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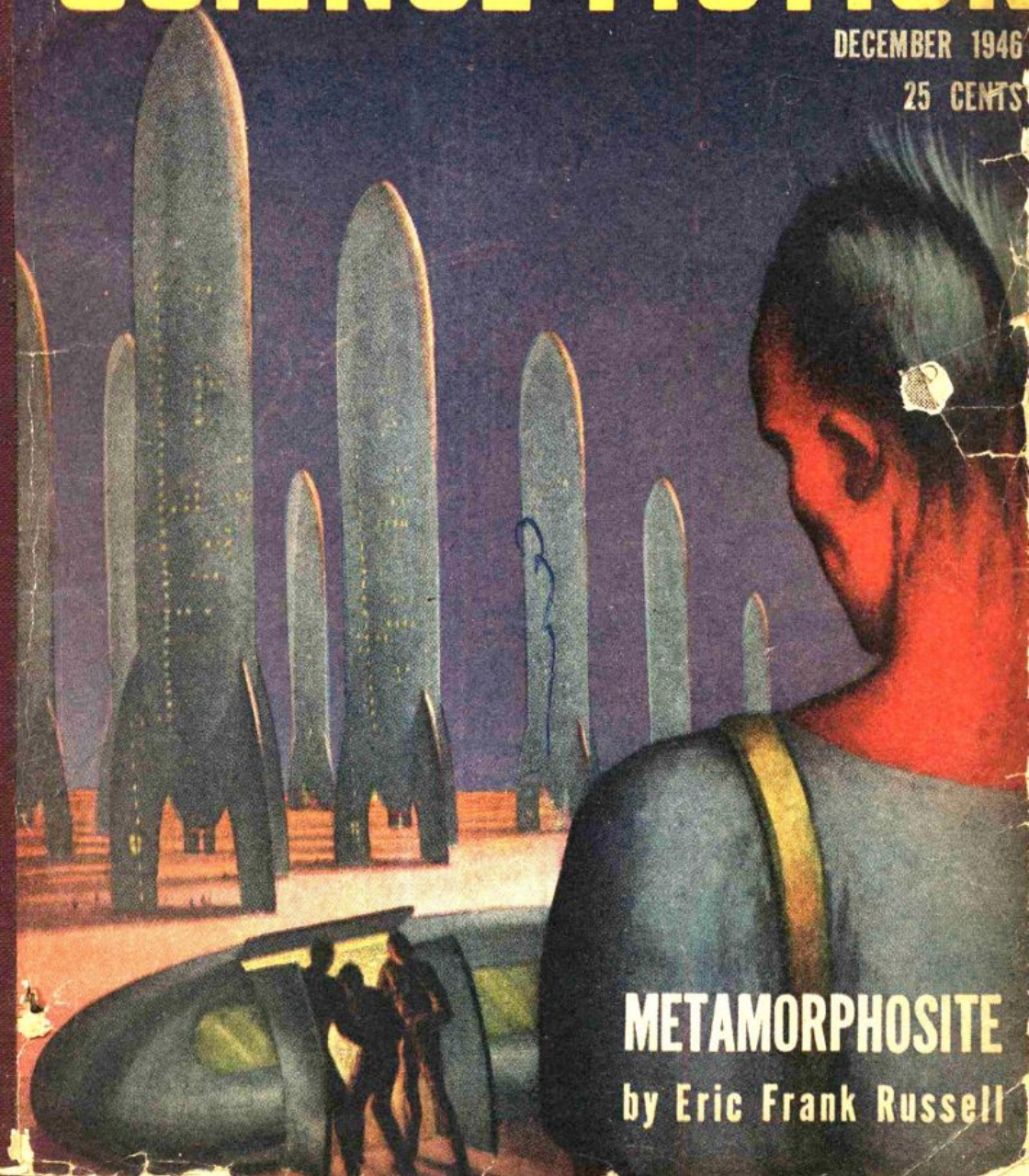
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METAMORPHOSITE

by Eric Frank Russell

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TIME ENOUGH

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett.

First published *Astounding*, December 1946.

The Old 'Uns lived in secret—not quite immortal, but for five hundred years or more they'd lived. But nevertheless they'd all died at about one century!

Sam Dyson found the secret of immortality five hundred years after the Blowup. Since research along such lines was strictly forbidden, he felt a panicky shock when the man from Administration walked into his office and almost casually told Dyson that immortality was nothing new.

“This is top secret,” the Administrator said, slapping a parcel of manifold sheets on Dyson’s desk. “Not these papers, of course,—but what I’m telling you and what you’re going to see. We hardly ever let anybody in on the secret. In your case we’re making an exception, because you’re probably the only guy who can correlate the necessary field work and know what the answers to the questions mean. There are plenty of intangibles in your work, and that’s why you’ve got to handle it personally.”

Dyson’s current assignment, which had originally interested him in the problem of immortality, dealt with artificial intellectual mutation. He sat back, trying not to show any particular emotion, and blinked at the Administrator.

“I thought the Archives—”

“The Archives are a legend, fostered by propaganda. There ain’t no Archives. A few scattered artifacts, that’s all. Hardly anything survived the Blowup except the human race.”

