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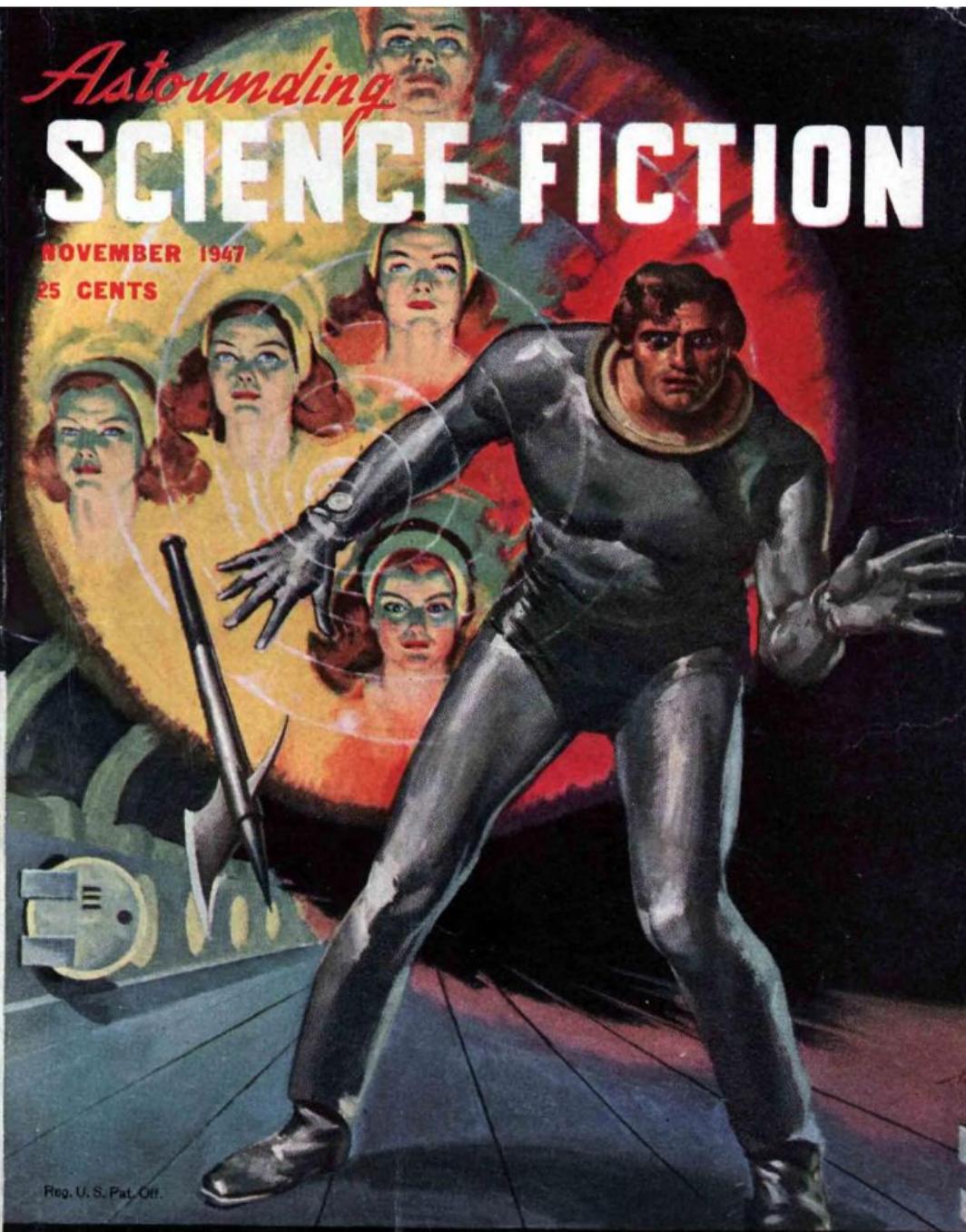
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CHILDREN OF THE LENS BY E. E. SMITH

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MARGIN FOR ERROR

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett.

First published *Astounding*, November 1947.

The big young man wanted insurance, which was all right. But it was the curious nature of the insurance he wanted that stirred questioning! Against putting phenylthiourea in the reservoir, or kicking a policeman. . . .

Ferguson had had this feeling before, though never so strongly. Until now the faint qualms he sometimes felt had fluttered through his mind and vanished too quickly to be recognizable. That was because he had never before talked with a Benjamin Lawson.

This time the qualms hovered, lingered—took focus and forced themselves up through the layers of the mind to his awareness. He had to free them and give them a name.

A name? But there was no name for qualms like these.

Is there some proverb that points out the tendency of social crises to create a man who can deal with them? Ferguson groped briefly for a literary peg to hang his baffling suspicions on. Failing, for the moment he crushed down the uneasiness and looked dubiously at Benjamin Lawson's face. The qualms sank docilely enough. They had been recognized. They could wait, now.

All Ferguson brought back with him from that brief excursion into the realms of the submerged mind was the knowledge that there was about Lawson something not to be trusted, and a suddenly much strengthened respect for his own hunches. Reason played no part in it. Ferguson *knew*—in effect—but he did not quite know that he knew.

For many years, he realized, he had been anticipating this. He had expected the coming of . . . of—

Of Benjamin Lawson.

He remembered how it had started.

In an office of ILC, a television screen buzzed a peremptory signal and turned bright red. Mr. Greg Ferguson, whose qualifications for vice president were unusual, turned on the descrambler automatically and winked at his guest. Before A.C.—Atomic Control—Ferguson would certainly have been a criminal, but in ILC he was an integrated, useful member of society. The fact that there were four hundred and ninety-nine other vice presidents never troubled him.

ILC stood for the Federal Bureau of Insurance, Lotteries, and Crèches.

“Mr. Ferguson marked as free,” a voice said. “Request attention to apparent swindle attempt.”

“Little the poor fool knows,” Ferguson remarked. “Cagliostro himself couldn't swindle ILC. But they certainly try.” He watched the screen fade to a blue-and-yellow design, a symbol of a playback.

Mr. Daniel Archer beamed. By profession he was a Fixer, which was a combination of attorney, publicity agent, sociologist, and secretary. He worked for a politician named Hiram Reeve, which was why he had called on Ferguson and listened for half an hour to the vice president's low-key boasting about how ILC worked.

"Wagner—" the televisor said.

"Tell that robot he needs a vacation," Ferguson ordered. "Not Wagner. Ben Lawson. That right, Mr. Archer?"

Archer nodded. "He's the one. Of course there may be nothing in it, but we never take chances. At least I don't."

Ferguson pondered while the visor screen turned pink with embarrassment, flashed rapidly through a selective color-wheel, and hunted for Ben Lawson's playback. This wasn't the first time a Fixer had asked Ferguson's advice. Fixers by definition were thorough investigators. They had to be, in order to keep their patrons in power. And there was less pork-barrel rolling than one might have expected, since good Fixers were always in demand, and they had the right to switch allegiance whenever they decided that their patrons' tactics conflicted with sound sociology. Archer was a fat, sardonic little man, but he had clever eyes.

"Wagner," Ferguson said, while they waited. "That was a simple case, open and shut. I used straight Operation Suicide on him. He had it all figured out. Except that he wasn't sure he could take out the policy—"

"Don't they all wonder that, when they're working an angle?"

Ferguson decided that Archer was playing dumb. Well, let him. Ferguson himself was always happy to explain the workings of ILC and his own job. The fact that he was also justifying himself had never occurred to him.

"Yes. And Wagner was surprised when we O.K.'d his application. Double indemnity covering suicide in any shape or form. I gather he's been trying to cut his throat ever since. Incidentally, he wants to take out an accident and liability policy now; seems he's got worried about accidental death since he isn't covered for it."

"Will he get the policy?"

"Why not? I told you the average percentages. We can't lose on accident, Mr. Archer. We can't lose. Here's Lawson's playback; let's catch it."

