:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

Inspector Clayton of the Investigation Branch attempted to enter the shop, but the door seemed to be locked. A few moments later, C. J. (Chris) McAllister, reporter of the Gazette-Bulletin, tried the door, found that it opened, and entered.

Inspector Clayton attempted to follow him, but discovered that the door was again locked. It is believed that McAllister went through to the back, as several spectators reported seeing him. Immediately after his reappearance, the strange building vanished as abruptly as it had appeared.

Police state they are baffled as to how the master magician created so detailed an illusion for so long a period before so large a crowd. They are prepared to recommend his show, when it comes, without reservations.

(Author's Note: The foregoing account did not mention that the police, dissatisfied with the affair, attempted to contact McAllister for a further interview, but were unable to locate him. Weeks have passed; and he has still not been found.

It was dark inside the shop beyond the door, too dark to see anything, and somehow, his eyes wouldn't accustom themselves to the intense gloom. Pure reporter's instinct made him step forward toward the blackness that pressed from beyond the rectangle of door. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw Inspector Clayton's hand reaching for the door handle that his own fingers had let go a moment before. And he knew instantly that if the inspector could prevent it, no reporter would get inside that building. His head was still turned, his gaze more on the police officer than on the darkness in front; and it was as he began another step forward that the remarkable thing happened.

The door handle would not allow Inspector Clayton to touch it. It twisted in some queer way, in some energy way, for it was still there, a strange, blurred shape. The door itself, without visible movement it was so swift, was suddenly touching McAllister's heel. Light, almost weightless, was that touch; and then, before he could think or react to what had happened, the momentum of his forward movement had carried him inside. As he breasted the darkness, there was a sudden, agonized tensing along his nerves. Then the door shut tight. the brief, unexpected agony faded. Ahead was a brightly-lit shop; behind-were unbelievable things!

For McAllister, the moment that followed was one of blank impression. He stood, body twisted awkwardly, only vaguely conscious of the shop's interior, but tremendously aware in the brief moment before he was interrupted of what lay beyond the transparent panels of the door through which he had just come.

There was no unyielding blackness anywhere, no Inspector Clayton, no muttering crowd of gaping spectators, no dingy row of shops across the way. It was not even the same street. There was no street. Instead, a peaceful park was visible. Beyond it, brilliant under a noon sun, was the skyline of a vast city. From behind him, a husky, musical, woman's voice said:

"You will be wanting a gun?"

people consider it silly of us to keep harping on that ancient feud." Her voice grew firmer. "We even know how clever the propaganda is that stresses the silliness of our stand. Meanwhile, we never allow any of her men in here. We continue to take our principles very seriously."

She paused as if she expected comprehension from him. But McAllister saw from the slow puzzlement creeping into her eyes that his face must look as blank as the thoughts behind it. Her men! The girl had spoken the words as if she were referring to some personage, and in direct reply to his use of the word, police officer. That meant her men, whoever she was, were policemen; and they weren't allowed in this gunshop. So the door was hostile, and wouldn't admit them. An emptiness struck into McAllister's mind, matching the hollowness that was beginning to afflict the pit of his stomach, a sense of un-plumbed depths, the first staggering conviction that all was not as it should be. The girl was speaking in a sharper tone:

"You mean you know nothing of all this, that for generations the gunmaker's guild has existed in this age of devastating energies as the common man's only protection against enslavement? The right to buy guns-" She stopped, her narrowed eyes searching him; then: "Come to think of it, there's something very peculiar about you. Your outlandish clothes - you're not from the northern farm plains are you?"

He shook his head dumbly, more annoyed with his reactions every passing second. But he couldn't help it. A tightness was growing in him now, becoming more unbearable instant by instant, as if somewhere a vital mainspring was being wound to the breaking point.

The young woman went on more swiftly: "And come to think of it, it is astounding that a policeman should have tried the door, and there was no alarm."

Her hand moved. Metal flashed in it, metal as bright as steel in blinding sunlight. There was not the slightest hint of an apology in her voice as she said: "You will stay where you are, sir, until I have called my father. In our business, with our responsibilities, we never take chances. Something is very wrong here." a point on the wall somewhat to his left. He followed her look in time to see seven miniature white lights flash on. Curious lights! He was fascinated by the play of light and shade, the waxing and waning from one tiny globe to the next, a rippling movement of infinitesimal increments and decrements, an incredibly delicate effect of instantaneous reaction to some supersensitive barometer. The lights steadied; his gaze reverted to the girl. To his surprise, she was putting away her gun. She must have noticed his expression.

"It's all right," she said coolly. "The automatics are on you now. If we're wrong about you, we'll be glad to apologize. Meanwhile, if you're still interested in buying a gun, I'll be happy to demonstrate."

So the automatics were on him. McAllister thought. He felt no relief at the information. Whatever the automatics were, they wouldn't be working in his favor. The young woman putting away her gun in spite of her suspicions spoke volumes for the efficiency of the new watchdogs. He'd have to get out of this place, of course. Meanwhile, the girl was assuming that a man who came into a gun-shop would, under ordinary circumstances, want to buy a gun. It struck him, suddenly, that of all the things he could think of, what he most wanted to see was one of those strange guns. There were incredible implications in the very shape of the instruments. Aloud he said:

"Yes, by all means show me." A thought occurred to him. He added, "I have no doubt your father is somewhere in the background making some sort of study of me."

The young woman made no move to bring out any weapons. Instead, she stared at him in puzzlement.

"You may not realize it," she said slowly, "but you have already upset our entire establishment. The lights of the automatics should have gone on the moment father pressed the buttons, as he did when I called him. They didn't! That's unnatural, and yet-" her frown deepened-"if you were one of them, how did you get through that door? Is it possible that her scientists have discovered human beings who do not affect the sensitive energies? And that you are but one of many such, sent as an experiment to determine thing requires explanation, but I mean that differently than you do."

His voice trailed. He had been half lowered over the chair, but instead of sinking into it, he came erect, slowly, like an old, old man. His eyes fixed on lettering that shone above a glass case of guns behind her. He said hoarsely:

"Is that-a calendar?"

She followed his gaze, puzzled. "Yes, it's June 3rd. What's wrong?"

"I don't mean that. I mean-" He caught himself with an effort. "I mean those figures above that: I mean-what year is this?"

The girl looked surprised. She started to say something, then stopped and backed away. Finally: "Don't look like that! There's nothing wrong. This is eighty-four of the four thousand seven hundredth year of the Imperial House of Isher. It's quite all right." his ears, strange and unsettling. McAllister could not quite analyze the meaning of it until the girl turned, and said:

"What is your name?"

McAllister gave it.

The girl hesitated, then: "Mr. McAllister, my father wants to know what year you're from!"

The gray-haired man stepped forward. "I'm afraid," he said gravely, "that there is no time to explain. What has happened is what we gunmakers have feared for generations: that once again would come one who lusted for unlimited power; and who, to attain tyranny, must necessarily seek first to destroy us. Your presence here is a manifestation of the energy force that she has turned against us - something so new that we did not even suspect it was being used against us. But I have no time to waste. Get all the information you can, Lystra, and warn him of his own personal danger." The man turned. The door closed noiselessly behind his tall figure.

McAllister asked: "What did he mean-personal danger?"

He saw the girl's brown eyes were uneasy as they rested on him. "It's hard to explain," she began in an uncomfortable voice. "First of all, come to the window and I'll try to make everything clear. It's all very confusing to you, I suppose."

McAllister drew a deep breath. "Now we're getting somewhere."

His alarm was gone. The gray-haired man seemed to know what it was all about. That meant there should be no difficulty getting home again. As for all this danger to the gunmaker's guild, that was their worry, not his. He stepped forward, closer to the girl. To his amazement, she cringed away as if he had threatened her. As he stared blankly, she laughed humorlessly; and finally she said:

"Don't think I'm being silly; don't be offended-but for your life's sake, don't touch any human body you might come in contact with."

McAllister was conscious of a chill. Then, suddenly, he felt a surge of impatience at the fear that showed in the girl's face. "Now look," he began,

wouldn't focus on you, and-"

"Energy-charged?" said McAllister.

The girl was staring at him. "Don't you understand?" she gasped. "You've come across seven thousand years of time. And of all the energies in the universe, time is the most potent. You're charged with trillions of trillions of time-energy units. If you should step outside this shop, you'd blow up Imperial City and half a hundred miles of land beyond.

"You-" she finished on an unsteady, upward surge of her voice-"you could conceivably destroy the Earth!"

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I certainly needed that."

She smiled encouragingly; and he was able now to be amazed at her conflicting personality. There had been on the one hand her inability a few minutes earlier to get to the point of the danger, an incapacity for explaining things with words. Yet obviously her action with the mirror showed a keen understanding of human psychology. He said: "The problem now is, from your point of view, to circumvent this Isher woman and get me back to 1951 before I blow up the Earth of ... of whatever year this is."

The girl nodded. "Father says that you can be sent back, but as for the rest, watch!"

He had no time for relief at the knowledge that he could be returned to his own time. She pressed another button. Instantly, the mirror was gone into metallic wall. Another button clicked. The wall vanished. Before him stretched a park similar to the one he had already seen through the front door, obviously an extension of the same gardenlike vista. Trees were there, and flowers, and green, green grass in the sun.

One vast building, as high as it was long, towered massively dark against the sky and dominated the entire horizon. It was a good quarter mile away; and incredibly, it was at least that long and that high. Neither near that monstrous building, nor in the park, was a living person visible. Everywhere was evidence of man's dynamic labor, but no men, no movement. Even the trees stood motionless in that breathless sunlit day.

"Watch!" said the girl again, more softly.

There was no click this time. She made an adjustment on one of the buttons, and the view was no longer so clear. It wasn't that the sun had dimmed its bright intensity. It wasn't even that glass was visible where a moment before there had been nothing. There was still no apparent substance between them and that gemlike park. But the park was no longer deserted.

Scores of men and machines swarmed out there. McAllister stared in amazement; and then as the sense of illusion faded, and the dark menace of those men penetrated, his emotion changed to dismay. have been destroyed without ever knowing what happened.

"But," McAllister exclaimed sharply, "what are you going to do? They're still out there, working-"

Her brown eyes burned with a fierce, yellow flame. "My father has warned the guild. And individual members have now discovered that similar invisible guns are being set up by invisible men outside their shops. The council will meet shortly to discuss defenses."

Silently, McAllister watched the soldiers connecting what must have been invisible cables that led to the vast buildings in the background; foot thick cables that told of the titanic power that was to be unleashed on the tiny weapon shop. There was nothing to be said. The reality out there overshadowed sentences and phrases. Of all the people here, he was the most useless, his opinion the least worth while. He must have said so, but he did not realize that until the familiar voice of the girl's father came from one side of him.

"You're quite mistaken, Mr. McAllister. Of all the people here you are the most valuable. Through you, we discovered that the Isher were actually attacking us. Furthermore, our enemies do not know of your existence, therefore have not yet realized the full effect produced by the new blanketing energy they have used. You, accordingly, constitute the unknown factor. We must make immediate use of you."

The man looked older, McAllister thought. There were lines of strain in his lean, sallow face as he turned to his daughter, and his voice, when he spoke, was edged with sharpness: "Lystra, No. 7!"

As the girl's fingers touched the seventh button, her father explained swiftly to McAllister, "The guild supreme council is holding an immediate emergency session. We must choose the most likely method of attacking the problem, and concentrate individually and collectively on that method. Regional conversations are already in progress, but only one important idea has been put forward as yet and-ah, gentlemen!"

He spoke past McAllister, who turned with a start. Men were coming out of the solid wall, lightly, easily, as if it were a door and they were stepping across a threshold. One, two, three-thirty. source of the new energy is the great building just outside this shop-"

He motioned toward the wall which had been a mirror and then the window through which McAllister had gazed at the monstrous structure in question. The speaker went on: "We've known, ever since the building was completed five years ago, that it was a power building aimed against us; and now from it new energy has flown out to engulf the world, immensely potent energy so strong that it broke the very tensions of time, fortunately only at this nearest gunshop. Apparently, it weakens when transmitted over distance."

"Look, Dresley," came a curt interruption from a small, thin man, "what good is all this preamble? You have been examining the various plans put forward by regional groups. Is there, or isn't there, a decent one among them?"

Dresley hesitated. To McAllister's surprise, the man's eyes fixed doubtfully on him, his heavy face worked for a moment, then hardened. "Yes, there is a method, but it depends on compelling our friend from the past to take a great risk. You all know what I am referring to. It will gain us the time we need."

"Eh?" said McAllister, and stood stunned as all eyes turned to stare at him.

stand how any one of you could even think of compulsion. According to you, I'm loaded with energy. I may be wrong, but if any of you should try to thrust me back down the chute of time, or even touch me, that energy in me would do devastating things-"

"You're damned right!" chimed in a young man. He barked irritably at Dresley: "How the devil did you ever come to make such a psychological blunder? You know that McAllister will have to do as we want to save himself; and he'll have to do it fast!"

Dresley grunted. "Hell," he said, "the truth is that we have no time to waste in explanation and I just figured that he might scare easily. I see, however, that we're dealing with an intelligent man."

McAllister's eyes narrowed over the group. This was phony. He said sharply, "And don't give me any soft soap about being intelligent. You fellows are sweating blood. You'd shoot your own grandmothers and trick me into the bargain, because the world you think right is at stake. What's this plan of yours that you were going to compel me to participate in?"

It was the young man who replied. "You are to be given insulated clothes and sent back to your own time-"

He paused. McAllister said: "That sounds okay so far. What's the catch?"

"There is no catch!"

McAllister stared. "Now, look here," he began, "don't give me any of that. If it's as simple as that, how the devil am I going to be helping you against the lsher energy?"

The young man scowled blackly at Dresley. You see," he said, "you've made Him suspicious with that talk of yours about compulsion." He faced McAllister. "What we have in mind is an application of a sort of an energy lever and fulcrum principle. You are to be the weight at the long end of a kind of energy 'crowbar,' which lifts the greater weight at the short end. You will go back five thousand years in time; the machine in the great building, to which your body is tuned and which has caused all this trouble, will move ahead in time several months."

time. You go five thousand years, the building goes-"

His voice faded, his eagerness drained from him as he caught the expression in McAllister's face.

"Lookl" said McAllister. "There's nothing more pitiful than a bunch of honest men engaged in an act of dishonesty. You're strong men, the intellectual type, who've spent your lives enforcing an idealistic conception. You've always told yourselves that if the occasion should ever require it, you would not hesitate to make drastic sacrifices. But you're not fooling anybody. What's the catch?" the background a man was saying:

"Our first purpose must be to gain time, then we must establish new shops in communities where they cannot be easily attacked. Simultaneously, we must contact every Imperial potential who can help us directly or indirectly, and finally we must-"

The voice went on, but McAllister heard no more. His frantic gaze fell on the girl, standing silent and subdued near the front door. He strode toward her; and either his glare or presence was frightening, for she cringed and turned white.

"Look!" he said. "I'm in this as deep as hell. What's the risk in this thing? I've got to feel that I have some chance. Tell, me, what's the catch?"

The girl was gray now, almost as gray and dead looking as the suit Peter Cadron was holding. "It's the friction," she mumbled finally, "you may not get all the way back to 1951. You see, you'll be a sort of 'weight' and-"

McAllister whirled away from her. He climbed into the soft almost flimsy suit, crowding the overall-like shape over his neatly pressed clothes. "It comes tight over the head, doesn't it?"

"Yes!" It was Lystra's father who answered. "As soon as you pull that zipper shut, the suit will become completely invisible. To outsiders, it will seem just as if you have your ordinary clothes on. The suit is fully equipped. You could live on the moon inside it."

"What I don't get," complained McAllister, "is why I have to wear it. I got here all right without it." He frowned. His words had been automatic, but abruptly a thought came. "Just a minute," he said, "what becomes of the energy with which I'm charged when I'm bottled up in this insulation?"

He saw by the stiffening expressions of those around him that he had touched on a vast subject.

"So that's it!" he snapped. "The insulation is to prevent me losing any of that energy.. That's how it can make a 'weight.' I have no doubt there is a connection from this suit to that other machine. Well, it's not too late."

With a desperate twist, he tried to jerk aside, to evade the clutching hands of the four men who leaped at him. But they had him instantly, and

was scarcely aware. For him there was only the girl, and the way the muscles of her lips were working and the way her voice suddenly cried: "This is utter outrage. Are we such cowards-is it possible that the spirit of liberty can survive only through a shoddy act of murder and gross defiance of the rights of the individual? I say no! Mr. McAllister must have the protection of the hypnotism treatment; surely so brief a delay will not be fatal."

"Lystra!" It was her father; and McAllister realized by his swift movement how quickly the older man grasped every aspect of the situation. He stepped forward and took the gun from his daughter's fingers - the only man in the room, McAllister thought, who could dare approach her in that moment with the certainty she would not fire. For hysteria was in every line of her face; and the tears that followed showed how dangerous her stand might have been against the others.

Strangely, not for a moment had hope come. The entire action seemed divorced from his life and his thought; there was only the observation of it. He stood there for a seeming eternity, and, when emotion finally came, it was surprise that he was not being hustled to his doom. With the surprise came awareness that Peter Cadron had let go of his arm, and stepped clear of him.

The man's eyes were calm, his head held proudly erect. He said, "Your daughter is right, sir. At this point we rise above our fears, and we say to this unhappy young man: 'Have courage! You will not be forgotten. We can guarantee nothing, cannot even state exactly what will happen to you. But we say, if it lies in our power to help you, that help you shall have.' And now-we must protect you from the devastating psychological pressures that would otherwise destroy you, simply but effectively."

Too late, McAllister noticed that the others had turned their faces away from that extraordinary wall-the wall that had already displayed so vast a versatility. He did not even see who pressed the activating button for what followed.

There was a flash of dazzling light. For an instant he felt as if his mind had been laid bare; and against that nakedness the voice of Peter Cadron

had stood still.

And it was like being a part of life that the great artist's picture of this quiet, peaceful scene before him was now in the collection of the empress herself. She had praised it, and naturally the thrice-blest artist had immediately and humbly begged her to accept it. What a joy it must be to be able to offer personal homage to the glorious, the divine, the serenely gracious and lovely Innelda Isher, one hundred eightieth of her line.

As they walked, Fara half turned to his wife. In the dim light of the nearest street lamp, her kindly, still youthful face was almost lost in shadow. He murmured softly, instinctively muting his voice to harmonize with the pastel shades of night: "She said-our empress said-that our little village of Glay seemed to her to have in it all the wholesomness, the gentleness, that constitutes the finest qualities of her people. Wasn't that a wonderful thought, Creel? She must be a marvelously understanding woman."

They had come to a side street, and what he saw about a hundred and fifty feet along it stopped his words. "Look!" Fara said hoarsely.

He pointed with rigid arm and finger at a sign that glowed in the night, a sign that read:

FINE WEAPONS THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS IS THE RIGHT TO BE FREE

Fara had a strange, empty feeling as he stared at the blazing sign. He saw that other villagers were gathering. He said finally, huskily, "I've heard of these shops. They're places of infamy against which the government of the empress will act one of these days. They're built in hidden factories and then transported whole to towns like ours and set up in gross defiance of property rights. That one wasn't there an hour ago." His face hardened. His voice had a harsh edge in it as he said, "Creel, go home."

He was surprised when Creel did not move off at once. All their married life, she had had a pleasing habit of obedience that had made life a won-

the first new building to come into Glay-since the picture was painted.

Fara was silent. This was a quality of his wife of which he did not approve, this reminding him unnecessarily of unpleasant facts. He knew exactly what she meant. The gigantic, multitentacled corporation, Automatic Atomic Motor Repair Shops, Inc., had come in under the laws of the State with their flashy building, against the wishes of the village council, and had already taken half of Fara's repair business.

"That's different!" Fara growled finally. "In the first place people will discover in good time that these new automatic repairers do a poor job. In the second place it's fair competition. But this weapon shop is a defiance of all the decencies that make life under the House of Isher such a joy. Look at the hypocritical sign: 'The right to buy weapons-' Aaaaahh!" He broke off with, "Go home, Creel. We'll see to it that they sell no weapons in this town."

He watched the slender woman-shape move off into the shadows. She was halfway across the street when Fara called after her: "And if you see that son of ours hanging around some street corner, take him home. He's got to learn to stop staying out so late at night."

The shadowed figure of his wife did not turn; and after watching her for a moment moving against the dim background of softly glowing street lights, Fara twisted on his heel and walked swiftly toward the shop. The crowd was growing larger every minute, and the night air pulsed with excited voices. Beyond doubt, here was the biggest thing that had ever happened to the village of Glay.

The sign of the weapon shop was, he saw, a normal-illusion affair. No matter what his angle of view, he was always looking straight at it. When he paused in front of the great display window, the words had pressed back against the store front, and were staring unwinkingly down at him. Fara sniffed once more at the meaning of the slogan, then turned to the sign in the window. It read:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

A spark of interest struck fire inside Fara. He gazed at the brilliant display of guns, fascinated in spite of himself. The weapons were of every green, gardenlike lot of tight-fisted old Harris. Fara frowned. Clever, these weapon shop people, selecting the property of the most disliked man in town, giving everybody an agreeable titillation. But the cunning of it made it vital that the trick should not succeed. He was still scowling anxiously when he saw the plump figure of Mel Dale, the mayor. Fara edged toward him hurriedly, touched his hat respectfully, and said, "Where's Jor?"

"Here." The village constable elbowed his way through a little crowd of men. "Any plans?" he said.

"There's only one plan," said Fara boldly. "Go in and arrest them."

The two men looked at each other, then at the ground. It was the big constable who answered shortly, "Door's locked. And nobody answers our pounding. I was just going to suggest we let the matter ride until morning."

"Nonsense!" Astonishment made Fara impatient. "Get an ax and we'll break down the door. Delay will only encourage such riffraff to resist. We don't want their kind in our village for a single night. Isn't that so?"

There was a hasty nod of agreement from everybody in his immediate vicinity. Too hasty. Fara looked around puzzled at eyes that lowered before his level gaze. He thought: "They are all scared. And unwilling." Before he could speak, Constable Jor said:

"I guess you haven't heard about those doors or these shops. From all accounts you can't break into them."

It struck Fara with a sudden pang that it was he who would have to act here. He said, "I'll get my atomic cutting machine from my shop. That'll fix them. Have I your permission to do that, Mr. Mayor?"

In the glow of the weapon shop window, the plump man was sweating visibly. He pulled out a handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. He said: "Maybe I'd better call the commander of the Imperial garrison at Ferd, and ask them."

