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BACK HUMAN BEING

YOU WERE NOT EVOLVED FOR SPACE

YOUR PLACE IS EARTH

YOU WILL DIE ALONE

BACK ADVENTURER

BACK

SEETEE SHOCK
BY WILL STEWART



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THE PRISONER IN THE SKULL

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett

First published *Astounding*, February 1949.

It isn't often a man gets hold of a slave like that! But John Fowler was just the man to use him hard, and to the last bit of his strength. Which, under the circumstances, was only justice. . .

He felt cold and weak, strangely, intolerably, inhumanly weak with a weakness of the blood and bone, of the mind and soul. He saw his surroundings dimly, but he saw—other things—with a swimming clarity that had no meaning to him. He saw causes and effects as tangible before him as he had once seen trees and grass. But remote, indifferent, part of another world.

Somehow there was a door before him. He reached vaguely—

It was almost wholly a reflex gesture that moved his finger toward the doorbell.

The chimes played three soft notes.

John Fowler was staring at a toggle switch. He felt baffled. The thing had suddenly spat at him and died. Ten minutes ago he had thrown the main switch, unscrewed the wall plate and made hopeful gestures with a screwdriver, but the only result was a growing suspicion that this switch would never work again. Like the house itself, it was architecturally extreme, and the wires were sealed in so that the whole unit had to be replaced if it went bad.

Minor irritations bothered Fowler unreasonably today. He wanted the house in perfect running order for the guest he was expecting. He had been chasing Veronica Wood for a long time, and he had an idea this particular argument might tip the balance in the right direction.

He made a note to keep a supply of spare toggle switches handy. The chimes were still echoing softly as Fowler went into the hall and opened the front door, preparing a smile. But it wasn't Veronica Wood on the doorstep. It was a blank man.

That was Fowler's curious impression, and it was to recur to him often in the year to come. Now he stood staring at the strange emptiness of the face that returned his stare without really seeming to see him. The man's features were so typical they might have been a matrix, without the variations that combine to make up the recognizable individual. But Fowler thought that even if he had known those features, it would be hard to recognize a man behind such utter emptiness. You can't recognize a man who isn't there. And there was nothing here. Some erasure, some expunging, had wiped out all trace of character and personality. *Empty.*

And empty of strength, too—for the visitant lurched forward and fell into Fowler's arms.

Fowler caught him automatically, rather horrified at the lightness of the body he found himself supporting. "Hey," he said, and, realizing the inadequacy of that remark, added a few pertinent questions. But there was no answer. Syncope had taken over.

Fowler grimaced and looked hopefully up and down the road. He saw nobody. So he lifted his guest across the threshold and carried him easily to a couch. *Fine*, he thought. *Veronica due any minute, and this paper weight barging in.*

Brandy seemed to help. It brought no color to the pale cheeks, but it pried the eyelids open to show a blank, wondering look.

“O. K. now?” Fowler asked, wanting to add, “Then go home.”

There was only the questioning stare. Fowler stood up with some vague intention of calling a doctor, and then remembered that the televisior instrument hadn’t yet been delivered. For this was a day when artificial shortages had begun to supplant real ones, when raw material was plentiful but consumers were wary, and were, therefore, put on a starvation diet to build their appetites and loosen their purse strings. The televisior would be delivered when the company thought Fowler had waited long enough.

Luckily he was versatile. As long as the electricity was on he could jury-rig anything else he needed, including facilities for first aid. He gave his patient the routine treatment, with satisfying results. Until, that is, the brandy suddenly hit certain nerve centers and emesis resulted.

Fowler lugged his guest back from the bathroom and left him on the bed in the room with the broken light switch to recuperate. Convalescence was rapid. Soon the man sat up, but all he did was look at Fowler hopefully. Questions brought no answer.

Ten minutes later the blank man was still sitting there, looking blank.

The door chimes sang again. Fowler, assured that his guest wasn’t *in articulo mortis*, began to feel irritation. Why the devil did the guy have to barge in now, at this particular crucial moment? In fact, where had he come from? It was a mile to the nearest highway, along a dirt road, and there was no dust on the man’s shoes. Moreover, there was something indefinably disturbing about the—*lack* in his appearance. There was no other word that fitted so neatly. Village idiots are popularly termed “wanting,” and, while there was no question of idiocy here, the man did seem—

What?

For no reason at all Fowler shivered. The door chimes reminded him of Veronica. He said: “Wait here. You’ll be all right. Just wait. I’ll be back—”

There was a question in the soulless eyes.

Fowler looked around. “There’re some books on the shelf. Or fix this—” He pointed to the wall switch. “If you want anything, call me.” On that note of haphazard solicitude he went out, carefully closing the door. After all, he wasn’t his brother’s keeper. And he hadn’t spent days getting the new house in shape to have his demonstration go haywire because of an unforeseen interruption.

Veronica was waiting on the threshold. “Hello,” Fowler said. “Have any trouble finding the place? Come in.”

“It sticks up like a sore thumb,” she informed him. “Hello. So this is the dream house, is it?”

“Right. After I figure out the right method of dream-analysis, it’ll be perfect.” He took her coat, led her into the livingroom, which was shaped like a fat comma and walled with triple-seal glass, and decided not to kiss her. Veronica seemed withdrawn. That was regrettable. He suggested a drink.

“Perhaps I’d better have one,” she said, “before I look the joint over.”

Fowler began battling with a functional bar. It should have poured and mixed drinks at the spin of a dial, but instead there came a tinkle of breaking glass. Fowler finally gave up and went back to the old-fashioned method. “Highball? Well, theoretically, this is a perfect machine for living. But the architect wasn’t as perfect as his theoretical ideas. Methods of construction have to catch up with ideas, you know.”

“This room’s nice,” Veronica acknowledged, relaxing on airfoam. With a glass in her hand, she seemed more cheerful. “Almost everything’s curved, isn’t it? And I like the windows.”

“It’s the little things that go wrong. If a fuse blows, a whole unit goes out. The windows—I insisted on those.”

“Not much of a view.”

“Unimproved. Building restrictions, you know. I wanted to build on the top of a hill a few miles away, but the township laws wouldn’t allow it. This house is unorthodox. Not very, but enough. I might as well have tried to put up a Wright house in Williamsburg. This place is functional and convenient—”

“Except when you want a drink?”

“Trivia,” Fowler said airily. “A house is complicated. You expect a few things to go wrong at first. I’ll fix ’em as they come up. I’m a jerk of all trades. Want to look around?”

“Why not?” Veronica said. It wasn’t quite the enthusiastic reaction for which Fowler had hoped, but he made the best of it. He showed her the house. It was larger than it had seemed from the outside. There was nothing super about it, but it was—theoretically—a functional unit, breaking away completely from the hidebound traditions that had made attics, cellars, and conventional bathrooms and kitchens as vestigially unfunctional as the vermiform appendix. “Anyway,” Fowler said, “statistics show most accidents happen in kitchens and bathrooms. They can’t happen here.”

“What’s this?” Veronica asked, opening a door. Fowler grimaced.

“The guest room,” he said. “That was the single mistake. I’ll use it for storage or something. The room hasn’t any windows.”

“The light doesn’t work—”

“Oh, I forgot. I turned off the main switch. Be right back.” He hurried to the closet that held the house controls, flipped the switch, and returned. Veronica was looking into a room that was pleasantly furnished as a bedroom, and, with tinted, concealed fluorescents, seemed light and airy despite the lack of windows.

“I called you,” she said. “Didn’t you hear me?”

Fowler smiled and touched a wall. “Sound-absorbent. The whole house is that way. The architect did a good job, but this room—”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing—unless you’re inside and the door should get stuck. I’ve a touch of claustrophobia.”

“You should face these fears,” said Veronica, who had read it somewhere. Fowler repressed a slight irritation. There were times when he had felt an impulse to slap Veronica across the chops, but her gorgeousness entirely outweighed any weakness she might have in other directions.

“Air conditioning, too,” he said, touching another switch. “Fresh as a spring breeze. Which reminds me. Does your drink want freshening?”

“Yes,” Veronica said, and they returned to the comma-shaped room. It was appreciably darker. The girl went to the window and stared through the immense, wall-long pane.

“Storm coming up,” she said. “The car radio said it’ll be a bad one. I’d better go, Johnny.”

“Must you? You just got here.”

“I have a date. Anyway, I’ve got to work early tomorrow.” She was a Korys model, much in demand.

Fowler turned from the recalcitrant bar and reached for her hand.

“I wanted to ask you to marry me,” he said.

There was silence, while leaden grayness pressed down beyond the window, and yellow hills rippled under the gusts of unfelt wind. Veronica met his gaze steadily.