And yet the government-controlled Archives were supposed to be the source of all modern knowledge!

“This is all secret, Dyson. You won’t talk. Sometimes we have to use mnemonic-erasure on blabbermouths, but blabbermouths aren’t often let in on such private affairs. You know how to keep your mouth shut. The truth is, we get our scraps of pre-Blowup science from human brains—certain people who were alive when the radiations began to run wild. We keep the Old ’Uns segregated: it’d be dangerous if the world knew immortals existed. There’d be a lot of dissatisfaction.”

Sweat chilled Dyson’s flanks. He said, “Of course I’ve heard the rumors of immortals—”

“All sorts of legends came out of the Blowup and the Lost Years. We’ve issued counterpropaganda to neutralize the original legend. A straight denial would have had no effect at all. We started a whispering campaign that sure, there were immortals, but they lived only a few hundred years, and they were such screwy mutants they were all insane. That part of the public that believes rumors won’t envy the immortals. As for legends, ever heard of the Invisible Snake that was supposed to punish carnal sin? It wasn’t till after we rediscovered the microscope that we identified the Snake with the spirochete. You’ll often find truth in myths, but sometimes it isn’t wise to reveal the truth.”

Dyson wondered if Administration could possibly have found out about his forbidden research. He hadn't *known* there were immortals; he'd investigated the legends, and his own work in controlled radiation and mental mutation had pointed the way.

The Administrator talked some more. Then he advised Dyson to televise his uncle, Roger Peaslee. "Peaslee's been to a Home and seen the Old 'Uns. Don't look surprised; of course he was sworn to silence. But he'll talk about it to you now; he knows you're going to the—Archives!"

But Dyson felt uneasy until his visitor had left. Then he called his uncle, who held a high post with Radioactives, and asked questions.

"It'll surprise you, I think," Peaslee said, with a sympathetic grin. "You may need psych conditioning when you get back, too. It's rather depressing. Still, until we get time travel, there's no other way of reaching back to Blowup days."

"I never knew—"

"Naturally. Well, you'll see what a Home's like. There'll be an interpreter assigned to give you the dope. And, as a matter of fact, it's good conditioning. You're going to Cozy Nook, aren't you?"

"I think ... yes, that's it. There are several?"

Peaslee nodded.

"You may run into some of your ancestors there. I know one of your great-greats is in Cozy Nook. It's a funny feeling, to look at and talk to somebody who five hundred years ago was responsible for your birth. But you mustn't let her know who you are."

"Why not?"

"It's a special set-up. The interpreter will give you the angles. All sorts of precautions have to be taken. There's a corps of psychologists who work on nothing but the Homes. You'll find out. And I'm busy, Sam. See you when you get back. I hear you're getting married."

"That's right," Dyson said. "We're both government certified, too." His smile was slightly crooked.

"Rebel," Peaslee said, and broke the circuit. The image slowly faded, leaving only a play of pastel colors driving softly across the screen's surface. Dyson sat back and considered.

Presumably neo-radar had not discovered his hidden laboratory, or there would have been trouble. Not serious trouble, in this paternalistic administration. Discussions, the semantics of logicians, and, in the end, Dyson knew that he would be argued around to the other side. They could twist logic damnably. And, very likely, they were right. If research in certain radiogenetic fields had been forbidden, the reasons for that step would hold even heavy water.

Immortality.

Within limits, of course. There were principles of half-life—of entropy—nothing lasts forever. But there were different yardsticks. It would be immortality by normal standards.

So, it had been achieved once before, quite by accident. That particular accident had left the planet in insane chaos for hundreds of years, providing a peculiarly unstable foundation for the new culture that had arisen since. It was rather like a building constructed, without plans, from the alloys and masonry of an earlier one. There were gaps and missing peristyles.

Dyson thumbed through the manifold sheets on his desk. They contained guides, problems in his current research—not the secret research in the hidden laboratory, but the government-approved work on intellectual mutation. To a layman some of the terms wouldn't have meant

anything, but Dyson was a capable technician. *Item 24: Check psychopathology of genius-types in pre-Blowup era, continuing line of investigation toward current times...*

He left a transference call for the interpreter, pulled on a cloak, and took a glider to Marta Hallam's apartment. She was drinking maté on the terrace, a small, fragile, attractive girl who efficiently put a silver tube in another maté gourd as soon as she had kissed Dyson. He sat beside her and rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger.

"We'll furlough in a few weeks," Marta said. "You work too hard. I'll see that you don't."

He looked at her and saw her against a misty background of a thousand years in the future—older, of course, but superficial attractiveness wasn't imported. He'd grow older, too. But neither of them would die. And the treatment did not cause sterility. Overcrowding of the planet could be handled by migration to other worlds; the old rocket fuels had already been rediscovered. Through research in a Home, perhaps, Dyson guessed.

Marta said, "What are you so glum about? Do you want to marry somebody else?"

There was only one way to answer that. After a brief while, Dyson grumbled that he hated to be certified like a bottle of milk.

"You'll be glad of it after we have children," Marta said. "If our genes had been haywire, we might have had a string of freaks."