"No!" Fara recognized evasion when he saw it. Suddenly, the conviction came that all the strength in this village was in him. "We must act ourselves. Other communities have let these people get in because they took

panels of the door. But after a minute it had still not affected the material. Fara refused to believe the failure, and played the boundlessly potent energy on that resisting wall. When he finally shut off his machine, he was perspiring freely. "I don't understand it," he gasped. "Why-no metal is supposed to stand up against a steady flood of atomic force. Even the hard metal plates used inside the blast chamber of a motor take the explosions in what is called infinite series, so that each one has unlimited rest. That's the theory, but actually steady running crystallizes the whole plate after a few months."

"It's as Jor told you," said the mayor. "These weapon shops are-big. They spread right through the empire, and they don't recognize the empress."

Fara shifted his feet on the hard grass, disturbed. He didn't like this kind of talk. It sounded sacrilegious. And besides it was nonsense. It must be. Before he could speak, a man in the crowd said, "I've heard it said that that door will open only to those who cannot harm the people inside."

The words shocked Fara out of his daze. His failure had had a bad psychological effect. He said sharply, "That's ridiculous! If there were doors like that, we'd all have them. We-"

What stopped his words was the sudden realization that he had not seen anybody try to open the door; and with all this reluctance around him it was quite possible that no one had tried. He stepped forward, grasped at the doorknob and pulled. The door opened with an unnatural weightlessness that gave him the fleeting impression that the knob had come loose into his hand. With a gasp, Fara jerked the door wide open.

"Jor," he yelled, "get in!"

The constable made a distorted movement-distorted by what must have been a will to caution, followed by the instant realization that he could not hold back before so many. He leaped awkwardly toward the open door. And it closed in his face.

Fara stared stupidly at his hand, which was still clenched. And then, slowly, a thrill coursed along his nerves. The knob had withdrawn. It had

minu. Are you crazy? A door has no sense.

Fear put a quaver into his voice. Shame at his alarm made him bold beyond his normal caution. Fara faced the shop grimly. The building loomed there under the night sky, in itself bright as day, alien and menacing, and no longer easily conquerable. He wondered what the soldiers of the empress would do if they were invited to act. And, suddenly, he foresaw flashingly that even they would be able to do nothing. Fara was conscious of horror that such an idea could enter his mind. He shut his brain tight.

"The door opened for me once," he said wildly. "It will open again."

It did. Gently, without resistance, with that same sensation of weightlessness, the strange, sensitive door followed the tug of his fingers. Beyond the threshold was dimness, a wide, darkened alcove. Behind him, Mayor Dale said:

"Fara, don't be a fool. What will you do inside?"

Fara was amazed to realize that he had stepped across the threshold. He turned, startled, and stared at the blur of faces. "Why-" he began blankly, then he brightened- "Why, I'll buy a gun, of course."

The brilliance of his reply, the cunning implicit in it, dazzled him for half a minute longer. The mood yielded slowly as he found himself in the dimly lighted interior of the weapon shop.

Fara tried to keep one eye on that door as he examined several showcases, each with three or four weapons either mounted or arranged in boxes or holsters. With narrowed eyes, he estimated his chances of grabbing one of the weapons from a case, and then, the moment someone came, force him outside where Jor would perform the arrest. Behind him, a man said quietly, "You wish to buy a gun?"

Fara turned with a jump. Brief rage flooded him at the way his plan had been wrecked by the arrival of the clerk. The anger died as he saw that the clerk was a fine looking, silver-haired man, older than himself. That was disconcerting. Fara had an immense and almost automatic respect for age. He said at last, lamely, "Yes, yes, a gun."

"For what purpose?" said the man in his quiet voice. Fara could only look at him. He wanted to get mad. He wanted to tell these people what he thought of them.

But the age of this representative locked his tongue. He managed speech with an effort of will. "For hunting." The plausible words stiffened his mind. "Yes, definitely for hunting. There is a lake to the north of here," he went on more fulsomely, "and-"

He stopped, scowling at the extent of his dishonesty. He was not prepared to go so deeply into prevarication. He said curtly, "For hunting."

Fara was himself again. He hated the man for having put him so completely at a disadvantage. With smoldering eyes he watched the old fellow click open a showcase and take, out a green-shining rifle. As the man faced him, weapon in hand, Fara was thinking: "Pretty clever, having an old man as a front." It was the same kind of cunning that had made them choose the property of Miser Harris. He reached for the gun; but the man held it out of his reach.

"Before I can even let you test this," lie said, "I am compelled by the bylaws of the weapon shops to inform you under what circumstances you may purchase a gun.'

So they had private regulations. What a system of psychological tricks to impress the gullible.

murder. In the case of the hunting rifle, only such specified game birds and animals as we may from time to time list in our display windows may be shot. Finally, no weapon can be resold without our approval. Is that clear?"

Fara nodded. For the moment, speech was impossible to him. He wondered if he ought to laugh out loud, or curse the man for daring to insult his intelligence. So the gun mustn't be used for murder or robbery. So only certain birds and animals could be shot. And as for reselling it, supposesuppose he bought this thing, took a trip of a thousand miles, and offered it to some wealthy stranger for two credits-who would ever know? Or suppose he held up a stranger. Or shot him. How would the weapon shop ever find out? He grew aware that the gun was being held out to him stock first. He took it, and had to fight the impulse to turn the muzzle directly on the old man.

"How does it work?" he asked.

"You simply aim it, and pull the trigger. Perhaps you would like to try it on a target we have."

Fara swung the gun up. "Yes," he said triumphantly, "and you're it. Now, just get over there to the front door, and then outside." He raised his voice. "And if anybody's thinking of coming through the back door, I've got that covered, too." He motioned jerkily at the clerk. "Quick now, move! I'll shoot! I swear I will."

The man was cool, unflustered. "I have no doubt you would. When we decided to attune the door so that you could enter despite your hostility, we assumed the capacity for homicide. However, this is our party. You had better adjust yourself accordingly, and look behind you."

There was silence. Finger on trigger, Fara stood moveless. Dim thoughts came of all the half-things he had heard in his days about the weapon shops; that they had secret supporters in every district, that they had a private and ruthless hidden government, and that once you got into their clutches, the only way out was death. But what finally came clear was a mind picture of himself, Fara Clark, family man, faithful subject of the empress, standing here in this dimly-lighted store, deliberately fighting so turn, you're crazy. That's the left wall of the building. I know there's no one there."

"I'm all in favor, Rad," said the old man, "of letting him live his life. But he was the prime mover of the crowd outside. I think he should be discouraged."

"We'll advertise his presence," said Rad. "He'll spend the rest of his life denying the charge."

Fara's confidence in the gun had faded so far that, as he listened in puzzled uneasiness to the incomprehensible conversation, he forgot it completely.

The old man said persistently: "I think a little emotion might have a longrun effect. Show him the palace."

Palace! The word tore Fara out of his paralysis. "See here," he began, "I can see now that you lied to me. This gun isn't loaded at all. It's-"

His voice failed him. His body went rigid. There was no gun in his hand.

"Why, you-" he began wildly. And stopped again. His mind heaved with imbalance. He fought off the spinning sensation, thought finally, tremblingly: Somebody must have sneaked the gun from him. That meant there was someone behind him. The voice was no mechanical thing. He started to turn. And couldn't. He struggled, pushing with his muscles. And couldn't turn, couldn't move, couldn't budge. The room was growing curiously dark. He had difficulty seeing the old man. He would have shrieked then if he could. Because the weapon shop was gone.

He was standing in the sky above an immense city. Standing in the sky, and nothing around him but air, and blue summer heaven, and the city a mile, two miles below. His breath seemed solidly embedded in his lungs. Sanity came back as the remote awareness impinged on his mind that he was actually standing on a hard floor, and that the city must be a picture somehow focused directly into his eyes.

For the first time, with a start, Fara recognized the metropolis below. It was the city of dreams, Imperial City, Capital of the glorious Empress Isher. From his great height he could see the grounds of the silver palace, the heard its calm, measured tones on the telestats-and distorted. Distorted by anger and an insolent certainty of command. That caricature of a beloved voice slashed across the silence as clearly as if he were there in the great room.

"I want that traitor killed, do you understand? I don't care how you do it, but I want to hear by tomorrow night that he is dead."

The picture snapped off and instantly Fara was back in the weapon shop. He stood for a moment, swaying, fighting to accustom his eyes to the dimness. His first emotion was contempt at the simpleness of the trickery. A motion picture. What kind of a fool did they think he was, to swallow something as transparently unreal as that? Abruptly, the appalling depravity of the scheme, the indescribable wickedness of what was being attempted here brought red rage.

"Why, you scum!" he flared. "So you've got somebody to act the part of the empress, trying to pretend that- Why, you-"

"That will do," said the voice of Rad. Fara shook as a big young man walked into his line of vision. The alarmed thought came that people who would besmirch so vilely the character of her imperial majesty would not hesitate to do physical damage to Fara Clark. The young man went on in a steely tone, "We do not pretend that what you saw was taking place this instant in the palace. That would be too much of a coincidence. But it was taken two days ago. The woman is the empress. The man whose death she ordered is a former adviser whom she considered a weakling. He was found dead in his apartment last night. His name, if you care to look it up in the news files, was Banton Vickers. However, let that pass. We're finished with you."

"But I'm not finished," Fara said in a thick voice. I've never heard or seen so much infamy in all my life. If you think this town is through with you, you're crazy. We'll have a guard on this place day and night, and nobody will get in or out." of the new weaponshop."

Fara stood, remembering what the young man had said: "We'll advertise his presence." He thought in agony: His reputation! Not that his was a great name, but he had long believed with a quiet pride that Fara Clark's motor repair shop was widely known in the community and countryside. First, his private humiliation inside the shop. And now this lying to people who didn't know why he had gone into the store.

He hurried to the telestat and called Mayor Dale. His hopes crashed as the plump man said:

"I'm sorry, Fara. I don't see how you can have free time on the telestat. You'll have to pay for it. They did."

"They did!" Fara wondered if he sounded as empty as he felt.

"And they've paid Lan Harris for his lot. The old man asked top price, and got it. He phoned me to transfer the title."

"Oh!" Fara's world was shattering. "You mean nobody's going to do anything? What about the Imperial garrison at Ferd?"

Dimly, he was aware of the mayor mumbling something about the empress' soldiers refusing to interfere in civilian matters. "Civilian matters!" Fara exploded. "You mean these people are just going to be allowed to come here whether we want them or not, illegally forcing the sale of lots by first taking possession of them?" A thought struck him. "Look," he said breathlessly, "you haven't changed your mind about having Jor keep guard in front of the shop?"

The plump face in the telestat plate grew impatient.

"Now, see here, Fara, let the constituted authorities handle this matter." "But you're going to keep Jor there," Fara said doggedly.

The mayor looked annoyed. "I promised, didn't I? So he'll be there. And now, do you want to buy time on the telestat? It's fifteen credits for one minute. Mind you, as a friend, I think you're wasting your money. No one has ever caught up with a false statement."

Fara said grimly, "Put two on, one in the morning, one in the evening."

"All right. We'll deny it completely. Good night."

Dau.

"Yes," said Creel in a bitter tone. "He's all bad. I'm sure you don't realize how bad. He's as cold as steel, but without steel's strength or integrity. He took a long time, but he hates even me now because I stood up for you for so long when I knew you were wrong."

"What's that?" said Fara, startled; then gruffly: "Come come, my dear, we're both upset. Let's go to bed."

He slept poorly.

dereliction. And yet he didn't want to get the man into trouble.

Out in the street, he saw that a large crowd was gathering in front of the weapon shop. Fara hurried. A man he knew greeted him excitedly: "Jor's been murdered, Fara!"

"Murdered!" Fara stood very still, and at first he was not clearly conscious of the thought that was in his mind: Satisfaction! Now, even the soldiers would have to act. He realized the ghastly tenor of his mind. He said slowly, "Where's the body?"

"Inside."

"You mean those . . . scum-" In spite of himself, he hesitated over the epithet. It was difficult to think of the silver-haired weapon shop man in such terms. His mind hardened. "You mean, those scum killed him, then pulled his body inside?"

"Nobody saw the killing," said another man, "but he's gone and hasn't been seen for three hours. The mayor got the weapon shop on telestat, but they claim they don't know anything about him. They've done away with him, that's what, and now they're pretending innocence. Well, they won't get out of it as easily as that. Mayor's gone to phone the soldiers at Ferd to bring up some big guns."

Something of the excitement that was in the crowd surged through Fara, the feeling that big things were brewing. It was the most delicious sensation that had ever tingled along his nerves, and it was all mixed with a strange pride that he had been so right about this, that he at least had never doubted that here was evil. He did not recognize the emotion as the fullflowering joy that comes to a member of a mob. But his voice shook as he said, "Guns? Yes, that will be the answer, and the soldiers will have to come, of course."

Fara nodded to himself in the immensity of his certainty that the Imperial soldiers would now have no excuse for not acting. He started to say something about what the empress would do if she found out that a man had lost his life because the soldiers had shirked their duty, but the words were drowned in a shout:

nunuleu cleuits inat we coulu îl anoru lo spenu.

Fara couldn't have moved or spoken to save his life. The mayor went on, with self-pity in his tone, "We've all known that it wasn't wise to interfere with these weapon shops. So long as the Imperial government leaves them alone, what right have we to set up guards or act against them? That's what I've thought from the beginning, but this man ... this . . . this Fara Clark kept after all of us, forcing us to move against our wills, and so now we've got a seven-hundred credit bill to meet and-"

He broke off with, "I might as well make it brief. When I called the garrison, the commander laughed and said that Jor would turn up. And I had barely disconnected when there was a money call from Jor. He's on Mars." He waited for the shouts of amazement to die down. "It'll takes four weeks for him to come back by ship, and we've got to pay for it, and Fara Clark is responsible."

The shock was over. Fara stood cold, his mind hard. He said finally, scathingly, "So you're giving up, and trying to blame me all in one breath. I say you are all fools."

As he turned away, he heard Mayor Dale saying that the situation was not completely lost as he had learned that the weapon shop had been set up in Glay because the village was equidistant from four cities, and that it was the city business the shop was after. This would mean tourists, and accessory trade for the village stores.

Fara heard no more. Head high, he walked back to his shop. There were one or two catcalls from the mob, but he ignored them. The worst of it, as the days passed, was the realization that the people of the weapon shop had no personal interest in him. They were remote, superior, undefeatable. When he thought of it, he felt a vague fear at the way they had transferred Jor to Mars in a period of less than three hours, when all the world knew that the trip by fastest spaceship could never be made in less than 24 days.

Fara did not go to the express station to see Jor arrive home. He had heard that the council had decided to charge Jor with half of the expense of the trip, on the threat of losing his job if he objected. On the second night He supposed nothing of the kind, but it was an opening.

"It wasn't a man. It was a girl."

Fara knitted his brows. He didn't like the idea of making trouble for women. But the cunning devils! Using a girl, just as they had used an old man as a clerk. It was a trick that deserved to fail; the girl was probably a hussy who needed rough treatment. Fara said harshly, "Well, what's happened?"

"She's still out, bold as you please. Pretty thing, too."

The bolt off, Fara took the hard plate over to the polisher, and began patiently the long, careful task of smoothing away the crystals that heat had seared on the once shining metal. The soft throb of the polisher made the background to his next words, "Has anything been done?"

"Nope. The constable's been told, but he says he doesn't fancy being away from his family for another month or so, and paying the cost into the bargain."

Fara contemplated that for a minute, as the polisher throbbed on. His voice shook with suppressed fury when he said finally, "So they're letting them get away with it. It's all been as clever as hell. Can't they see that they mustn't give an inch before these . . . these transgressors? It's like giving countenance to sin."

From the corner of his eye, he noticed that there was a grin on the face of the other. It struck Fara suddenly that the man was enjoying his anger. And there was something else in that grin-a secret knowledge. Fara pulled the engine plate away from the polisher. He faced the ne'er-do-well. "Naturally, that sin part wouldn't worry you much."

"Oh," said the man nonchalantly, "the hard knocks of life make people tolerant. For instance, after you know the girl better, you yourself will probably come to realize that there's good in all of us."

It was not so much the words, as the I've-got-secret-in-formation tone that made Fara snap, "What do you mean -after I get to know the girl bet-ter! I won't even speak to the brazen creature."

scarlet, then went out, slamming the door. Fara stood for a moment, stiffly. Then, with jerky movements he shut off his power and went out into the street. The time to put a stop to that kind of thing was-now!

He had no clear plan, simply a determination to end an impossible situation. It was all mixed up with his anger against Cayle. How could he have had such a worthless son, he who paid his debts and worked hard, and tried to be decent and live up to the highest standards of the empress?

He wondered if there mightn't be bad blood on Creel's side, not from her mother, of course-Fara added the qualification hastily. There was a fine, hard-working woman, who would leave Creel a tidy sum one of these days. But Creel's father had disappeared when she was a child.

And now, Cayle with this weapon shop girl, who had let herself be picked up-he saw them as he turned the corner onto Second Avenue. They were heading away from Fara. As he came up, the girl was saying:

"You have the wrong idea about us. A person like you can't get a job in our organization. You belong in the Imperial service, where they can use young men of good appearance and ambition."

Fara was too intent for her words to mean anything. He said harshly, "Cayle!"

The couple turned, Cayle with the measured unhurriedness of a young man who had gone a long way on the road to acquiring steel-like nerves; the girl was quicker, but dignified.

Fara had a feeling that his anger was self-destroying, but the violence of his emotions ended that thought even as it came. He said thickly, "Cayle, get home at once."

He was aware of the girl looking at him curiously from strange, graygreen eyes. No shame, he thought, and his rage mounted, driving away the alarm that came at the sight of the flush that was creeping into Cayle's cheeks.

The flush faded into a pale, tight-lipped anger as Cayle half-turned to the girl and said, "This is the childish old fool I've got to contend with. For-

a partial product of that deeper problem. Only, now that the smash was here, he didn't want to face it.

All. through the day in his shop, he kept pushing it out of his mind, kept thinking: Would this go on now, as before, Cayle and he living in the same house, not even looking at each other when they met, going to bed at different times, getting up, Fara at 6:30, Cayle at noon? Would that go on through all the days and years to come?

Creel was waiting for him when he arrived home. She said: "Fara, he wants you to loan him five hundred credits, so that he can go to Imperial City."

Fara nodded wordlessly. He brought the money back to the house the next morning, and gave it to Creel, who took it into Cayle's bedroom.

She came out a minute later. "He says to tell you goodbye."

When Fara came home that evening Cayle was gone. He wondered whether he ought to feel relieved. But the only sensation that finally came was a conviction of disaster.

made many successful decisions, she had said-he remembered the words as if she were still speaking them-"Why, yes, I'm from Imperial City. I'm going back there Thursday afternoon."

This Thursday afternoon she was going to the great city, while he remained in Glay. He couldn't stand it. He felt ill, savage as an animal in his desire to go also. It was that, more than his quarrel with his father, which made him put pressure on his mother for money. Now, he sat on the local carplane to Ferd, dismayed to find that the girl was not aboard.

At the Ferd Air Center, waiting for the Imperial City plane, he stood at various vantage points and looked for Lucy Rail. But the crowds jamming toward the constant stream of interstate planes defeated even his alert eyes. All too soon his own vast machine glided in for a landing. That is, it seemed too soon until he saw the plane coming toward him. A hundred feet high at the nose, absolutely transparent, it shimmered like a jewel as it drew up in the roadstead.

To Cayle there came a tremendous excitement. Thought of the girl faded. He clambered aboard feverishly. He did not think of Lucy again until the plane was hurtling along over the evergreen land far below. He leaned back in his comfortable chair then, and wondered; What kind of a person was she, this girl of the weapon shop? Where did she live? What was her life as a member of an almost rebel organization? . . . There was a man in a chair about ten feet along the aisle. Cayle suppressed an impulse to ask him all the questions that bubbled inside him. Other people might not realize as clearly as he himself did that, though he had lived all his life in Glay, he wasn't really village. He'd better not risk a rebuff.

A man laughed. A woman said, "But, darling, are you sure we can afford a tour of the planets?" They passed along the aisle, Cayle assessing the casualness with which they were taking the trip.

He felt enormously self-conscious at first, but he also gradually grew casual. He read the news on his chair 'stat. With idle glances he watched the scenery speeding by below, adjusting his chair scope for enlarged vi-

gambler, but not quite decided about the others. The question was, which one was the sucker?

"Make the game more interesting," Seal suggested.

Cayle was suddenly pale. He realized now that these three were a team. And he was their selected victim. Instinctively, he glanced around to see how many people were observing his shame. To his relief, nobody at all was looking. The man who had been sitting ten feet away was not in sight. A stout, well-dressed woman paused at the entrance of the section but turned away. Slowly the color trickled back into his face. So they thought they had found someone who would be an easy mark, did they. He stood up, smiling.

"Don't mind if I do," he said.

He sat down in the vacant chair across from the yellow-eyed man. The deal fell to Cayle. In quick succession and honestly, he dealt himself a king down and two kings up. He played the hand to the limit and, even with the low stakes, eventually raked in about four credits in coins.

He won three out of the next eight games, which was below average for him. He was a callidetic, with temporary emphasis on automatic skill at cards, though he had never heard the word. Once, five years before when he was seventeen, while playing with four other boys for credit twentieths, he won nineteen out of twenty games of showdown. Thereafter, his gambling luck, which might have rescued him from the village, was so great that no one in Glay would play with him.

In spite of his winning streak now, he felt no sense of superiority. Seal dominated the game. There was a commanding air about him, an impression of abnormal strength, not physical. Cayle began to be fascinated.

"I hope you won't be offended," he said finally, "but you're a type of person who interests me."

The yellow eyes studied him thoughtfully, but Seal said nothing.

"Been around a lot, I suppose?" said Cayle.

He was dissatisfied with the question. It was not what he wanted. It sounded less than mature. Seal, mere gambler though he was, towered

and if anybody tells you that wonderful Venus is beckoning, tell 'em to go to hell- that's Venus. Hell, I mean. Endless sandstorms. And one day, when I was in Venusburg, the temperature rose to eight-four Centigrade." He finished. "They don't tell you things like that in the ads, do they?"

Cayle agreed hastily that they didn't. He was taken aback by the volubility of the reply. It sounded boastful like-he couldn't decide. But the man was abruptly less interesting. He had one more question.

"Are you married?" he asked.

Seal laughed. "Married! Listen, my friend, I get married every place I go. Not legally, mind you." He laughed again, significantly. "I see I'm giving you ideas."