“I know you did. I mean—I’ve been expecting you to.”

“Well?”

She moved her shoulders uneasily.

“Not now.”

“But—Veronica. Why not? We’ve known each other for a couple of years—”

“The truth is—I’m not sure about you, Johnny. Sometimes I think I love you. But sometimes I’m not sure I even like you.”

He frowned. “I don’t get that.”

“Well, I can’t explain it. It’s just that I think you could be either a very nice guy or a very nasty one. And I’d like to be quite certain first. Now I’ve got to go. It’s starting to rain.”

On that note she went out, leaving Fowler with a sour taste in his mouth. He mixed himself another drink and wandered over to his drawing board, where some sketches were sheafed up in a disorderly fashion. Nuts. He was making good dough at commercial art, he’d even got himself a rather special house—

One of the drawings caught his eye. It was a background detail, intended for incorporation later in a larger picture. It showed a gargoyle, drawn with painstaking care, and a certain quality of vivid precision that was very faintly unpleasant. Veronica—

Fowler suddenly remembered his guest and hastily set down his drink. He had avoided that room during the tour of inspection, managing to put the man completely out of his mind. That was too bad. He could have asked Veronica to send out a doctor from the village.

But the guest didn’t seem to need a doctor. He was working on the wall-switch, at some danger, Fowler thought, of electrocuting himself. “Look out!” Fowler said sharply. “It’s hot!” But the man merely gave him a mild, blank stare and passed his hand downward before the panel.

The light went out.

It came on again, to show the man finishing an upward gesture.

No toggle switch stub protruded from the slot in the center of the plate. Fowler blinked. “What—?” he said.

Gesture. Blackout. Another gesture.

“What did you do to that?” Fowler asked, but there was no audible reply.

Fowler drove south through the storm, muttering about ham electricians. Beside him the guest sat, smiling vacantly. The one thing Fowler wanted was to get the guy off his hands. A doctor, or a cop, in the village, would solve that particular problem. Or, rather, that would have been the solution, if a minor landslide hadn’t covered the road at a crucial point.

With difficulty Fowler turned the car around and drove back home, cursing gently.

The blank man sat obediently at his side.

They were marooned for three days. Luckily the larder was well-stocked, and the power lines, which ran underground, weren't cut by the storm. The water-purifying unit turned the muddy stream from outside into crystalline nectar, the FM set wasn't much bothered by atmospheric disturbances, and Fowler had plenty of assignments to keep him busy at his drawing board. But he did no drawing. He was exploring a fascinating, though unbelievable, development.

The light switch his guest had rigged was unique. Fowler discovered that when he took the gadget apart. The sealed plastic had been broken open, and a couple of wires had been rewound in an odd fashion. The wiring didn't make much sense to Fowler. There was no photo-electric hookup that would have explained it. But the fact remained that he could turn on the lights in that room by moving his hand upward in front of the switch plate, and reverse the process with a downward gesture.

He made tests. It seemed as though an invisible fourteen-inch beam extended directly outward from the switch. At any rate, gestures, no matter how emphatic, made beyond that fourteen-inch distance had no effect on the lights at all.

Curious, he asked his guest to rig up another switch in the same fashion. Presently all the switches in the house were converted, but Fowler was no wiser. He could duplicate the hookup, but he didn't understand the principle. He felt a little frightened.

Locked in the house for three days, he had time to wonder and worry. He fed his guest—who had forgotten the use of knife and fork, if he had ever known it—and he tried to make the man talk. Not too successfully.

Once the man said: "Forgotten . . . forgotten—"

"You haven't forgotten how to be an electrician. Where did you come from?"

The blank face turned to him. "Where?" A pause. And then—

"When? Time . . . time—"

Once he picked up a newspaper and pointed questioningly at the date line—the year.

"That's right," Fowler said, his stomach crawling. "What year did you think it was?"

"Wrong—" the man said. "Forgotten—"

Fowler stared. On impulse, he got up to search his guest's pockets. But there were no pockets. The suit was ordinary, though slightly strange in cut, but it had no pockets.

"What's your name?"

No answer.

"Where did you come from? Another—*time*?"

Still no answer.

Fowler thought of robots. He thought of a soulless world of the future peopled by automatons. But he knew neither was the right answer. The man sitting before him was horribly normal. And empty, somehow—drained. Normal?

The norm? That non-existent, figurative symbol which would be monstrous if it actually appeared? The closer an individual approaches the norm, the more colorless he is. Just as a contracting line becomes a point, which has few, if any, distinguishing characteristics. One point is exactly like another point. As though humans, in some unpleasant age to come, had been reduced to the lowest common denominator.

The norm.

“All right,” Fowler said. “I’ll call you Norman, till you remember your right name. But you can’t be a . . . point. You’re no moron. You’ve got a talent for electricity, anyhow.”

Norman had other talents, too, as Fowler was to discover soon. He grew tired of looking through the window at the gray, pouring rain, pounding down over a drenched and dreary landscape, and when he tried to close the built-in Venetian shutters, of course they failed to work. “May that architect be forced to live in one of his own houses,” Fowler said, and, noticing Norman made explanatory gestures toward the window.

Norman smiled blankly.

“The view,” Fowler said. “I don’t like to see all that rain. The shutters won’t work. See if you can fix them. The view—” He explained patiently, and presently Norman went out to the unit nominally called a kitchen, though it was far more efficient. Fowler shrugged and sat down at his drawing board. He looked up, some while later, in time to see Norman finish up with a few swabs of a cloth. Apparently he had been painting the window with water.

Fowler snorted. “I didn’t ask you to wash it,” he remarked. “It was the shutters—”

Norman laid a nearly empty basin on a table and smiled expectantly. Fowler suffered a slight reorientation. “Time-traveling, ha,” he said. “You probably crashed out of some booby hatch. The sooner I can get you back there the better I’ll like it. If it’d only stop raining . . . I wonder if you could rig up the televisior? No, I forgot. We don’t even have one yet. And I suspect you couldn’t do it. That light switch business was a fluke.”

He looked out at the rain and thought of Veronica. Then she was there before him, dark and slender, smiling a little.

“Wha—” Fowler said throatily.

He blinked. Hallucinations? He looked again, and she was still there, three-dimensionally, outside the window—

Norman smiled and nodded. He pointed to the apparition.

“Do you see it too?” Fowler asked madly. “It can’t be. She’s outside. She’ll get wet. What in the name of—”

But it was only Fowler who got wet, dashing out bareheaded in the drenching rain. There was no one outside. He looked through the window and saw the familiar room, and Norman.

He came back. “Did you paint her on the window?” he asked. “But you’ve never seen Veronica. Besides, she’s moving—three-dimensional. Oh, it can’t be. My mind’s snapping. I need peace and quiet. A green thought in a green shade.” He focused on a green thought, and Veronica faded out slowly. A cool, quiet, woodland glade was visible through the window.

After a while Fowler figured it out. His window made thoughts visible.

It wasn’t as simple as that, naturally. He had to experiment and brood for quite some time. Norman was no help. But the fact finally emerged that whenever Fowler looked at the window and visualized something with strong emphasis, an image of that thought appeared—a projective screen, so to speak.

It was like throwing a stone into calm water. The ripples moved out for a while, and then slowly quieted. The woodland scene wasn’t static; there was a breeze there, and the leaves glittered and the branches swayed. Clouds moved softly across a blue sky. It was a scene Fowler finally recognized, a Vermont woodland he had seen years ago. Yet when did sequoias ever grow in Vermont?

A composite, then. And the original impetus of his thoughts set the scene into action along normal lines. When he visualized the forest, he had known that there would be a wind, and

that the branches would move. So they moved. But slower and slower—though it took a long while for the action to run down.

He tried again. This time Chicago's lake shore. Cars rushed along the drive. He tried to make them run backwards, but got a sharp headache and a sense of watching a jerky film. Possibly he could reverse the normal course of events, but his mind wasn't geared to handle film running backward. Then he thought hard and watched a seascape appear through the glass. This time he waited to see how long it would take the image to vanish. The action stopped in an hour, but the picture did not fade completely for another hour.

Only then did the possibilities strike him with an impact as violent as lightning.

Considerable poetry has been written about what happens when love rejected turns to hate. Psychology could explain the cause as well as the effect—the mechanism of displacement. Energy has to go somewhere, and if one channel is blocked, another will be found. Not that Veronica had definitely rejected Fowler, and certainly his emotion for the girl had not suffered an alchemic transformation, unless one wishes to delve into the abysses of psychology in which love is merely the other face of hatred—but on those levels of semantic confusion you can easily prove anything.