"I know. I just don't like—"

"Look," she said, staring at him. "At worst, we'd have been treated, to compensate for negative RH or anything like that. Or our kids would have had to be put in an incubation clinic. A year or two of separation from them at most. And worth it, when you figure that they'd have come out healthy specimens."

Dyson said cryptically, "Things would have been a lot easier if we'd never had the Blowup."

"Things would have been a lot easier if we'd stayed unicellular blobs," Marta amplified. "You can't eat your cake and keep the soda bicarb on the shelf."

"A philosopher, eh? Never mind. I've got something up my sleeve—"

But he didn't finish that, and stayed where he was for a while, drinking maté and noticing how lovely Marta's profile was against the skyline and the immense, darkening blue above. After a while the interpreter announced himself, having got Dyson's transference notice, and the two men went out together into the chilly night.

Five hundred years before, an atom was split and the balance of power blew up. Prior to that time, a number of people had been playing tug of war with a number of ropes. Nuclear fission, in effect, handed those people knives. They learned how to cut the ropes, and, too late, discovered that the little game had been played on the summit of a crag whose precipitous sides dropped away to abysmal depths beneath.

The knife was a key as well. It opened fantastic new doors. Thus the Blowup. Had the Blowup been due only to the atomic blast, man might have rebuilt more easily, granting that the planet remained habitable. However, one of the doors the key opened led into a curious, perilous place where physical laws were unstable. Truth is a variable. But no one knew how to vary it until after unlimited atomic power had been thrown on the market.

Within limits, anything could happen, and plenty of things did. Call it a war. Call it chaos. Call it the Blowup. Call it a shifting of a kaleidoscope in which the patterns rearranged themselves constantly. In the end, the status quo re-established itself. Man chewed rat bones,

but he was an intelligent animal. When the ground became solid under his feet again, he began to rebuild.

Not easily. Hundreds of years had passed. *And very little of the earlier culture had survived.*

When you consider how much of human knowledge is due to pyramiding, that's easier to understand. Penicillin was discovered because somebody invented a microscope because somebody learned how to grind lenses because somebody found out how to make glass because somebody could make fire. There were gaps in the chain. An atomic war would have blown up the planet or ravaged it, but the catastrophe would have been quick—or complete—and if the planet survived, there would have been artifacts and records and the memories of mankind. But the Blowup lasted for a long time—time itself was used as a variable once during that homicidal, suicidal, fratricidal struggle—and *there were no records.*

Not many, at least. And they weren't selective. Eventually cities rose again, but there were odd gaps in the science of the new civilization. Some of those holes filled themselves in automatically, and a few useful records were dug up from time to time, but not many, and the only real clue men had to the scientific culture of pre-Blowup days was something that had remained stable through the variable-truth-atomic cataclysm.

The colloid of the human brain.

Eyewitnesses.

The Old 'Uns in the secret, segregated Homes, who had lived for five centuries and longer.

Will Mackenzie, the interpreter, was a thin, rangy, freckled man of forty, with the slow, easy motions one automatically associated with a sturdier, plumper physique. His blue eyes were lazy, his voice was soothing, and when Dyson fumbled at the unaccustomed uniform, his helpful motions were lazily efficient.

"A necktie?" Dyson said. "A which?"

"Necktie," Mackenzie explained. "That's right. Don't ask me why. Some of the Old 'Uns don't bother with it, but they're inclined to be fussy. They get conservative after the first hundred years, you know."

Dyson had submerged that mild uneasiness and was determined to play this role at its face value. Administration might suspect his *sub rosa* research, but, at worst, there would be no punishment. Merely terribly convincing argument. And probably they did not suspect. Anyway, Dyson realized suddenly, there were two sides to an argument, and it was possible that he might convince the logicians—though that had never been done before. His current job was to dig out the information he needed from the Old 'Uns and—that ended it. He stared into the enormous closet with its rows of unlikely costumes.

"You mean they go around in those clothes all the time?" he asked Mackenzie.

"Yeah," Mackenzie said. He peeled off his functionally aesthetic garments and donned a duplicate of Dyson's apparel. "You get used to these things. Well, there are a few things I've got to tell you. We've plenty of time. The Old 'Uns go to bed early, so you can't do anything till tomorrow, and probably not much then. They're suspicious at first."

"Then why do I have to wear this now?"

"So you can get used to it. Sit down. Hike up your pants at the knee, like this—see? Now sit."

He pawed at the rough, unfamiliar cloth, settled himself, and picked up a smoke from the table. Mackenzie sat with an accomplished ease Dyson envied, and pressed buttons that

resulted in drinks sliding slowly out from an aperture in the wall.

“We’re not *in Cozy Nook* yet,” the interpreter said. “This is the conditioning and control station. None of the Old ’Uns know what goes on outside. They think there’s still a war.”

“But—”

Mackenzie said, “You’ve never been in a Home before. Well, remember that the Old ’Uns are abnormal. A little—” He shrugged. “You’ll see. I’ve got to give you a lecture. O.K. At the time of the Blowup, the radioactivity caused a cycle of mutations. One type was a group of immortals. They won’t live forever—”

Dyson had already done his own research on that point. Radium eventually turns to lead. After a long, long time the energy-quotients of the immortals would sink below the level necessary to sustain life. A short time as the life of a solar system goes—a long time measured against the normal human span. A hundred thousand years, perhaps. There was no certain way to ascertain, except the empirical one.