A gleam came into Archer's mild eyes. He leaned forward to watch the screen. It showed an office in an ILC bureau in a distant city. A clerk—an ordinary front man—was rising from his chair as the client entered. Ferguson touched a stud in the auxiliary screen and watched it with half his vision while pertinent data, recorded and correlated by robot machines, flashed into view.

Brain radiations normal . . . no important glandular stimulus . . . adrenals normal . . . body temperature constant at 98.8 correct for client after mild exercise . . .

"Confident," Ferguson said. "He's got something all worked out. The perfect crime—he thinks. He's the one?"

Archer nodded. They studied the client. He was a perfectly ordinary young man, who might have been stamped out with a matrix labeled *Specimen of Younger Generation, Male, Sound in Wind and Limb*. He was simply a big, blond youngster, with blue eyes, a pleasant smile, and, presumably, not a worry in the world.

Through the screen the clerk said, "Mr. Lawson?"

"That's right. Ben Lawson."

"Please sit down. How can I help you? Not a crèche registration, I suppose—unless you're married?"

Lawson smiled. "Me married? Not for quite a while yet. I'll let you know in plenty of time before the kids come along."

The clerk laughed dutifully. "Then it's insurance or lottery. We've got the Pimlico, the Queensland Royal Blue, the Irish—"

"I don't gamble," Lawson said. "It's insurance. Can I take out insurance to cover these possibilities?" He pushed a slip of paper across the desk.

The clerk said, "We insure everything that isn't antisocial, sir. We insure against fire, failure, fraud, felony, fright, fits, flaying, fleabites—" It was a familiar gag at ILC. But now the clerk had glimpsed the list. He slowed down and stopped. He frowned, gave Lawson a quick glance, and said, "You say you don't gamble?"

"Well, I suppose you could call insurance a gamble, couldn't you? What's the matter? Have I put down anything antisocial on my list?"

The clerk hesitated. "We've got our own arbitrary rules about antisociability, sir. Homicide is, of course, but we insure against homicide. And against most crimes, except when the client's too poor a risk. You understand, there has to be a complete examination—"

"I'm healthy, I think."

"Not only you, sir. There has to be a survey into your background, your environment, your associates—"

"Complicated, huh?" Lawson asked.

The clerk swallowed and looked at the list again. "Kicking a policeman," he said, rather faintly. "That . . . ah . . . seems to be the mildest item you want to be insured against."

"Would that be antisocial, by your rules?"

"I can't answer that offhand. However, all these . . . items . . . seem rather unlikely, don't they? I should think you would be better advised to select other policies. We would be happy to make up a selection for you after our personal survey has been completed, something perhaps more suitable—"

"Oh, suit yourself," Lawson said. "Those are the policies I want, though. If I can't get them, I'll have to think of something else. I made quite a list, in case some of the items weren't acceptable to ILC. But I haven't exhausted the possibilities."

"Putting phenylthiourea in the city reservoir," the clerk murmured. "You want to be insured against . . . ah . . . putting phenylthiourea in the city reservoir?"

"That's right," Lawson said cheerfully.

"Oh. Is this a toxic substance?"

"Nope."

"Do you have any intention of putting phenylthiourea in the city reservoir?"

"That's what I want to be insured against," Lawson said, looking wide-eyed and innocent.

"I see," the clerk said, coming to some conclusion. "Would you mind answering our routine questionnaire now? An appointment will be made as soon as we've completed our survey."

"I suppose the premiums would be low enough for me to handle?"

"They'd vary."

"I haven't got much money," Lawson said. "Still I guess something could be worked out." He smiled slowly. "O.K., the questionnaire?"

“You can use this visor,” the clerk said, making an adjustment. “If you’ll signal when you’re finished . . . here’s the button—”

The clerk went out. The visor began taking qualitative and qualitative pictures of Lawson, stereoscopic and fluoroscopic. It said briskly, with the inflexibly arrogant tone of a robot-mechanism, “Full name, please, last name first.”

“Lawson, Benjamin.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Date of birth?”

“April ninth, Twenty—”

Back at local headquarters Ferguson pressed a few buttons, studied a blowup from the “Encyclopedia Britannica” that flipped on the screen, and nodded at Archer.

Archer said, “What’s—”

“It’s a chemical compound, it says here, made up of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and sulphur. Seven out of ten people find it bitter as the devil. The other three find it tasteless. It’s a matter of gene inheritance, dominant or recessive.”

“Toxic?”

“Anything is, in large enough quantities, including H₂O. People get drowned, don’t they? But why put phen . . . phenylthiourea in the city reservoir? Why not arsenic, if he’s homicidal?”

“Is he?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re getting the survey made now. Very odd. Slightly ridiculous. When people try to outsmart ILC, they usually work it out with careful logic, doing their best to cover up what they really intend. This guy Lawson is practically telling us what he’s intending. Don’t ask me if we’ll accept him as a client; it all depends on the survey.”

“Kicking a policeman,” Archer said dreamily, his face placid and his eyes shrewd. “What else did he have on his list?”

“Here it is on the visor. Peculiar. He not only wants financial coverage, but he wants our scot-free clause. He doesn’t want to suffer any legal consequences.”

“You arrange that, don’t you? You’re a Federal Bureau. If he kicks a policeman—”

“If we issue the policy,” Ferguson said grimly, “he’s certainly not going to be able to kick a policeman. I’ll see to that. Maybe this boy thinks he can outsmart ILC, but he’s not going to outsmart me.”

“A personal matter?” Archer said, looking at Ferguson intently.

“Sure, that’s why I’m a socially integrated individual. I can channel my impulses into constructive canals, instead of destructive ones. I’m rather proud of my resourcefulness, Mr. Archer, and proud of ILC. I’m using my mind to its full capacity here—and where else could I do that? Except perhaps as a Fixer.”

“Thank you,” Archer said politely. “If you can put my mind at rest about Ben Lawson, I’ll be grateful. So far it’s what they used to call a maggot—a whim. But I’ve never yet met an altruist who wasn’t getting something out of his altruism himself. Lawson—”

But Ferguson was brooding over Lawson as an enemy of ILC. “Phenylthiourea, eh?” he said. “I’ll fix his wagon.”

The foundations for the Bureau were necessarily laid in Chicago, Alamogordo, and Hiroshima. It was built on the instability of an atom. The Atomic War occurred at the right time and at the wrong time. If the global warhead had exploded in the mid-forties, the result would have been catastrophe, devastation, and red ruin. It didn't. If it had exploded after atomic energy had been perfected and production methods sufficiently improved and speeded up, the result would have been, in all likelihood, a fine opportunity for future civilizations to develop on the outlying planets, with the Earth as a secondary Sun. The difference was, very roughly, the difference between a pistol with one cartridge in the chamber and a pistol with a full clip. But when the level of world thought had returned to customary post-war standards—meaning a cheerfully optimistic concept that the next dip on the roller coaster either didn't exist or wouldn't come in our time—then presently saturation point was reached. International politics and national economics were going down while atomic science went up. Luckily the bottom was reached before the top. There was an Atomic War, neither as mildly cataclysmic as it might have been in 1946 nor as finally thorough as it would have been decades later. It merely depopulated most of the planet.

But that, of course, was inevitable.

It was also inevitable for the race to rebuild. One advantage of the utter breakdown was the factor that specialization became difficult and union important. Biologists, psychologists, physicists, and sociologists were forced to work together, by virtue of pure necessity. Physically they decentralized, but mentally they became federalists in thought and action. Miraculously, a sufficiently stable world government was worked out. At first it was concentrated in a small area north of Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, but it spread. Knowledge of technology still existed, which helped a great deal. But there was the immense problem of rebuilding.

One answer lay in eliminating the difficulty of children. Infanticide would have solved the immediate problem but scarcely the racial one. Having children was encouraged, because of the increase in sterility and freak mutants and the decrease in normal births. Still, it became necessary to solve the vital difficulty of general immaturity.

In a word, not many people continued to mature after they had children. At least one parent began to slow down, never achieving full mental maturity.