Call it reorientation. Fowler had never quite let himself believe that Veronica wouldn't fall into his arms. His ego was damaged. Consequently it had to find some other justification, some assurance—and it was unfortunate for Norman that the displacement had to occur when he was available as scapegoat. For the moment Fowler began to see the commercial possibilities of the magic windowpane, Norman was doomed.

Not at once; in the beginning, Fowler would have been shocked and horrified had he seen the end result of his plan. He was no villain, for there are no villains. There is a check-and-balance system, as inevitable in nature and mind as in politics, and the balance was beginning to tip when Fowler locked Norman in the windowless room for safekeeping and drove to New York to see a patent attorney. He was careful at first. He knew the formula for the telepathically-receptive window paint by now, but he merely arranged to patent the light-switch gadget that was operated by a gesture. Afterwards, he regretted his ignorance, for clever infringements appeared on the heels of his own device. He hadn't known enough about the matter to protect himself thoroughly in the patent.

By a miracle, he had kept the secret of the telepathic paint to himself. All this took time, naturally, and meanwhile Norman, urged on by his host, had made little repairs and improvements around the house. Some of them were impractical, but others were decidedly worth using—short-cuts, conveniences, clever methods of bridging difficulties that would be worth money in the open market. Norman's way of thinking seemed curiously alien. Given a problem, he could solve it, but he had no initiative on his own. He seemed satisfied to stay in the house—

Well, satisfied was scarcely the word. He was satisfied in the same sense that a jellyfish is satisfied to remain in its pool. If there were quivers of volition, slight directional stirrings, they were very feeble indeed. There were times when Fowler, studying his guest, decided that Norman was in a psychotic state—catatonic stupor seemed the most appropriate label. The man's will was submerged, if, indeed, he had ever had any.

No one has ever detailed the probable reactions of the man who owned the goose who laid the golden eggs. He brooded over a mystery, and presently took empirical steps, afterwards regretted. Fowler had a more analytical mind, and suspected that Norman might be poised at a

precarious state of balance, during which—and only during which—he laid golden eggs. Metal can be pliable until pressure is used, after which it may become work-hardened and inflexible. Fowler was afraid of applying too much pressure. But he was equally afraid of not finding out all he could about the goose's unusual oviparity.

So he studied Norman. It was like watching a shadow. Norman seemed to have none of the higher reflexes; his activities were little more than tropism. Ego-consciousness was present, certainly, but—where had he come from? What sort of place or time had it been? Or was Norman simply a freak, a lunatic, a mutation? All that seemed certain was that part of his brain didn't know its own function. Without conscious will or volition, it was useless. Fowler had to supply the volition; he had to give orders. Between orders, Norman simply sat, occasionally quivering slightly.

It was bewildering. It was fascinating.

Also, it might be a little dangerous. Fowler had no intention of letting his captive escape if he could help it, but vague recollections of peonage disturbed him sometimes. Probably this was illegal. Norman ought to be in an institution, under medical care. But then, Norman had such unusual talents!

Fowler, to salve his uneasiness, ceased to lock the door of the windowless room. By now he had discovered it was unnecessary, anyhow. Norman was like a subject in deep hypnosis. He would obey when told not to leave the room. Fowler, with a layman's knowledge of law, thought that probably gave him an out. He pictured himself in the dock blandly stating that Norman had never been a prisoner, had always been free to leave the house if he chose.

Actually, only hunger would rouse Norman to disobey Fowler's commands to stay in his room. He would have to be almost famished, even then, before he would go to the kitchen and eat whatever he found, without discrimination and apparently without taste.

Time went by. Fowler was reorienting, though he scarcely knew it yet, toward a whole new set of values. He let his illustrating dwindle away until he almost ceased to accept orders. This was after an abortive experiment with Norman in which he tried to work out on paper an equivalent of the telepathic pictures on glass. If he could simply sit and *think* his drawings onto bristol board—

That was, however, one of Norman's failures.

It wasn't easy to refrain from sharing this wonderful new secret with Veronica. Fowler found himself time and again shutting his lips over the information just in time. He didn't invite her out to the house any more; Norman was too often working at odd jobs around the premises. Beautiful visions of the future were building up elaborately in Fowler's mind—Veronica wrapped in mink and pearls, himself commanding financial empires all based on Norman's extraordinary talents and Norman's truly extraordinary willingness to obey.

That was because of his physical weakness, Fowler felt sure. It seemed to take so much of Norman's energy simply to breathe and eat that nothing remained. And after the solution of a problem, a complete fatigue overcame him. He was useless for a day or two between jobs, recovering from the utter exhaustion that work seemed to induce. Fowler was quite willing to accept that. It made him even surer of his—guest. The worst thing that could happen, of course, would be Norman's recovery, his return to normal—

Money began to come in very satisfactorily, although Fowler wasn't really a good business man. In fact, he was a remarkably poor one. It didn't matter much. There was always more where the first had come from.

With some of the money Fowler started cautious inquiries about missing persons. He wanted to be sure no indignant relatives would turn up and demand an accounting of all this money. He questioned Norman futilely.

Norman simply could not talk. His mind was too empty for coherence. He could produce words, but he could not connect them. And this was a thing that seemed to give him his only real trouble. For he wanted desperately sometimes to speak. There was something he seemed frantic to tell Fowler, in the intervals when his strength was at its peak.

Fowler didn't want to know it. Usually when Norman reached this pitch he set him another exhausting problem. Fowler wondered for awhile just why he dreaded hearing the message. Presently he faced the answer.

Norman might be trying to explain how he could be cured.

Eventually, Fowler had to face an even more unwelcome truth. Norman did seem in spite of everything to be growing stronger.

He was working one day on a vibratory headset gimmick later to be known as a Hed-D-Acher, when suddenly he threw down his tools and faced Fowler over the table with a look that bordered on animation—for Norman.

"Sick—" he said painfully. "I . . . know . . . *work!*" It was an anathema. He made a defiant gesture and pushed the tools away.

Fowler, with a sinking sensation, frowned at the rebellious nonentity.

"All right, Norman," he said soothingly. "All right. You can rest when you finish this job. You must finish it first, though. You must finish this job, Norman. Do you understand that? You must finish—"

It was sheer accident, of course—or almost accident—that the job turned out to be much more complicated than Fowler had expected. Norman, obedient to the slow, repeated commands, worked very late and very hard.

The end of the job found him so completely exhausted he couldn't speak or move for three days.

As a matter of fact it was the Hed-D-Acher that turned out to be an important milestone in Fowler's progress. He couldn't recognize it at the time, but when he looked back, years later, he saw the occasion of his first serious mistake. His first, that is, unless you count the moment when he lifted Norman across his threshold at the very start of the thing.

Fowler had to go to Washington to defend himself in some question of patent infringement. A large firm had found out about the Hed-D-Acher and jumped in on the grounds of similar wiring—at least that was Fowler's impression. He was no technician. The main point was that the Hed-D-Acher couldn't be patented in its present form, and Fowler's rivals were trying to squeeze through a similar—and stolen—Hed-D-Acher of their own.

Fowler phoned the Korys Agency. Long distance television was not on the market yet and he was not able to see Veronica's face, but he knew what expression must be visible on it when he told her what he wanted.

"But I'm going out on a job, John. I can't just drop everything and rush out to your house."

"Listen, Veronica, there may be a hundred thousand bucks in it. I . . . there's no one else I can trust." He didn't add his chief reason for trusting her—the fact that she wasn't over-bright.

In the end, she went. Dramatic situations appealed to her, and he dropped dark hints of corporation espionage and bloody doings on Capitol Hill. He told her where to find the key

and she hung up, leaving Fowler to gnaw his nails intermittently and try to limit himself to one whiskey-soda every half hour. He was paged, it seemed to him, some years later.

“Hello, Veronica?”

“Right. I’m at the house. The key was where you said. Now what?”

Fowler had had time to work out a plan. He put pencil and note pad on the jutting shelf before him and frowned slightly. This might be a risk, but—

But he intended to marry Veronica, so it was no great risk. And she wasn’t smart enough to figure out the real answers.

He told her about the windowless room. “That’s my houseboy’s—Norman. He’s slightly half-witted, but a good boy on mechanical stuff. Only he’s a little deaf, and you’ve got to tell him a thing three times before he understands it.”

“I think I’d better get out of here,” Veronica remarked. “Next you’ll be telling me he’s a homicidal maniac.”

Fowler laughed heartily. “There’s a box in the kitchen—it’s in that red cupboard with the blue handle. It’s pretty heavy. But see if you can manage it. Take it in to Norman and tell him to make another Hed-D-Acher with a different wiring circuit.”

“Are you drunk?”