Mackenzie said, “A lot of the Old ’Uns were killed during the Blowup. They’re vulnerable to accidents, though they’ve a tremendously high resistance to disease. It wasn’t till after the Blowup, after reconstruction had started, that anybody knew the Old ’Uns were—what they were. There’d been tribal legends—the local shaman had lived forever, you know the typical stuff. We correlated those legends, found a grain of truth in them, and investigated. The Old ’Uns were tested in the labs. I don’t know the technical part. But I do know they were exposed to certain radiations, and their body-structures were altered.”

Dyson said, “How old do they average?”

“Roughly, five hundred years. During the radioactive days. It isn’t hereditary, immortality, and there haven’t been any such radioactives since, except in a few delayed-reaction areas.” Mackenzie had been thrown off his routine speech by the interruption. He took a drink.

He said, “You’ll have to see the Old ’Uns before you’ll understand the entire picture. We have to keep them segregated here. They have information we need. It’s like an unclassified, huge library. The only link we have with pre-Blowup times. And, of course, we have to keep the Old ’Uns happy. That isn’t easy. Supersenility—” He took another drink and pushed a button.

Dyson said, “They’re human, aren’t they?”

“Physically, sure. Ugly as sin, though. Mentally, they’ve gone off at some queer tangents.”

“One of my ancestors is here.”

Mackenzie looked at him queerly. “Don’t meet her. There’s a guy named Fell who was a technician during the Blowup, and a woman named Hobson who was a witness of some of the incidents you’re investigating. Maybe you can get enough out of those two. Don’t let curiosity get the better of you.”

“Why not?” Dyson asked. “I’m interested.”

Mackenzie’s glass had suddenly emptied.

“It takes special training to be an interpreter here. As for being a caretaker ... one of the group that keeps the Old ’Uns happy ... they’re hand-picked.”

He told Dyson more.

The next morning Mackenzie showed his guest a compact gadget that fitted into the ear. It was a sonar, arranged so that the two men could talk, unheard by others, simply by forming words inaudibly. The natural body-noises provided the volume, and it was efficient, once Dyson had got used to the rhythmic rise and fall of his heartbeat.

“They hate people to use ’Speranto in front of them,” Mackenzie said. “Stick to English. If you’ve got something private to say, use the sonor, or they’ll think you’re talking about them. Ready?”

“Sure.” Dyson readjusted his necktie uncomfortably. He followed the interpreter through a valve, down a ramp, and through another barrier. Filtered, warm sunlight hit him. He was standing at the top of an escalator that flowed smoothly down to the village below—Cozy Nook.

A high wall rimmed the Home. Camouflage nets were spread above, irregularly colored brown and green. Dyson remembered that the Old ’Uns had been told this was still war time. A pattern of winding streets, parks, and houses was below.

Dyson said, “That many? There must be a hundred houses here, Mackenzie.”

“Some of ’em are for interpreters, psychologists, nurses and guests. Only forty or fifty Old ’Uns, but they’re a handful.”

“They seem pretty active,” Dyson said, watching figures move about the streets. “I don’t see any surface cars.”

“Or air-floaters, either,” Mackenzie said. “We depend on sliding ways and pneumo tubes for transportation here. There’s not much territory to cover. The idea is to keep the Old ’Uns happy, and a lot of them would want to drive cars if there were any around. Their reactions are too slow. Even with safeties, there’d be accidents. Let’s go down. Do you want to see Fell first, or Hobson?”

“Well ... Fell’s the technician? Let’s try him.”

“Over,” Mackenzie nodded, and they went down the escalator. As they descended, Dyson noticed that among the modern houses were some that seemed anachronistic; a wooden cottage, a red-brick monstrosity, an ugly glass-and-concrete structure with distorted planes and bulges. But he was more interested in the inhabitants of the Home.

Trees rose up, blocking their vision, as they descended. They were ejected gently on a paved square, lined with padded benches. A man was standing there, staring at them, and Dyson looked at him curiously.

In his ear a voice said, “He’s one of the Old ’Uns.” Mackenzie was using the inaudible sonor.

The man was old. Five hundred years old, Dyson thought, and suddenly was staggered by the concept. Five centuries had passed since this man was born, and he would go on without change while time flowed in flux without touching him.

What effect had immortality had upon this man?

For one thing, he had not been granted eternal youth. The half-time basic precluded that. Each year he grew older, but not quite as old as he had grown the preceding year. He was stooped—Dyson was to learn to recognize that particular stigmata of the Old ’Uns—and his body seemed to hang loosely from the rigid crossbars of his clavicle. His head, totally bald, thrust forward, and small eyes squinted inquisitively at Dyson. Nose and ears were grotesquely enlarged. Yet the man was merely old—not monstrous.