Unlike the gorilla—

For some reason Ferguson felt nervous and expounded at length to Archer, who listened with every appearance of great interest. Perhaps this was because Ferguson himself had now entered into the Fixer's calculations. At any rate, Archer listened.

"Man is immature," Ferguson said. "Any naturalist or biologist can prove that. Or any sociologist, for that matter." He conveniently forgot that his guest owned a degree in sociology. "Our cranial sutures aren't knit, our habit-patterns aren't adult, the physical proportions of our bodies—well, we're built physically like the immature gorilla. And we act that way, too. We're a social race. We like physical contact, competitive games, horseplay—generally speaking. I'll admit that immaturity is what gives us our drive; we're insecure, so we experiment. The mature gorilla doesn't need to. He's perfectly adjusted to his environment—he's got his feeding-ground and his harem, and about his only real danger is from young bulls who want his harem. He's bad-tempered and perfectly self-sufficient. Lord knows we're not, or we wouldn't throw so many parties!"

"ILC is trying to mature the race," Archer said, half-questioningly.

“Children are a handicap, in our culture,” Ferguson said. “The male gorilla drives his kids away when they begin growing. And they can fend for themselves; they’re equipped to do that, in the jungle. But civilization has made a deadlier jungle. One that only a nominal adult can cope with. No provision was made for the young of the species; that was left as an individual problem. The result was a culture in which the male was dominant and women enslaved. Oh, very roughly—but rearing children in pre-atomic cities was a full-time job. Wastage!”

Archer moistened his lips.

“Have a drink,” Ferguson suggested. “Want to dial me a Scotch and soda, while you’re at it?” He waited, watching the great curved sweep of the window. He gestured, and at the signal the soft rhythm of color-patterns gathered like a folding curtain and ran down like water and was gone, revealing the view beyond. The city was small in population but large in area, and there were a great many parks.

This is the way it should be, Ferguson thought. *This is safe.*

So you had a convalescent world—a basically healthy organism but susceptible to a good many figurative diseases. People with a susceptibility to cancer should avoid continual irritation of tissue. Cancer is uncontrolled pathological cell-growth. Controlled cell-growth is normal and beneficial. Similarly—atomics.

Avoid irritation.

People, in fact, lived pretty much as they wanted to under ILC. They couldn’t have everything, naturally. Neuroses couldn’t be eliminated overnight. But the Atomic War was the equivalent of electric shock therapy. *En masse*, ILC used a palliative plan. Individually—ILC insured.

Not everything. There are no Utopias. Even supermen would have superproblems. There was an iron hand, but the velvet glove was the textile people loved to touch. The atomic cancer was arrested by drastic surgery; yet it had filtered through the bloodstream. So, in lieu of a real answer, ILC avoided irritation. ILC kept the world-patient from catching other ailments that might cause irritation. Anything could build to a sociological infection which could in turn make the cancer break out again. As long as the race was healthy, it was medium safe.

That applied to Greg Ferguson, too.

ILC made certain of that. No irritations would arise for him—the formula said—that couldn’t be adjusted. Ferguson was a crooked peg in a crooked hole. Conceivably he was less mature—or, rather, more immature—than most; conceivably he needed the safety-factor, the stability, the certain security which the symbol of ILC represented to him.

In fact, he did need that. Badly.

You can’t rebuild the world in a day. There was plenty of technological knowledge, but not many people. That meant an all-out effort. So ILC cut down the factors that retarded maturation. The group had to be large to support research workers not immediately productive, and if one-half of every couple had to rear a batch of children, the potential manpower was halved. So the children were placed in crèches. The young gorilla can survive in a jungle—young children were given the equivalent of a safe jungle. A crèche—and the parents didn’t have the responsibility, and could continue their maturing process.

The Federal Bureau of Insurance, Lotteries and Crèches made that possible. It was impossible to finance the crèches by taxation; the government wanted to avoid irritation, not augment it. And the Lotteries helped a great deal, but Insurance was the real answer. It was the place where steam was blown off. It was the answer man It was where budding neuroses were caught. People take out insurance, by and large, because of neuroses and in the old days they had good reason. Under ILC practically anything was insurable. A man wants insurance against something he's afraid will happen, or something he wants to happen. Often it is a socially or personally pathological matter.

The adult gorilla, however, needs no insurance.

“Here's a case—potential psychosis of a client.”

Ferguson shifted a visor screen down. A man's face appeared. He looked normal.

Archer raised his eyebrows.

“He wants insurance against infectious disease,” Ferguson explained. “The premium's rather high on that, obviously. We still haven't licked all the mutated bugs, though the race built up strong resistance after the biological battles. But look at his survey and see what you get.”

Information fled madly across the screen while Archer waited.

“Well?”

“I don't see anything special,” the Fixer said.

“No? You don't see why the guy may presently want suicide insurance?”

“Mm-m. Suicide. Why? He's well integrated. Useful, happy—”

“Any unusual purchases? Try the chemist's list.”

“Oh. Green soap. Germicides. A UV portal—”

“Two of 'em, one for his office, one for his home. The guy is working straight toward a lovely case of misophobia. That should mean fear of mice but it means fear of dirt. The rest is routine, for the psych crew. I gather the initial irritant occurred when he was home on a visit from his crèche, as a kid. Spilled some gunk on his sister and hurt her. His parents made the wrong kind of a fuss. He's got a guilt complex. Eventually he may hear voices from the woodwork telling him he's sinned. You see?”

“Ah,” Archer said, “does he get his policy—this potential misophobe?”

“Of course. Why not? When he gets his final exam is where the gimmick comes in.”

“The hypnosis . . . oh, yes. I'd like to know more about that.”

“Well,” Ferguson said, “it's the reason why this particular client will be a good risk instead of a poor one. We'll cure him and channel his neuroses at the same time. Barring genuine accident—the percentages will be in our favor. They wouldn't be otherwise, because of the guy's submerged death-wish. Eventually he'd purposely expose himself to some contagious disease, without knowing anything about it consciously. He wants to be punished. Misophobia, ha.”

“Report on Benjamin Lawson,” the televisor announced.

“Good,” Ferguson said. “Shoot it across.”

Lawson was twenty-one years and one week old. He was absolutely normal. Even his minor deviations during his training period were merely normal. Had they been absent, that would have been suspicious and worth investigation. All children put frogs in their teachers' desks, provided the frogs are available. Rodents, insects, or reptiles will do at a pinch.

On his twenty-first birthday Lawson had had the choice of several jobs for which he was prepared. His field seemed to be general integration; he had studied everything omnivorously but rather casually. However, he had taken advantage of the month-long vacation period optional to all graduates, and stayed home most of the time, visiting his parents, who were mildly pleased to have him. He read a great many newstapes, and he interviewed a government councilor named Hiram Reeve, suggesting that Reeve introduce an immaturity pension bill at the next session. That accounted for Archer's presence; Archer was Hiram Reeve's Fixer.

"Detail," said the televisor. "Lawson proposed the inverse of an old-age pension. All children would become eligible at birth and continue to draw the pension until reaching biological maturity. Councilor Reeve agreed to present such a bill—"

"But he won't," Ferguson said to himself. "Campaign promises, eh?"

"Within the last two years Lawson has studied these subjects: biology, mutation, biological time and entropic time, endocrinology, psychology, pathology, sociology, and the philosophy of humor. His studies were intensive rather than casual. There seems to—"

"Skip to his home life, for the last few days," Ferguson requested. "What's he reading there?" He leaned toward the screen, but the instant closeup view made his motion unnecessary. Sprawled languidly in a relaxer, the cheerful Mr. Lawson was immersed in Joe Miller's Joke Book.

Some days later, Lawson called at ILC by appointment and this time he saw Greg Ferguson, who had flown in an hour earlier to superintend the final exams. Certain preparations were necessary. In the old days, a company might not issue fire insurance on a tenement until the owner put up fire escapes, so ILC stipulated that psychic fire escapes must be built on every client. Moreover, ILC built them.

"You understand, Mr. Lawson," Ferguson said, "the policies become invalidated if at any time you should refuse to return for additional examinations, should we decide they're necessary."