Fowler repressed an impulse to bite the mouthpiece off the telephone. His nerves were crawling under his skin. “This isn’t a gag, Veronica. I told you how important it is. A hundred thousand bucks isn’t funny. Look, got a pencil? Write this down.” He dictated some technical instructions he had gleaned by asking the right questions. “Tell that to Norman. He’ll find all the materials and tools he needs in the box.”

“If this is a gag—” Veronica said, and there was a pause. “Well, hang on.”

Silence drew on. Fowler tried to hear what was happening so many miles away. He caught a few vague sounds, but they were meaningless. Then voices rose in loud debate.

“Veronica!” Fowler shouted. “Veronica!” There was no answer.

After that, voices again, but softer. And presently:

“Johnny,” Veronica said, “if you ever pull a trick like that on me again—”

“What happened?”

“Hiding a gibbering idiot in your house—” She was breathing fast.

“He’s . . . what did he do? *What happened?*”

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Except when I opened the door your houseboy walked out and began running around the house like a . . . a bat. He was trying to talk—Johnny, he scared me!” She was plaintive.

“Where is he now?”

“Back in his room. I . . . I was afraid of him. But I was trying not to show it. I thought if I could get him back in and lock the door—I spoke to him, and he swung around at me so fast I guess I let out a yell. And then he kept trying to say something—”

“What?”

“How should I know? He’s in his room, but I couldn’t find a key to it. I’m not staying here a minute longer. I . . . *here he comes!*”

“Veronica! Tell him to go back to his room. Loud and—like you mean it!”

She obeyed. Fowler could hear her saying it. She said it several times.

“It doesn’t work. He’s going out—”

“Stop him!”

“I won’t! I had enough trouble coaxing him back the first time—”

“Let me talk to him,” Fowler said suddenly. “He’ll obey me. Hold the phone to his ear. Get him to listen to me.” He raised his voice to a shout. “*Norman! Come here! Listen to me!*” Outside the booth people were turning to stare, but he ignored them.

He heard a faint mumble and recognized it.

“Norman,” he said, more quietly, but with equal firmness. “Do exactly what I tell you to do. Don’t leave the house. Don’t leave the house. *Don’t leave the house.* Do you understand?”

Mumble. Then words: “Can’t get out . . . can’t—”

“Don’t leave the house. Build another Hed-D-Acher. Do it now. Get the equipment you need and build it in the living room, on the table where the telephone is. Do it now.”

A pause, and then Veronica said, shakily: “He’s gone back to his room. Johnny, I . . . he’s coming back! With that box of stuff—”

“Let me talk to him again. Get yourself a drink. A couple of ’em.” He needed Veronica as his interpreter, and the best way to keep her there would be with the aid of Dutch courage.

“Well—here he is.”

Norman mumbled.

Fowler referred to his notes. He gave firm, incisive, detailed directions. He told Norman exactly what he wanted. He repeated his orders several times.

And it ended with Norman building a Hed-D-Acher, with a different type of circuit, while Veronica watched, made measurements as Fowler commanded, and relayed the information across the wire. By the time she got slightly high, matters were progressing more smoothly. There was the danger that she might make inaccurate measurements, but Fowler insisted on check and double-check of each detail.

Occasionally he spoke to Norman. Each time the man’s voice was weaker. The dangerous surge of initiative was passing as energy drained out of Norman while his swift fingers flew.

In the end, Fowler had his information, and Norman, completely exhausted, was ordered back to his room. According to Veronica, he went there obediently and fell flat on the floor.

“I’ll buy you a mink coat,” Fowler said. “See you later.”

“But—”

“I’ve got to hurry. Tell you all about it when I see you.”

He got the patent, by the skin of his teeth. There was instant litigation, which was why he didn’t clean up on the gadget immediately. He was willing to wait. The goose still laid golden eggs.

But he was fully aware of the danger now. He had to keep Norman busy. For unless the man’s strength remained at a minimum, initiative would return. And there would be nothing to stop Norman from walking out of the house, or—

Or even worse. For Fowler could, after all, keep the doors locked. But he knew that locks wouldn’t imprison Norman long once the man discovered how to pose a problem to himself. Once Norman thought: *Problem how to escape*—then his clever hands would construct a wall-melter or a matter-transmitter, and that would be the end for Fowler.

Norman had one specialized talent. To keep that operating efficiently—for Fowler’s purpose—all Norman’s other faculties had to be cut down to minimum operation speed.

The rosy light in the high-backed booth fell flatteringly upon Veronica’s face. She twirled her martini glass on the table and said: “But John, I don’t think I want to marry you.” The

martini glass shot pinpoints of soft light in his face as she turned it. She looked remarkably pretty, even for a Korys model. Fowler felt like strangling her.

“Why not?” he demanded.

She shrugged. She had been blowing hot, and cold, so far as Fowler was concerned, ever since the day she had seen Norman. Fowler had been able to buy her back, at intervals, with gifts or moods that appealed to her, but the general drift had been toward estrangement. She wasn’t intelligent, but she did have sensitivity of a sort, and it served its purpose. It was stopping her from marrying John Fowler.

“Maybe we’re too much alike, Johnny,” she said reflectively. “I don’t know. I . . . how’s that miserable house-boy of yours?”

“Is *that* still bothering you?” His voice was impatient. She had been showing too much concern over Norman. It had probably been a mistake to call her in at all, but what else could he have done? “I wish you’d forget about Norman. He’s all right.”

“Johnny, I honestly do think he ought to be under a doctor’s care. He didn’t look at all well that day. Are you sure—”

“Of course I’m sure! What do you take me for? As a matter of fact, he is under a doctor’s care. Norman’s just feeble-minded. I’ve told you that a dozen times, Veronica. I wish you’d take my word for it. He . . . he sees a doctor regularly. It was just having you there that upset him. Strangers throw him off his balance. He’s fine now. Let’s forget about Norman. We were talking about getting married, remember?”

“You were. Not me. No, Johnny, I’m afraid it wouldn’t work.” She looked at him in the soft light, her face clouded with doubt and—was it suspicion? With a woman of Veronica’s mentality, you never knew just where you stood. Fowler could reason her out of every objection she offered to him, but because reason meant so little to her, the solid substratum of her convictions remained unchanged.

“You’ll marry me,” he said, his voice confident.

“No.” She gave him an uneasy look and then drew a deep breath and said: “You may as well know this now, Johnny—I’ve just about decided to marry somebody else.”

“Who?” He wanted to shout the question, but he forced himself to be calm.

“No one you know. Ray Barnaby. I . . . I’ve pretty well made up my mind about it, John.”

“I don’t know the man,” Fowler told her evenly, “but I’ll make it my business to find out all I can.”

“Now John, let’s not quarrel. I—”

“You’re going to marry me or nobody, Veronica.” Fowler was astonished at the sudden violence of his own reaction. “Do you understand that?”

“Don’t be silly, John. You don’t own me.”

“I’m not being silly! I’m just telling you.”

“John, I’ll do exactly as I please. Now, let’s not quarrel about it.”

Until now, until this moment of icy rage, he had never quite realized what an obsession Veronica had become. Fowler had got out of the habit of being thwarted. His absolute power over one individual and one unchanging situation was giving him a taste for tyranny. He sat looking at Veronica in the pink dimness of the booth, grinding his teeth together in an effort not to shout at her.

“If you go through with this, Veronica, I’ll make it my business to see you regret it as long as you live,” he told her in a harsh, low voice.

She pushed her half-emptied glass aside with sudden violence that matched his. “Don’t get me started, John Fowler!” she said angrily. “I’ve got a temper, too! I’ve always known there was something I didn’t like about you.”

“There’ll be a lot more you don’t like if you—”

“That’s enough, John!” She got up abruptly, clutching at her slipping handbag. Even in this soft light he could see the sudden hardening of her face, the lines of anger pinching downward along her nose and mouth. A perverse triumph filled him because at this moment she was ugly in her rage, but it did not swerve his determination.

“You’re going to marry me,” he told her harshly. “Sit down. You’re going to marry me if I have to—” He paused.

“To what?” Her voice was goading. He shook his head. He couldn’t finish the threat aloud.

Norman will help me, he was thinking in cold triumph. *Norman will find a way.*

He smiled thinly after her as she stalked in a fury out of the bar.

For a week Fowler heard no more from her. He made inquiries about the man Barnaby and was not surprised to learn that Veronica’s intended—if she had really been serious about the fellow, after all—was a young broker of adequate income and average stupidity. A nonentity. Fowler told himself savagely that they were two of a kind and no doubt deserved each other. But his obsession still ruled him, and he was determined that no one but himself should marry Veronica.