He said something Dyson could not understand. The sound held inquiry, and, at random, he said, “How do you do. My name is Dyson—”

“*Shut up!*” the sonor said urgently in his ear, and Mackenzie moved forward to intercept the old man, who was edging toward the escalator. Gibberish spewed from the interpreter’s lips, and answering gibberish came from the Old ’Un. Occasionally Dyson could trace a familiar word, but the conversation made no sense to him.

The old man suddenly turned and scuttled off. Mackenzie shrugged.

“Hope he didn’t catch your name. He probably didn’t. There’s a woman here with the same name—you said you had an ancestor in Cozy Nook, didn’t you? We don’t like the Old ’Uns to get any real concept of time. It unsettles them. If Mander should tell her—” He shook his head. “I guess he won’t. Their memories aren’t good at all. Let’s find Fell.”

He guided Dyson along one of the shaded walks. From porches bright eyes stared inquisitively at the pair. They passed workers, easily distinguishable from the Old ’Uns, and once or twice they passed one of the immortals. There could be no difficulty in recognizing them.

“What did Mander want?” Dyson asked.

“He wanted out,” Mackenzie said briefly. “He’s only a couple of hundred years old. Result of one of the freak radiation areas blowing off two centuries ago.”

“Was he speaking English?”

“His form of it. You see—they lack empathy. They forget to notice how their words sound to the listener. They slur and mispronounce and in the end it takes a trained interpreter to understand them. Here’s Fell’s place.” They mounted a porch, touched a sensitive plate, and the door opened. A young man appeared on the threshold.

“Oh, hello,” he said, nodding to Mackenzie. “What’s up?”

“Research business. How’s Fell?”

The male nurse grimaced expressively. “Come in and find out. He’s had breakfast, but—”

They went in. Fell was sitting by a fire, a hunched, huddled figure so bent over that only the top of his bald, white head was visible. The nurse retired, and Mackenzie, motioning Dyson to a chair, approached the Old ’Un.

“Professor Fell,” he said softly. “Professor Fell. Professor Fell—”

It went on like that for a long time. Dyson’s nerves tightened. He stared around the room, noticing the musty, choking atmosphere that not even a precipitron could eliminate. Here was none of the dignity of age. This foul-smelling, crouching old man huddled in his chair—

Fell lifted his head wearily and let it fall again. He spoke. The words were unintelligible.

“Professor Fell,” Mackenzie said. “We’ve come for a talk. Professor—”

The figure roused again. It spoke.

Mackenzie used the sonor. “They understand English—some of ’em, anyway. Fell isn’t like Mander. I’ll have him talking soon.”

But it took a long time, and Dyson had a throbbing headache before a grain of information was elicited from Fell. The Old ’Un had entirely lost the sense of selectivity. Or, rather, he had acquired his own arbitrary one. It was impossible to keep him from straying from the subject. Mackenzie did his best to act as a filter, but it was difficult.

And yet this old man had been alive five hundred years ago.

Dyson thought of a maté tube, pierced with a number of tiny holes at the end to admit the liquid. Fell was such a tube, stretching back into the unrecorded past—and he, too, was pierced with a thousand such holes through which the irrelevant came in painful, spasmodic gushes. Someone had cooked an egg too long once—the price of wool was monstrous—some unknown politician was crooked—it must be arthritis, or else—that boy, what was his name? Tim, Tom, something like that—he’d been a genius-type, yes, but the poor boy—it isn’t as warm now as it used to be—

Who? Don't bother me. I don't remember. I mean I don't want to be bothered. I'll tell you something, that reagent I made once—

It was all very dull; every schoolboy today knew about that reagent. But Mackenzie had to sit and listen to the interminable tale, though he mercifully spared Dyson most of it. Then, gradually, he edged Fell back to the subject.

Oh, the genius boy—he developed migraine. The specific didn't work long. Medicine's got a lot to learn. I remember once—

Dyson made a few notes.

What he most wanted were factors in the physiomenal off-norm variations of the genius-types that had been produced at random by the Blowup. Fell had been a technician at that time, and an excellent research man. But all his notes, naturally, had vanished in the aftermath, when painfully rebuilt units of civilization kept tumbling down again, and the man's memory was leaky. Once Dyson made careful notes before he realized that Fell was giving him the formula for a Martini in chemical terminology.

Then Fell got irritable. He hammered weakly on the arm of his chair and demanded an eggnog, and Mackenzie, with a shrug, got up and let the male nurse take over. The interpreter went out into the filtered sunlight with Dyson.

“Any luck?”

“Some,” Dyson said, referring to his notes. “It's a very spotty picture, though.”

“You've got to allow for exaggerations. It's necessary to double check their memories before you can believe 'em. Luckily, Fell isn't a pathological liar like some of the Old 'Uns. Want to look up the Hobson woman?”

Dyson nodded, and they strolled through the village. Dyson saw eyes watching him suspiciously, but most of the Old 'Uns were engrossed in their own affairs.

“Just what's the angle on your research?” Mackenzie asked. “Or is it confidential?”

“We're trying to increase mental capacity,” Dyson explained. “You remember the I. Q. boys born after the Blowup. Or, rather, you've heard stories about them.”

“Geniuses. Uh-huh. Some were crazy as bedbugs, weren't they?”