"Oh, sure. That's all right. But do I get my insurance?"

"You want a separate policy to cover each contingency?"

"Yes. If I can afford the premiums on them all."

"You've got twenty-five policies here," Ferguson said. "They cover quite a range. The premiums would vary, naturally. It would be a poor risk for us to insure you against turning your ankle—we'd rather insure you against being rained on, since we can control the weather these days. You've got quite an extreme range here, everything from orange crop failure in Florida to snakebite. Crops don't fail, incidentally."

"Well, not through climatic conditions," Lawson said, "but wasn't there some mutated boll weevils that ruined the cotton in South Carolina a few years ago?"

Ferguson nodded. "You're betting on the chance of a similar mutation hitting Florida oranges, then?"

"I guess I'm betting against chance, in a way. Some of these policies are pretty sure to pay off."

"Do you think so?" Ferguson asked. "Remember, you'll have some heavy premiums to pay—and betting against chance is a dangerous business."

"May I—?" Lawson examined the figures Ferguson handed him. He whistled. "That fifth one's plenty expensive. Why's that?"

“Insurance against your purposely giving somebody hay fever? Difficulty of proof, for one thing, but mainly there are too many virus mutations these days. The allergies are tricky. We’ll insure you on that score, of course, but it’ll cost you money. Why do you want to give somebody hay fever?”

“I want to be insured *against* doing that, Mr. Ferguson,” Lawson said blandly. “But I don’t think I can afford that one. Still, the other items—” He computed rapidly in his head. “I suppose I could scrape up first premiums.”

Ferguson watched the young man. By now he knew Ben Lawson, inside and out. He knew his heredity and his habit patterns. He knew how and why the client worked. And there was absolutely nothing suspicious about Lawson, except Archer’s hunch.

And that wasn’t actionable.

So he merely said, “Mr. Lawson, I’m bound to give you a warning. If you can pay only the first premiums, you’re going to lose your money and your insurance—unless you take a job and make some more dough.”

“Nobody *has* to take a job.”

“People get hungry if they don’t. Even if they apply for the dole, they work it out in man-hours of labor.”

“Oh?” Lawson said.

“The insurance we issue is sound. We underwrite, and we pay, when required. But I want to warn you that our losses are due almost entirely to the laws of uncontrollable chance. When the personal factor enters into the question—we don’t lose. In your case the personal factor applies completely. There’s no way in which you could accidentally put phenylthiourea in the city reservoir.”

“No way at all?”

“The chances are astronomical. You haven’t found a way to upset the laws of chance, have you?”

“Wouldn’t you know it by now if I had? You check pretty thoroughly.”

Ferguson nodded. “That’s correct. If you get at the reservoir, it’ll be due to your own personal impulse. You know that’s impossible, or it will be.”

“Impossible?”

“Nearly so. The hypnosis treatment is more effective than most people realize. We’re going to condition you so you *can’t* do any of the things you’re insuring against.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Lawson said. “I certainly wouldn’t want to put phenylthiourea in the city reservoir, would I?”

Watching the young man, Ferguson had an inexplicable moment of *déjà vu*; and he stayed motionless and silent, because he didn’t like such things, and let free association—by which is meant selective association—flow through his mind. Presently he had it, though he had to go back to the days of his gauche adolescence. It was very much like the times when he was in an Upper Crèche, immature, facing an adult who made him feel awkward and ignorant—an adult who knew so many more of the rules than he did.

He studied Lawson. There was nothing overt to account for this—except the equivalent of the curious behavior of the dog in the nighttime. Lawson wasn’t apparently up to anything. Lawson seemed to feel perfectly at ease. And even though the hypnotic treatment was guaranteed, including the inevitable margin for error. Ferguson felt a slight qualm near his liver. His solar plexus. The great nerves gather there, working in harmony with the brain-

mechanism that was government *per se*—and so Ferguson sensed a threat and that hinted at an opening abyss at his feet.

ILC was the cornerstone. The alternative was the only real personal devil that had ever been created—the threat of uncontrolled atomics. But then sanity and logic, which have betrayed so many people in the past, came back, and he knew that one man couldn't upset the applecart. Especially this wide-eyed youth.

Cocky fledgling. He'd just broken the shell of his crèche egg. Naturally he felt competent to cope with anything. He'd always coped with whatever had existed within his eggshell. But that shell had been a barrier, keeping the wrong things out.

"There is one point," Ferguson said. "Your dreams."

"What about them?"

"Our experts have queried that angle. Especially the hypnogogic visions. But up to three years ago your recorded dreams followed a regular pattern, with variations. Since then—"

"They don't?"

"Oh, they do. They follow a pattern. But *without* variations."

"That just means I'm a type, doesn't it? A real norm?"

Ferguson scowled. "The norm's an arbitrary figure. Are you trying to kid me?"

"I'm sorry. I underestimated you. I know the theoretical norm would be pretty much of a monster. It's a handy semantic term. Even if norms exist, they can't stay that way under environmental pressures."

"So. Either you've been lying about your dreams for the last few years, or you haven't."

"Nobody's complained."

"People look for different things. In the crèches they look for one thing. Here we look for another."

"If I'm a bad risk, you can turn me down."

"Oh, no," Ferguson said flatly. "We seldom turn down a client. We allow margins; we pay off when necessary. We insure. If we could control the uncertainty factor, we could just charge a flat sum to work miracles. As it is, in the majority of cases we don't have to pay off. Because we have our hypnotic treatment as extra insurance—our own. But when we do pay, we want to know why. We've got a close schedule of statistics, and they have to check. Apparently you're not antisocial. You've no latent criminal tendencies that we can discover. You're a normal man for your age." Ferguson stopped, a curious qualm going through him at his own words. He realized that he didn't believe what he had just said. He *knew*, with a flat, impossible conviction, that Lawson was not—*normal*.

There was no evidence. Not even the item that had brought Archer in on the case. Suppose, Ferguson thought, he should ask Lawson, "Why did you request Councilor Reeve to back an immaturity pension?" He would get an answer, but not a satisfactory one. For Lawson would not have profited by such a pension. He was legally, mentally, and physically mature. So his plea to the Councilor had been, apparently, simple altruism, and far from logical, since the young of the species already had the equivalent of an immaturity pension under the present system.

Ferguson listened with detachment to the new note of annoyance in his own voice.

"Sometimes people think they can swindle ILC," he said. "They never succeed."

It was a key word he had thrown. Ferguson waited. The young man grinned.

"It seems to me," he said, "that you take yourselves awfully seriously, if you don't mind my saying so. If I'd plotted out a solemn method to fake an accident or something, you

wouldn't have bothered. As long as life is real and earnest, you don't object, but one touch of humor and you think I'm going to reach CM and explode in your face."

Ferguson tightened his mouth. After a moment he said, "We'll take a chance. What policies do you want?"

"Well—I think we'll forget about these three. The premiums are too high. I'll take the rest—twenty-two policies, I make it. All right?"

"You can afford to pay two premiums on each, then—exclusive of the three you've thrown out. Why not choose fewer, so you can be sure they won't lapse before you get a job?"

Lawson said. "Well, if I picked two or three and they paid off, I couldn't get the others afterward at the same rate, could I?"

"Obviously not. We'd have to allow—"

"I'll take them all, then, except the three I can't afford."

"Thank you," Ferguson said, but he didn't mean it.

"It's perfectly obvious what he intends to do," Ferguson said. "He'll try to get us to pay off on one policy so he can continue to pay all the other premiums. And whenever his bank account runs low, he'll cash in on another policy. Kick a policeman or something. What a low idea of humor."

Archer took a long time to answer. He closed his eyes, apparently considered the whole problem, opened them again, and inquired, "Do you staff officers in ILC have psychiatric checkups?"

"Now I'm crazy. Is that it?"

"It's easier to believe that than to think one man could upset your whole organization so easily. Why jump to the unlikeliest conclusion before you've checked on the likelier ones? I know ILC has paid off on insurance before, but always in line with the law of averages."