Cayle said, "You don't have to get ideas like that from other people."

He spoke automatically. He hadn't expected such a revelation of character. No doubt Seal was a man of courage. But the glamour was gone from him. Cayle recognized that it was his village morality, his mother's ethics, that were assessing the other. But he couldn't help it. For years he had had this conflict between his mother's credos and his instinctive awareness that the world outside could not be compressed into the mores that encompassed village life.

Seal was speaking again, heartily. "This boy is really going to be somebody in ever-glorious Isher, eh, boys? And I'm not over-stating either." He broke off. "Where do you get all those good cards?"

Cayle had won again. He raked in the pot, and hesitated. He had won forty-five credits, and knew he had better quit before he caused irritation. "I'm afraid I'll have to stop," he said. "I've some things to do. It's been a pleas-"

He faltered, breathless. A tiny, glittering gun peered at him over the edge of the table. The yellow-eyed man said in a monotone, "So you think it's time to quit, eh?" His head did not turn, but his voice reached out directly at his companions. "He thinks it's time to quit, boys. Shall we let him?" It must have been a rhetorical question, for the henchmen merely grimaced.

on this big ship, with all its busy, self-centered people?" His voice hardened. "Hand it over! Quick! I'm not fooling. I'll give you ten seconds."

It took longer than that to turn over the money but apparently the continuity of acquiescence was all that was required. He was allowed to put his empty pocketbook back into his pocket and several coins were ignored. "You'll need a bite before we land," Seal said generously.

The gun disappeared under the table and Seal leaned back in his chair with an easy relaxation. "Just in case," he said, "you decide to complain to the captain, let me tell you that we would kill you instantly without worrying about the consequences. Our story is simple. You've been foolish and lost all your money at cards." He laughed and climbed to his feet, once more imperturbable and mysterious. "Be seeing ya, fellow. Better luck next time."

The other men were climbing to their feet. The three sauntered off and, as Cayle watched, they disappeared into the forward cocktail bar. Cayle remained in his chair, hunched and devastated.

His gaze sought the distant clock-July 15, 4784 Isher- two hours and fifteen minutes out of Ferd and an hour still to Imperial City.

With closed eyes Cayle pictured himself arriving in the old city as darkness fell. His first night there that was to have been so thrilling, would now be spent on the streets. Cayle moved out of her line of vision and sank into a seat.

A movement caught his distracted gaze. A man was slumping into a chair at the table across the aisle. He wore the uniform of a colonel in Her Imperial Majesty's Army. He was so drunk he could hardly sit, and how he had walked to the seat was a mystery rooted deep in the laws of balance. His head came around, and his eyes peered Wearily at Cayle.

"Spying on me, eh?" His voice went down in pitch, and up in volume. "Waiter!"

A steward hurried forward. "Yes, sir?"

"The finest wine for my shadow n'me." As the waiter rushed off, the officer beckoned Cayle. "Might as well sit over here. Might as well travel together, eh?" His tone grew confidential. "I'm a wino, y' know. Been trying to keep it from the empress for a long time. She doesn't like it." He shook his head sadly. "Doesn't like it at all. Well, what're you waiting for? C'mon over here."

Cayle came hastily, cursing the drunken fool. But hope came too. He had almost forgotten, but the weapon shop girl had suggested he join the Imperial forces. If he could obtain information from this alcoholic and join up fast, then the loss of the money wouldn't matter. "I've got to decide," he told himself. He distinctly thought of himself as making a decision.

He sipped his wine presently, more tense than he cared to be, eyeing the older man with quick, surreptitious glances. The man's background emerged slowly out of a multitude of incoherent confidences. His name was Laurel Medlon. Colonel Laurel Medlon, he would have Cayle understand, confidant of the empress, intimate of the palace, head of a tax collecting district.

"Damned, hic, good one, too," he said with a satisfaction that gave more weight to his words than the words themselves.

He looked sardonically at Cayle. "Like to get in on it, eh?" He hiccoughed. "Okay, come to my office-tomorrow."

His voice trailed. He sat mumbling to himself. And, when Cayle asked a question, he muttered that he had come to Imperial City "... when I was

able question, the older main would not listen to further appeals.

"And here I am," Cayle thought, "stripped because that old fool-" The futile anger faded. Because large towns like Ferd probably had their own special brand of cloth, as easily identifiable as anything in Glay. The unfairness of it, he saw with reaching clarity, went far beyond the stubborn stupidity of one man.

But it was good to know, even at this eleventh hour.

The colonel was stirring. And, once more, Cayle pressed his question. "But how did you get into the Army? How did you become an officer in the first place?"

The drunken man said something about the empress having a damned nerve complaining about tax money. And then there was something about the attack on the weapon shops being a damned nuisance, but that wasn't clear. Another remark about some two-timing dames who had better watch out made Cayle visualize an officer who maintained several mistresses. And then, finally came the answer to his question.

"I paid five thousand credits for my commission-damn crime ..." He gabbled again for a minute, then, "Empress insists on giving them out for nothing right now. Won't do it. A man's got to have his graft." Indignantly, "I sure paid plenty."

"You mean," Cayle urged, "commissions are available now without money? Is that what you mean?" In his anxiety, he grabbed the man's sleeve.

The officer's eyes, which had been half closed, jerked open. They glared at Cayle suspiciously. "Who are you?" he snapped. "Get away from me." His voice was harsh, briefly almost sober. "By God," he said, "you can't travel these days without picking up some leech. I've a good mind to have you arrested."

Cayle stood up, flushing. He staggered as he walked away. He felt shaken and on the verge of panic. He was being hit too hard and too often.

The blur faded slowly from his mind. He saw that he had paused to peer into the forward cocktail bar. Seal and his companions were still there. The sight of them stiffened him and he knew why he had come back to look at Cayle leaned back in his seal. The feit drained of vitality.

The trip, his first beyond Ferd, was taking toll of his strength. "How is it?" he asked finally, straightening, "that they didn't pick you? Oh, I know you probably aren't wearing village type clothes, but how do they select?"

The girl shook her head. "These men," she said, "go around surreptitiously using transparencies. The first thing they discover is, if you're wearing a weapon shop gun. Then they leave you strictly alone."

Cayle's face hardened. "Could I borrow yours?" he asked tautly. "I'll show those skunks."

The girl shrugged. "Weapon shop guns are tuned to individuals," she said. "Mine wouldn't work for you. And, besides, you can use it only for defense. It's too late for you to defend yourself."

Cayle stared gloomily down through the myradel floor. The beauty below mocked him. The splendor of the towns that appeared every few minutes merely deepened his depression. Slowly the desperation came back. It seemed to him suddenly that Lucy Rail was his last hope and that he had to persuade her to help him. He said, "Isn't there anything that the weapon shops do besides sell guns?"

The girl hesitated. "We have an information center," she said finally.

"What do you mean-information? What kind of information?"

"Oh, everything. Where people were born. How much money they have. What crimes they've committed or are committing. Of course, we don't interfere."

Cayle frowned at her, simultaneously dissatisfied and fascinated. He had not intended to be distracted but for years there had been questions in his mind about the weapon shops.

And here was somebody who knew.

"But what do they do?" He said insistently. "If they've got such wonderful guns why don't they just take over the government?"

Lucy Rail smiled and shook her head. "You don't understand," she said. "The weapon shops were founded more than two thousand years ago by a man who decided that the incessant struggle for power of different groups was insane and the civil and other wars must stop forever. It was a time founder the idea was the invention of an electronic and atomic system of control which made it possible to build indestructible weapon shops and to manufacture weapons that could only be used for defense. That last ended all possibility of weapon shop guns being used by gangsters and other criminals and morally justified the entire enterprise. For defensive purposes a weapon shop gun is superior to an ordinary or government weapon. It works on mind control and leaps to the hand when wanted. It provides a defensive screen against other blasters, though not against bullets but since it is so much faster, that isn't important."

She looked at Cayle and the intentness faded from her face. "Is that what you wanted to know?" she asked.

"Suppose you're shot from ambush?" Cayle asked.

She shrugged. "No defense." She shook her head, smiling faintly. "You really don't understand. We don't worry about individuals. What counts is that many millions of people have the knowledge that they can go to a weapon shop if they want to protect themselves and their families. And, even more important, the forces that would normally try to enslave them are restrained by the conviction that it is dangerous to press people too far. And so a great balance has been struck between those who govern and those who are governed."

Cayle stared at her in bitter disappointment. "You mean that a person has to save himself? Even when you get a gun you have to nerve yourself to resist? Nobody is there to help you?"

It struck him with a pang that she must have told him this in order to show him why she couldn't help him.

Lucy spoke again. "I can see that what I've told you is a great disappointment to you. But that's the way it is. And I think you'll realize that's the way it has to be. When a people lose the courage to resist encroachment on their rights, then they can't be saved by an outside force. Our belief is that people always have the kind of government they want and that individuals must bear the risks of freedom, even to the extent of giving their lives." of the face. The smaller man was plummeted out of his stool and knocked to the floor. His two companions jumped to their feet. Cayle kicked the nearer man in the groin, mercilessly. The fellow moaned, and staggered, clutching his stomach.

Ignoring him, Cayle dived at the third man, who was trying to get his gun from a shoulder holster. He struck the gambler with the full weight of his body, and from that moment the advantage was his. It was he who secured the gun, struck savagely with it at the man's groping hand and drew blood and a cry of pain, followed by a mad scramble to break free.

Cayle whirled, in time to see Seal climb to his feet. The man rubbed his jaw and they stood staring at each other. . "Give me back my money," said Cayle. "You picked the wrong man."

Seal raised his voice. "Folks, I'm being robbed. This is the most bare-faced-"

He stopped. He must have realized that this was not a matter of being clever or reasonable. He must have realized it for he suddenly held up his hands and said quickly, "Don't shoot, you fool! After all, we didn't shoot you."

Cayle, finger on trigger, restrained himself. "My money?" he snapped.

There was an interruption. A loud voice said, "What's going on here? Put up your hands, you with the gun."

Cayle turned and backed toward the near wall. Three ship's officers with portable blasters stood just inside the door, covering him. Not once during the argument that followed did Cayle lower his own gun.

He told his story succinctly and refused to surrender. "I have reason to believe," he said, "that the officers of a ship on which such incidents can occur are not above suspicion. Now, quick, Seal, my money."

There was no answer. He sent a swift look to where Seal had been-and felt a sense of emptiness.

The gambler was gone. There was no sign of the two henchmen.

"Look," said the officer who seemed to be in command, "put up your gun and we'll forget the whole matter." small amount. If you should desire, at some future date to pay an additional gratuity, I shall be happy to give you my address.

Cayle said, "I'll report you to your firm."

The officer shrugged. "Complaint forms are available in the lounge. You'll have to attend a hearing at our Ferd office at your own expense."

"I see," said Cayle grimly. "It works out very nicely for you, doesn't it?"

"I didn't make the rules," was the reply. "I just live under them."

Quivering, Cayle walked back to the salon where he had last seen the weapon shop girl. But she was still not in sight. He began to tense himself for the landing, now less than half an hour away. Below he could see that the shadows of approaching darkness were lengthening over the world of Isher. The whole eastern sky looked dark and misty as if out there, beyond the far horizon, night had already come.

A few minutes after Cayle had walked away from her, the girl closed her book and strolled in a leisurely fashion into a private telestat booth. She locked the door, then pulled the switch that disconnected the instrument from the main board in the captain's cabin.

She took one of the rings from her fingers, manipulated it into a careful integration with the government 'stat. A woman's face took shape on the screen, said matter-of-factly, "Information Center."

"Connect me with Robert Hedrock."

"One moment, please."

The man's face that came almost immediately onto the screen was rugged rather than handsome but it looked sensitive as well as strong and there was a pride and vitality in every muscular quirk, in every movement, that was startling to see. The personality of the man poured forth from the image of him in a ceaseless, magnetic stream. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet though resonant:

"Coordination department."

"This is Lucy Rail, guardian of Imperial Potential, Cayle Clark." She went on to describe briefly what had happened to Cayle. "We measured him as a callidetic giant and are watching him in the hope that his rise will be so sonal loan from you. Provide no other protection of any kind. He's on his own completely. Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"Goodbye then."

It required less than a minute for Lucy Hall to restore the 'stat to its full government status.

very fact that the girl had loaned him money and given him her name and address must prove something. Cayle sighed with pleasure, finally, and went out to get some supper.

He had noticed an automat at the comer. It was deserted except for a middle-aged man. Cayle bought a steak from the instantaneous cooking machine, and then deliberately sat down near the other diner.

"I'm new here," he said conversationally. "Can you give me a picture of the city? I'd appreciate it."

It was a new tack, for him, admitting naivete. But he felt very sure of himself, and very convinced that he needed data more than he needed to protect his own self-conscious pride. He was not too surprised when the stranger cleared his throat importantly and then said:

"New to the big city, eh? Been anywhere yet?"

"No. Just arrived."

The man nodded, half to himself, a faint gleam of interest in his gray eyes. Cayle thought cynically: "He's wondering how he can take advantage of me."

The other spoke again, his tone half-ingratiating now. "My name is Gregor. I live just around the corner in a skytel. What do you want to know?"

"Oh," Cayle spoke quickly, "where's the best residential district? Where's the business section? Who's being talked about?"

Gregor laughed. "That last-the empress, of course. Have you ever seen her?"

"Only on the 'stats."

"Well, you know then that she's just a kid trying hard to be tough."

Cayle knew nothing of the kind. Despite his cynicism, he had never thought of any member of the ruling family of Isher except in terms of their titles. Automatically, he rejected this man's attempt to make a human being out of Imperial Innelda.

He said, "What about the empress?"

"They've got her trapped in the palace-a bunch of old men who don't want to give up power."

tle short myself right now but-"

Cayle smiled wryly. So that was the extent of this man's machinations. It was part of the corrupt pattern of Isher life, but in this case such a mean and miserable part that it didn't matter. He shook his head and said gently:

"I'll be happy to go out some other time. Tonight, I'm kind of tired-you know, long trip-just got in."

He applied himself to his food, not at all unhappy. The conversation had done him no harm, in fact, he felt slightly better. Without ever having been in Imperial City, he had a better idea than Gregor as to what was, and what was not, sensible.

The meal cost more than he had expected. But even that he decided not to regret. After his experiences on the plane he needed sustenance. He went out onto the street contentedly. The neighborhood swarmed with children, and though it was already dark the play went on relentlessly.

Cayle paused for a moment to watch them. Their ages seemed to vary from about six to twelve years. Their play was of the group-rhythm type taught in all the schools, only this was heavily overlaid with a sex-motif that he had never seen before. He was startled, then rueful.

"Good heavens!" he thought. "I had the reputation for being a devil of a fellow. To these kids I'd be just plain naive."

He went up to his room, conscious that the young man over whom the elders of Glay had many times shaken their heads was really a simple, honest soul. He might come to a bad end but it would be because he was too innocent, not the other way around.

It disturbed him. In Glay there had been a certain pleasure in defying the conventions. In Glay he had thought of himself as being "city." Lying on the bed he knew that was true up to a point only. He lacked experience and knowledge, automatic response and awareness of dangers. His immediate plans must include remedies for these weaknesses. The vagueness of the purpose disturbed him. He had an uneasy feeling that he was making stop-gap decisions, that somehow he was not comprehending the main decision he must make one of these days.

out with a million, meaning, of course, a million credits." Whether or not this good fortune has ever been achieved the signs do not indicate.

The write-up concluded generously, "The Penny Palace has the distinction of having more fifty-fifty games for the number of machines it has in operation than any other establishment on the Avenue of Luck."

It was that plus the low stakes that interested Cayle. His immediate plans did not include walking out "with a million." He wanted five hundred credits to begin with. After that-well, then he could afford to enlarge his horizon.

He laid his first bet on a machine that pumped the words odd and even into a swirling pool of light. When ten of each had been pumped into the pool the liquid-looking stuff suffered a chemical change, after which it would support only one of the words on its surface. All the others sank through a screen and vanished.

The winning words floated easily face up and somehow set in motion the paying mechanism or the collecting mechanism. The bettors either saw their bets vanish with a click or else their winnings would slide automatically to the square before which they stood. Cayle heard the click of defeat.

He doubled his bet and this time won. He withdrew his original stake, and played with the coin he had won. The intricate lights fused, the pump squished, then up floated the word even. The pleasant sound of money sliding softly toward him assailed Cayle's ears. It was a sound that he was to hear often during the next hour and a half for, despite the fact that he played cautiously and only with pennies, he won just over five credits.

Tired at last he retreated to a connecting restaurant. When he came back into the "treasure room," as it was called, he noticed a game that was played in an even more intimate fashion by the player himself.

The money went into a slot, releasing a lever, and when this was pulled a light sequence was set up. The movement was very rapid but it resolved swiftly into red or black.

- The game was thus but another variation of the odd and even sequence, since the player had the same fifty-fifty chance of winning. Making more money could wait.

She came in almost immediately. "I'm out on the street now," she answered his request.

Cayle could see what she meant. Her face almost filled the screen. Extens-stats magnified from a tiny image. People used them on the street, keeping them connected with their home 'stats. One of the fellows in Glay had one.

Before Cayle could speak, the girl said: "I'm on my way to my apartment. Wouldn't you like to meet me there?"

Would he!

Her apartment turned out to be a four room affair, unique only in the abundance of automatic devices. After a quick look around, it was clear to Cayle that Lucy Rail never did a stroke of housework. What puzzled him, however, was that the place seemed unprotected. The girl came out of her bedroom dressed for the street and shrugged at his comment.

"We weapon shop people," she said, 'live just like anyone else, usually in the nicer residential districts. Only our shops and-" she hesitated-"a few factories and, of course, the Information Center are protected from interference."

She broke off. "You said something about buying a suit. If you wish I'll help you select it. I've only two hours, though."

Cayle held the door open for her, exhilarated. The invitation to her apartment must have a personal meaning. Whatever her duties for the weapon shops, they couldn't possibly include inviting obscure Cayle Clark to her apartment, even if only for a few moments. He decided to assume that she was interested in him as an individual.

They took a carplane, Lucy pushing the button that brought the machine down to pick them up.

"Where are we going?" Cayle asked.

The girl smiled, and shook her head. "You'll see," she said. When they were in the plane, she pointed up. "Look," she said.

cioures, une name ciour cremain in his memory.

"It's a store worth seeing," Lucy said.

It seemed to Cayle that she was enjoying his enjoyment. It made him feel a little naive-but not too much. What was important was that she was going with him. He ventured, "It's so kind of you to help me."

Haberdashery Paradise turned out to be more impressive than its ads. The building was three blocks long and eighty stories high. So Lucy told him; and added, "We'll go to the main sections quickly, then buy your suit."

The entrance to Paradise was a hundred yards wide, and thirty stories high. An energy screen kept the weather out but its doorless vastness was otherwise without barriers. It was easy to press through the harmless screen into the domed anteroom. The Paradise not only supplied beach clothing-it supplied a beach with a quarter of a mile of surging water tumbling from a misty horizon onto rich, tangy smell of the sea itself. Paradise not only supplied ski outfits, it supplied startlingly lifelike mountains with a twisting half-mile of snow-covered slope.

"Paradise is a COMPLETE STORE," said one flashing sign to which Lucy called his attention. "If there is anything you do not see that fits in with our slogan, 'Everything for the Man,' ask for it. We have it at a price."

"That includes women," Lucy said matter-of-factly. "They charge the same for women as they do for their suits, anywhere from five credits to fifty thousand. You'd be surprised how many women of good family register when they need money. It's all very discreet, of course."

Cayle saw that she was looking at him thoughtfully. And that he was expected to make a comment. It was so direct that he was startled. He said hastily, "I shall never pay money for a woman."

It seemed to satisfy her, for they went from there to the suits. There were thirty floors of suits but each floor had its own price range. Lucy took him to the twenty-thirty credit floor and pointed out to him the difference in weave between "city" cloth and the cloth of his own suit. For thirty-two credits he bought a suit, tie, socks and shoes.

"I don't think," said Lucy practically, "you should go any higher than that yet."

began to walk at a quickening pace.

By the time he came to where the Fifth Interplanetary Bank sat heavily on the base from which its ethereal spires soared to a height of sixty-four stories, ambition was surging in him again. It was a big bank in which to deposit the tiny sum of fifteen credits but the money was accepted without comment, though he was required to register his fingerprints.

Cayle left the bank, more relaxed than he had been at any time since the robbery. He had a savings account. He was suitably dressed. There remained one more thing before he proceeded to the third phase of his gambling career. From one of the public carplanes he had located the alldirectional sign of a weapon shop, nestling in its private park near the bank. He walked briskly up the beflowered pathway, and he was almost at the door when he noticed the small sign, which he had never seen before in a weapon shop. The sign read:

ALL METROPOLITAN WEAPON SHOPS

TEMPORARILY CLOSED

NEW AND OLD RURAL SHOPS OPEN AS USUAL

Cayle retreated reluctantly. It was one possibility he had not expected, the fabulous weapon shops being closed. He turned as a thought came. But there was no indication as to when the shops would reopen, no date, nothing at all but the one simple announcement. He stood frowning, experiencing a sense of loss, shocked by the silence. Not, he realized that that last should be bothering him. In Glay it was always silent around the weapon shop.

The feeling of personal loss, the what-ought-he-to-do-now bewilderment grew. On impulse, he tried the door. It was solid and immovable. His second retreat began, and this time he carried through to the street.

He stood on a safety isle undecided as to what button to push. He thought back over the two and a half hours with Lucy and it seemed a curious event in space-time. He felt appalled, remembering how drab his conversation had been. And yet, except for a certain directness, a greater decisiveness, her own conversation left no dazzling memories.

heading: STAFF OFFICES, PENTHOUSE.

A note in brackets under the listing said: Secure pass to penthouse elevator at reception desk on 15th floor.

The reception department took his name, but there was a subdued consultation before a man attached it to a relayer and submitted it for the examination of an inner office authority. A middle-aged man in captain's uniform emerged from a door. He scowled at Cayle. "The colonel," he said, "doesn't like young men." He added impatiently, "Who are you?"

It didn't sound promising. But Cayle felt his own stubbornness thickening in his throat. His long experience at defying his father made it possible for him to say in a level voice, "I met Colonel Medlon on a plane to Imperial City yesterday and he insisted I come to see him. If you will please inform him that I am here-"

The captain looked at him for a full half minute. Then, without a word, he went back into the inner sanctum. He emerged, shaking his head but more friendly. "The colonel says that he does not remember you but that he will give you a minute." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Was he-uh-under the influence?"