“Specialized. You've heard of Ahmed. He had a genius for military organization, but after he'd conquered, he didn't know how to reconstruct. He ended up very happy, in a private room playing with tin soldiers. Trouble is, Mackenzie, there's a natural check-and-balance. You can't increase intelligence artificially without loading the seesaw, at the wrong end. There are all kinds of angles. We want to build up mental capacity without weakening the brain-colloid in other directions. The brainier you are, the less stable you are, usually. You're too apt to get off on one particular hobby and ride it exclusively. I've heard stories about a man named Ferguson, born about three hundred years ago, who was pretty nearly a superman. But he got interested in chess, and pretty soon that was all he cared about.”

“The Old 'Uns won't play games, especially competitive ones. But they're certainly not geniuses.”

“None of them?”

Mackenzie said, “At the climacteric, their minds freeze into complete inelasticity. You can date them by that. Their coiffures, their clothes, their vocabularies—that's the label. I suppose senility is just the stopping point.”

Dyson thought of half-time, and then stopped short as a musical note thrummed through the village. Almost instantly there was a crowd in the street. The Old 'Uns gathered, thronging

closely and moving toward the sound. Mackenzie said, "It's a fire."

"You're not fireproofed?"

"Not against arson. Some fool probably decided he was being persecuted or ignored and started a fire to get even. Let's—" He was thrust away from Dyson by the mob. The musty odor became actively unpleasant. Dyson, pressed in on all sides by the grotesque, deformed Old 'Uns, told himself desperately that physical aspects were unimportant. But if only he were more *used* to deformity—

He pushed his way free and felt a hand on his arm. He looked down into the face of Mander, the Old 'Un he had met at the foot of the escalator that had brought him down to Cozy Nook. Mander was grimacing and beckoning furiously. Gibberish, urgent and unintelligible, poured from his lips. He tugged at Dyson's arm.

Dyson looked around for Mackenzie, but the interpreter was gone. He tried vainly to interrupt the Old 'Un; it was impossible. So he let himself be pulled a few yards away, and then stopped.

"Mackenzie," he said slowly. "Where is Mackenzie?"

Mander's face twisted as he strained to understand. Then his bald head bobbed in assent. He pointed, gripped Dyson's arm again, and started off. With some misgivings, Dyson let himself accompany the Old 'Un. Did the man really understand?

It wasn't far to their destination. Dyson didn't really expect Mackenzie to be in the antique wooden house he entered, but by this time he was curious. There was a darkened room, a sickening sweet odor that was patchouli, though Dyson did not identify it, and he was looking at a shapeless huddle in an armchair, a thing that stirred and lifted a face that had all run to fat, white, violet-veined, with sacks of fat hanging loosely and bobbing when the tiny mouth opened and it spoke.

It was very dim in the room. The furniture, replicas of old things made to the Old 'Uns' description, loomed disturbingly. Through the patchouli came other odors, indescribable and entirely out of place in this clean, aseptic, modern age.

"Im'n-s'n," the fat woman said thinly.

Dyson said, "I beg your pardon. I'm looking for Mackenzie—"

Mander clutching painfully at his biceps, a bickering argument broke out between the two Old 'Uns. The woman shrilled Mander down. She beckoned to Dyson, and he came closer. Her mouth moved painfully. She said, with slow effort:

"I'm Jane Dyson. Mander said you were here."

His own ancestor. Dyson stared. It was impossible to trace any resemblance, and certainly there was no feeling of kinship, but it was as though the past had stooped and touched him tangibly. This woman had been alive five hundred years ago, and her flesh was his own. From her had come the seed that became, in time, Sam Dyson.

He couldn't speak, for there was no precedent to guide him. Mander chattered again, and Jane Dyson heaved her huge body forward and wheezed, "They're not fooling me ... no war ... I know there's no war! Keeping me locked up here— You get me out of here!"

"But—wait a minute! I'd better get Mackenzie—"

Again Mander squealed. Jane Dyson made feeble motions. She seemed to smile.

"No hurry. I'm your aunt—anyway? We'll have a cup of tea—"

Mander rolled a table forward. The tea service was already laid out, the tea poured in thermocups that kept it at a stable temperature.

“Cup of tea. Talk about it. *Sit—down!*”

All he wanted to do was escape. He had never realized the sheer, sweating embarrassment of meeting an ancestor, especially such a one as this. But he sat down, took a cup, and said, “I’m very busy. I can’t stay long. If I could come back later—”

“You can get us out of here. Special exits—we know where, but we can’t open them. Funny metal plates on them—”

Emergency exits were no novelty, but why couldn’t the locks be activated by the Old ’Uns? Perhaps the locks had been keyed so that they would not respond to the altered physiochemistry of the immortals. Wondering how to escape, Dyson took a gulp of scalding, bitter tea—

Atrophied taste buds made delicacy of taste impossible. Among the Old ’Uns there were no gourmets. Strong curries, chiles—

Then the drug hit him, and his mind drowned in slow, oily surges of lethargic tides.