They were in Ferguson's office overseeing Lawson's hypnosis, which, according to the visitor, was progressing according to schedule. So far there had been no hitch. Lawson was a fair hypnotic subject, even without the drug. He had gone into test catalepsy, and reacted in a normal manner. He had gone through the usual routine of firing a blank cartridge at a psychiatrist, which might have meant that (a) he was homicidal, or (b) he unconsciously realized the gun was loaded with blanks, or (c) he abhorred psychiatrists. Rechecks indicated that the second was true. He had also been instructed to swipe a dollar from an attendant's pocket, and that meant nothing either. Barter is the basic; currency is necessarily a symbol, and what a dollar meant to Lawson was difficult to discover.

Psychiatry is as exact and inexact a science as mathematics. Once you realize that it's possible to create a whole new system of mathematics at need, you realize that ordinary math is accurate only when the rules are followed. But if you use the rules of one system to solve the problems of another system, there may arise some difficulty. The psychiatrists working on Lawson were not bollixed, but Ferguson thought they might not know it if they were.

And yet he had nothing to work on except a hunch.

Hunches are exact sciences, though, once you get away from fairy tale concepts. So-called prescient dreams can be accurate. A wish-fulfillment dream may certainly be prescient; it's at least a half and half gamble. Ferguson's hunch came from his unconscious, which had the hopes and fears of all his years. He had achieved security against tremendous odds, for in the Twentieth Century he would have been a miserably unhappy specimen. To him ILC symbolized security, which he vitally needed. A threat to ILC was, very definitely, a threat to

himself. And, like most other men, he had the buried nightmare psychosis of the ultimate chain reaction.

ILC did mean status quo, in a way. The people in charge allowed for stress and strain and flux, of course; environment makes a vast amount of difference in precision measurements—of metal, for example. If you kept the human race in a vacuum under glass, status quo would be practicable. As it was—

“He makes me nervous,” Ferguson said inadequately. “A hunch is no evidence, but—”

“What’s the matter? Think he’s a superman?” Archer asked ironically.

Ferguson considered his nails. “You’re not serious.”

“Well—it’s unlikely.”

“I’ve done a lot of research from time to time on just that subject,” Ferguson said. “Sometimes I’ve wondered . . . Why the devil are *you* checking up on Lawson if you’re so sure he’s harmless?”

“I don’t take chances. A good Fixer is like an aneroid barometer. Sensitive. I’ve got certain specialized training and skills. When there’s the equivalent of a variation in atmospheric pressure, I notice it, and I like to find out what the cause was. I’ve been on a lot of wild-goose chases, but—I don’t take chances.”

“It’s no coincidence that we’re working on the same problem,” Ferguson said. “You noticed the result and I guess I noticed the cause. We’ve each got a directional fix on Lawson—he’s the cross-bearing. Like a storm brewing in the Antarctic. It’s as though you noticed a falling barometer in Wisconsin while I noticed a thermal at the South Pole. Well—Lawson makes me feel funny. And Lawson asked your patron to back a bill, which is where you came in. Hiram Reeve must have had a lot of screwball bills proposed to him before this.”

“But never altruistically.”

“What—never?”

“I meant never. Sometimes you have to dig deep to find the payoff, but it’s always there. There’s compensation involved, always, psychologically anyway. You’ll find that disinterested reformers aren’t as disinterested as they appear—if you check up on their personal warps. People who want to save the world, Mr. Ferguson, generally have a plush-seated throne picked out for themselves in the brave new one. But Lawson’s proposition was apparently altruistic, and I want to make sure he had a selfish motive for proposing his immaturity pension idea. Then I can relax.”

“It’s just a job to you, then?”

“I like to do my job. That’s why I’m working for Reeve—he’s the most competent politico around. If there were a better one, I’d change allegiance. But right now—apparently I’m looking for normality in Lawson and you’re looking for abnormality.”

“He’s normal,” Ferguson said. “Notice that reaction chart.”

They examined the televisior. Lawson was being conditioned against kicking a policeman.

“Will it work?” Archer asked.

“Impossible to tell. We depend a great deal on implanting fear of consequences. But we insure against consequences. In lab conditions, Lawson might very well refrain from kicking a policeman, because he unconsciously knows he wouldn’t get his policy if he did. But once he’s insured—the policy guarantees against consequences. There’s always a margin for error.”

Across the screen moved a jiggling green line that meant Lawson refrained from kicking the equivalent of a policeman.

Three days later Lawson threw phenylthiourea into the reservoir. He did it within range of one of the watchdog telephoto lenses, set up in a ring around the water supply, and first he held up the labeled bottle so there would be no mistake. Thereafter he laughed hilariously and went away.

“I want protection against a homicidal impulse,” Ferguson said to the ILC psychiatrist. “Probably it’s got a paranoid base. There’s a client out to git me.”

“Out to git you, is he?” the psychiatrist said. “What’s he been up to?”

Ferguson told him. “There’s nothing yet,” he ended. “Not even a neurosis, as far as I know. But I worry about the guy. He’s taken out twenty-two policies, and—I’m afraid of how I may start to feel later.”

“Identification with ILC. I expect we can get rid of that feeling. Sublimate it or something. Remove the cause. Oh, well. One swallow doesn’t make a dipsomaniac. We’ll put you through the routine, Ferguson.”

“I keep thinking of mature gorillas. A nice therapy would be for me to take a hunting trip and shoot male gorillas. I don’t know. This could lead to claustrophobia and agoraphobia. Fear of open spaces, I mean, not fear of crowds. Then I’d have to spend my time like those figures in one of those little houses that foretell weather. Keep dashing in and out. What about a nice padded cell with walls that expand and contract?”

“What about a sedative?” the psychiatrist countered. “The trouble with you staff boys, as a matter of fact, is that the minute you get a hangnail you think it’s a major psychosis. These minor things generally adjust themselves automatically. We keep complete, up-to-date charts of all the staff, and we know a great deal more about you than you think. You’re all right. Just to keep you happy, we’ll go through the routine and make sure you’re not a lycanthrope—though you wouldn’t be holding down the job you do if you hadn’t achieved integration.”

“But what about Lawson?” Ferguson inquired plaintively.

That was, of course, already taken care of. Naturally ILC called Lawson in for re-examination. He came willingly enough, apparently suppressing a mild amusement at the whole proceeding. Ferguson had a deep-rooted conviction that the psychiatrists would discover nothing. All his old qualms and fears combined to tell him that whatever Lawson had was beyond the range of ILC’s precision instruments to discover. The only real way to detect his variation from the norm would be to correlate the effect he had on other bodies—the way Pluto’s existence was suspected before it was actually discovered.

But Lawson’s psychological pattern came safely within the extreme range of normality.

He had a high resistance-quotient; so had many other people. Repeated treatments of sodium pentothal failed to break down all his barriers—that wasn’t a wholly unfamiliar phenomenon. He lay on the couch, doped with the hypnotic drug, and answered questions in a way that entirely failed to satisfy Ferguson.

“How did you feel when you threw phenylthiourea into the reservoir?” they asked him.

“I felt good,” Lawson said.

“Did you remember that we had agreed you couldn’t throw phenylthiourea into the reservoir?”

Silence.

They repeated the query.

“No,” Lawson said.

“Could you kick a policeman?”

“No.”