Cayle nodded. He did not trust himself to speak. The captain said in a low, urgent voice, "Go inside and push him for all he's worth. A very important personage has called him twice today and he wasn't in. And now you've got him nervous. He's frightened of what he says when he's under. Doesn't dare touch a drop when he's in town, you know."

Cayle followed the backstabbing captain, with one more picture of the Isher world taking form in his mind. Here was a junior officer who appeared to be maneuvering for his superior's job.

He forgot that as he stepped out of the penthouse elevator. He wondered tensely if he were capable of handling this situation. The gloomy feeling came that he wasn't. He took one look at the man who sat behind a great desk in the corner of a large room and the fear that he would be thrown bodily out of the 19th District Headquarters evaporated. more he paused. "I thought it was your position that made it possible for you to speak so strongly and so freely."

There was silence. Cayle had time for cautious self-congratulation but he did not delude himself. This man had not risen to his present position by being afraid or simpleminded.

"Uh-" said Colonel Medlon finally, "what did we-uh- agree on?"

"Among other things, sir," said Cavle, "you told me that the government was in need of officers and you offered me a commission."

"I do not," said Colonel Medlon, "recall the offer." He seemed to be bracing himself. "However, if I did so far forget myself as to make such an offer I have very regretfully to inform you that I have no authority to make you an officer. There is a regular procedure with regard to commissions, completely out of my hands. And since the positions are held in great esteem the government has long regarded them as a source of financial return. For instance, a lieutenancy would cost you five thousand credits even with my influence behind you. A captaincy would disturb you to the extent of fifteen thousand credits, which is quite a sum for a young fellow to raise and-"

Cayle had been listening with a developing wryness. Looking back over his words it seemed to him that he had done his best with the material. He just wasn't in a position to make use of Medlon's indiscretions. He said with a twisted smile, "How much is a colonelcy?"

The officer guffawed. "Young fella," he said jovially, "it is not paid for in money. The price comes out of your soul, one black spot at a time."

He broke off, earnestly. "Now, look," he said. "I'm sorry if I was a little free with Her Majesty's commissions yesterday, but you understand how these things are. And just to show you I'm not a welsher, even when I'm not responsible, tell you what I'll do. You bring five thousand credits here at your convenience in, say-well, two weeks, and I'll practically guarantee you a commission. How's that?"

This medion lighted up. The face of a young woman came onto the screen.

"Colonel," she said curtly, "where the hell have you been?"

The officer stiffened. Then turned slowly. But Cayle did not need the un-

easy reaction of the other man to realize who the woman was.

He was looking at the Empress of Isher.

That will be all, will Clark, the Salu, too loudly.

It was the loudness that brought Cavle out of his blur of emotional reaction. He was still ashamed of himself but it was a shame of something that had happened, not of what was happening. He had a sudden picture of himself, tall and well-dressed, and not too bad looking, standing here before a drink-wrecked caricature of a man, and before the woman of Isher. His gaze touched her face in the 'stat without flinching. He bowed slightly, an instinctive gesture that made him feel even better.

He had no doubt now of her identity. At twenty-five the Empress Innelda was not the world's most beautiful woman. But there was no mistaking her long, distinctive face and green eyes. It was the face of the Isher family of emperors and empresses. Her voice, when she spoke again, was her 'stat voice, familiar to anyone who had ever listened to her anniversary greetings-so different, though, to have her speaking directly at him.

"What is your name, young man?"

It was Medlon who answered, quicklv, his voice tense but calm. "An acquaintance of mine, Your Majesty." He turned to Cayle. "Goodbye, Mr. Clark. I enjoyed our conversation."

"I said, what is your name?" The woman ignored the interruption. It was spoken so straight at him that Cayle shrank. But he gave his name.

"And why are you in Medlon's office?"

Cayle caught Medlon's eye. A tense eye, it was, striving to attract his attention. A remote part of his brain had admired Medlon's skillful earlier words. His admiration faded. The man was in a panic. Deep inside Cayle a hope started. He said, "I was inquiring about the possibility of obtaining a commission in Your Majesty's armed forces."

"I thought so," said the empress in a level voice. She paused. She looked thoughtfully from Cayle to Medlon, then back to Cayle. Her skin was a smooth, light tan in color. Her head was proudly held. She looked young and alive and gloriously confident. And something of her experience in handling men showed then. Instead of asking Cayle the next question, she gave Medlon a way out.

"And may I ask, Colonel, what your answer was?"

familiar to me." Passion replaced the sarcasm. "Somehow or other, the young men who normally buy their way into the army have heard that something is up and so they remain away in droves. I am beginning to suspect there is a pro-weapon shop conspiracy to put off the few likely prospects who do turn up."

Her eyes flashed with green fires. It was apparent that she was angry and that the restraints were off. She turned to Cayle.

"Cayle Clark," she said in a ringing voice, "how much were you asked to pay for your commission?"

Cayle hesitated. Medlon's eye was a terrible thing to see, it was so dark. His half-turned head seemed unnatural in the way it was twisted. The message in that abnormal eye needed no words. The colonel was regretting everything he had said to the prospective lieutenant of Her Majesty's Imperial Army.

The appeal was so great that Cayle felt repelled. He had never before experienced the sensation of having a man completely at his mercy. It made him cringe. Abruptly, he didn't want to look. He said, "Your Majesty, I met Colonel Medlon on the Inter-State yesterday and he offered me a commission without any strings attached."

He felt better for the words. He saw that the officer was relaxing and that the woman was smiling with pleasure.

"Well, Colonel," she said, "I'm glad to hear that. And, since it answers in a satisfactory fashion what I was going to talk to you about, you have my felicitations. That is all."

The screen clicked into blankness. Colonel Medlon sank slowly back into his chair. Cayle walked forward, smiling. The colonel said in a level voice, "It has been a pleasure to meet you, young man. But now, I am very busy. I certainly hope I shall be hearing from you in the next two weeks with the five thousand. Goodbye."

Cayle did not move immediately, but the bitterness of the defeat was already upon him. Out of the darkness of his thoughts, came the consciousness that to him had come an improbable opportunity. And he had nullified for further attention at a later date.

Darkness was settling over the city of the Ishers when he finally emerged from District 19 Headquarters. He looked up at the cold fixed stars through a mist of ads, and felt much more at home than he had the night before. He was beginning to see his way through the maze of existence on this world. And it seemed to him that he had come through very well, considering his ignorance. All around him, the sidewalks began to give off the sunlight they had absorbed during the day. The night waxed brighter as the heavens above grew darker. He became more confident as he walked. He had been right to attack Seal regardless of risks, and he had been right to hold back on Medlon. Seal was an individual out in the open as he was, and basically no one cared what happened to him. But the colonel could call on the power of Isher law.

He had not intended to return to the Avenue of Luck until morning. But now having, it seemed to him, resolved his inner doubts, he changed his mind. If he could win five thousand credits and buy a commission, the treasures of Isher would start pouring in his direction. And Lucy Rail-he mustn't forget Lucy.

Even one day was too long to wait.

before he was fifteen, realized there was electronic intricacy behind the deceptive appearance of alertness. A ball of force was the core. It was about an inch in diameter and it rolled erratically inside a larger plastic ball. Faster, faster, faster it darted over the inner surface, until its speed transcended the resistance of matter. Then, like the pure force it was, it burst the limitations of its prison. Through the plastic it plunged, as if there were nothing there, as if it were a beam of light that had been imprisoned by an unnatural physical law in an almost invisible cage.

And yet, the moment it was free, it grew afraid. It changed color, subtly, swiftly, and it slowed. Its speed of escape must have been miles a second but so great was its fear that it stopped completely after traveling less than three feet.

It began to fall. And until the moment of fall, until it almost touched the table, it gave an illusion of being everywhere. It was an illusion entirely inside the minds of the players, a product of enormous velocity and mental hallucination. Each player had the conviction that the ball was flying straight toward him, that when it fell it would fall into the channel he had activated with a number. It was inevitable that the majority of the gamblers were due for disappointment when the ball, its mission accomplished, dropped into a channel and activated the odds mechanism.

The very first game in which Cayle participated paid him thirty-seven credits for his one. He raked in his winnings with an attempt at casualness but the shock of victory overflowed along his nerves in spasms of excitement. He placed a credit each in four channels, lost, then bet the same numbers again and won ninety credits. During the next hour he won on an average once in five times. He recognized that this luck was phenomenal even for him- and long before the hour was up he was risking ten credits in each channel that he played.

At no time did he have an opportunity to count his money. At intervals, he would thrust a handful of credits into the automatic changer and receive large bills, which he would press into an inner pocket. Not once did he draw on his reserves. After awhile, he thought in a curious panic, "I must have

put in his side pocket. There was more money in other pockets-and again and again, without being more than blurrily aware of the fact, he would strew large bills at random in various channels. How much he couldn't remember. Nor did it matter. The machine always counted accurately and paid him the right odds.

He was swaying now like a drunken man. His body seemed to be floating above the floor. He played on in an emotional mist almost oblivious of others. He did become conscious that more and more players were riding his luck, calling up his numbers in their own channels. But that was unimportant and personally meaningless. He did not come out of his daze until the ball plunked down like a dead thing in its cage. He stood stolid, waiting for the game to begin again, unaware that he had anything to do with its stopping until a plump, dark man came forward.

The stranger said with an oily smile, "Congratulations, young man, we welcome your patronage. We are happy for you-but for these other ladies and gentlemen we have bad news. The rules of this house, which are conspicuously posted in our fine establishment, do not permit luck riders, as we call them. This fortunate young man's trend of luck has been definitely established. Henceforth, all other bets must be placed before the 'winner' makes his choice. The machine has been set to react accordingly. So do not cause yourself disappointment by making a last-second wager. It will not work. And now, good luck to all of you and especially to you, young man."

He waddled off, still smiling. A moment later, the ball was whirling again.

It was during the third game that Cayle thought out of nothingness: "Why, I'm the center of attention." It startled him. He had come out of that oblivion on which he had counted to maintain his security. "I'd better slip out of here as quietly as possible," he thought.

He turned from the table-and a pretty girl threw her arms around him, pressed tightly against him and kissed him.

"Oh, please, let me have some of your luck. Please, please."

He couldn't move his hands without a woman's bare skin being available for his touch-naked arms, naked backs, and dresses cut so low in front that he was constantly having his head drawn down into soft, daintily perfumed bosoms. When he bent an inch for a natural reason the ever-present hands pulled him the rest of the way.

And still the night and his luck did not end. He had a sense of too much pleasure, too much applause at every spin, at every win. And whether he won or not women flung themselves into embraces with him and either kissed him commiseratingly or in a frenzy of delight. Wild music played in the background. He was twenty-three years old and the attack on every sense of his body overwhelmed his caution. When he had won uncountable thousands of credits the doors of the Penny Palace closed and the rolypoly man came over and spoke curtly.

"All right," he said, "that's enough. The place is cleared of strangers and we can stop this nonsense."

Cayle stared at him, and the clock of danger was ticking so loudly that his whole brain hummed with the sound. "I think," he mumbled, "I'll go home."

Somebody slapped his face-hard. "Again," said the plump man. "He's still riding an emotional jag." The second blow was harder. Cayle came out of his haze with a sharp comprehension that he was in deadly peril.

"What's going on here?" he stammered. His eyes appealed to the people who had been cheering him only minutes before. The people whose presence had lulled him ... It was impossible that anything would be done against him while they were around.

He whirled on ihe plump man. And then stood rigid as rough hands grabbed him and rougher hands probed in the pockets of his clothes relieving him of his winnings. As from a great distance he heard the plump man speak again.

"Don't be naive. There is nothing unusual about what has happened. All the regular players have been squeezed out. Not only out of the game, but out of the building. The thousand people in here now are hired for such

understand how sick. But somewhere on earth must be a scientist who could help him. The record was that he hadn't exploded.

He was walking rapidly now, and clear of the crowd. Once, he looked back, and saw that the people were dispersing in the aimless fashion of folk who had lost their center of interest. McAllister turned a corner, and forgot them.

"I've got to decide."

The words were loud, close. It took a moment to realize that he had spoken them.

Decide? He hadn't thought of his position as requiring a decision. Here he was. Find a scientist ... If that was a decision, he had already made it. The question was, who? Memory came of his old physics professor at City College. Automatically, he turned into a phone booth and fumbled for a nickel. With a sickening sense of disaster, he remembered that he was dressed in an all-enclosing, transparent suit, and that his money was inside. He drew back, then stopped, shaken. What was happening?

It was night, in a brilliant, glowing city. He was standing on the boulevard of an avenue that stretched jewel-like into remote distance. It was a street that flamed with a soft light gleaming up from its surface-a road of light, like a river flowing under a sun that shone nowhere else, straight and smooth.

He walked along for uncomprehending minutes, fighting a wild hope, but at last the thought forced through to his consciousness: Was this again the age of Isher and the gunmakers? It could be. It looked right, and it meant they had brought him back. After all, they were not evil, and they would save him if they could. For all he knew, weeks had passed in their time.

He began to hurry. Find a weapon shop. A man walked by him, and McAllister turned and called after him. The man paused curiously, and looked back, then continued on his way. McAllister had a brief picture of dark, intense eyes, and a visualization of a person on his way to a marvelous home of the future. It was that that made him suppress his impulse to run after the man. first mighty, unexpected blow of that untamed wind. Then, bracing himself, he fought for mental and physical calm.

The shining wondrous night city was gone. Gone also the glowing road. Both vanished, transformed into this deadly, wilderness world. He peered through the driving snow. It was daylight, and he could make out the dim shadows of trees that reared up through the white mist of blizzard less than fifty feet away. Instinctively, he pressed toward their shelter and stood finally, out of that blowing, pressing wind. He thought: "One minute in the distant future; the next-where?"

There was certainly no city. Only trees, and uninhabited forest and a bitter, primeval winter. How long he stood there, while those winds blew and that storm raged, he had no idea. He had time for a thousand thoughts, time to realize that the suit protected him from the cold as if there was no cold; and then-

The blizzard was gone. And the trees. He stood on a sandy beach. Before him stretched a blue, sunlit sea that rippled over broken, white buildings. All around, scattered far into that shallow, lovely sea, far up into the weed-grown hills, were the remnants of a once tremendous city. Over all clung an aura of incredible age, and the silence of the long-dead was broken only by the gentle, timeless lapping of the waves.

Again came that instantaneous transition. More prepared this time, he nevertheless sank twice under the surface of the vast, swift river that carried him on and on. It was hard swimming, but the insulated suit was buoyant with the air it manufactured each passing second. And, after a moment, he began to struggle purposely toward the tree-lined shore a hundred feet to his right. A thought came, and he stopped swimming. "What's the use!" The truth was as simple as it was terrible. He was being shunted from the past to the future. He was the "weight" on the long end of an energy seesaw; and in some way he was slipping further ahead and further back each time. Only that could explain the catastrophic changes he had already witnessed. In an hour would come another change.

Was.

Beyond doubt, the gunmakers had won their respite. For at the far end of this dizzy teeter-totter was the machine that had been used by the Isher soldiers as an activating force. It too teetered past, then future, in this mad seesaw.

But that decision. He'd really have to try to think about it...

brought to the attention of the weapon shop executive council. From the beginning he was on special duty and his assignment to the coordination department during an emergency was merely a normal step in his meteoric rise to weapon shop power.

Hedrock was aware that a few members of the council and a number of the top executives considered his ascent too rapid and not in the best interests of the weapon shops. That he was even regarded by some as a mysterious figure, though no sinister connotations were intended by the critics. No one actually questioned the verdict of the Pp machine in his favor, which puzzled him at times. At some later date, he decided, he would investigate the machine much more carefully and discover just why normally skeptical men accepted its judgments without question-

It had proved inordinately simple for him to fool it, lie to it, tell it his carefully doctored story.

True, he had special control of his mind and abnormal technical knowledge of machine reaction to biological processes. There was also the overruling fact of his friendliness to the weapon shops-which undoubtedly helped. The Pp machine, he had been told, had the weapon shop door's unique sensitivity for recognizing hidden hostility. And its basic structure included the ability, also built into every gun, to recognize and react within limitations. Like the weapons that would not kill except in self-defense or under other restrictions, its intricately acute electronic senses perceived minute differences in the reactions of every part of the examined body. It was an invention that had been developed since the last time he had been a member of the weapon shops a hundred-odd years before. It was new to him. And their dependence on it made it necessary for Robert Hedrock, Earth's one immortal man, friend of the weapon shops, to make sure it was as effective a safeguard as they thought.

But that was for later. It was the least of the problems confronting him. He was a man who had to make up his mind, how soon was not yet clearbut all too soon it seemed to him. The first great attack of the youthful empress had already closed the weapon shops in every large city on earth. was a platform just inside the door. From it projected an energy plane. Hedrock stepped into one of the pairs of insulators on the platform. The moment he felt them grip his shoes he walked out onto the vaguely glowing latticework of force.

In the center of the room (center on height-depth as well as length-width level) seven weapon shop councilors were standing around a machine that floated in a transparent plastic case. They greeted Hedrock briefly, then returned their attention to the machine. Hedrock watched them silently, conscious of their intense, unnormal depression. Beside him Peter Cadron whispered, "It's almost time for another swing."

Hedrock nodded. And slowly, as he gazed at the wizard mechanism floating in its vacuumized case, their absorption communicated itself to him. It was a map of time. A map of inter-crossed lines so finely drawn that they seemed to waver like heat waves on a torrid day.

Theoretically the lines extended from a central point into the infinite past and the infinite future (with the limitation that in the mathematics employed, infinity was almost zero). But after several trillion years the limitation operated to create a blurred effect, which was enhanced by the unwillingness of the eyes to accept the image. On that immense ocean of time, the shadowy shapes, one large and very near the center, one a mere speck on the curving vastness of the map, lay moveless. Hedrock knew that the speck was a magnified version of the reality, which was too small to make out with the naked eye. The image had been so organized that its every movement was followed by a series of magnifiers. These instruments were attuned to separate sensitive energies and adjusted automatically to the presence of additional onlookers.

As Hedrock watched with pitying eyes both shadows moved. It was a movement that had no parallel in macro-cosmic space-a movement so alien that the vision could not make an acceptable image. It was not a particularly swift process but, in spite of that, both shadows-withdrew? Where? Even the weapon shop scientists had never quite decided that. They withwhere in the name of space are we going to release it?

Hedrock tried to picture that. He had not been among those who talked to McAllister, the reporter from the twentieth century. His understanding of what had happened had been pieced together from fragmentary accounts. And one of his purposes in coming to this room now was to learn the details.

He drew Cadron aside and frankly asked for information. Cadron gazed at him with a wry smile. "All right," he said, "I'll tell you. The truth is, all of us are ashamed of the way we acted."

Hedrock said, "Then you feel that McAllister should not have been sacrificed?"

Cadron shook his head. "No, that isn't exactly what I mean." His frown deepened. "I guess the best method is to tell you the whole story-briefly, of course."

He began. "The girl attendant of the Greenway shop heard someone come and went out to attend to him. The customer was a queer looking chap in outlandish clothes. It turned out that he was a newspaper reporter from the twentieth century A.D. He was so obviously disconcerted, so fascinated by the showcases with their energy guns. And he gave an account of a weapon shop having appeared in a street in a little city in which he lived. I can imagine the sensation it caused but the truth is that everybody thought it was an illusion of some kind.

"It seemed solid, of course. But when the police tried to open the door, naturally it wouldn't open. McAllister, with a reporter's curiosity, finally tried the door himself. For him, of course-he not being a police or government official-it opened immediately. He went inside.

"He admitted to the attendant experiencing a sense of tension as he crossed the threshold and, although he didn't know it, it was at that moment that he picked up the first measure of time-energy, the equivalent of approximately seven thousand years-his weight being the other factor. When the attendant told her father-who was in charge of the shop-what had occurred, he realized immediately that something was wrong. In a few minutes he had verified that the shop was being subjected to titanic energy

ing upon McAllister and tossing him back into his own time. We could do this by putting him into an insulated space suit which would prevent him from exploding until we could develop a mechanism for that purpose.

"We knew that he would seesaw back and forth in time, shifting the government building and its energies out of this space-time area."

Cadron shook his head gloomily. "I still don't see what else we could have done. We were compelled to act swiftly in a field where no great knowledge is available, and the fact that we merely got out of the frying pan and into the fire was just our hard luck. But personally I feel very badly about the whole thing."

"Do you think McAllister is still alive?" Hedrock asked.

"Oh yes. The suit into which we put him was one of our supers, complete with an eight ring food-making device, and there's a cup in it that's always full of water. The other facilities are equally automatic."

He smiled a twisted smile. "We had an idea, completely false as it turned out, that we could save him at some later date."

"I see," said Hedrock. He felt depressed. It was unfortunate but all the decisions had been made before he had even heard of the danger.

The newsman was now the juggernaut of juggernauts. In all the universe there had never been anything like the power that was accumulating, swing by swing, in his body. Released, the explosion would rock the fabric of space. All time would sigh to its echoes and the energy tensions that created the illusion of matter might collapse before the strain.

"What's the latest about the building?" Hedrock asked.

Cadron was more cheerful. "It's still within its critical limits. We've got to make our decision before it reaches the danger stage."

Hedrock was silent. The matter of what the decision should be was a sore point with him, who was obviously not going to be asked. He said finally. "What about the men who are working on the problem of slowing the swings and bringing the seesaw back this way?"

Another man answered that. "The research is abandoned. Science four thousand seven hundred and eighty-four has no answer. We're lucky

we found his organization set-up to be efficient in the extreme. Mr. Hedrock, will you now bring us up to date?"

Hedrock glanced from person to person thoughtfully. He saw that they were watching him, and that raised his necessity level. His problem, it seemed to him, was to make up his own mind about the seesaw, then carry out his decision without regard for the attitude of his nominal superiors. It would be difficult.

He began succinctly, "Since the first directive was given me, we have set up one thousand two hundred and forty-two new shops, primarily in small villages, and three thousand eight hundred and nine contacts have been established, however tenuous in some cases, with Imperial government personnel, both military and civil."

He explained briefly his system of classifying the various individuals into groups on the basis of vocation, degree of importance and, what was more important, pitch of enthusiasm .for the venture into which the empress had precipitated her adherents.