Short of hypnosis, there seemed no immediate way to change her mind. But perhaps he could change Barnaby’s. He believed he could, given enough time. Norman was at work on a rather ingenious little device involving the use of a trick lighting system. Fowler had been impressed, on consideration, by the effect of the rosy light in the bar on Veronica’s appearance.

Another week passed, with no news about Veronica. Fowler told himself he could afford to remain aloof. He had the means to control her very nearly within his grasp. He would watch her, and wait his time in patience.

He was very busy, too, with other things. Two more devices were ready for patenting—the Magic Latch keyed to fingerprint patterns, and the Haircut Helmet that could be set for any sort of hair trimming and would probably wreak havoc among barbers. But litigation on the Hed-D-Acher was threatening to be expensive, and Fowler had learned already to live beyond his means. Far beyond. It seemed ridiculous to spend only what he took in each day, when such fortunes in royalties were just around the corner.

Twice he had to take Norman off the lighting device to perform small tasks in other directions. And Norman was in himself a problem.

The work exhausted him. It had to exhaust him. That was necessary. An unpleasant necessity, of course, but there it was. Sometimes the exhaustion in Norman’s eyes made one uncomfortable. Certainly Norman suffered. But because he was seldom able to show it plainly, Fowler could tell himself that perhaps he imagined the worst part of it. Casuistry, used to good purpose, helped him to ignore what he preferred not to see.

By the end of the second week, Fowler decided not to wait on Veronica any longer. He bought a dazzling solitaire diamond whose cost faintly alarmed even himself, and a wedding band that was a full circle of emerald-cut diamonds to complement it. With ten thousand dollars worth of jewelry in his pocket, he went into the city to pay her a call.

Barnaby answered the door.

Stupidly Fowler heard himself saying: “Miss Wood here?”

Barnaby, grinning, shook his head and started to answer. Fowler knew perfectly well what he was about to say. The fatuous grin would have told him even if some accurate sixth sense had not already made it clear. But he wouldn't let Barnaby say it. He thrust the startled bridegroom aside and shouldered angrily into the apartment, calling: “Veronica! Veronica, where are you?”

She came out of the kitchen in a ruffled apron, apprehension and defiance on her face.

“You can just get right out of here, John Fowler,” she said firmly. Barnaby came up from behind him and began a blustering remonstrance, but she slipped past Fowler and linked her arm with Barnaby's, quieting him with a touch.

“We were married day before yesterday, John,” she said.

Fowler was astonished to discover that the cliché about a red swimming haze of rage was perfectly true. The room and the bridal couple shimmered before him for an instant. He could hardly breathe in the suffocating fury that swam in his brain.

He took out the white velvet box, snapped it open and waved it under Veronica's nose. Liquid fire quivered in the myriad cut surfaces of the jewels and for an instant pure greed made Veronica's face as hard as the diamonds.

Barnaby said: “I think you'd better go, Fowler.”

In silence, Fowler went.

The little light-device wouldn't do now. He would need something more powerful for his revenge. Norman put the completed gadget aside and began to work on something new. There would be a use for the thing later. Already plans were spinning themselves out in Fowler's mind.

They would be expensive plans. Fowler took council with himself and decided that the moment had come to put the magic window on the market.

Until now he had held this in reserve. Perhaps he had even been a little afraid of possible repercussions. He was artist enough to know that a whole new art-form might result from a practical telepathic projector. There were so many possibilities—

But the magic window failed.

Not wholly, of course. It was a miracle, and men always will buy miracles. But it wasn't the instant, overwhelming financial success Fowler had felt certain it would be. For one thing, perhaps this was too much of a miracle. Inventions can't become popular until the culture is ready for them. Talking films were made in Paris by Méliès around 1890, but perhaps because that was a double miracle, nobody took to the idea. As for a telepathic screen—

It was a specialized luxury item. And it wasn't as easy or as safe to enjoy as one might suppose. For one thing, few minds turned out to be disciplined enough to maintain a picture they deliberately set out to evoke. As a mass entertaining medium it suffered from the same faults as family motion pictures—other peoples' memories and dreams are notoriously boring unless one sees oneself in them.

Besides, this was too close to pure telepathy to be safe. Fowler had lived alone too long to remember the perils of exposing one's thoughts to a group. Whatever he wanted to project on his private window, he projected. But in the average family it wouldn't do. It simply wouldn't do.

Some Hollywood companies and some millionaires leased windows—Fowler refused to sell them outright. A film studio photographed a batch of projected ideations and cut them into

a dream sequence for a modern Cinderella story. But trick photography had already done work so similar that it made no sensation whatever. Even Disney had done some of the stuff better. Until trained imaginative projective artists could be developed, the windows were simply not going to be a commercial success.

One ethnological group tried to use a window to project the memories of oldsters in an attempt to recapture everyday living customs of the recent past, but the results were blurred and inaccurate, full of anachronisms. They all had to be winnowed and checked so completely that little of value remained. The fact stood out that the ordinary mind is too undisciplined to be worth anything as a projector. Except as a toy, the window was useless.

It was useless commercially. But for Fowler it had one intrinsic usefulness more valuable than money—

One of the wedding presents Veronica and Barnaby received was a telepathic window. It came anonymously. Their suspicions should have been roused. Perhaps they were, but they kept the window. After all, in her modeling work Veronica had met many wealthy people, and Barnaby also had moneyed friends, any of whom might in a generous mood have taken a window-lease for them as a goodwill gesture. Also, possession of a magic window was a social distinction. They did not allow themselves to look the gift-horse too closely in the mouth. They kept the window.

They could not have known—though they might have guessed—that this was a rather special sort of window. Norman had been at work on it through long, exhausting hours, while Fowler stood over him with the goading repetitious commands that kept him at his labor.

Fowler was not too disappointed at the commercial failure of the thing. There were other ways of making money. So long as Norman remained his to command the natural laws of supply and demand did not really affect him. He had by now almost entirely ceased to think in terms of the conventional mores. Why should he? They no longer applied to him. His supply of money and resources was limitless. He never really had to suffer for a failure. It would always be Norman, not Fowler, who suffered.

There was unfortunately no immediate way in which he could check how well his magic window was working. To do that you would have to be an invisible third person in the honeymoon apartment. But Fowler, knowing Veronica as he did, could guess.

The window was based on the principle that if you give a child a jackknife he'll probably cut himself.

Fowler's first thought had been to create a window on which he could project his own thoughts, disguised as those of the bride or groom. But he had realized almost immediately that a far more dangerous tool lay ready-made in the minds of the two whose marriage he meant to undermine.

"It isn't as if they wouldn't break up anyhow, in a year or two," he told himself as he speculated on the possibilities of his magic window. He was not justifying his intent. He didn't need to, any more. He was simply considering possibilities. "They're both stupid, they're both selfish. They're not material you could make a good marriage of. This ought to be almost too easy—"

Every man, he reasoned, has a lawless devil in his head. What filters through the censor-band from the unconscious mind is controllable. But the lower levels of the brain are utterly without morals.

Norman produced a telepathic window that would at times project images from the unconscious mind.

It was remotely controlled, of course; most of the time it operated on the usual principles of the magic window. But whenever Fowler chose he could throw a switch that made the glass twenty miles away hypersensitive.

Before he threw it for the first time, he televised Veronica. It was evening. When the picture dawned in the television screen he could see the magic window set up in its elegant frame within range of the televisor, so that everyone who called might be aware of the Barnaby's distinction.

Luckily it was Veronica who answered, though Barnaby was visible in the background, turning toward the 'visor an interested glance that darkened when Fowler's face dawned upon the screen. Veronica's politely expectant look turned sullen as she recognized the caller.

"Well?"

Fowler grinned. "Oh, nothing. Just wondered how you were getting along."

"Beautifully, thanks. Is that all?"

Fowler shrugged. "If that's the way you feel, yes."

"Good-by," Veronica said firmly, and flicked the switch. The screen before Fowler went blank. He grinned. All he had wanted to do was remind her of himself. He touched the stud that would activate that magic window he had just seen, and settled down to wait.

What would happen now he didn't know. Something would. He hoped the sight of him had reminded Veronica of the dazzling jewelry he had carried when they last met. He hoped that upon the window now would be dawning a covetous image of those diamonds, clear as dark water and quivering with fiery light. The sight should be enough to rouse resentment in Barnaby's mind, and when two people quarrel wholeheartedly, there are impulses toward mayhem in even the most civilized mind. It should shock the bride and groom to see on a window that reflected their innermost thoughts a picture of hatred and wishful violence. Would Veronica see herself being strangled in effigy in the big wall-frame? Would Barnaby see himself bleeding from the deep scratches his bride would be yearning to score across his face?

Fowler sat back comfortably, luxuriating in speculation.

It might take a long time. It might take years. He was willing to wait.