There wasn't much they could do about it that hadn't already been done. They gave him supplementary hypnotic treatments, reinforcing the conditioning even more thoroughly than before. But he was written down under Margin for Error. He was a rare type, yet he came within the limits of normality. If he had extensions beyond that norm—the psychiatrists couldn't detect them. Ferguson thought he had. Convincing other people was another matter. ILC had quite as much evidence on its side as he had on his—if you could call it evidence. Apparently it wasn't. And the points that really convinced Ferguson himself were intangibles, on which he could produce no evidence at all. Sometimes he himself felt doubt, but in the end he always swung back to the blind, illogical conviction that was part of his mind by now. Hypersensitivity? Was that the answer? He had for many years been interested in the subject of the theoretical superman, and there had been times when, looking askance at someone or other, he had wondered—

But never before had he felt conviction. With a part of his brain that seemed to be as specialized and infallible as radar—a sensitivity apparently only he possessed, he *knew*. He had always, deep within him, expected that some day the theoretical would become the practical. Now he thought that it had happened. But how could he convince anyone who did not already have this same conviction springing from an inner perception to which even he could give no name? He might as well announce the second coming of the Messiah. People would dismiss him as a crank, at best. Public disbelief would in effect invalidate the truth—if it were true. There had never been but one man who could safely have claimed to be Napoleon—and even he, without sufficient evidence, might expect to be certified. Before the time of Galileo, Ferguson told himself, there must have been a number of lunatics who, among their other delusions, were convinced that the Earth went round the Sun.

Margin for Error would not exist if a good many people did not fall into that particular classification. To choose one case arbitrarily looked like simple eccentricity on Ferguson's part. He had no arguments anyone could understand. He was a pre-Galilean convinced of the Earth's orbit. And he had no telescopic apparatus an ordinary human could use.

What could he do about it?

Only what he had already done.

The psychiatrists could help up to a certain point—the limit of visibility on their figurative telescopes. But he dared not tell them all he suspected, for fear of being tagged as a psychotic himself. In effect he had to psychoanalyze himself, a notoriously difficult task—and try to segregate and analyze the nameless, certain sense that told him what Lawson was.

Meanwhile Benjamin Lawson went placidly about his business.

Having latched on to a good deal of money from ILC, as the result of his escapade at the reservoir, he deposited it with an investment broker and rented a small cottage fully equipped by Services. He seemed to want to avoid responsibility. There was an odd air of *playing* to his life. Food, prepared and hot, arrived, a week's supply at a time, and Lawson had only to push a button, make his selection, and eat. Then he pushed another button and the service disappeared for automatic cleansing. Since the house was functional, there were no dust-catchers, and air-conditioning and electronic gadgets took care of the inevitable filth that occurs everywhere except in a hard vacuum. There was a playground-resort a few hundred miles away, and Lawson often flew there to ski, play tennis, have a vigorous game of skatch,

or swim. He bought thousands of books and book-reels and read omnivorously. He had a chemical laboratory and other laboratories, all purely amateur. He had a great deal of fun making soap, and only the chlorophyl-deodorizer-units saved the bungalow from becoming a stench and an abomination.

He didn't do any work.

A year later he kicked a policeman. His money was running low.

Ferguson was doing pretty well. A hitherto-unrealized psychosis had been uncovered, involving a forgotten infancy-wish for the moon; and by a remarkable series of associations, involving green cheese, butter, and bread, it had resolved itself into the father-image, which was familiar enough to be handled by even the stupidest psychiatrist. Ferguson called on his father, an ancient and unregenerate, oldster who spent most of his time collecting dirty limericks, and was conscious of no particular reaction, except a feeling of mild boredom when his antique sire insisted on repeating every limerick he knew at least three times. He was left with a conviction that his father needed psychoanalysis, and he went back to work mentally cleansed and integrated, he felt.

Then Lawson kicked the policeman.

"But that was over two years ago," Archer said into the televisior. "I remember you were all steamed up about it then. Still, it's been two years! Lawson hasn't collected on any more policies, has he?"

"That's not the point," Ferguson said, a muscle in his cheek twitching. "Everyone but me has forgotten about Lawson—he's down in the files as just another case. I called to see if you'd lost interest, too."

Archer made a noncommittal sound.

Ferguson looked at him across the miles. "I'd be willing to bet," he said, "that you've got Lawson's name on your calendar for a future checkup."

Archer hesitated. "All right," he said. "You win. But it's simply routine; I've checked on him every six months. I do that with a good many people—I told you once I don't take chances. Luckily I've got a competent staff, so I can afford the time. But it's just routine."

"It may be routine with your other cases," Ferguson said, "but don't tell me it's only that with Lawson."

Archer smiled. "I know you've got a phobia about him. Is there anything new?"

Ferguson looked thoughtfully at Archer, wondering how much of his motive he should reveal at this time. He decided to stick to the facts.

"You know what I believe, Archer. I haven't any proof. He has been careful never to do anything that would give him away. Neither has he shown any indication of what he intends to do when he does use his—powers. I think I've found out why."

"Could it be simply because he's a normal man without any special powers?" Archer asked gently.

"No, it couldn't! I'll tell you what it really is. He's still a child."

"At twenty-three?"

Ferguson smiled. "Do you know the ages of all your routine cases that well?"

"Well, go on," Archer said, shrugging.

"I've been studying his case very thoroughly. I've made charts and graphs from the information I've gathered, and I've showed them to specialists. I've got opinions and I've

made comparisons. Lawson's activity-patterns are those of a twelve-year-old child—with variations. Intellectually he's not twelve years old, but his recreations—his periods of relaxation, when the intellectual centers of the brain aren't exclusively in control—that's when the important factors begin to show. He thinks like an adult, but he plays like a child. It's delayed maturation; it must be."

"So you believe he'll turn into a superman when he grows up?"

"That's why he went to your patron Reeve when he graduated from his crèche. It's the immaturity pension angle. He wasn't as altruistic as he seemed; by his own standards he was immature at the time. He still is. He's simply waiting until he grows up."

"Then what? He'll conquer the world?"

"I think he could if he wanted to." Ferguson considered Archer's face on the screen. "Well?" he said.

"What do you expect me to say to that?"

"I'm waiting for you to cross Archer's name off your list. If your only interest in him has been curiosity about the altruism angle, you can check him off as of now. Are you going to?"

Archer paused a fraction of a second too long before he said, "Sure."

"That means you're not going to. You're too accurate a barometer to dismiss me as a crackpot entirely."

"You keep leaving me with nothing to say except go on."

Ferguson said, "I've got a phobia, I'll admit that. I've been living with it for a long time now. I don't like it. It's like living with one leg and no prosthetic device—I can get used to it, but my own adjustment won't help the rest of the world. I'm going to make Lawson furnish proof that will convince you and everybody else that he's—what he is. I'll need your help. He's made some good investments. That's why he hasn't yet needed to collect on any of those other policies he got originally. I'm beginning to think he took out so many just to disarm suspicion, so he could remain within the margin for error if he had to break two or three. He's broken two. He's been investigated. If he broke a third, I think other people besides me might begin to worry and wonder. I want him to break another. It's time people did begin to worry. This is where you come in. If Lawson's investments went wrong, he'd need more dough. I want them to go wrong. That's more your line than mine. What do you say?"

"What's in it for me?" Archer asked.

"You can stop worrying about that memo on your calendar—one way or the other. I promise that if nothing happens I'll never bother you again about it." That was the end of what Ferguson said aloud. In his own mind he finished the sentence. "*—but I won't have to. Lawson will!*"

Lawson was not likely to take that lying down. Ferguson did not expect vindictiveness from the boy; Lawson would be above petty revenge. But he could not afford to let a thing like this happen unchecked; Ferguson meant Lawson to know that this was a deliberate attack. And if Lawson was what Ferguson believed him to be, he could not afford to let the knowledge of his superior potentialities be spread abroad. If guns are being tired at you, you spike those guns. There need be nothing vindictive about it—but self-preservation must be as strong in the immature superman as it is in any other organism.

One of two things would happen; Lawson would collect on another policy, which would put him perilously close to the outside limits of Margin for Error. ILC would worry and wonder, remembering the suspicions Ferguson had already planted. Lawson could scarcely afford to break his hypnosis a third time openly. The alternative could only be an overt

retaliation on his attackers; that was what Ferguson hoped for with part of his mind. It would be the more certain way of proving his case. And Archer had to be in on it. In a perfunctory way Ferguson was sorry he had to drag Archer into this. He would have had no objection to staking himself out alone as bait for the tiger if it would do any good. But no tethered goat has ever killed a tiger yet, alone. Ferguson had already established himself too firmly as a crackpot in the minds of those whose opinions mattered. If he could pull Archer down with him, Archer would have to fight back against the superman, or go under. Corroborative evidence from a man like Archer would have some weight with the authorities.