"From three scientists," Hedrock went on, "who regard the weapon shops as an integral part of Isher civilization, we gained in the first ten days the secret of the science behind the time-energy machine in so far as that science is known to the government. We discovered that, of the four generals in charge of the enterprise, two were opposed to it from the beginning, a third was won over when the building disappeared-but the fourth, General Doocar, the man in charge, unfortunately will not abandon the attack until she does. He is an empress man in the sense of personal loyalty transcending his own feelings, and opinions."

He paused, expecting them to comment. But no one said anything. Which was actually the most favorable response of all. Hedrock continued, "Some thousands of officers have deserted the Imperial forces, but only one member of the Imperial Council, Prince del Curtin, openly opposed the attack after the execution of Banton Vickers who, as you knew, criticized the whole plan. And the prince's method of disapproval has been to withdraw from the palace while the attack is in progress. was to leave channels along which she could withdraw gracefully when the crises came."

He looked around, questioningly. He was keenly aware that, with these men he dared not try to put his ideas over in a disguised form. He said frankly, "I hope that Council members will not take it amiss if I recommend for their consideration the following basic tactic. I am counting on some opportunity occurring of which we can take advantage and so bring her whole war machine to a stop. My assumption is that once it has stopped the empress will busy herself with other matters and conveniently forget all about the war she started."

Bedrock paused in order to give weight to his next words. "My staff and I will watch anxiously for the opportunity and will call your attention to any-thing that seems to have possibilities. And now, are there any questions?"

The first few were minor. Then a man said, "Have you any notion as to what form this so-called opportunity will take?"

Hedrock said carefully, "It would be difficult to go into all the avenues that we are exploring. This young woman is open on many fronts to persuasion and to pressure. She is having a hard time with recruits for the army. She is still subject to the connivances and intrigues of a group of older people who are reluctant to accept her as an adult They withhold information from her. Despite her efforts to keep in touch with what is going on, she is caught in an old, old net: Her communication with the real world is snarled up." Hedrock finished. "In one way or another we are trying to take advantage of these various weaknesses."

The man who had already spoken said, "This is only a formula."

"It is a formula," said Hedrock, "based on my study of the character of the empress."

"Don't you think you had better leave such studies to the Pp machine expert and to the No-men?"

"I examined all the weapon shop data on the lady before offering my suggestion."

energy floors. Watching that pendulum could become a drug. The brain itself would be weakened by the strain of attending a mechanism which recorded the spasms of real bodies in their movements through time itself.

It was bad enough to know that the building and the man were swinging steadily back and forth.

He arrived back in his office just in time to catch a 'stat call-up from Lucy.

"... in spite of my efforts," she said, "I was forced out of the Penny Palace. And when the doors shut I knew what was going to happen. I'm afraid he was taken to one of the houses of illusion, and you know what that means."

Hedrock nodded thoughtfully. He noted sharply that the girl seemed disturbed by her experience. "Among other things," he said slowly, "the illusion energies have some qualifying effect on callidity. The nature of the modification cannot be determined without subsequent measurement but it can be stated with reasonable certainty that his luck will never again take the direction of success at gambling."

He had delayed his reaction while he examined her face. Now he said with decision, "It is unfortunate that Clark has fallen prey to all these pitfalls of the city so easily. But since he was never more than a long-run possibility we can let him go without regret, particularly-and this cannot be stressed too often-as even the slightest interference in the natural progression of his life would cause later suspicion that would nullify any good he might do us.

"You may accordingly consider yourself detached from him. Further instructions will, be given you in due course." He paused. "What's the matter, Lucy? Got an emotional fixation on him?"

Her expression left no doubt of it. Hedrock pressed on quietly, "When did you discover it?"

Whatever resistance had been in her, whatever fear of discovery, was gone. "It was when those other women were kissing him. You mustn't think," she added hastily, "that disturbed me. He'll go through quite a lot of it before he settles down."

He acted now with decision but without haste. From a wall safe he took the micro-film plans of the time control machine-the one in the room where he had talked to the weapon shop councilors a little more than two hours before. He had requested Information Center to send them to him and they had done so without comment. There was nothing unusual in their compliance. As head of the coordination department he had access to all the scientific knowledge of the weapon shops. He even had an explanation as to why he wanted the plans in the event that he was asked. He wanted to study them, so his story would go, in the hope that some solution would suggest itself. But his reasons were private and his purpose personal.

With the films in his pocket he headed along the corridor toward the nearest stairway. He went down five flights and came to a section of the Hotel Royal Ganeel that was not occupied by the weapon shops. He unlocked an apartment door, went inside, and locked the door behind him.

It was an imposing suite, as befitted an executive of the weapon shopsfive rooms and a tremendous library. He went straight to the library, closed and locked the door, then carefully examined the place for spying devices. There were none, which was what he expected. As far as he knew he was not under suspicion. But he never took unnecessary chances.

Swiftly he held one of the rings on his finger against an ordinary looking electric socket. A loop of metal slid out. He inserted his finger into the loop and pulled. What happened in that moment was an ordinary enough weapon shop phenomenon. He was transmitted by a weapon shop matter transmitter a distance of about eleven hundred miles into one of his numerous laboratories. What was out of the ordinary about the action was that the presence of the transmitter was not known to the weapon shop council. The laboratory had for centuries been one of his many closely-guarded secret retreats.

He decided that he could safely remain an hour. But that all he could hope to do in one night was to make another print of the microfilm. Building a duplicate machine would require many visits such as this. As it turned out he had time to make an extra print of the plans. Very carefully he put the

liance of the famous Avenue of Luck was unabated. Magic street still, alive with swarms of human moths fluttering from one light source to another. The lights themselves blazed day and night, but the crowds would gradually fade away as the darkness of the upper skies waned. It was time for her also to go home. But she lingered in an unnatural indecision, knowing she could do nothing, wondering what she could do. The inner conflict drained her strength and twice within an hour she paused for energy drinks.

There was something else, also, a sense of personal disaster. She had always taken it for granted that she would eventually marry a weapon shop man. All through school and college, when her own application for membership. was already approved, she had considered all others-the ordinary people-as outsiders. She thought with a piercing comprehension, "It was that moment on the ship when he was in trouble. I was sorry for him."

He was in deeper trouble now. If she could possibly locate the house he had been taken to, she would-what? Her mind paused. She felt astounded at the forcefulness of the idea that came. Why, it was ridiculous. If she went to one of these places she would have to go through with an illusion, mentally and physically.

It seemed to her, shakily, that the weapon shops would separate her from their organization for even considering such a thing. But when her mind automatically flashed back over the fine print of the documents she had signed, she couldn't recall any prohibition. In fact, some of the sentences, as she remembered them, were positively sensational when examined in her present situation:

"... Weapon Shop people may marry according to their desire ... participate in, or partake of, any vice or pleasure of Isher for persona! Reasons ... There are no restrictions on the use made of a member's spare time by the member...

"It is, of course, taken for granted that no member will wish to do anything that might harm his or her standing with the Pp machine ... as everyone has been clearly told...periodic examinations by the Pp will determine the status of a member's continuance with the shops..."In the event that a search for a comparatively normal sensual adventure ended with the even bolder participation of the ego.

She came out of her intent memory reverie to realize that she was walking rapidly toward the special flash signal of a 'stat station. Within a minute she had her connection with the Weapon Shop Information Center. A few seconds later she tucked a 'stat duplicate of the 2,108 addresses of Houses of Illusion in her purse, and headed for the Penny Palace.

Her decision was made and from that moment she had not a thought of drawing back.

Inside the Penny Palace she saw things that Cayle could not possibly have observed without having the knowledge that she had. The play, she saw, was almost back to normal. A few of the hired people were still ostentatiously playing at games that would otherwise have been bare of players. The moment enough legitimate pleasure seekers were risking money on a machine the hirelings withdrew casually. Lucy headed toward the rear of the great room, pausing frequently and pretending to watch the play at various games. She carried a weapon shop nullifier in her purse. So she opened and shut doors leading to the manager's office without setting off the Imperial-type alarms.

Inside she depended entirely on her ring alarm to warn her of the approach of anyone. Coolly but swiftly she searched the office. First she pressed the machine-file activator, pecking out the key word illusion: The file-screen remained blank. She clicked off the word house. No response.

Surely he had the address of the house or houses with which he dealt. In a fury she snatched up the 'stat book and operated its activators. But there, too, house and illusion produced no response. Was it possible this man Martin-she had found his name on various documents-had connections with only a few houses and had their numbers in his head? Grimly, she realized it was very possible indeed.

She had no intention of leaving before she had exhausted all the possibilities of her position. She made a quick examination of the contents of the desk. Finding nothing she settled into the comfortable chair and waited. Not FIElly yill, the salu at last.

It was obviously not a complete reaction. Lucy waited. And finally it came, a purring question with an overtone of snarl. "What do you want?"

"My husband."

From all angles that seemed to Lucy the best identification to make of herself. It was natural that there might be a Mrs. Cayle Clark in the back-ground.

"Husband?" echoed the man blankly. He looked genuinely puzzled.

Lucy said in a monotone, "He was winning. I waited in the background, keeping an eye on him. Then I was forced out by a pushing crowd. When I tried to get back in the doors were locked. And when they opened he wasn't there. I put two and two together and here I am."

It wasn't a long speech, but it covered the subject. It gave the picture of a worried, determined wife. And that was very important. It would be unfortunate if he suspected that the weapon shops were interested in Cayle Clark. She saw that understanding had come to the pig-like man.

"Oh, you mean him." He laughed curtly, his eyes watchful. "Sorry, young lady. I merely called a truckplane service that had contacts. What they do with the people they pick up I don't know."

Lucy said precisely, "What you mean is you don't know the address to which they took him but you know the kind of place. Is that correct?"

He stared at her thoughtfully, as if trying to make up his mind about something. Finally, he shrugged. "House of Illusion," he said.

The fact that she had guessed that did not make the confirmation less valuable. Just as his apparent frankness did not mean that he was telling the truth. Lucy said, "I notice there's a Lambeth in the corner over there. Bring it here."

He brought it instantly. "You'll notice," he said, "I'm not resisting."

Lucy made no reply. She picked up the Lambeth cone and pointed it at the fat man. "What is your name?"

"Harj Martin."

The Lambeth needles remained stationary. Martin it was.

would shoot under fewer restrictions than the guns sold to consumers.

Martin sighed. "Very well," he said. "The name of the firm is Lowery Truckplanes."

The Lambeth needles indicated the name was correct. Lucy backed toward the door. "You're getting off easy," she said. "I hope you realize that."

The fat man nodded, licking his lips. She had a final mental picture of his blue eyes watching her warily, as if he still hoped to catch her off guard.

No further words were spoken. She opened the door, slipped through, and half a minute later was safely out on the street.

Anton Lowery was a blond giant who lifted himself sleepily from his pillow and stared stupidly at Lucy. He made no attempt to get up. He said finally, "I don't know where they would have taken him. It's just transportation business with us, you understand. The driver calls up houses at random, until he finds one that can use a man. We don't keep records."

He sounded vaguely indignant. Like an honest trucker whose business ethics were being questioned for the first time. Lucy wasted no time arguing the matter. "Where can I locate the driver?" she asked. It seemed the driver had gone off duty at 2 A.M. and was not due back for another 66 hours. "It's these unions," said Mr. Lowery. "Short hours, big pay and plenty of time off." Giving her the information seemed to bring him a satisfaction, a sense of victory over her that detracted considerably from the indignation of his tone. "Where does he live?" Lucy asked.

He hadn't the faintest idea. "Might get that from the union," he suggested. "They don't give us addresses."

It turned out that he couldn't remember the name of the union. The Lambeth, which she had brought with her from the Penny Palace, verified his statements one by one. Lucy sagged. In three days Cayle would be initiated into the sordid life of the houses of illusion. The dark thought aroused her to abrupt anger.

"Damn you!" she said savagely. "When the driver reports back to work, you get the address of the house from him. I'll call you ten minutes after he's due back and you'd better have the information."

She slept on that thought like an overtired child.

was not responsible for her feelings. He had merely recognized them, and used his knowledge of psychology to intensify her pursuit. A callidetic of the measurement of Cayle Clark would yet make himself felt in Isher. The chance that the impact would affect the war itself was not impossible. Once started on the right path, the pace of activity, the pattern of callidity, would be a direct moving cube, piling up so fast that no human brain would grasp the extent of what was happening until afterwards. If only there were some way of discovering what form it would take-Hedrock shook himself inwardly. He was not given to wishful thinking. They would simply have to watch Clark's movements and hope that they would recognize the moment when it arrived. He saw that the girl was waiting for him to speak again. His thoughts grew instantly sharp. He said, "What time is your appointment?"

"Tonight at ten-thirty." She managed a grim smile. "The receptionist insisted I be on time. Apparently, they can hardly handle the business they get."

"Supposing he isn't among those available at that time-what will you say?"

"I gather that there is a complete illusion break at that time. The men and women are then allowed to select partners. However, if he shouldn't be available, I shall not be either. I shall be very finicky."

"Do you think Clark will recognize you?" He saw that she didn't understand what he meant. He explained. "The illusions leave after-image hallucinations which interfere with visual perception."

Lucy said, "I'll make him recognize me."

She described several methods she would use. Hedrock considered them, then shook his head. "It's obvious," he said, "that you've never been in a house. These people are perpetually, endlessly, suspicious. Until you are actually in a state of illusion your chances of saying anything that is not overheard are dim. Once the automatic machines begin radiating stimuli they don't worry about you any more. Bear that in mind and adjust yourself to any situation that may come up." coordination office. His work was his life. Virtually all his waking hours were spent at his desk. Now he called the weapon shop naval headquarters and ordered them to dispatch a protective warship. And still he was not satisfied. Frowning, he considered the potentialities of Lucy's position and finally called for her secret file. In two minutes, by weapon shop interspatial transportation, the remote Information Center precipitated the plate onto the table in front of him. First, he checked the facts-comprehension 110, horizon 118, plethora 105, dominance 151, ego 120, emotional index 150-

Hedrock paused there. Compared to the norm of 100, not forgetting the average of 85, Lucy was a fine, intelligent girl with a somewhat high-category emotional capacity. It was that that had brought her into the affair. After Cayle Clark was identified (by a routine check-up on the crowds that gathered before a new weapon shop) as a callidetic giant it was decided to contact him through the medium of an unmarried woman with a high emotion index.

Deliberately, the weapon makers' Council anticipated that the callidetic would excite fixation in Lucy. There were other factors involved in her selection, mostly sanity safeguards for a young woman who was going to be subjected to unnatural stresses. For one thing it was desirable, from the point of view of the girl's happiness, that the attraction be mutual for the time being. Permanency, of course, could not be guaranteed in a changing world.

One by one Hedrock examined the factors applicable to the present situation. At last he sighed. He felt sorry for Lucy. The weapon shops did not normally interfere with the private lives of their members or of anyone. Only the unparalleled emergency justified using an individual human being as a pawn.

Thought of the emergency drew his mind. He returned the file to Information Center then switched on the 'stat again. He manipulated it intently, rejected several images that resulted from the "draw" of energy in the room he was aiming at and finally had what he wanted, the map of time. He had no difficulty locating the large shadow. It was lying six weeks and a day in few dozen agents who obtained immediate and direct access to him at any time of the day or night. Those not so favored talked to machines or to any one of a dozen executives who alternated on a three-shift basis.

Again and again the condensed accounts required more thorough investigation. Not once did he begrudge the time. Not once did he let himself feel rushed. Each report was examined in the detail that he considered necessary.

Ten-thirty came and, though he was aware that Lucy must now have arrived at the house, he paused only briefly and called the weapon shop warship, which was hovering high above the place. For a moment he examined the house itself as it showed through a telescope, a toylike structure in a suburban estate that seemed all garden. Then, the picture of it clear in his mind, he turned to his work. Flowers and shrubs protruded cunningly from a score of breaks in the abundant stone that made up the larger part of the yard. A massive screen of gigantic green-fronded plants started about a hundred feet from the entrance of the building, and almost hid it from view.

She walked under them, and came presently to an entrance that built up gradually, beginning as a low fence that soon towered higher than her head, and finally curved up above her to form a gleaming roof. She could see the end of it nearly fifty yards ahead.

Twice, involuntarily, she slowed. The first time, something soft seemed to caress her face. It was almost as if a loving hand reached out and delicately touched her, with affectionate fingers. The second time, the result was more dramatic. She caught her breath suddenly. A flush burned her face and spread warmly down her body. She felt embarrassed yet happy, a little shy but excited. She couldn't help wondering if this could be how a young girl might feel on her wedding night.

It was in just such nuances that the House of Illusion excelled. Here, tired old rogues-men and women both- could recapture for a price otherwise lost emotions of their abused bodies.

She reached the turning of the corridor, and found herself confronted by an alcove fitted with scores of mirrors. She moved toward them hesitantly, wondering if they could be doors, disturbed by the possibility that she might choose the wrong one. She paused finally, and waited for one of the doors to open. But after a minute or so, nothing had happened; so she began to push against the face of first one mirror, then another.

The first six were solid, as if there was an immovable wall behind them. The seventh opened easily, and proved to be a swinging door. She went through it into a corridor that was only a little wider than her body. Her shoulders kept brushing the walls, and she had an uneasy feeling of being closed in, a distinct sensation of the space being too narrow for comfort. It was more than a physical feeling. It was in her mind, associated with, fears of confined places, somehow connected with all the unknown things that pation of immeasurable joy about to be experienced. Breathlessly, she came to the end of the corridor, and pushed at the narrow wall-end that was there. It opened easily, and this time, to her relief, she saw that she had come to a small though nicely furnished room. As she entered, she saw that a woman sat behind a desk just left of the door. Lucy stopped, and the woman said:

"Sit down, please. Naturally, there has to be an interview the first time someone visits our establishment."

She was a woman of forty or so, with classically good-looking face, except that her eyes were narrowed and her lips drawn into a thin line. Silently she indicated a chair, and Lucy sat down without a word. The woman began:

"You understand, my dear, that everything you tell me will be kept confidential. In fact-" Her lips made the motions of a smile, and she touched her forehead with a manicured finger-"it never gets beyond here. But I must tell you that I have a perfect memory. Once I hear somebody talk, or see someone, I never forget them."

Lucy said nothing. She had met a number of individuals with eidetic memories; and she accepted the woman's statement that she had such a memory. From all the accounts she herself had heard of the Houses of Illusion, no record had ever been found of the customers. Apparently, this house kept its records inside the mind of someone who could remember such things.

The woman went on, "This means, of course, that we operate on a strictly cash basis. What is your annual income?"

"Five thousand credits." Lucy did not hesitate.

"Where do you work?"

Lucy named a firm well-known in the city. All this was simple, and long prepared for by the weapon shops. Every weapon shop member was listed as a worker in an organization which was either secretly owned by the shops or else owned by a weapon shop supporter. Thus, if a member was tions, involved. Actually, her income had other charges on it-a thousand credits income tax, for instance. Her clothes bill was much higher than twenty-five credits. And yet-and yet, she could, if necessary, if her craving for pleasure over-reached her caution, get by on even less than the woman had indicated. Inherent in the other's calculations was the obvious fact that a person on the downward path would want to come oftener than once a week. In such an event, she could move to cheaper quarters, buy less expensive clothes, eat less-there were many short cuts possible, and all of them as old as human corruption.

The woman placed the money in a drawer, and stood up. "Thank you, my dear. I hope we have a long and mutually satisfying association. Through this door, please." It was another concealed door, and it led to a broad corridor with an open doorway at the end of it. As she approached it, Lucy saw that it was a large and luxurious bedroom. The size of it was apparent even before she reached it. Several things about it made her suspicious, and so she did not enter immediately, but paused instead on the threshold, and studied the interior. She must, she told herself, remember that this was a House of Illusion. Here, what would normally seem real, might be nothing but fantasy. She recalled the clues Hedrock had given her as to how to detect the mechanically-induced delusions. And presently she saw that if she let herself look at the room out of the corners of her eyes, the scene blurred curiously, particularly at the very edge of her vision. She seemed to see the figure of a woman, and there was a suggestion of the room being larger than it appeared now. Lucy smiled, walked towards the far wall, straight through it-solid though it seemed-and found herself in an enormous room that glittered with mirrors along three of its walls. A woman attendant hurried towards her, and bowed apologetically. "You will please pardon us, Miss. But since this is your first visit to our establishment, it was necessary to assume that you knew nothing of our little bag of tricks. Did you learn about this particular illusion from a friend, or have you been to other houses?"

not.

The white dress was wonderfully soft to her touch; and as she slipped it over her head, the feel of it on her skin brought a gasp of delight from her lips. The creation was made of a special costly cloth that was designed to affect only the pleasure nerves of the body. Its cost was more than a hundred credits a yard.

She stood for a long moment, letting the sensation of pleasure creep over her. Abruptly, excitement swept her. She swayed dizzily, and thought: "It really doesn't matter. Whatever happens here tonight, I'm going to have fun."

She slipped her feet cozily into the sandals, staggered a little as she fumbled for the catch of the door; and then, steady again, opened it, and stood blinking at a vista-like room where men sat at tables along one wall and women along the opposite wall. The walls glittered with colorful plastic designs. A great liquor bar spread all across the side of the room facing her. Lucy made a half-hearted attempt to test for illusion by looking at the scene out of the corners of her eyes. But she didn't worry about it. This was it. Here was the concourse room. In a few minutes she would have her chance to get Cayle. If she didn't make contact-well, it didn't matter. There were other nights. So she told herself hazily.

She walked out into the room, swaggering a little. Scornfully, she surveyed the other women, sitting at their little tables, drinking from tiny glasses. Most were older than she was, older by a great deal. Abruptly bored by her competition, she glanced towards the men on the far side of the room. She saw with momentary interest that what had seemed one room was in reality two. A transparent barrier ran the full length of the room from ceiling to floor, dividing the men from the women. It was possible, of course, that the barrier also was an illusion. And that it would disappear either for individuals or for the entire group at the right moment. Lucy, who knew something of the energies involved in the processes by which the houses achieved their effects, guessed that such a joining of the two sections would eventually occur.

tion."

She looked steadily at her watch, determined not to be rushed. The hands showed five seconds of the end of the minute when a slim little man came out of the alcove, and raised his hand. Lucy glanced hastily toward Cayle, saw with a sudden lift that he was watching her, and then heard the little man say in a cheerful tone:

"Down goes the barrier, folks. Now's the time to get acquainted."

There were different reactions to the signal. Most of the women remained seated. Several, however, got up hastily and hurried across the room. Lucy, sensing that Cayle was coming toward her, stayed where she was. He sank down into the chair opposite her, and said steadily, "I think you're very attractive, Miss."