It took even longer than Fowler had expected. Slowly the poison built up in the Barnaby household, very slowly. And in that time a different sort of toxicity developed in Fowler's. He scarcely realized it. He was too close.

He never recognized the moment when his emotional balance shifted and he began actively to hate Norman.

The owner of the golden goose must have lived under considerable strain. Every day when he went out to look in the nest he must have felt a quaking wonder whether this time the egg would be white, and valuable only for omelets or hatching. Also, he must have had to stay very close to home, living daily with the nightmare of losing his treasure—

Norman was a prisoner—but a prisoner handcuffed to his jailer. Both men were chained. If Fowler left him alone for too long, Norman might recover. It was the inevitable menace that made travel impossible. Fowler could keep no servants; he lived alone with his prisoner. Occasionally he thought of Norman as a venomous snake whose poison fangs had to be removed each time they were renewed. He dared not cut out the poison sacs themselves, for

there was no way to do that without killing the golden goose. The mixed metaphors were indicative of the state of Fowler's mind by then.

And he was almost as much a prisoner in the house as Norman was.

Constantly now he had to set Norman problems to solve simply as a safety measure, whether or not they had commercial value. For Norman was slowly regaining his strength. He was never completely coherent, but he could talk a little more, and he managed to put across quite definitely his tremendous urge to give Fowler certain obscure information.

Fowler knew, of course, what it probably was. The cure. And Norman seemed to have a strangely touching confidence that if he could only frame his message intelligibly, Fowler would make arrangements for the mysterious cure.

Once Fowler might have been touched by the confidence. Not now. Because he was exploiting Norman so ruthlessly, he had to hate either Norman or himself. By a familiar process he was projecting his own fault upon his prisoner and punishing Norman for it. He no longer speculated upon Norman's mysterious origin or the source of his equally mysterious powers. There was obviously something in that clouded mind that gave forth flashes of a certain peculiar genius. Fowler accepted the fact and used it.

There was probably some set of rules that would govern what Norman could and could not do, but Fowler did not discover—until it was too late—what the rules were. Norman could produce inconceivably intricate successes, and then fail dismally at the simplest tasks.

Curiously, he turned out to be an almost infallible finder of lost articles, so long as they were lost in the confines of the house. Fowler discovered this by accident, and was gratified to learn that for some reason that kind of search was the most exhausting task he could set for his prisoner. When all else failed, and Norman still seemed too coherent or too strong for safekeeping, Fowler had only to remember that he had misplaced his wristwatch or a book or screwdriver, and to send Norman after it.

Then something very odd happened, and after that he stopped the practice, feeling bewildered and insecure. He had ordered Norman to find a lost folder of rather important papers. Norman had gone into his own room and closed the door. He was missing for a long time. Eventually Fowler's impatience built up enough to make him call off the search, and he shouted to Norman to come out.

There was no answer. When he had called a third time in vain, Fowler opened the door and looked in. The room was empty. There were no windows. The door was the only exit, and Fowler could have sworn Norman had not come out of it.

In a rising panic he ransacked the room, calling futilely. He went through the rest of the house in a fury of haste and growing terror. Norman was not in the kitchen or the living room or the cellar or anywhere in sight outside.

Fowler was on the verge of a nervous collapse when Norman's door opened and the missing man emerged, staggering a little, his face white and blank with exhaustion, and the folder of papers in his hand.

He slept for three days afterward. And Fowler never again used that method of keeping his prisoner in check.

After six uneventful months had passed Fowler put Norman to work on a supplementary device that might augment the Barnaby magic window. He was receiving reports from a bribed daily maid, and he took pains to hear all the gossip mutual friends were happy to pass

on. The Barnaby marriage appeared to suffer from a higher than normal percentage of spats and disagreements, but so far it still held. The magic window was not enough.

Norman turned out a little gadget that produced supersonics guaranteed to evoke irritability and nervous tension. The maid smuggled it into the apartment. Thereafter, the reports Fowler received were more satisfactory, from his point of view.

All in all, it took three years.

And the thing that finally turned the trick was the lighting gadget which Fowler had conceived in that bar interlude when Veronica first told him about Barnaby.

Norman, worked on the fixtures for some time. They were subtle. The exact tinting involved a careful study of Veronica's skin tones, the colors of the apartment, the window placement. Norman had a scale model of the rooms where the Barnabys were working out their squabbles toward divorce. He took a long time to choose just what angles of lighting he would need to produce the worst possible result. And of course it all had to be done with considerable care because the existing light fixtures couldn't be changed noticeably.

With the help of the maid, the job was finally done. And thereafter, Veronica in her own home was—ugly.

The lights made her look haggard. They brought out every line of fatigue and ill-nature that lurked anywhere in her face. They made her sallow. They caused Barnaby increasingly to wonder why he had ever thought the girl attractive.

"It's your fault!" Veronica said hysterically. "It's all your fault and you know it!"

"How could it be my fault?" Fowler demanded in a smug voice, trying hard to iron out the smile that kept pulling up the corners of his mouth.

The television screen was between them like a window. Veronica leaned toward it, the cords in her neck standing out as she shouted at him. He had never seen that particular phenomenon before. Probably she had acquired much practice in angry shouting in the past three years. There were thin vertical creases between her brows that were new to him, too. He had seen her face to face only a few times in the years of her marriage. It had been safer and pleasanter to create her in the magic window when he felt the need of seeing her.

This was a different face, almost a different woman. He wondered briefly if he was watching the effect of his own disenchanting lighting system, but a glimpse beyond her head of a crowded drugstore assured him that he was not. This was real, not illusory. This was a Veronica he and Norman had, in effect created.

"You did it!" Veronica said accusingly. "I don't know how, but you did it."

Fowler glanced down at the morning paper he had just been reading, folded back to the gossip column that announced last night's spectacular public quarrel between a popular Korys model and her broker husband.

"What really happened?" Fowler asked mildly.

"None of your business," Veronica told him with fine illogic. "You ought to know! You were behind it—you know you were! You and that half-wit of yours, that Norman. You think I don't know? With all those fool inventions you two work out, I know perfectly well you must have done *something*—"

"Veronica, you're raving."

She was, of course. It was sheer hysteria, plus her normal conviction that no unpleasant thing that happened to her could possibly be her own fault. By pure accident she had hit upon the truth, but that was beside the point.

“Has he left you? Is that it?” Fowler demanded.

She gave him a look of hatred. But she nodded. “It’s your fault and you’ve got to help me. I need money. I—”

“All right, all right! You’re hysterical, but I’ll help you. Where are you? I’ll pick you up and we’ll have a drink and talk things over. You’re better off than you know, baby. He never was the man for you. You haven’t got a thing to worry about. I’ll be there in half an hour and we can pick up where we left off three years ago.”

Part of what he implied was true enough, he reflected as he switched off the television screen. Curiously, he still meant to marry her. The changed face with its querulous lines and corded throat repelled him, but you don’t argue with an obsession. He had worked three years toward this moment, and he still meant to marry Veronica Barnaby as he had originally meant to marry Veronica Wood. Afterward—well, things might be different.

One thing frightened him. She was not quite as stupid as he had gambled on that day years ago when he had been forced to call on her for help with Norman. She had seen too much, deduced too much—remembered much too much. She might be dangerous. He would have to find out just what she thought she knew about him and Norman.

It might be necessary to silence her, in one way or another.

Norman said with painful distinctness: “Must tell you . . . *must*—”

“No, Norman.” Fowler spoke hastily. “We have a job to do. There isn’t time now to discuss—”

“Can’t work,” Norman said. “No . . . *must* tell you—” He paused, lifted a shaking hand to his eyes, grimacing against his own palm with a look of terrible effort and entreaty. The strength that was mysteriously returning to him at intervals now had made him almost a human being again. The blankness of his face flooded sometimes with almost recognizable individuality.

“Not yet, Norman!” Fowler heard the alarm in his own voice. “I need you. Later we’ll work out whatever it is you’re trying to say. Not now. I . . . look, we’ve got to reverse that lighting system we made for Veronica. I want a set of lights that will flatter her. I need it in a hurry, Norman. You’ll have to get to work on it right away.”

Norman looked at him with hollow eyes. Fowler didn’t like it. He would not meet the look. He focused on Norman’s forehead as he repeated his instructions in a patient voice.

Behind that colorless forehead the being that was Norman must be hammering against its prison walls of bone, striving hard to escape. Fowler shook off the fanciful idea in distaste, repeated his orders once more and left the house in some haste. Veronica would be waiting.

But the look in Norman’s eyes haunted him all the way into the city. Dark, hollow, desperate. The prisoner in the skull, shut into a claustrophobic cell out of which no sound could carry. He was getting dangerously strong, that prisoner. It would be a mercy in the long run if some task were set to exhaust him, throw him back into that catatonic state in which he no longer knew he was in prison.