Ferguson watched Archer's face anxiously. He saw the decision hang in the balance for an interminable chain of seconds. Then Archer nodded.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

Ferguson let out his breath in a long sigh.

The ease with which Lawson thought of a third alternative was infuriating. He did neither of the things Ferguson expected. Instead, he took out insurance on the *Nestor*, a luxury liner on the Earth-Moon run, and since a great many people wanted similar policies—it was almost a lottery, in view of an epidemic of meteor swarms—no attention was aroused at ILC. Besides, the usual margin for error had been allowed. The *Nestor* blasted off three days after its announced time for departure, which gave it a sufficient safety factor and caused dozens of people to cancel their policies.

So the *Nestor* avoided the meteor swarms, but ran into an atomic warhead which had been orbiting in free space for years, awaiting the fatal appointment.

The *Nestor* was running on atomic fuel. The great ship blazed white for an instant and disintegrated.

So did Ferguson. Not literally, of course; not with the spectacular finality of the ship.

Perhaps the worst part was the waiting. He was almost certain that Lawson knew what had been intended, and why, and who was responsible.

But nothing happened.

There was no yardstick. Ferguson didn't know what to expect because he didn't know Lawson's limitations. Ferguson might, unknown to himself, be walking straight toward an apparently accidental demise, hours or days from now, as final as that of the *Nestor*. It seemed fairly obvious that Lawson had foreseen that final rendezvous between the ship and the wandering warhead in its orbit. Was there a rendezvous ahead for Ferguson? Or was he being ignored? He didn't know which thought he liked less.

His work began to suffer. He wasn't eating well these days, which might have brought on his headaches. He overheard his secretary complaining that he was developing a temper like a bear, but he knew that was the wrong simile; the adult gorilla exhibited tendencies more like what Ferguson was feeling now. Irritation, a desire for solitude, above all suspicion. It was the suspicion that bothered him most.

After he had made the third major mistake in a row in office routine he took a vacation by request. He was more glad than sorry when the request came through—not that he thought a vacation would help to solve his problem—you can't negate a fact like Lawson by ignoring it—but he was at least relieved of the troublesome suspicion which had been developing to major proportions of late.

He was suspicious of new clients.

He kept remembering Lawson's aggressively normal face and manner in their first interview. And now he read behind every application the potential for—

A second Lawson.

For six months he tried to run away from a nightmare. The Himalaya Playground didn't help. Specialized occupational therapy didn't help either. Nor did the Moon. Ferguson found the satellite bleak and unfriendly, even at the stimulating Shady Glen north of Tycho. When he looked up at the clouded disk of Earth in the sky, he kept thinking the masses of light and dark had the shape of Lawson's face. It covered the whole planet, just as the shadow of Lawson had covered all of Ferguson's life by now. Lawson watched him unwinkingly from above.

Time on the Moon has a different quality from time on Earth. He had to count up laboriously sometimes to discover how long it had been since he left ILC. He had a reason for wandering, because there was a message he expected. A message from Archer. Before he left Earth, he had asked Archer to notify him in case anything developed. A good many months must have gone by, though here on the Moon they didn't seem so long. But no message came.

When he saw the dull colors of winter spreading down from the pole, he knew his six-months' period was up and he would have to think about going back soon. And now he had to face it; he was afraid to go back, until he heard from Archer. Eventually he undertook the considerable expense of a person-to-person call. It was not, after all, an expense. The call could not be completed. Archer had disappeared.

It was hard to check from this far away, but apparently the Fixer's office had been closed some months ago, and there was no forwarding number. By the time Ferguson's reservation for the return trip came up, he knew what he had to do.

If he had gone straight home, things might have worked out quite differently. But at that time of year the space liner was operating between Tycho and a port in South Africa. An old compulsion which had been haunting Ferguson for some time now saw its chance and broke out of all control.

For a long while he had wanted very much to kill a gorilla. It was not as irrational as it sounded. Psychiatrically speaking, he knew it involved symbolism and displacement. Emotionally, he knew what face he would see across the sights of the gun when he found his gorilla. It had to be an adult male.

With all the resources of his time, this wasn't difficult to arrange; but the disgraceful ease with which the telephoto analyzers located a specimen, the simplicity of driving the sullen brute into an ambush with supersonics, the facility with which Ferguson, in his fast armored Hunter, shot his quarry, left the man completely dissatisfied. Men had killed gorillas before. It proved nothing. It didn't prove the point that bothered him.

Sight and memory of the gorilla's face, in death, stayed with him. The monster had been mature, for his species. Antisocial and dangerous. But dangerous only to whatever intruded into his domain.

With a mature superman, Ferguson thought, human progress might stop. A superman would not feel insecurity, that goad which has always driven mankind. A superman would be a law unto himself. Would he behave like an anthropomorphic god, lending a helping hand to Homo sapiens, or would mankind seem to him as alien and unimportant as a savage tribe?

Lesser breeds without the law—

But the world belonged to man. Not to Lawson. ILC was the law. ILC was the fortress. Without ILC's stability, there would be no protection. *I'm not safe any more*, Ferguson

thought. *I could never stand alone. Maybe that merely means racial immaturity; ILC does stand in loco parentis, but it's always been that way—man has always wanted an All-Father image—*

Ferguson turned in the rifle, but he kept the pistol.

There was no difficulty about locating Lawson. He still lived in the same cottage. But he seemed to be looking slightly older. He nodded cheerfully to Ferguson when the latter came in.

“Hello,” he said.

Ferguson took out the gun and aimed it at Lawson.

Lawson looked scared, or pretended to.

“Don’t,” he said hastily. “I can explain. Don’t shoot me.”

His apparent fright was the only thing that stopped Ferguson’s finger on the trigger.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” Lawson assured him in a soothing voice. “Please put down that gun.”

“I know all about you. You’re dangerous. You could conquer the world if you wanted to.”

“I doubt it,” Lawson said, his fascinated stare on the gun-muzzle. “I’m not really a superman, you know.”

“You’re not ordinary Homo sapiens.”

“Now look. I know a good deal about you, too. You could hardly expect me not to after what’s happened. A man’s investments don’t all go haywire at once unless somebody’s been manipulating the market against him.”

“So that’s what happened to Archer.” Ferguson’s voice rose. “I suppose I can expect the same thing, whatever it is.”

“Archer? You must mean Reeve’s Fixer. So far as I know, he’s going about his business as usual.” Lawson was eyeing his adversary warily. “You’re the problem right now,” he said. “You’re not going about *your* business; you’re going about mine. I wish you’d lay off, Ferguson. I know what you’re thinking, but honestly, I’m not doing anyone any harm. Maybe you have reason for some of your conclusions about what you call my super-powers, but there’s nothing miraculous about them. It . . . it’s just—”

“It’s what?” Ferguson demanded as the other man hesitated.

“Call it a—way of thinking. That’s as close as I can come to explaining what it is I’ve got. I just don’t make mistakes. Not ever.”

“You made one when you let me come in just now, with a gun in my pocket.”

“No, I didn’t,” Lawson said.

There was a pause.

He went on: “Suppose I tell you a little about it. You were partly right, you know, in what you’ve been saying about me. I am immature. Normally, I’d never have known I wasn’t mature at twenty-one. There weren’t any standards of comparison. But this—thing—in my mind helped there. It isn’t prescience, it’s just a . . . a way of thinking. You might call it precision and knowledge of precision tactics. An ability to disassociate the personality from pure thought. I can disassociate logic from emotion, you see—but that’s only part of it. Before I graduated from the crèche, I knew it would take a good many years before I really matured.”

“You’re not human. You don’t give a care about human beings.”