She nodded her acceptance of the compliment, not trusting herself to speak. An attendant bent down beside her. "Satisfactory, Miss?" The question was softly spoken.

Lucy inclined her head again. The attendant said, "This way."

She stood up, thinking: "As soon as we're alone, we can start to plan."

There was a sudden flurry of excitement at one of the doors. The woman who had originally interviewed Lucy rushed in, and spoke in a low tone to the little man. A moment later, a bell began to ring. Lucy half-turned; and, doing so, in some curious fashion lost her balance. She felt herself falling into darkness ...

Hedrock was still in his office at five minutes after eleven when the 'stat buzzed, and Lucy's face came on the screen. She shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't know what happened. Things seemed to be going along all right. He recognized me without giving away that he knew me, and we were apparently about to be led to some private room, when everything went black. The next thing I knew I was here in my apartment."

"Just a moment," Hedrock said.

He broke the connection, and called the warship. The commander shook his head. "I was just about to call you. There was a police raid, and the warning must have been very short, because they loaded the women said, but that eliminates min nom the picture. We don't date interfere.

"What'll I do?" she asked.

"Just wait," he said. "Wait."

That was all there was to say.

ior us.

He could see from the gray look in Creel's face the thought that was in her mind. He said under his breath: "Damn that boy!"

But he felt relieved. Amazingly, relieved! Cayle was beginning to appreciate the value of parents. He switched on the viewer. "Come and collect," he said.

The face that came on the screen was heavy-jowled, beetle-browed and strange. The man said: "This is Clark Pearton of the Fifth Bank of Ferd. We have received a sight draft on you for ten thousand credits. With carrying charges and government tax, the sum required will be twelve thousand one hundred credits. Will you pay it now or will you come in this afternoon and pay it?"

"B-but ... b-but-" said Fara. "W-who-" He stopped, conscious of the heavy-faced man saying something about the money having been paid out to Cayle Clark, that morning, on emergency call. At last Fara found his voice:

"But the bank had no right," he expostulated, "to pay out the money without my authority."

The voice cut him off coldly. "Are we then to inform our central that the money was obtained under false pretenses? Naturally, an order will be issued immediately for the arrest of your son."

"Wait ... wait-" Fara spoke blindly. He was aware of Creel beside him, shaking her head at him. She was white, and her voice was a sick, stricken thing, as she said:

"Fara, let him go. He's through with us. We must be as hard. Let him go."

The words rang senselessly in Fara's ears. They didn't seem to fit into any normal pattern. He was saying: "I ... I haven't got- How about my paying ... installments?"

"If you wish a loan," said Clerk Pearton, "naturally we will be happy to go into the matter. I might say that when the draft arrived, we checked up on your status, and we are prepared to loan you eleven thousand credits on indefinite call with your shop as security. I have the form here, and if you money. He salu it was an emergency.

Creel said in a low, dead voice, "In one hour he's stripped us of our savings. He must have done it deliberately, thinking of us as two old fools who wouldn't know any better than to pay it."

"All I see," Fara interrupted, "is that I have saved our name from disgrace."

His high sense of duty rightly done lasted until mid-afternoon, when the bailiff from Ferd came to take over the shop.

"But what-" Fara began.

The bailiff said, "The Automatic Atomic Repair Shops, Limited, took over your loan from the bank and are foreclosing."

"It's unfair," said Fara. I'll take it to court." He was thinking dazedly: If the empress ever learned of this, she'd ... she'd-

The courthouse was a big, gray building; and Fara felt emptier and colder every second, as he walked along the gray corridors. In Glay, his decision not to give himself into the hands of a lawyer had seemed a wise act. Here, in these enormous halls and palatial rooms, it seemed the sheerest folly.

He managed, nevertheless, to give an account of the criminal act of the bank in first giving Cayle the money, then turning over the note to his chief competitor, apparently within minutes of his signing it. He finished with, "I'm sure, sir, the empress would not approve of such goings-on against honest citizens."

"How dare you," said the cold-voiced person on the bench, "use the name of her holy majesty in support of your own gross self-interest?"

Fara shivered. The sense of being intimately a member of the empress' great human family yielded to a sudden chill and a vast mind-picture of the ten million icy courts like this, and the myriad malevolent and heartless men-like this-who stood between the empress and her loyal subject, Fara. He thought passionately: If the empress knew what was happening here, how unjustly he was being treated, she would-

Or would she?

without a word. She said finally, curtly:

"Nothing doing. Fara. I'm one who has to make loans often from the bank to swing deals. If I tried to set you up in business, I'd find the Automatic Atomic Repair people getting after me. Besides, I'd be a fool to turn money over to a man who lets a bad son squeeze a fortune out of him. Such a man has no sense about worldly things. And I won't give you a job because I don't hire relatives in my business." She finished. "Tell Creel to come and live at my house. I won't support a man, though. That's all."

He watched her disconsolately for a while, as she went on calmly superintending the clerks who were manipulating the old, no longer accurate measuring machines. Twice her voice echoed through the dust-filled interior, each time with a sharp: "That's overweight, a gram at least. Watch your machine."

Though her back was turned, Fara knew by her posture that she was still aware of his presence. She turned at last with an abrupt movement, and said, "Why don't you go to the weapon shop? You haven't anything to lose, and you can't go on like this."

Fara went out then, a little blindly. At first the suggestion that he buy a gun and commit suicide had no real personal application. But he felt immeasurably hurt that his mother-in-law should have made it. Kill himself? It was ridiculous. He was still a young man, just going on fifty. Given the proper chance, with his skilled hands, he would wrest a good living even in the world where automatic machines were encroaching everywhere. There was always room for a man who did a good job. His whole life had been based on that credo.

He went home to find Creel packing. "It's the common sense thing to do," she said. "We'll rent the house and move into rooms."

He told her about her mother's offer to take her in, watching her face as he spoke. Creel shrugged. "I told her 'No' yesterday," she said thoughtfully. "I wonder why she mentioned it to you."

Fara walked swiftly over to the great front window overlooking the garden with its flowers, its pool, its rookery. He tried to think of Creel away So it was to be death!

suffer the humiliation of being recognized. But now that his fear was realized, he stood his ground stubbornly. The important thing about killing himself was that there be nobody for Creel to bury at great expense. Neither knife nor poison would satisfy that basic requirement. "I want a gun," said Fara, "that can be adjusted to disintegrate a body six feet in diameter in a single shot. Have you that kind?"

The old man turned to a showcase and brought forth a sturdy revolver that glinted with all the soft colors of the inimitable Ordine plastic. The man said in a precise voice, "Notice the flanges on this barrel are little more than bulges. This makes the model ideal for carrying in a shoulder holster under the coat. It can be drawn very swiftly because, when properly attuned, it will leap toward the reaching hand of its owner. At the moment it is attuned to me. Watch while I replace it in its holster and-"

The speed of the draw was amazing. The old man's fingers moved; and the gun, four feet away, was in them. There was no blur of movement. It was like the door the night that it had slipped from Fara's grasp, and slammed noiselessly in Constable Jor's face. Instantaneous!

Fara, who had parted his lips, as the old man was explaining, to protest the needlessness of illustrating any quality of the weapon except what he had asked for, closed them again. He stared in fascination. And something of the wonder that was here held his mind and his body. He had seen and handled the guns of soldiers, and they were simply ordinary metal or plastic things that one used clumsily like any other material substance, not like this at all, not possessed of a dazzling life of their own, leaping with an intimate eagerness to assist with all their superb power the will of their master.

With a start, Fara remembered his purpose. He smiled wryly, and said, "All this is very interesting. But what about the beam that can fan out?"

The old man said calmly, "At pencil thickness, this beam will pierce any body except certain alloys of lead up to four hundred yards. With proper adjustment of the firing nozzle, you can disintegrate a six-foot object at fifty yards or less. This screw is the adjuster." self at any time. That is your personal privilege in a world where privileges grow scantier every year. As for the price of this revolver, it's four credits."

"Four ... only four credits!" said Fara.

He stood astounded, his mind snatched from its dark purpose. Why, the plastic alone was-and the whole gun with its fine, intricate workmanshiptwenty-five credits would have been cheap. He felt a thrill of interest. The mystery of the weapon shops suddenly loomed as vast and important as his own black destiny. But the old man was speaking again:

"And now, if you will remove your coat, we can put on the holster."

Automatically, Fara complied. It was vaguely startling to realize that, in a few seconds, he would be walking out of here, equipped for self-murder, and that there was now not a single obstacle to his death. Curiously, he was disappointed. He couldn't explain it, but somehow there had been in the back of his mind a hope that these shops might, just might-what?

What indeed? Fara sighed. And grew aware again of the old man's voice:

"Perhaps you would prefer to step out of our side door. It is less conspicuous than the front."

There was no resistance in Fara. He was conscious of the man's fingers on his arm, half guiding him; and then the old man pressed one of several buttons on the wall-so that's how it was done-and there was the door. He could see flowers beyond the opening. Without a word he walked toward them. He was outside almost before he realized it. vision, his very being was concentrating on the section of machine that stood where the weapon shop had been. His brain lifted up, up in his effort to grasp the tremendousness of the dull-metaled immensity of what was spread here under a summer sun beneath a sky as blue as a remote southern sea.

The machine towered into the heavens, five great tiers of metal, each a hundred feet high; and the superbly streamlined five hundred feet ended in a peak of light, a spire that tilted straight up a sheer two hundred feet farther, and matched the sun for brightness.

And it was a machine, not a building, because the whole lower tier was alive with shimmering lights, mostly green, but sprinkled colorfully with red and occasionally blue and yellow. Twice, as Fara watched, green lights directly in front of him flashed unscintillatingly into red.

The second tier glowed with white and red lights, although there were only a fraction as many lights as on the lowest tier. The third section had on its dull-metal surface lights of blue and yellow; they twinkled softly here and there over the vast area.

The fourth tier was a series of signs, that brought the beginning of comprehension. The whole sign was:

WHITE-BIRTHS RED-DEATHS GREEN-LIVING BLUE-IMMIGRATION TO EARTH YELLOW-EMIGRATION The fifth tier was all sign, finally explaining: SOLAR SYSTEM 11,474,463,747 EARTH 11,193,247,361 MARS 97,298,604 VENUS 141,053,811 MOONS 42,863,971

The numbers changed, even as he looked at them, leaping up and down, shifting below and above what they had first been. People were dy-

to mars, when another of the main's words penetrated.

"Case?" said Fara violently. "Individual case!"

The man, a heavy-faced, blue-eyed young chap of around thirty-five, looked at him curiously: "You must know why you're here," he said. "Surely, you wouldn't have been sent through here unless you had a problem of some kind that the weapon shop courts will solve for you: there's no other reason for coming to Information Center."

Fara walked on because he was in the line now, a fast-moving line that curved him inexorably around the machine; and seemed to be heading him toward a door that led into the interior of the great metal structure.

So it was a building as well as a machine.

A problem, he was thinking, why of course, he had a problem. A hopeless, insoluble, completely tangled problem so deeply rooted in the basic structure of Imperial civilization that the whole world would have to be overturned to make it right.

With a start, he saw that he was at the entrance. He thought with awe: In seconds he could be committed irrevocably-to what?

The woman said:

"Thank you. It will take a few minutes to get your file. Won't you sit down?"

He hadn't noticed the chair. He sank into it, and his heart was beating so wildly that he felt choked. There was scarcely a thought in his head, nor a real hope; only an intense, almost mind-wrecking exictement. He realized, suddenly, that the girl was speaking to him, but only snatches of what she said came through that screen of tension in his mind:

"-Information Center is ... in effect ... a bureau of statistics. Every person born ... registered here ... their education, change of address ... occupation ... and the highlights of their life. The whole is maintained by ... combination of ... unauthorized and unsuspected liaison with ... Imperial Chamber of Statistics and ... through medium of agents ... every community-"

It seemed to Fara that he was missing vital information, and that if he could only force his attention and hear more - He strained, but it was of no use. His nerves were jumping too madly for him to focus his mind on what she was saying. He tried to speak, but before he could force words out of his trembling lips, there was a click, and a thin, dark plate slid onto the woman's desk. She took it up and examined it. After a moment, she said something into a mouthpiece, and in a short time two more plates precipitated out of the empty air onto her desk. She studied them impassively, looked up finally.

"You will be interested to know," she said, "that your son, Cayle, is on Mars."

"Eh?" said Fara. He half rose from his chair, but before he could say anything the young woman was speaking again, firmly:

"I must inform you that the weapon shops take no action against individuals. We are not concerned with moral correction. That must come naturally from the individual, and from the people as a whole-and now if you will give me a brief account of your problem for the record and the court."

Sweating, Fara sank back into his seat; most desperately, he wanted more information about Cayle. He began: "But . . . but what . . . how-" He

blink sense into a visual confusion that rivaled in magnitude the tornado of noise.

Men, men, men everywhere; men by the thousands in a long, broad auditorium, packed into rows of seats, pacing with an abandon of restlessness up and down the aisles, and all of them staring with frantic interest a a long board marked off into squares, each square lettered from the alphabet. The tremendous board with its lists of names ran the full length of the immense room. The Name Room, Fara thought shakily as he sank into a seat. And his name would come up in the C's.

It was like sitting in at a no-limit poker game, watching the jewelprecious cards turn up. It was like playing the exchange with all the world at stake during a stock crash. It was nerve-wracking, dazzling, exhausting, fascinating, terrible.

New names kept flashing on to the twenty-six squares; and men would shout like insane beings and some fainted, and the uproar was shattering; the pandemonium raged on, one continuous, unbelievable sound. And every few minutes a great sign would flash along the board, telling everyone:

"WATCH YOUR OWN INITIALS."

Fara watched. Each second it seemed to him that he couldn't stand it an instant longer. He wanted to scream at the roomful of men to be silent. He wanted to jump up to pace the floor, but others who did that were yelled at hysterically. Abruptly, the blind savagery of it scared Fara. He thought unsteadily: "I'm not going to make a fool of myself. I-"

"Clark, Fara-" winked the board. "Clark, Fara-"

With a shout, Fara leaped to his feet. "That's me!" he shrieked. "Me!"

No one turned. No one paid the slightest attention. Shamed, he slunk across the room where an endless line of men kept crowding into a corridor beyond. The silence in the long corridor was almost as shattering as the noise it replaced. It was hard to concentrate on the idea of a number, 474. It was completely impossible to imagine what could lie beyond-474.

names ran from A to Z, and there were about five hundred of them. The folder carried no explanation; and Fara slipped it automatically into his side pocket, as the voice came again from the shining globe.

"It has been established," the words came precisely, "that the Fifth Interplanetary Bank perpetrated upon you a gross swindle, and that it is further guilty of practicing scavengery, deception, blackmail and was accessory in a criminal conspiracy. The bank made contact with your son, Cayle, through what is guite properly known as a scavenger, that is, an agent whose job it is to find young men and women who are in financial difficulties but who have parents with money. The scavenger obtains for this service a commission of eight percent, which is always paid by the borrower, in this case, your son. The bank practiced deception in that its authorized agents deceived you by claiming that it had already paid out ten thousand credits to your son, whereas only one thousand credits was paid over and that not until your signature had been obtained. The blackmail guilt arises out of the threat to have your son arrested for falsely obtaining a loan, a threat made at a time when no money had exchanged hands. The conspiracy consists of the action whereby your note was promptly turned over to your competitor. The bank is accordingly triple-fined thirty-six thousand three hundred credits. It is not in our interest Fara Clark, for you to know how this money is obtained. Suffice to know that the bank pays it, and that of the fine the weapon shops allocate to their own treasury a total of one half. The other half-"

There was a plop; a. neatly packaged pile of bills fell onto the table. "For you," said the voice. Fara, with trembling fingers, slipped the package into his coat pocket. It required the purest mental and physical effort for him to concentrate on the next words that came.

"You must not assume that your troubles are over. The re-establishment of your motor repair shop in Glay will require force and courage. Be discreet, brave and determined, and you cannot fail. Do not hesitate to use the gun you have purchased in defense of your rights. The plan will be explained to you. And now, proceed through the door facing you."

"Folder?" Fara echoed blankly. It took him a long moment to remember that he had picked up a folder from the table in Room 474.

He studied the list of company names with a gathering puzzlement, noting that the name Automatic Atomic Motor Repair Shops was well down among the A's, and the Fifth Interplanetary Bank only one of several great banks included. Fara looked up finally:

"I don't understand," he said. "Are these the companies you have had to act against?"

The silver-haired man smiled grimly, shook his head.

"That is not what I mean. These firms constitute only a fraction of the eight million companies that are constantly in our books." He smiled again, humorlessly: "These companies all know that, because of us, their profits on paper bear no relation to their assets. What they don't know is what the difference really is, and, as we want a general improvement in business morals, not merely more skillful scheming to outwit us, we prefer them to remain in ignorance."

He paused, and this time he gave Fara a searching look, said at last: "The unique feature of the companies on this particular list is that they are every one wholly owned by Empress Isher." He finished swiftly: "In view of your past opinions on that subject, I do not expect you to believe me."

Fara stood quite still. He did believe it, with unquestioning conviction, completely, finally. The amazing, the unforgivable thing was that all his life he had watched the march of ruined men into the oblivion of poverty and disgrace-and blamed them.

Fara groaned. "I've been like a madman," he said. "Everything the empress and her officials did was right. No friendship, no personal relationship could survive with me that did not include belief in things as they were. I suppose if I started to talk against the empress I would receive equally short shrift."

"Under no circumstances," said the old man, "must you say anything against her majesty. The weapon shops will not countenance any such words, and will give no further aid to anyone who is so indiscreet. The emthe three men from the top down, excluding the royal family, who gave the order for the particular execution involved. But we do not again want that kind of bloody murder. Nor are we interested in any criticism of our toleration of so much that is evil. It is important to understand that we do not interfere in the main stream of human existence. We right wrongs; we act as a barrier between the people and their more ruthless exploiters. Generally speaking, we help only honest men; that is not to say that we do not give assistance to the less scrupulous, but only to the extent of selling them guns-which is a very great aid indeed, and which is one of the reasons why the government is relying almost exclusively for its power on an economic chicanery.

"In the four thousand years since the brilliant genius, Walter S. de Lany invented the vibration process that made the weapon shops possible, and laid down the first principles of weapon shop political philosophy, we have watched the tide of government swing backward and forward between democracy under a limited monarchy to complete tyranny. And we have discovered one thing: People always have the kind of government they want. When they want change, they must change it. As always we shall remain an incorruptible core-and I mean that literally; we have a psychological machine that never lies about a man's character-I repeat, an incorruptible core of human idealism, devoted to relieving the ills that arise inevitably under any form of government.

"But now-your problem. It is very simple, really. You must fight, as all men have fought since the beginning of time for what they valued, for their just rights. As you know, the Automatic Atomic Repair people removed all your machinery and tools within an hour of foreclosing on your shop. This material was taken to Ferd, and then shipped to a great warehouse on the coast. We recovered it, and with our special means of transportation have now replaced the machines in your shop. You will accordingly go there and-"

Fara listened with a gathering grimness to the instructions, nodded finally, his jaw clamped tight.

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In their dealings with the houses the police objected only to the idea that dead men tell no tales. Proprietors found themselves mercilessly hailed into court when they broke that one unalterable rule. After thousands of years, it had proved an effective method of keeping vice operating within the important limit, that the victim survived his grim experience.

Cayle stepped off the gangplank onto the soil of Mars. And stopped. It was an involuntary reaction. The ground was as hard as rock. The chill of it penetrated the soles of his shoes and somehow pierced the marrow of his being. With ice-cold eyes he surveyed the bleak town of Shardl. And this time a thought came, a hatred so violent that he shuddered. A determination so strong that he could feel the ice within him turning to steel.

"Get a move on you-" A stick prodded his shoulders. One of the soldiers directing the disembarkation of the long line of sullen men bawled the words, his voice sounding strangely hollow in that rarefied air.

Cayle did not even turn around. He moved-that was his reaction to the insult and indignity. He walked along, keeping his place in the line; and with every step he took the chill off the ground penetrated more deeply into his being. He could feel the coldness of the air now in his lungs. Ahead of him other men felt the constriction. They began to run. Still others broke past him, breathing hoarsely, the whites of their eyes showing, their bodies clumsily responding to the lesser gravity. The ground was rough and uneven and those who fell cried out as the jagged edges tore at them. Human blood stained the iron-hard soil of ever-frozen Mars.

Cayle walked on, unheeding, contemptuous of those who had lost their heads. They had been warned against the gravity. And the great enclosed plastic compound was only a quarter of a mile away, the intervening cold shocking but bearable. He reached the compound, his flesh tingling, his feet numbed. It was warm inside and he made his way slowly to the side of the building from which the main section of the town was visible.

Shardl was a mining town. It stood on a flat plain that was just beginning to blossom here and there with the green of warm atomic gardens. The

mines."

Cayle was immune to the appeal. He had heard of this system of colonizing the cold planet of Mars and the hot planet of Venus. Eventually every acre of soil would be occupied, and the planet subjected to the beneficient influence of atomic power. And so, over the millennia, men would at last thaw all the icy habitable worlds of the Solar System and chill the burning deserts of Venus and Mercury. Men working out their lives on the drabber spawnings of their sun would create reasonable facsimiles of the far green Earth from which they had come.

That was the theory. In all those lazy days at public school, when he had read and listened to the accounts of colonization, he had not dreamed that he would one day be standing here, looking out at the half-light world of Mars, standing here, caught by a process too ruthless for any man, raised as he had been raised, to resist. He had no hatred now of his father. That was gone out of him into the hazy mists of the past, into that world of nothingness where his illusions had gone. The poor dumb fool-that was his thought now. Perhaps it was just as well some people never did comprehend the realities of life in the empire of lsher.

His own personal problem was solved in a simple, effective manner. He had been afraid. Now he wasn't. He had, astonishingly enough, been honest. Now, he wasn't. Well, in a way, he wasn't. It all depended on an individual's outlook on life as to how far he'd accept the theory that a human being must be strong enough to face the necessities of his era. Cayle Clark intended to face them all the way. Not for long would such a man as he had become remain on Mars. Meanwhile, he must sign nothing that would restrict his movements. He must be cautious, but seize opportunities instantly on an all-out basis.

Behind him a voice said slyly, "Am I addressing Cayle Clark, formerly of the village of Glay?"

Cayle turned slowly. He hadn't expected opportunity to come so quickly. The man who stood before him was small. He wore an overcoat of expenthey had anything in common.

"Interested?" asked the creature.

Cayle started to nod. And then a word that hadn't really penetrated before came through to his consciousness.