Some sort of a hypnotic, of course. Under the surface he could still think, a little, but he was fettered. He was a robot. He was an automaton. He remembered being put in a dark place and hidden until nightfall. Then he remembered being led furtively through the avenues to an exit. His trained hands automatically opened the lock. Those escape doors were only for emergency use, but his will was passive. He went out into the moonlight with Jane Dyson and Mander.

It was unreclaimed country around the Home. The Old ’Uns didn’t know that highways were no longer used. They wanted to hit a highway and follow it to a city. They bickered endlessly and led Dyson deeper and deeper into the wilderness.

They had a motive. Jane Dyson, the stronger character, overrode Mander’s weak objections. She was going home, to her husband and family. But often her mind failed to grasp that concept, and she asked Dyson questions he could not answer.

It wasn’t shadowy to him; it was not dreamlike. It had a pellucid, merciless clarity, the old man and the old woman hobbling and gasping along beside him, guiding him, talking sometimes in their strange, incomprehensible tongue, while he could not warn them, could not speak except in answer to direct orders. The drug, he learned, was a variant of pentothal.

“I seen them use it,” Jane Dyson wheezed. “I got in and took a bottle of it. Lucky I did, too. But I knew what I was doing. They think I’m a fool—”

Mander he could not understand at all. But Jane Dyson could communicate with him, though she found it painful to articulate the words with sufficient clarity.

“Can’t fool us ... keeping us locked up! We’ll fix ’em. Get to my folks ... uh! Got to rest ___”

She was inordinately fat, and Mander was cramped and crippled and bent into a bow. Under the clear moonlight it was utterly grotesque. It could not happen. They went on and on, dragging themselves painfully down gullies, up slopes, heading northward for some mysterious reason, and more and more the hands that had originally been merely guiding became a drag. The Old ’Uns clung to Dyson as their strength failed. They ordered him to keep on. They hung their weight on his aching arms and forced their brittle legs to keep moving.

There was a cleared field, and a house, with lights in the windows. Jane Dyson knocked impatiently on the door. When it opened, a taffy-haired girl who might have been seven stood

looking up inquiringly. Dyson, paralyzed with the drug, saw shocked fear come into the clear blue eyes.

But it passed as Jane Dyson, thrusting forward, mumbled, “Is your mother home? Run get your mother, little girl. That’s it.”

The girl said, “Nobody’s home but me. They won’t be back till eleven.”

The old woman had pushed her way in, and Mander urged Dyson across the threshold. The girl had retreated, still staring. Jane plopped herself into a relaxer and panted.

“Got to rest ... where’s your mother? Run get her. That’s it. I want a nice cup of tea.”

The girl was watching Dyson, fascinated by his paralysis. She sensed something amiss, but her standards of comparison were few. She fell back on polite habit.

“I can get you some maté, ma’am.”

“Tea? Yes, yes. Hurry, Betty.”

The girl went out. Mander crouched by a heating plate, mumbling. Dyson stood stiffly, his insides crawling coldly.

Jane Dyson muttered, “Glad to be home. Betty’s my fourth, you know. They said the radiations would cause trouble ... that fool scientist said I was susceptible, but the children were all normal. Somebody’s been changing the house around. Where’s Tom?” She eyed Dyson. “You’re not Tom. I’m ... what’s this?” The girl came back with three maté gourds. Jane seized hers greedily.

“You mustn’t boil the water too long, Betty,” she said.

“I know. It takes out the air—”

“Now you be still. Sit down and be quiet.”

Jane drank her maté noisily, but without comment. Dyson had a queer thought, but she and the child were at a contact point, passing each other, in a temporal dimension. They had much in common. The child had little experience, and the old woman had had much, but could no longer use hers. Yet real contact was impossible, for the only superiority the Old ’Un had over the child was the factor of age, and she could not let herself respect the child’s mentality or even communicate, save with condescension.

Jane Dyson dozed. The child sat silent, watching and waiting, with occasional puzzled glances at Mander and Dyson. Once Jane ordered the girl to move to another chair so she wouldn’t catch cold by the window—which wasn’t open. Dyson thought of immortality and knew himself to be a fool.

For man has natural three-dimensional limits, and he also has four-dimensional ones, considering time as an extension. When he reaches those limits, he ceases to grow and mature, and forms rigidly within the mold of those limiting walls. It is stasis, which is retrogression unless all else stands still as well. A man who reaches his limits is tending toward sub-humanity. Only when he becomes superhuman in time and space can immortality become practical.

Standing there, with only his mind free, Dyson had other ideas. The real answer might be entirely subjective. Immortality might be achieved without extending the superficial life span at all. If you could reason sufficiently fast, you could squeeze a year’s reasoning into a day or a minute—

For example, each minute now lasted a hundred years.

Jane Dyson woke up with a start. She staggered to her feet. “We can’t stay,” she said. “I’ve got to get on home for dinner. Tell your mother—” She mumbled and hobbled toward the

door. Mander, apathetically silent, followed. Only Jane remembered Dyson, and she called to him from the threshold. The little girl, standing wide-eyed, watched Dyson stiffly follow the others out.

They went on, but they found no more houses. At last weariness stopped the Old 'Uns. They sheltered in a gully. Mander crawled under a bush and tried to sleep. It was too cold. He got up, hobbled back, and pulled off the old woman's cloak. She fought him feebly. He got the cloak, went back and slept, snoring. Dyson could do nothing but stand motionless.