Veronica was not there. He waited for an hour in the bar. Then he called her apartment, and got no answer. He tried his own house, and no one seemed to be there either. With unreasonably mounting uneasiness, he went home at last.

She met him at the door.

“Veronica! I waited for an hour! What’s the idea?”

She only smiled at him. There was an almost frightening triumph in the smile, but she did not speak a word.

Fowler pushed past her, fighting his own sinking sensation of alarm. He called for Norman almost automatically, as if his unconscious mind recognized before the conscious knew just what the worst danger might be. For Veronica might be stupid but he had perhaps forgotten how cunning the stupid sometimes are. Veronica could put two and two together very well. She could reason from cause to effect quite efficiently, when her own welfare was at stake.

She had reasoned extremely well today.

Norman lay on the bed in his windowless room, his face as blank as paper. Some effort of the mind and will had exhausted him out of all semblance to a rational being. Some new, some overwhelming task, set him by—Veronica? Not by Fowler. The job he had been working on an hour ago was no such killing job as this.

But would Norman obey anyone except Fowler? He had defied Veronica on that other occasion when she tried to give him orders. He had almost escaped before Fowler's commanding voice ordered him back. Wait, though—she had coaxed him. Fowler remembered now. She could not command, but she had coaxed the blank creature into obedience. So there was a way. And she knew it.

But what had the task been?

With long strides Fowler went back into the drop-shaped living room. Veronica stood in the doorway where he had left her. She was waiting.

"What did you do?" he demanded.

She smiled. She said nothing at all.

"What happened?" Fowler cried urgently. "Veronica, answer me! What did you do?"

"I talked to Norman," she said. "I . . . got him to do a little job for me. That was all. Good-by, John."

"Wait! You can't leave like that. I've got to know what happened. I—"

"You'll find out," Veronica said. She gave him that thin smile again and then the door closed behind her. He heard her heels click once or twice on the walk and she was gone. There was nothing he could do about it.

He didn't know what she had accomplished. That was the terrifying thing. She had talked to Norman—And Norman had been in an almost coherent mood today. If she asked the right questions, she could have learned—almost anything. About the magic window and the supersonics and the lighting. About Norman himself. About—even about a weapon she could use against Fowler. Norman would make one if he were told to. He was an automaton. He could not reason; he could only comply.

Perhaps she had a weapon, then. But what? Fowler knew nothing at all of Veronica's mind. He had no idea what sort of revenge she might take if she had a field as limitless as Norman's talents offered her. Fowler had never been interested in Veronica's mind at all. He had no idea what sort of being crouched there behind her forehead as the prisoner crouched behind Norman's. He only knew that it would have a thin smile and that it hated him.

"You'll find out," Veronica had said. But it was several days before he did, and even then he could not be sure. So many things could have been accidental. Although he tried desperately he could not find Veronica anywhere in the city. But he kept thinking her eyes were on him, that if he could turn quickly enough he would catch her staring.

“That’s what makes voodoo magic work,” he told himself savagely. “A man can scare himself to death, once he knows he’s been threatened—”

Death, of course, had nothing to do with it. Clearly it was no part of her plan that her enemy should die—and escape her. She knew what Fowler would hate most—ridicule.

Perhaps the things that kept happening were accidents. The time he tripped over nothing and did a foolishly clownish fall for the amusement of a long line of people waiting before a ticket window. His ears burned whenever he remembered that. Or the time he had three embarrassing slips of the tongue in a row when he was trying to make a good impression on a congressman and his pompous wife in connection with a patent. Or the time in the Biltmore dining room when he dropped every dish or glass he touched, until the whole room was staring at him and the head waiter was clearly of two minds about throwing him out.

It was like a perpetual time bomb. He never knew what would happen next, or when or where. And it was certainly sheer imagination that made him think he could hear Veronica’s clear, high, ironic laughter whenever his own body betrayed him into one of these ridiculous series of slips.

He tried shaking the truth out of Norman.

“What did you do?” he demanded of the blank, speechless face. “What did she make you do? Is there something wrong with my synapses now? Did you rig up something that would throw me out of control whenever she wants me to? *What did you do, Norman?*”

But Norman could not tell him.

On the third day she televised the house. Fowler went limp with relief when he saw her features taking shape in the screen. But before he could speak she said sharply: “All right, John. I only have a minute to waste on you. I just wanted you to know I’m *really* going to start to work on you beginning next week. That’s all, John. Good-by.”

The screen would not make her face form again no matter how sharply he rapped on it, no matter how furiously he jabbed the buttons to call her back. After awhile he relaxed limply in his chair and sat staring blankly at the wall. And now he began to be afraid—

It had been a long time since Fowler faced a crisis in which he could not turn to Norman for help. And Norman was no use to him now. He could not or would not produce a device that Fowler could use as protection against the nameless threat. He could give him no inkling of what weapon he had put in Veronica’s hand.

It might be a bluff. Fowler could not risk it. He had changed a great deal in three years, far more than he had realized until this crisis arose. There had been a time when his mind was flexible enough to assess dangers coolly and resourceful enough to produce alternative measures to meet them. But not any more. He had depended too long on Norman to solve all his problems for him. Now he was helpless. Unless—

He glanced again at that stunning alternative and then glanced mentally away, impatient, knowing it for an impossibility. He had thought of it often in the past week, but of course it couldn’t be done. Of course—

He got up and went into the windowless room where Norman sat quietly, staring at nothing. He leaned against the door frame and looked at Norman. There in that shuttered skull lay a secret more precious than any miracle Norman had yet produced. The brain, the mind, the source. The mysterious quirk that brought forth golden eggs.

“There’s a part of your brain in use that normal brains don’t have,” Fowler said thoughtfully aloud. Norman did not stir. “Maybe you’re a freak. Maybe you’re a mutation. But there’s something like a thermostat in your head. When it’s activated, your mind’s activated,

too. You don't use the same brain-centers I do. You're an idling motor. When the supercharger cuts in *something* begins to work along lines of logic I don't understand. I see the result, but I don't know what the method is. If I could know that—"

He paused and stared piercingly at the bent head. "If I could only get that secret out of you, Norman! It's no good to you. But there isn't any limit to what *I* could do with it if I had your secret and my own brain."

If Norman heard he made no motion to show it. But some impulse suddenly goaded Fowler to action. "I'll do it!" he declared. "I'll try it! What have I got to lose, anyhow? I'm a prisoner here as long as this goes on, and Norman's no good to me the way things stand. It's worth a try."

He shook the silent man by the shoulder. "Norman, wake up. Wake up, wake up, wake up. Norman, do you hear me? Wake up, Norman, we have work to do."

Slowly, out of infinite distances, the prisoner returned to his cell, crept forward in the bone cage of the skull and looked dully at Fowler out of deep sockets.

And Fowler was seized with a sudden, immense astonishment that until now he had never really considered this most obvious of courses. Norman could do it. He was quite confident of that, suddenly. Norman could and must do it. This was the point toward which they had both been moving ever since Norman first rang the doorbell years ago. It had taken Veronica and a crisis to make the thing real. But now was the time—time and past time for the final miracle.

Fowler was going to become sufficient unto himself.

"You're going to get a nice long rest, Norman," he said kindly. "You're going to help me learn to . . . to think the way you think. Do you understand, Norman? Do you know what it is that makes your brain work the way it does? I want you to help my brain think that way, too. Afterward, you can rest, Norman. A nice, long rest. I won't be needing you any more after that, Norman."

Norman worked for twenty-four hours without a break. Watching him, forcing down the rising excitement in his mind, Fowler thought the blank man too seemed overwrought at this last and perhaps greatest of all his tasks. He mumbled a good deal over the intricate wiring of the thing he was twisting together. It looked rather like a tesseract, an open, interlocking framework which Norman handled with great care. From time to time he looked up and seemed to want to talk, to protest. Fowler ordered him sternly back to his task.

When it was finished it looked a little like the sort of turban a sultan might wear. It even had a jewel set in the front, like a headlight, except that this jewel really was light. All the wires came together there, and out of nowhere the bluish radiance sprang, shimmering softly in its little nest of wiring just above the forehead. It made Fowler think of an eye gently opening and closing. A thoughtful eye that looked up at him from between Norman's hands.

At the last moment Norman hesitated. His face was gray with exhaustion as he bent above Fowler, holding out the turban. Like Charlemagne, Fowler reached impatiently for the thing and set it on his own head. Norman bent reluctantly to adjust it.