"What bank did you say?"

The human caricature smiled with the look of a man who realized he was bearing precious gifts. "The Fifth Bank," he said, "You made a deposit in our central at Imperial City about a month ago. In the course of a normal investigation of the background of any new depositor we discovered that you were on your way to Mars under unpleasant circumstances. We therefore wish to place our loan department at your service."

"I see," said Cayle carefully.

His eyes, sharp and alert, made another more detailed examination of this agent of the great bank. But there was nothing new, nothing to inspire confidence. And yet he did not think of ending the conversation. "Just what would the bank do for me?" he asked quietly.

The man cleared his throat. "You are the son of Fara and Creel Clark?" he asked pompously.

Cayle admitted the relationship after a moment's hesitation.

"You desire to return to Earth?"

There was no hesitation about his answer to that. "Yes," he said.

"The base fare," said the man, "is six hundred credits for the trip when the distance between Mars and Earth permits a twenty-four day journey. When the distance is greater the cost is 10 credits a day extra. You probably knew that."

Cayle hadn't known. But he had guessed that the mine head wage of 25 credits a week would not provide a quick means of returning to Earth. He felt tensed, conscious of how completely a man without resources could be confined to a planet. He had an idea of what was coming.

"The Fifth Bank," said the man in a grand tone, "will loan you the sum of one thousand credits if your father will guarantee the debt and if you will sign a note agreeing to pay back ten thousand credits." Cayle interrupted. "So far as I am concerned the money has to be paid over to me before I sign."

The other shrugged, and laughed. "As you will. I see you are a sharp dealer. Come over to the mine manager's office."

He walked off, Cayle following thoughtfully. It was too easy and he didn't like it. Everything was happening too swiftly, as if-well, as if this were part of the routine of the end of a voyage. He slowed and looked around alertly. There was a long line of offices, he saw, where other men were being taken by well-dressed individuals.

It seemed to him that he could visualize the picture then. The first offer on the bulletin board. Volunteer to go on a farm. If they didn't get you that way, then along came a smooth tongued man to offer a loan on the basis of your family credit. The loan money would either not be advanced at all or it would be stolen from you almost immediately afterwards.

Thereupon, having exhausted all your available resources, present and future, you were on Mars to stay.

"There'll be a couple of witnesses," Clark thought. "Big fellows with guns on them to make sure that you don't get your money."

It was a good way to colonize an unfriendly planet, possibly the only way, considering that human beings were not too interested any more in pioneering.

He walked into the office. And there were the two men, well-dressed, smiling, friendly. They were introduced as, respectively, the mine manager and a clerk from the bank. Clark wondered cynically how many other persons, shanghaied as he had been, were being introduced at this moment to the "mine manager." It sounded very impressive and it must be thrilling to have a chance to talk in heart to heart fashion with so important a personage, to realize that he was human after all. Cayle shook hands with him and then turned to look the situation over. The important thing was to get the money legally. That meant actually signing the document and getting a copy. Even that might not mean anything but, after all, there was a certain amount of law on the planets. The dangerous thing was to be without see if it were locked from the outside. It was. Quietly, he closed the door and, with a smile, turned back into the room. He shivered convincingly. "Sure chilly out there. I'll be glad to get back to Earth."

The three men smiled sympathetically and the reptilian bank agent held out a document with ten one-hundred credit notes clipped to it. Clark counted the money and put it in his pocket. Then he read the contract. It was quite simple, apparently designed to ease the minds of people who were suspicious of involved forms. There were three copies, one to be sent to Earth, one for the Martian branch and one for him. They were properly signed and sealed and awaited only his signature. Clark tore off the bottom one and put it into his pocket. The others were inserted into the registered circuit. He signed the first one with a flourish-and then he stepped back and threw the pen, point first, into the face of the "manager."

The man screamed and put his hand up to his torn cheek.

That was all Clark saw. With a jump he reached the side of the toadlike man, grabbed at his neck just above the heavy coat collar and squeezed with all his strength. The creature yelped and struggled weakly.

For a moment then, Clark had the sharp fear that his plan of attack had been falsely based. He had assumed that the other had a gun also and would reach for it in panic. Long skinny fingers were clawing inside the voluminous coat. They came out clutching a little glittering blaster that Clark snatched, hand and all, and crushed into his own palm. Simultaneously, he squeezed the weapon away from the other's grasp.

He saw that the big "clerk" had his gun out, and was edging around, trying to get a chance to use it without harming the reptile. Clark took a snap shot at the man's foot. The radiant flame made a thin, bright beam. There was an odor of burning leather and a streamer of blue smoke. With a cry, the fellow dropped his weapon and sat down heavily on the floor. He writhed there, clutching at his foot. At Clark's urging, the "manager" held up his hands reluctantly. Swiftly, Clark relieved him of his blaster, picked up the one on the floor and backed toward the door.

among the starry brilliants of the jewel-case sky. Gradually Earth became a large, shining ball of light, then a monstrous, misty, unbelievable thing that filled half the sky. The continents showed through. And on Earth's night-side, partly visible as the ship swung past the moon, the cities shone with intermittent glitter that rivaled the heavens themselves.

Clark saw that vision of Earth in snatches only. Five days from destination he had discovered a stud poker game in one of the holds. From the beginning he lost. Not every game - an occasional win helped him recuperate a few credits. But by the third day of the endless game, the second last of the trip, the direction of his fortune was so marked that he took alarm and quit.

In his cabin he counted the money that remained to him-eighty-one credits. He had paid eight percent commission on the thousand credits to the representative of the bank. The rest had gone on fare, poker losses and one Imperial-style gun. "At least," Clark thought, "I'll soon be back in Imperial City. And with more money than when I arrived last time."

He lay back, amazingly at ease. The poker losses did not disturb him. He hadn't, when he came right down to it, planned to try gambling again. He had a different picture of his Life. He would take risks, of course, but on a higher level. He had won five hundred thousand credits - at least-in the Penny Palace. It would be difficult to collect it but he would succeed. He felt himself patient and capable, ready for all eventualities.

As soon as he had the money he would secure a commission from Colonel Medlon. He might pay for it and he might not. It depended upon the moment. There was no vengefulness in his plan. He didn't care what happened to two venal creatures like Fatty and the colonel. They were stepping stones, it seemed to Clark, in the most ambitious scheme that had ever been planned in the Empire of Isher. A scheme rooted in a fact that seemed to have escaped all the creature-men who had risen to positions of rank in the Imperial Service.

Innelda of Isher meant well by the country. In his one contact with her he had sensed a personality frustrated by the corruption of others. In spite man who had made a personal contact, it spelled massive opportunity.

To all his planned actions Clark made but one qualification. First, he must seek out Lucy Rail and ask her to marry him.

That hunger would not wait.

The ship came down into its cradle a few minutes before noon on a cloudless day. There were formalities and it was two o'clock before Clark's papers were stamped and he emerged into the open. A breeze touched his cheeks and, from the peak of metal that was the landing field, he could see the dazzling city to the west.

It was a view to make a man catch his breath, but Clark did not waste any time. From a 'stat booth, he called Lucy's number. A pause, then a young man's face came onto the screen. "I'm Lucy's husband," he said. "She went out for a minute, but you don't want to talk to her." Persuasively. "Take a good look at me and you'll agree."

Clark stared blankly. But the familiarity of the other's face would not penetrate through the shock of the words he had spoken.

"Look hard," the image in the 'stat urged.

Clark began, "I don't think that-"

And then he got it. He drew back like a man whose face had been slapped. He put out his hand as if he would defend his eyes from a vision that was too bright for them. He could feel the blood draining from his cheeks, and he swayed. The now familiar voice drew him back to normalcy.

"Pull yourself together!" it said. "And listen. I want you to meet me tomorrow night on the beach of the Haberdashery Paradise. Take one more look at me, convince yourself, and be there."

Clark didn't need the look but his eyes sought the image face. And there was no question. The face that was staring at him from the 'stat was his own.

Cayle Clark was looking at Cayle Clark-at 2:10 P.M., October 4, 4784 Isher.

miliation. Surely, after four months, they cannot keep on delaying."

As soon as she had her dress on she began to receive palace officials. First, Gerritt, the chief of Palace Administration. He had a problem, many of them, and as usual, annoying ones. That was partially her own fault. Long ago she had insisted that all punishment of the palace staff be referred to her. Today the predominant motif was insolence. Servants defying their superiors and shirking their work. The offense was becoming common.

"For heaven's sake," Innelda said irritably, "if they don't like the limitations of their positions, why don't they quit? Palace trained servants can always obtain positions, if only for what they are believed to know about my private life."

"Why doesn't your Majesty let me handle these personal matters?" said Gerritt. It was his stock remark, stolidly made. She knew that eventually he would wear her down but not to his own benefit. No stubborn old conservative was going to have full control of the huge staff of palace servitors. A heritage from the regency period, he and all his kind were going to be asked to vacate. She sighed, and dismissed him - and was back with her problem. What to do? Should she order attacks wherever possible? Or wait in the hope that new information would turn up? The trouble was that she had been waiting now for so many weeks.

General Doocar came in, a tall, thin man with slate gray eyes. He saluted with an angular motion and said, "Madam, the building reappeared for two hours and forty minutes last night, only one minute from the estimated time."

Innelda nodded. That was routine now. The pattern of reappearance had been established within a week of the first disappearance. She still insisted on being kept informed of the building's movements, just why, she couldn't decide.

"I'm like a child," she thought self-critically. "I can't let anything get out of my control." The analysis darkened her mood. She made a few sharp remarks about the efficiency of the military scientists under his command, then asked the question. The general shook his head.

noying to have come out at last with a thought that she had restrained so often in the past. She said defensively, "It seems that the so-called common soldiers are more loyal than my commissioned officers, and braver."

He shrugged. "You allow these tax creatures of yours the privilege of selling commissions," he said. "You do, generally, get educated people that way, but you surely don't expect a man who has paid ten thousand credits for a captaincy to take the chance of getting himself killed."

The argument began to weary her. She had heard it all before in different words. The same old meanings, reinforced by the same dramatizations, though it was some weeks now since the problem of commissions in the armed forces had been mentioned. The subject was not a pleasant one. It reminded her now of something she had almost forgotten. "The last time we talked of this," she said slowly, "I requested you to contact Colonel Medlon and ask him whatever became of that officer he was about to commission when I called him one day? It isn't often that I make personal contacts with lower ranks." Suddenly she became savage - "I'm hedged in here by a brigade of old men who don't know how to mobilize an army." She fought down her anger. "But never mind that. What about him?" General Doocar said stonily, "Colonel Medlon informs me that the young officerprospect did not return at the appointed hour. The colonel assumes that he must have got wind of what was up and hastily changed his mind."

There was silence. She found herself thinking-that the explanation sounded wrong. He wasn't like that. And besides the empress personally had talked to him.

She did not underestimate the power of such personal contact. People who met the Empress of Isher felt not only her personal charm but experienced the abnormal aura of her position. The combination was overpowering, not to be lightly dismissed on the word of a suspected "wino."

She spoke at last with a quiet determination. "General, inform the colonel today that he will either produce this young officer or face a Lambeth in the morning." stincts are denied normal expression."

The green, imperial eyes flashed. "I am not interested in weapon shop philosophy."

She was abruptly astounded that he should have mentioned the weapon shops in such a fashion. She flung the accusation at him. The grand old man was immune.

"Madam," he said, "when I stop examining the ideas and philosophies of a power that has now existed for three thousand seven hundred years you may have my resignation."

The woman rejected the argument. Everywhere she turned was this semi-worship of the weapon shops. More, it was an acceptance of the shops as a legitimate facet of Isher civilization. "I must get rid of these old men," she thought, not for the first time. "They treat me as a child and will always treat me that way." Aloud she said icily, "General, I am not interested in hearing the moral teachings of an organization that at base is responsible for all the immorality in the Solar System. We live in an age where productive capacity is so great that no one need ever starve. Crime, because of economic need does not exist. The problem of psychiatric crime can be solved whenever we get hold of the afflicted person. But what is the situation?" She was hot now with remembered rage. "We discover that our psychopath has been sold a weapon shop gun. The owner of a House of Illusion is similarly protected. True, in that case there is an understanding between the police and the houses whereby raids are allowed. But if any individual owner should decide to resist, we would have to bring a thirtythousand-cycle cannon to defeat him." She paused to survey the job done by her hairdresser, felt satisfied, waved the woman away.

"Ridiculous and criminal!" she continued. "On every side, we are frustrated in our desire to end this eternal wickedness of millions of individuals, who sneer at the law because they have weapon shop guns. It would be different, if these-gun makers-would limit the sale of their products to respectable people. But when any sort of scoundrel can buy one-"

"A defensive gun!" interjected the general softly. "Defensive only."

General Doocar bowed.

"As for the rest," said Innelda, "keep the military police after them. As soon as this mess is over, I'll set up special court martial and we'll teach these traitors the meaning of their oaths of allegiance."

"Suppose," said Doocar, and his voice was soft again, "they have weapon shop guns?"

Her reaction to that was so violent that she grew calm in her anger. "My friend," she said gravely, "when army discipline can be set at nought by an underground organization, then even the generals must realize it is time to destroy the subversion." She made a motion with her right arm. A gesture of decisiveness. "This afternoon, General, I shall visit the laboratories of Olympian Field. I want to see what progress has been made in finding out just what the weapon makers did to that building. Tomorrow morning, at least, Colonel Medlon must procure for me the young man he was supposed to have commissioned. If he cannot do it, one corrupt head will roll. You may think I'm being childish, concerning myself with one individual. But I must start somewhere. And that young man I know about. Him I can check on. But now," she said, "you weapon shop admirer, get out of here before I do something drastic."

"Madam," protested Doocar mildly. "I am loyal to the House of Isher."

"I am glad to hear it," said Innelda scathingly.

She brushed past him and went out into the hallway without looking back.

remnant; the residue of the emigration of young people that had followed the departure of Prince del Curtin.

"Did everybody have a nice sleep last night?" Innelda broke the silence sweetly. They hastened to assure her that they had. "How nice," she murmured-and settled into a moody silence. She wasn't sure just what she wanted of her companions. Lightness, perhaps. But how much? A year before; a newly introduced young man had asked her if she were still a virgin. And since she was, the incident still annoyed her.

Crudeness was definitely out of order. She had an instinctive feeling that immorality on her part would reflect on the reputation of the Isher family. But then what? She pecked at a piece of toast. What did she want? A positive approach-a belief in principles, with an ability to see the humorous side of We. Her own upbringing, severe and simple, had stressed the positive mind trainings. Very important, but seriousness could be overdone. She stiffened with an old determination. "I've got to get rid of these humorless, do-nothing, let's-be-careful-and-not-rock-the-boat, think-twice-and-stop-" She paused, self-pityingly, and prayed to her private gods, "Give me one good joke a day to make me laugh and one man who can handle affairs of state and, in addition, know how to amuse me. If only Del were here."

She scowled in annoyance at the direction her thoughts were taking. Her cousin, Prince del Curtin, disapproved of the attack on the weapon shops. What a shock, when she had first discovered that. And what mortification when all the young men of his clique left the palace with him, refusing to participate in the adventure. Having killed Banton Vickers for threatening to inform the weapon shops of her plans, a treasonous utterance that would have destroyed her prestige if she had let it pass, she could not overlook the opposition. Tight-lipped, she recalled their final conversation, the prince, cold and formal, marvelously goodlooking in his anger, herself uncertain but determined, as he said, "When you get over this madness, Innelda, you may call me back." He must have known that it was an opportunity for her to say, "That will be never." But she hadn't dared to say it. She had been like a wife, she thought bitterly. Wronged but unwilling to say understand was why he, who had so much, had given it all up. She asked the question earnestly. "And please," she said, "do not insult me by suggesting that you were concerned with the moral issue of the war. Tell me simply and plainly why you gave up all your possessions for dishonor and disgrace. In one act you disinherited yourself. The very least that can happen to you is that you'll be sent to Mars or Venus permanently. Were you a fool or a coward or both?"

He shrugged. "I suppose I was a fool." His feet fumbled nervously over the floor. His eyes did not evade her direct stare, but his answer left her dissatisfied. After ten minutes she had got no real explanation out of him. It was possible that the profit and loss motivation had not influenced his decision. She tried a new approach. "According to your file," she said, "you were notified to report to building eight hundred A and, because of your rank, it was explained to you that at last a method had been found to destroy the weapon shops. An hour later, after having burned your private papers, you left your office and took up residence in a seaside cottage which you had purchased secretly-you thought-five years ago. A week later, when it was clear that you did not intend to do your duty, you were arrested. You have been in close confinement ever since. Is that picture fairly correct?"

The man nodded but said nothing. The empress studied him, biting her lips. "My friend," she said softly at last, "I have it in my power to make your punishment anything I desire. Anything. Death, banishment, commutation-" she hesitated-"reinstatement."

Major Sanders sighed wearily. "I know," he said. That was the picture I suddenly saw."

"I don't understand." She was puzzled. "If you realize the potentialities of your act, then you were very foolish."

"The picture," he said in a monotone, as if he had not heard her interruption, "of a time when someone, not necessarily yourself, would have that power without qualification, without there being anywhere to turn, without alleviation, without-hope." ieu, as i nave, actual results.

She saw with astonishment that her words had not touched him. She drew back, offended. It was all so crystal clear and here was one more obstinate fool. She restrained her anger with an effort. "Major," she said, "with the weapon shops out of the way we could introduce steadying laws that could not be flouted. There would be more uniform administration of justice because people would have to accept the judgment of the courts, their only recourse being appeals to the higher courts."

"Exactly," said Sanders. That was all. His tone rejected her logic. She studied him for a long moment, all the sympathy gone from her. Then she said bitterly, "If you're such a firm believer in the weapon shops, why didn't you protect yourself by going to them for a defensive gun?"

"I did."

She hesitated; then asked coldly, "What was the matter. Did your courage fail you when it came to the point of using it to defend yourself from arrest?"

Watching him, she knew she shouldn't have said that. It left her open to a retort which, she realized, might be devastating. Her fear was justified.

Sanders said, "No, Your Majesty. I did exactly what some of the otheruh-deserters did. I took off my uniform and went to a weapon shop, intending to buy a gun. But the door wouldn't open. It appears that I am one of the few officers who believe that the Isher family is the more important of the two facets of Isher civilization."

His eyes had been bright as he spoke. Now they grew depressed again. "I am," he said, "in exactly the position you want to put everybody into. I have no way to turn. I must accept your law; must accept secret declarations of war on an institution that is as much a part of Isher civilization as the House of Isher itself; must accept death if you decree it, without a chance to defend myself in open battle. Your Majesty," he finished quietly, "I respect and admire you. The officers who deserted are not scoundrels. They were merely confronted with a choice and they chose not to participate in an attack on things as they are. I doubt if I could put it more honestly than that."

beginning to feel that it is wrong for me to make any reports whatever about him. However, the general circumstances being what they are, I am as requested, trying to recall every detail of what happened. I will begin with the moment that I received a 'stat call from him on the morning of his arrival from Mars.

The time as I remember it was about half past ten. That conversation was extremely brief. We exchanged greetings, and then he asked me to marry him. My feelings about Cayle Clark are well known to the head of the Coordination Department. And I am sure Mr. Hedrock will not be surprised that I agreed instantly to the proposal, and that we signed our marriage declarations on the registered circuit a few minutes before noon the same morning. We then went to my apartment, where, with one interruption, we remained the rest of that day and that night. The interruption came at a quarter to two when he asked me if I would take a walk around the block while he used my 'stat for a call. He didn't say whether the call would be incoming or out-going but, on returning, I noticed on the 'stat meter that it had been an incoming call.

I do not apologize for leaving the apartment at his request. My acquiescence seems to me, normal. During the course of the day and evening, he made no further reference to the call but instead described to me everything that had happened to him since I last saw him in the House of Illusion. I do confess that his account at times was not so clear as it might have been and he more than once gave me the impression that he was relating events which had happened to him a considerable time ago.

The morning after our marriage he was up early, and said that he had many things to do. Since I was anxious to call up Mr. Hedrock, I let him go without objection. The subsequent report of another weapon shop agent that a very expensive private carplane picked him up a block from the apartment and took off before the agent could summon transportation, puzzles me. Frankly, I cannot understand it.

Since then, Cayle has not been to the apartment but he has called me up every morning and told me that he cannot give me details as yet about

he was divested of vital memories, given a bonus depending on length of service and shooed off with the blessings of the organization. But Lucy was a key contact during a great crisis. The conflict between her duty to the shops and her personal situation must not be allowed to become too disturbing.

Hedrock frowned over the problem, then dialed the 'stat. Lucy's face came onto the screen and Hedrock said earnestly, "I have just read your statement, Lucy, and I want to thank you for your cooperation. We appreciate your position thoroughly and I have been asked-" he worded it deliberately as if an executive group were behind what he was saying-"I have been asked to request that you hold yourself ready for a call from us night and day until the critical period is over. In return, the weapon shops will do everything in their power to protect your husband from any dangerous reactions that may result from what he is doing."

It was no light promise. He had already handed the assignment over to the protective branch. Insofar as it was possible to protect a man in the Imperial sphere the job was being done. He watched Lucy's face casually but intently. Intelligent though she was, she would never fully comprehend the weapon shop-Isher war. It didn't show. No guns were firing. Nobody was being killed. And even if the weapon shops were destroyed Lucy would not immediately notice the difference. Her life might never be affected and not even the immortal man could say what the pattern of existence would be when one of the two power facets of the culture was eliminated. He saw that Lucy was not satisfied with what he had said. He hesitated, then, "Mrs. Clark, on the day you were married you took your husband's callidity measurements and gave them to us. We Lave never told you the integrated result because we did not want to alarm you. I think, however, that you will be interested rather than anxious.

"They're special?" Lucy asked.

"Special!" Hedrock searched for adjectives. "Your husband's callidity at the time you measured him was the highest that has ever been recorded in the history of the Information Center. The index has nothing to do with were able to guess what it was.

Hedrock explained the situation, then, "Lucy," he said, "are you sure you have held nothing back? I swear to you it is a matter of life and death, particularly his life."

The girl shook her head. And though he watched closely her eyes did not change, showed not a trace of myopia. They widened, but that was another phenomenon. Her mouth remained firm, which was a good sign. It was impossible to tell definitely, of course, just by looking at her physical reactions-except that Lucy Rail was not known ever to have taken evasive training. Where Robert Hedrock could lie without giving one of the known lie-reactions, Lucy simply didn't have the experience or nerve-control training to stifle the unconscious signals of her muscles.