Jane Dyson dozed and woke and talked and dozed again. She brought up scattered, irrelevant memories of the past and spread them out for Dyson's approval. The situation was almost ideal. She had a listener who couldn't interrupt or get away.

"Thought they could fool an old woman like me.... I'm not old. Making me chew bones. Was that it? There was a bad time for a while. Where's Tom? Just leave me alone—"

And—"Telling me I was going to live forever! Scientists! He was right, though. I found that out. I *was* susceptible. It scared me. Everything going to pot, and Tom dying and me going on.... I got some pills. I'd got hold of them. More'n once I nearly swallowed them, too. You don't live forever if you take poison, that's certain. But I was smart. I waited a while. Time enough, I said. It's cold."

Her mottled, suety cheeks quivered. Dyson waited. He was beginning to feel sensation again. The hypnotic was wearing off.

Rattling, painful snores came from the invisible Mander, hidden in the gloom. A cold wind sighed down the gully. Jane Dyson's fat white face was pale in the faint light of distant, uninterested stars. She stirred and laughed a high, nickering laugh.

"I just had the funniest dream," she said. "I dreamed Tom was dead and I was old."

A copter picked up Dyson and the Old 'Uns half an hour later. But no explanations were made until he was back in the city, and even then they waited till Dyson had time to visit his secret laboratory and return. Then his uncle, Roger Peaslee, came into Dyson's apartment and sat down without invitation, looking sympathetic.

Dyson was white and sweating. He put down his glass, heavily loaded with whiskey, and stared at Peaslee.

"It was a frame, wasn't it?" he asked.

Peaslee nodded. He said, "Logic will convince a man he's wrong, *provided* the right argument is used. Sometimes it's impossible to find the right argument."

"When Administration sent me to the Home, I thought they'd found out I was doing immortality research."

"Yes. As soon as they found out, they sent you to Cozy Nook. That was the argument."

"Well, it was convincing. A whole night in the company of those—" Dyson drank. He didn't seem to feel it. He was still very pale.

Peaslee said, "We framed that escape, too, as you've guessed. But we kept an eye on you all along, to make sure you and the Old 'Uns would be safe."

"It was hard on them."

"No. They'll forget. They'll think it was another dream. Most of the time they don't know they're old, you see. A simple defense mechanism of senility. As for that little girl, I'll admit that wasn't planned. But no harm was done. The Old 'Uns didn't shock or horrify her. And nobody will believe her—which is fine, because the Archive myth has to stand for a while."

Dyson didn't answer. Peaslee looked at him more intently.

“Don’t take it so hard, Sam. You lost an argument, that’s all. You know now that age without increasing maturity doesn’t mean anything. You’ve got to keep going ahead. Stasis is fatal. When we can find out how to overcome that, it’ll be safe to make people immortal. Right?”

“Right.”

“We want to study that laboratory of yours, before we dismantle it. Where’s it hidden?”

Dyson told him. Then he poured himself another drink, downed it, and stood up. He picked up a sheet of paper from the table and tossed it at his uncle.

“Maybe you can use that, too,” he said. “I was just down at the lab making some tests. I got scared.”

“Eh?”

“Jane Dyson was especially susceptible to the particular radiations that cause immortality. Like cancer, you know. You can’t inherit it, but you can inherit the susceptibility. Well I remembered that I’d been working a lot with those radiations, in secret. So I tested myself just now.”

Peaslee opened his mouth, but he didn’t say anything.

Dyson said, “It wouldn’t have bothered most people—those radiations. But Jane Dyson passed on her susceptibility to me. It was accidental. But—I was exposed. *Why didn’t Administration get on to me sooner!*”

Peaslee said slowly: “You don’t mean—”

Dyson turned away from the look beginning to dawn in his uncle’s eyes.

An hour later he stood in his bathroom alone, a sharp blade in his hand. The mirror watched him questioningly. He was drunk, but not very; it wouldn’t be so easy to get drunk from now on. *From now on—*

He laid the cold edge of the knife against one wrist. A stroke would let out the blood from his immortal body, stop his immortal heart in mid-beat, turn him from an immortal into a very mortal corpse. His face felt stiff. The whiskey taste in his mouth couldn’t rinse out the musty smell of senility.

The thought: *Of course there’s Marta. Fourscore and ten is the normal span. If I cut it off now, I’ll be losing a good many years. When I’m ninety, it would be time enough. Suppose I went on for a little while longer, married Marta—*

He looked at the knife and then into the glass. He said aloud:

“When I’m ninety I’ll commit suicide.”

Young, firm-fleshed, ruddy with health, his face looked enigmatically back at him from the mirror. Age would come of course. As for death—

There would be time enough, sixty years from now, when he faced a mirror and knew that he had gone beyond maturity and into the darkening, twilight years. He would know, when the time came—of course he would know!

And in Cozy Nook, Jane Dyson stirred and moaned in her sleep, dreaming that she was old.

THE END.

[The end of *Time Enough* by Henry Kuttner (as Lewis Padgett)]