There was a singing moment of anticipation—

The turban was feather-light on his head, but wherever it touched it made his scalp ache a bit, as if every hair had been pulled the wrong way. The aching grew. It wasn't only the hair that was going the wrong way, he realized suddenly—

It wasn't only his hair, but his mind—

It wasn't only—

Out of the wrenching blur that swallowed up the room he saw Norman's anxious face take shape, leaning close. He felt the crown of wire lifted from his head. Through a violent, blinding ache he watched Norman grimace with bewilderment.

"No," Norman said. "No . . . wrong . . . *you* . . . wrong—"

"I'm wrong?" Fowler shook his head a little and the pain subsided, but not the feeling of singing anticipation, nor the impatient disappointment at this delay. Any moment now might bring some interruption, might even bring some new, unguessable threat from Veronica that could ruin everything.

"What's wrong?" he asked, schooling himself to patience. "Me? How am I wrong, Norman? Didn't anything happen?"

"No. Wrong . . . *you*—"

"Wait, now." Fowler had had to help work out problems like this before. "O.K., I'm wrong. How?" He glanced around the room. "Wrong room?" he suggested at random. "Wrong chair? Wrong wiring? Do I have to co-operate somehow?" The last question seemed to strike a response. "Co-operate how? Do you need help with the wiring? Do I have to do something after the helmet's on?"

"Think!" Norman said violently.

"I have to think?"

"No. Wrong, wrong. Think wrong."

"I'm thinking wrong?"

Norman made a gesture of despair and turned away toward his room, carrying the wire turban with him.

Fowler, rubbing his forehead where the wires had pressed, wondered dizzily what had happened. *Think wrong*. It didn't make sense. He looked at himself, in the television screen, which was a mirror when not in use, fingered the red line of the turban's pressure, and murmured, "Thinking, something to do with thinking. What?" Apparently the turban was designed to alter his patterns of thought, to open up some dazzling door through which he could perceive the new causalities that guided Norman's mind.

He thought that in some way it was probably connected with that moment when the helmet had seemed to wrench first his hair and then his skull and then his innermost thoughts in the wrong direction. But he couldn't work it out. He was too tired. All the emotional strain of the past days, the menace still hanging over him, the tremulous excitement of what lay in the immediate future—no, he couldn't be expected to reason things through very clearly just now. It was Norman's job. Norman would have to solve that problem for them both.

Norman did. He came out of his room in a few minutes, carrying the turban, twisted now into a higher, rounder shape, the gem of light glowing bluer than before. He approached Fowler with a firm step.

"You . . . thinking wrong," he said with great distinctness. "Too . . . too old. Can't change. Think wrong!"

He stared anxiously at Fowler and Fowler stared back, searching the deep-set eyes for some clue to the meaning hidden in the locked chambers of the skull behind them.

"Thinking wrong." Fowler echoed. "Too . . . old? I don't understand. Or—do I? You mean my mind isn't flexible enough any more?" He remembered the wrenching moment when every mental process had tried vainly to turn sidewise in his head. "But then it won't work at all!"

“Oh, yes,” Norman said confidently.

“But if I’m too old—” It wasn’t age, really. Fowler was not old in years. But the grooves of his thinking had worn themselves deep in the past years since Norman came. He had fixed inflexibly in the paths of his own self-indulgence and now his mind could not accept the answer the wire turban offered. “I can’t change,” he told Norman despairingly. “If I’d only made you do this when you first came, before my mind set in its pattern—”

Norman held out the turban, reversed so that the blue light bathed his face in blinking radiance. “This—will work,” he said confidently.

Belated caution made Fowler dodge back a little. “Now wait. I want to know more before we . . . how can it work? You can’t make me any younger, and I don’t want any random tampering with my brain. I—”

Norman was not listening. With a swift, sure gesture he pressed the wired wreath down on Fowler’s head.

There was the wrenching of hair and scalp, skull and brain. This first—and then very swiftly the shadows moved upon the floor, the sun gleamed for one moment through the eastern windows and the world darkened outside. The darkness winked and was purple, was dull red, was daylight—

Fowler could not stir. He tried furiously to snatch the turban from his head, but no impulse from his brain made any connection with the motionless limbs. He still stood facing the mirror, the blue light still winked thoughtfully back at him, but everything moved so fast he had no time to comprehend light or dark for what they were, or the blurred motions reflected in the glass, or what was happening to him.

This was yesterday, and the week before, and the year before, but he did not clearly know it. *You can’t make me any younger.* Very dimly he remembered having said that to Norman at some remote interval of time. His thoughts moved sluggishly somewhere at the very core of his brain, whose outer layers were being peeled off one by one, hour by hour, day by day. But Norman could make him younger. Norman was making him younger. Norman was whisking him back and back toward the moment when his brain would regain flexibility enough for the magical turban to open that door to genius.

Those blurs in the mirror were people moving at normal time-speed—himself, Norman, Veronica going forward in time as he slipped backward through it, neither perceiving the other. But twice he saw Norman moving through the room at a speed that matched his own, walking slowly and looking for something. He saw him search behind a chair-cushion and pull out a creased folder, legal size—the folder he had last sent Norman to find, on that day when he vanished from his closed room!

Norman, then, had traveled in time before. Norman’s powers must be more far-reaching, more dazzling, than he had ever guessed. As his own powers would be, when his mind cleared again and this blinding flicker stopped.

Night and day went by like the flapping of a black wing. That was the way Wells had put it. That was the way it looked. A hypnotic flapping. It left him dazed and dull—

Norman, holding the folder, lifted his head and for one instant looked Fowler in the face in the glass. Then he turned and went away through time to another meeting in another interval that would lead backward again to this meeting, and on and on around a closing spiral which no mind could fully comprehend. It didn’t matter. Only one thing really mattered. Fowler stood there shocked for an instant into almost total wakefulness, staring at his own face in the mirror, remembering Norman’s face.

For one timeless moment, while night and day flapped around him, he stood helpless, motionless, staring appalled at his reflection in the gray that was the blending of time—and he knew who Norman was.

Then mercifully the hypnosis took over again and he knew nothing at all.

There are centers in the brain never meant for man's use today. Not until the race has evolved the strength to handle them. A man of today might learn the secret that would unlock those centers, and if he were a fool he might even turn the key that would let the door swing open.

But after that he would do nothing at all of his own volition.

For modern man is still too weak to handle the terrible energy that must pour forth to activate those centers. The grossly overloaded physical and mental connections could hold for only a fraction of a second. Then the energy flooding into the newly unlocked brain-center never meant for use until perhaps a thousand more years have remodeled mankind, would collapse the channels, fuse the connections, make every synapse falter in the moment when the gates of the mind swing wide.

On Fowler's head the turban of wires glowed incandescent and vanished. The thing that had once happened to Norman happened now to him. The dazzling revelation—the draining, the atrophy—

He had recognized Norman's face reflected in the mirror beside his own, both white with exhaustion, both stunned and empty. He knew who Norman was, what motives moved him, what corroding irony had made his punishing of Norman just. But by the time he knew, it was already far too late to alter the future, or the past.

Time flapped its wings more slowly. That moment of times gone swung round again as the circle came to its close. Memories flickered more and more dimly in Fowler's mind, like day and night, like the vague, shapeless world which was all he could perceive now. He felt cold and weak, strangely, intolerably, inhumanly weak with a weakness of the blood and bone, of the mind and soul. He saw his surroundings dimly, but he saw—other things—with a swimming clarity that had no meaning to him. He saw causes and effects as tangible before him as he had once seen trees and grass. But remote, indifferent, part of another world.

Help was what he needed. There was something he must remember. Something of terrible import. He must find help, to focus his mind upon the things that would work his cure. Cure was possible; he knew it—he knew it. But he needed help.

Somehow there was a door before him. He reached vaguely, moving his hand almost by reflex toward his pocket. But he had no pocket. This was a suit of the new fashion, sleek in fabric, cut without pockets. He would have to knock, to ring. He remembered—

The face he had seen in the mirror. His own face? But even then it had been changing, as a cloud before the sun drains life and color and soul from a landscape. The expunging amnesia wiped across its mind had had its parallel physically, too; the traumatic shock of moving through time—the *dark wing flapping*—had sponged the recognizable characteristics from his face, leaving the matrix, the characterless basic. This was not his face. He had no face; he had no memory. He knew only that this familiar door before him was the door to the help he must have to save himself from a circling eternity.

It was almost wholly a reflex gesture that moved his finger toward the doorbell. The last dregs of memory and initiative drained from him with the motion.

Again the chimes played three soft notes. Again the circle closed.
Again the blank man waited for John Fowler to open the door.

THE END

[The end of *The Prisoner in the Skull* by Henry Kuttner (as Lewis Padgett)]