"Mr. Hedrock," she said, "you know that you can count on me to the limit."

That was a victory for his immediate purpose. But he broke the connection, dissatisfied, not with Lucy or with the other agents, but with himself. He was missing something. His mind was not seeing deep enough into reality. Just as the solution to the seesaw problem was eluding him, so now he was baffled by what must in reality be very apparent. Sitting here in his office, mulling over facts and figures, he was too far from the scene.

It was clearly time for an on-the-spot investigation by Robert Hedrock in person.

should pursue. He favored the irresistible approach-he thought-better leave the decision about that for the moment. As he walked into the "treasure room" a ring on his little finger tingled. A transparency was probing him from his right. He walked on, then turned casually to examine the two men from whose direction the impulse had come. Were they employees or independents? Since, he always carried about fifty-thousand credits on him, independent sharpers would be a nuisance. He smiled gently as he came up to them.

"I'm afraid not," he said, "Forget any plans you had, eh?"

The heavier of the two men reached into a coat pocket, then shrugged. "You're not carrying a weapon shop gun," he said pointedly. You're not armed at all."

Hedrock said, "Would you like to test that?" And looked straight at the man's eyes.

The gambler was the first to glance away. "C"mon, Jay," he said. "This job isn't the way I figured it."

Hedrock stopped him as he turned away. "Work here?"

The man shook his head. "Not," he said frankly, "if you're against it."

Hedrock laughed. "I want to see the boss."

"That's what I thought," the man said. "Well, it was a good job while it lasted."

This time Hedrock let them go. He felt no surprise at their reaction. The secret of human power was confidence. And the confidence they had seen in his eyes was rooted in certainties of which most men had never heard. In all the world there had never been a man armed as he was with mental, physical, emotional, neural and molecular defenses.

Lucy's description of Martin's office made it unnecessary for him to explore. He entered the corridor at the back of the gambling section. As he closed the door behind him, a net fell over him, neatly enveloping him. It drew instantly tight and pulled him several feet above the floor. Hedrock made no effort to free himself. There was enough light for him to see the floor five feet below, and the indignity of his position did not disturb him. He ulocks. Say, the salu querulously, who are you?

Hedrock made a gesture. It was very carefully timed and estimated. One of the rings on his fingers dissolved the hard material of the net. It parted beneath him like a door opening. He landed on his feet. He said, "Start talking, my friend. I'm in a hurry."

Ignoring the gun that Martin snatched, he brushed past him into the large office. When he spoke again the confidence was in his voice. It required only a few moments after that for the resigned gambling palace operator to decide on cooperation. "If all you want is information, okay." He added. "Your date is right. It was October fifth about midnight when this guy Clark came in here. He had his twin brother with him."

Hedrock nodded, but said nothing. He was not here for discussion.

"Boy," said Martin, "they were about the most cold-blooded twins I ever saw and they worked together like a team. One of them must have had some Army experience because he stood-well, you know the hypnotic posture they get. He was the one who knew everything, and was he ever tough! I started to say something about not being a sucker and I got a blast across my legs. I made a bit too fast a move when I turned to pump the money out of the safe and another blast took off some of my hair."

He pointed at a bald spot on one side of his head. Hed-rock examined it briefly. It had been close but obviously trained shooting. Weapon shop or Army. By elimination, Army.

"You're all right," he commented.

Martin shuddered. "That guy wasn't worrying whether I was all right or not." He finished, complainingly, "Life is getting too tough. I never knew the normal defense devices of Isher could be so easily nullified."

Outside Hedrock headed for a carplane stop in a meditative mood. The existence of the two Cayles was now established. And one of them had been in the Army long enough to receive more than preliminary officer training. He had had that training on October fifth, a mere one day after Cayle Clark's arrival from Mars. By the morning of the sixth, the day Clark joined the Army, according to the record, he had 500,000 credits.

Hedrock came forward smiling. Last time, in speaking to a delegation of this council, he had had the pressures of the time map and the empress on his spirit. The map was still in the building, its problem unsolved, becoming more urgent every hour. But now he had one solution. He began without preliminary. "Gentlemen, on the morning of November twenty-seventh, twelve days hence, we will send a message to the Isher Empress, and request her to end her war. We will accompany our request with facts and figures that will convince her she has no alternative."

He expected a sensation, and he got it. These men knew that, when it came to his job, he was not one to raise false hopes (they had yet to discover that his efficiency was equally great in other fields). Feet stirred, and there was excitement.

Peter Cadron said explosively, "Man! Don't keep us in suspense. What have you discovered?"

"Permit me," said Hedrock, "to recapitulate." He went on. "Are you aware, on the morning of June third, four thousand seven hundred and eighty-four Isher, a man from the year nineteen hundred and fifty-one A.D. appeared in our Greenway weapon shop. The discovery was then made that the empress was directing a new energy weapon against all Imperial City weapon shops. This energy was a form of atomic power, old in nature but new to science. Its discovery heralds another step forward in our understanding of the complex structure of the space-time tensions that make for the existence of Matter. The source of the energy in Imperial City was a building completed about a year ago and located on Capital Avenue. Its effect on the Greenway shop differed from its effect on shops further away. Theoretically, it should have destroyed any material structure instantly but, though lsher rulers have never known it, weapon shops are not made of matter in the accepted sense. And so there was an intricate interplay of gigantic forces that took place predominantly in time itself. And so a man came seven thousand years out of the past."

He described briefly, using pure mathematical terms, the seesaw action of the man and the building, once they were launched into the abyss of stability. The building when it swings into the past, occupies the same 'space' as it did in normal time but there are no repercussions- for the reason that similarity is a function of time itself, not of its tension-product. McAllister started at seven thousand years, the building at two seconds. That is approximate.

"Today the man is several quadrillions of years away and the building swings at a distance of somewhat less than three months. The fulcrum, of course, moves forward in our time, so that we have the following situationthe building no longer swings back in time as far as June third, where the seesaw originally started. Please bear these facts in mind while I turn briefly to another division of this seemingly complicated but basically simple business."

Hedrock paused. There were quick minds in this room. It interested him to see that every face was still expectant. Now that he himself knew the truth it seemed queer that they had not yet grasped the reality. He continued: "Gentlemen, the Coordination Department discovered some months ago that there existed in the village of Glay a callidetic giant. With so much internal pressure pushing him we had no difficulty maneuvering him into coming to Imperial City. At first, our belief that he would influence events markedly was nullified by his ignorance of Isher realities. I won't go into the details but he was shipped to Mars as a common laborer. He was able to return almost immediately."

He went on to explain how Lucy Rail had been married to one Cayle Clark a few hours before the arrival of the ship that brought Cayle Clark back to Earth, how the two Clarks secured 500,000 credits, then visited Colonel Medlon, one of them disguised. The visit was a fortunate one for Medlon. He had just been asked by the empress to produce Clark, or else. A captaincy was conferred on Clark, with the usual hypnotic machine training for officers. The following day he reported to the empress.

"For a reason which she considers to have been impulse, but which is traceable to his callidity, she attached him to her personal staff and he is there now. Wherever his influence extends, he has followed a very interwhy many Lucy man?

"Partly love, partly-" Hedrock hesitated. He had asked Lucy a pointed question and her answer made his reply possible now. "I would say he grew immensely cautious, and began to think of the future. Basic urges came to the fore. Suppose something happened to a man who in a few weeks had accomplished the miracle that he had. Gentlemen, he wanted an heir and Lucy was the only honest girl he knew. It may be a permanent arrangement. I cannot say. Clark, in spite of his rebellion against his parents is essentially a well-brought up young man. In any event, Lucy will not suffer. She will have the interesting experience of having a child. And, as a wife, she has community property rights."

Peter Cadron climbed to his feet. "Gentlemen," he said, "I move a vote of thanks to Robert Hedrock for the service he has rendered the weapon shops." The applause was prolonged.

"I move further," said Peter Cadron, "that he be given the rank of unrestricted member."

Once more there were no dissenters. Hedrock bowed his appreciation. The reward was more than an honor. As an unrestricted member he would be subject only to the Pp machine examinations. His movements and actions would never be scrutinized and he could use every facility of the shops as if they were his own property. He had been doing that anyway but in future there would be no suspicion. It was a mighty gift.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, when the clapping ended.

"And now," said Peter Cadron, "I respectfully request Mr. Hedrock to leave the council room while we discuss our remaining problem, the see-saw."

Hedrock went out gloomily. He had momentarily forgotten that the greatest danger remained.

tificial fog that, for months now, had cut off this city district from the view of the curious. She walked slowly forward, her distinctive Isher face turning this way and that as she examined the scene. She beckoned Captain Clark. "When is the building due?"

The smiling young man saluted briskly. "In seven minutes, Your Majesty."

"Have you all the necessary equipment?"

She listened carefully to his recapitulation. Seven groups of scientists would enter the building, each with his own instrument. It was a pleasure to realize that Captain Clark had personally checked over the lists of machines in each group. "Captain," she glowed, "you're a treasure."

Cayle did not reply. Her praise meant nothing. This girl, who almost literally owned the world, surely did not expect intelligent people to be absolutely faithful to her in exchange for a few compliments and Army pay. He had no sense of anticipatory guilt and in fact did not regard what he intended to do as being in any way damaging to her. In Isher you did what was necessary and for hira there was no turning back. The pattern of his action was already set.

The woman was looking over the scene again. The hole in the ground where the building had been was to her right. To her left was the Greenway weapon shop with its park. It was the first time she had seen one in which the glitter signs were not working. That made her feel better. The shop seemed strangely isolated there in the shadows of its trees. She clenched her hands and thought: "If all the weapon shops in the Solar System were suddenly eliminated the few thousand parklike lots where they had been could so easily be converted into almost anything that-in one generation," she told herself with a dark certainty-"they'd be forgotten. The new children would grow up wondering what mythological nonsense their elders were talking.

"By all the gods of space," she said aloud, passionately, "it's going to happen."

been damaged in any way by its experiences. What about the rats?"

The rats had been placed in the building during an earlier appearance. So far, they had showed no sign of being affected. It was wise, though, to verify that they were still unharmed. She waited now in an upper room, glancing intermittently at her watch, as the minutes fled by.

It was annoying to realize that she was nervous. But standing there in the virtual silence of an almost empty building she felt that she was being foolish in that she was even considering going along. She glanced at the men who had volunteered to accompany her if she went. Their silence was not normal and they did not look at her but stood moodily gazing through the transparent wall. There was a sound of footsteps. Captain Clark came striding into view. He was smiling and in his cupped hands he held a white rat. "Your Majesty," he said. "Just look at him. Bright as a button."

He was so cheerful that when he held the little animal out to her she took it and stared down at it thoughtfully. On abrupt impulse, she drew it up and pressed its warm body against her cheek.

"What would we do," she murmured, "without lovely little rats like you?" She glanced at Captain Clark. "Well, sir," she said, "what is the scientific opinion?"

"Every rat," Clark said, "is organically, emotionally and psychologically sound. All the tests that show rats for what they are were favorable."

Innelda nodded. It fitted. At the beginning, on the day the first attack was launched, before the men inside knew what was happening, the structure had disappeared, causing an immense confusion inside, of which she had never received a coherent account. The moment, on that occasion, the building reappeared, all personnel were withdrawn and no one had been permitted to take the "trip" since then. But physical examinations of the men proved then unharmed.

Still Innelda hesitated. It would look bad now if she failed to go along, but there were so many factors to be considered. If anything happened to her the Isher government might fall. She had no direct heir. The succession would fall to Prince del Curtin, who was popular but known by many people Was uue back.

It flashed into view and presently men began to troop out. One of the scientists came over. "Your Majesty," he said, "the journey was accomplished without incident except for one thing. Captain Clark, as you know, intended to leave the building for exploration purposes. He did leave it. We received one message from him, spoken into his wrist 'stat to the effect that the date was August seventh, four thousand and eighty-four Isher. That was the last we heard. Something must have happened to him. He failed to come back in time to make the return journey with us."

"But-" said Ihnelda. She stopped blankly. Then, "But that means, from August seventh to November twenty-sixth there were two Cayle Clarks in existence, the normal and the one who went back in time."

She paused, uncertain. "The old time paradox," she thought to herself. "Can man go back in time and shake hands with himself?" Aloud, she said wonderingly, "But whatever became of the second one?" It was late afternoon, but he was able to rent a four-room office before the close of business that day. An employment agency promised to have several stenographers and bookkeepers report by nine A.M. the following morning. And though the place was furnished as an office only, he was able to obtain a cot before dark from a twenty-four hour rental service. That night, he planned into the early morning hours, and then slept restlessly on the cot. He rose shortly after dawn and, carrying with him the sheet of paper on which he had his calculations, took an elevator down to the exchange room of one of the largest stockbrokerage firms in the city. In his pocket were some five hundred thousand credits which had been given to him by the "second" Cayle Clark. The money was mostly in bills of large denomination, and there were as many of them as one man could burden himself with, and still be able to move.

Before that day had run its course, he had made thirty-seven hundred thousand credits. And the bookkeepers upstairs were busy making records of his stock transactions; the stenographers were beginning to write letters; and a chartered accountant, hastily hired as office manager, hired more help and took on more office space on adjoining floors.

Tired but jubilant, Cayle spent the evening preparing for the next day. He had had one experience of what a man could do who had brought with him from the future complete stock market reports for a period of two and a half months. He slept that night with a sense of exhilaration. He could scarcely wait for the next day. And the next. And the next and the next.

During the month of August, he won ninety billion credits. In that series of deals, he took over one of the chain banks, four billion-credit industrial establishments and obtained partial control of thirty-four other companies.

During the month of September he made three hundred and thirty billion credits, and absorbed the colossal First Imperial Bank, three interplanetary mining corporations and part ownership of two hundred and ninety companies. By the end of September, he was established in a hundred-story sky-scraper in the heart of the financial district, and he gave Employment In-

was a natural step to seek out Colonel Medion and so prepare to groundwork for the journey into the past.

Two Cayle Clarks-really one only, but from different times - and that was the story that Robert Hedrock gave to the weapon shop council. That was the phenomenal incident that forced the empress to end her war lest other officers or men wreck the financial stability of the Solar System by trying to repeat the success of Cayle Clark. anyry man.

The hard, metal padlock yielded before the tiny, blazing power of the revolver. One flick of fire, the metal dissolved, and he was inside. It was dark, too dark to see, but Fara did not turn on the lights immediately. He fumbled across to the window control, turned the windows to darkness vibration, and then clicked on the lights. He gulped with awful relief as he saw that the machines, his precious tools that he had watched the bailiff carry away, were here again, ready for use.

Shaky from the pressure of his emotion, Fara called Creel on the telestat. It took a little while for her to appear; and she was in her dressing gown. When she saw who it was she turned very pale.

"Fara, oh, Fara, I thought-"

He cut her off grimly: "Creel, I've been to the weapon shop. I want you to do this: go straight to your mother. I'm here at my shop. I'm going to stay here day and night until it's settled that I stay ... I shall go home later for some food and clothing, but I want you to be gone by then. Is that clear?"

Color was coming back into her lean, handsome face. She said: "Don't you bother coming home, Fara. I'll do everything necessary. I'll pack all that's needed into the carplane, including a folding bed. We'll sleep in the back room at the shop."

Morning came palely but it was ten o'clock before a shadow darkened the open door; and Constable Jor came in. He looked shamefaced.

"I've got an order here for your arrest," he said.

"Tell those who sent you," Fara replied deliberately, "that I resisted arrest-with a gun." The deed followed the words with such rapidity that Jor blinked. He stood like that for a moment, a big, sleepy-looking man, staring at that gleaming, magical revolver; then:

"I have a summons here ordering you to appear at the great court of Ferd this afternoon. Will you accept it?"

"Certainly."

"Then you will be there?"

"I'll send my lawyer," said Fara. "Just drop the summons on the floor there. Tell them I took it."

on his way here with his bodyguards, two of them."

Shakily, Fara watched the mayor go out. The crisis was at hand. He braced himself, thought: Let them come, let them-

It was easier than he had expected, for the men who entered the shop turned pale when they saw the holstered revolver. There was a violence of blustering nevertheless, that narrowed down finally to:

"Look here," the man said, "we've got your note for twelve thousand one hundred credits. You're not going to deny you owe that money."

"I'll buy it back," said Fara stonily, "for exactly one thousand credits, the amount actually paid to my son."

The strong-jawed young man looked at him for a long time. "We'll take it," he said finally, curtly.

Fara said: "I've got the agreement here."

His first customer was old man Miser Lan Harris. Fara stared at the long-faced oldster with a vast surmise, and his first, amazed comprehension came of how the weapon shop must have settled on Harris' lot by arrangement. It was an hour after Harris had gone that Creel's mother stamped into the shop. She closed the door.

"Well," she said. "You did it, eh? Good work. I'm sorry if I seemed rough with you when you came to my place, but we weapon-shop supporters can't afford to take risks for those who are not on our side.

"But never mind that. I've come to take Creel home. The important thing is to return everything to normal as quickly as possible."

It was over. Incredibly, it was over. Twice, as he walked home that night, Fara stopped in midstride, and wondered if it had not all been a dream. The air was like wine. The little world of Glay spread before him, green and gracious, a peaceful paradise where time had stood still. as real as nature. A cool wind blew from that restless sea onto Hedrock's back and into her face. The woman gazed bitterly at Hedrock. She saw a man of earnest mien and commanding appearance. But it was his eyes that startled her. They were strong and kind and infinitely brave. She hadn't expected such special qualities. The visitor took on sudden importance. She looked down at the card again.

"Walter de Lany," she said thoughtfully. She seemed to listen to the name as she spoke it, as if she expected it to acquire meaning. Finally she shook her head, wonderingly. "How did you get in here? I found this appointment on my list and took it for granted that the chamberlain must have arranged it because it involved necessary business."

Hedrock said nothing. Like so many Imperials, the chamberlain lacked the defensive mind trainings. And, though the empress herself had them, she did not know that the weapon shops had developed energy methods for forcing instantaneous favorable response from the unprotected. The woman spoke again.

"Very strange," she said.

Hedrock said, "Reassure yourself, Madam. I have come to solicit your mercy on behalf of an unfortunate, guiltless man."

That caught her. Once more her eyes met his, flinched from the strength that was there, then steadied.

Hedrock said quietly, "Your Majesty, you are in a position to do an act of unparalleled kindness to a man who is nearly five million years from here, swinging from past to future as your building forces him ever further away."

The words had to be spoken. He expected her to realize instantly that only her intimates and her enemies would know certain details about the vanishing building. The way the color drained from her cheeks showed that she was realizing.

"You're a weapon shop man?" she whispered. She was on her feet. "Get out of here," she breathed. "Out!"

Hedrock stood up. "Your Majesty," he said, "control yourself. You are in no danger."

only been dealing with the shops the last few days, you have yielded to them. You have been compelled to end the war and to destroy your timeenergy machines. You have agreed not to prosecute the officer-deserters but only to discharge them. And you have granted immunity to Cayle Clark."

He saw in her face that he had not touched her. She was staring at him, frowning. "There must be a reason," she said, "that you dare to talk to me like this."

Her own words seemed to galvanize her. She turned back to her chair and stood with finger poised over the ornamental arm. "If I should press this alarm," she said, "it would bring guards."

Hedrock sighed. He had hoped she would not force him to reveal his power. "Why not, then," he suggested, "press it?" It was time, he thought, that she found out her true situation. The woman said, "You think I won't?" Firmly, her extended finger pressed downward.

There was silence except for the lapping of the waves and the soft sound of the lifelike breeze. After at least two minutes Innelda, ignoring Hedrock as if he did not exist, walked twenty feet to a tree, and touched one of the branches. It must have been another alarm, because she waited-not so long this time-and then walked hurriedly over to the thick brush that concealed the elevator shaft. She activated its mechanism and, when there was no response, came slowly back to where Hedrock waited, and sat down in her chair. She was pale but composed. Her eyes did not look at him but her voice was calm and without fear. "Do you intend to murder me?"

Hedrock shook his head, but said nothing. More strongly now, he regretted that he had had to reveal to her how helpless she could be, particularly regretted it because she would undoubtedly start modernizing the defenses of the palace in the mistaken belief that she was protecting herself against superior weapon shop science. He had come here this afternoon prepared for any emergency, physical or mental. He could not force her to do what he wanted but his fingers blazed with offensive and defenOne Sherice them. But what do you want the to do?

Hedrock said, "Your Majesty, this man commands our pity and our mercy. He is floating in a void whose like no human eyes will ever see again. He has looked upon our Earth and our sun in their infancy and in their old, old age. Nothing can help him now. We must give him the surcease of death."

In her mind Innelda saw the night he pictured. But she was more intent now, seeing this event in its larger environment. "What," she said, "about this machine you have?"

"It is a duplicate of the map machine of the weapon shops." He didn't explain that he had built it in one of his secret laboratories. "It lacks only the map itself, which was too intricate to fashion swiftly."

"I see." Her words were automatic, not a real response. She studied his face. She said slowly, "Where do you fit into all this?"

It was a question that Hedrock was not prepared to answer. He had come to the Empress of Isher because she had suffered a defeat and, her position being what it was, it was important that she should not remain too resentful. An immortal man, who was once more interfering in the affairs of mortals, had to think of things like that. "Madam," he said, "there is no time to waste. The building is due here again in one hour."

The woman said, "But why cannot we leave this decision to the weapon shop council?"

"Because they might make the wrong decision."

"What," persisted Innelda, "is the right decision?" Sitting there, Hedrock told her.

Cayle Clark set the controls so that the carplane would make a wide circle around the house.

"Oh, my goodness I" said Lucy Rail Clark, "Why it's one of these up-inthe-air places-"

She stopped and stared with wide, wondering eyes at the grounds below, at the hanging gardens, at the house floating in the air. "Oh, Cayle," she said, "are you sure we can afford it?" government is purified the better off the world will be. And believe me-" his face hardened-"I've had just enough experience to make me want to purify it."

He landed the carplane on the roof of the five-story residence. He led Lucy into the interior, down into the world of bright, gracious rooms where she and he would live forever.

At least, at twenty-two or three, it seemed as if it would be forever.

lain half-dead on a battlefield of the middle twentieth century, resigned to personal oblivion. Then he had thought that he must die so that others might live. The feeling now was the same, but stronger and on a much higher level.

How it would be worked he had no idea. But the seesaw would end in the very remote past, with the release of the stupendous temporal energy he had been accumulating with each of those monstrous swings.

He would not witness but he would aid in the formation of the planets.