Lawson said, “Look at it this way. Long ago, there was child labor. Kids were put to work in mines and factories when they were ten—or even before that. How could they reach normal

maturity under those conditions? They needed normal childhood, with the right facilities. I had the same problem, with a maturation delayed years beyond the time of everybody else. I couldn't take a job—any job. I could have coped with the requirements, of course, but it would have—warped me. Even before I got my particular ability fully developed, I had a sort of protective instinct pointing out the right direction to take—generally. Just as a new-hatched chicken runs from danger. I *needed* a normal childhood—one that would be normal for me.”

“I suspected what you were.”

“Because of what you are,” Lawson said gently.

Ferguson blinked. “You're antisocial and dangerous,” he said. “Your record shows that. You wrecked the *Nestor*.”

“You know better than that. You're trying to make me a personal devil.”

“You insured the *Nestor*, and the *Nestor* ran into an atomic warhead in space. What about logics of probability?”

“What about logic?” Lawson countered. “I can think and integrate without emotional bias when necessary, that's all. It's not prescience. It was a matter of hard work, research, astronomy, historical study, and integration. I found out the exact time of the *Nestor*'s departure, I found records of spaceships that had noted radiations in certain areas above the stratosphere. I checked on what atomic shells were fired during the Atomic War. I don't think any ordinary human would have had the patience or the speed to do the integration I did, but—it's simply hard work, plus extensions of the brain that have always been shackled before.”

“You can foretell the future?”

“Given the factors, I can formulate the probable final equation—yes. But as for this special talent of mine—I can't tell you. All I can say is that technology has its limits, but the human mind hasn't. We've gone tremendously far with technologies—so far that we nearly killed ourselves with atomics because we didn't know how to use nuclear fission. But every weapon creates the man to use it—and to hammer it into a plowshare. I'm a mutation. Eventually we'll know how to handle atomics without danger—”

“*We*?”

“I'm the first. But there are others like me in the crèches now. Immature as yet. But my brothers will grow—”

Ferguson thought of the gorilla.

Lawson said, “I know how to think. I'm the first man in the world who ever knew how to do that. I'll never need a psychiatrist. I don't think I'll ever make a mistake, because I can really think impersonally, and there's nobody who's ever been able to do that before. That's the basis of the future—not technologies that people misuse, but people who can use technology. Right now, there are over eighty children in crèches who have that special factor for logic in their minds. It's a dominant mutation. We don't want to rule; we'll never want that. It's only autocrats who need power—those who tag groups as ‘little people’ so that by comparison they'll be big people. My job, just at present, is to see that my brother mutants get the immaturity pension they need. I must provide that money somehow. I can do it; I've worked out some methods—”

“Nevertheless I'm going to kill you,” Ferguson said. “I'm afraid of you. You could rule the world.”

“Madmen rule,” Lawson said. “Sane men work, directionally. Atomics have to be controlled; that's one step. It takes pure, sane thought to handle that. And I'm the first truly

sane man who has ever existed on Earth.”

“Like that gorilla I shot yesterday? He was integrated. He was vicious and touchy and static. He had his feeding-ground and his harem, and that was enough for him. He wanted no progress and needed none. That’s maturity for you. Progress stops—the world stops. You’re a dead end, Lawson—and in a minute you’ll just be dead.”

“Do you think you can kill me?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, if you’re a superman. But I’m going to try.”

“And if you fail?”

“Probably you’ll kill me. Because if you don’t, I’ll spread the word, and you’ll be lynched—some day. At least, I’ll talk. If that’s the only weapon I have against you.”

“Animals kill,” Lawson said. “Men kill. I don’t kill.”

“I do,” Ferguson said, and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

When the room steadied about him again, he was seated in a deep chair staring at the gun on the floor where he had dropped it. For the moment it didn’t matter why he had failed—why the gun had failed. The fact of failure was enough.

Lawson had been intolerably kind. He had a vague feeling that Lawson had gone away somewhere to fetch him a drink. His time-sense was unsteady again. Perhaps that was because he had so newly returned from the Moon. Whatever the reason, his sense of urgency was gone.

Then on the wall he saw the television panel, and an urgency woke again in him in a new direction. Archer. Archer could give him the answer. If Archer were still alive.

With no recollection of motion he found himself before the screen, steadying himself with braced hands on the base, giving the familiar call number for the office where Archer no longer worked. He got from the exchange the same information his lunar call had elicited—office closed, no forwarding address. He tried Archer’s home, with the same lack of result. Then he tried the office of Hiram Reeve, the politician who had been Lawson’s patron, and here he found the right answer.

“ZX 47-6859. That’s a private number, Mr. Ferguson. ILC will keep it confidential, of course?”

Ferguson promised, and blanked the face out quickly. His voice was a little unsteady as he repeated the ZX number. It seemed incredible that Archer’s plump face should dawn so clearly and promptly in the screen. Ferguson had pictured him as dead or destroyed in some subtler way, with so many vivid variations as applied to himself, that he tried stupidly to reach out and touch the screen for reassurance. The surface was cold and smooth beneath his fingertips, but Archer jumped back and laughed, putting up a futile hand to shield his eyes from the imagined blow.

“Hey, what’s the idea?” he demanded.

“Are you all right, Archer? Where are you? What’s happened?”

“Sure I’m all right,” Archer said. “What about you? You don’t look too good.”

“I don’t feel too good. But I’ve got proof. He’s admitted it!”

“Hold on a minute. Let’s get this straight. I know you just got back from the Moon, but—”

“I’m at Lawson’s house. I’ve confronted him with the evidence.” Ferguson made a great effort and forced his mind into co-ordinated thought. So much depended on what he was able to put across in the next few sentences. He could not afford weakness yet. “Lawson’s admitted

everything I've been telling you," he said. "It was all true. For a while I almost thought I was going crazy, but now Lawson admits it—listen, Archer, he admits it! You've got to help me! I realize my record's bad—I knew, but I couldn't convince anybody, and it nearly drove me off my rocker. I suppose I've been sounding psychotic for a long time now, but they'll listen to you. They've got to—because I tried to shoot Lawson, and I couldn't. Somebody will have to do something quick." He paused, drew a deep breath, and said harshly, "There are eighty more of *them*. Do you hear that, Archer? They're growing up. They're going to take over. I know how that sounds, but you've got to believe me. Give me a chance to prove it! Could you get here fast? How far away are you? It all depends on you; Archer, please don't fail me!"

Archer smiled. It was borne in upon Ferguson's mind that he looked like a different man now. Somehow in the last six months he had shed his reserve, his wariness, and seemed completely relaxed and confident. But a slight shadow darkened his look of jovial content when he answered.

"I can get there right away," he said. "Hold on." He turned away from the screen. Ferguson saw the back of his head as he crossed the room and opened a door in the far wall. He heard the door open. Beyond the opening door he had a brief glimpse of a tiny, distant room in which a tiny, distant man stood with his back to the door, looking into a television screen. Very small and clear on that miniature screen he saw a miniature duplicate of a man opening a door upon a room in which a man stood facing a television screen—

It was the sound of the opening door that rescued him from the plunge through abyss after diminishing abyss of infinite duplication. He heard the door opening twice, once in the screen and once in the wall behind him. When he turned, Archer was crossing the threshold.

This time it was a long while before the room stopped turning. "I'm sorry," Archer said. "I should have warned you. I guess I just didn't think. Things have been happening pretty fast around here."

"What things? What happened? What are you doing here?"

"I work here," Archer said.

"You—*work here*?"

"I've changed my patron. No law against that, is there? I worked for Reeve as long as I thought he was the best man. But now I'm working for Ben Lawson. He's the best—man."

Ferguson made an inarticulate sound. "You traitor," he said wildly.

"To what?"

"Your own species!"

"Oh, very likely," Archer said blandly. "Still, I know where I'm most useful. And I like to be useful. It's none of our business to sit in judgment, is it?"

"Of course it's our business! Who will if we don't? I—"

Archer interrupted. "It doesn't matter whether we do or don't. You saw what happened when you tried to shoot Lawson."

Ferguson had entirely forgotten the pistol. Now he crossed the room unsteadily, picked it up, and broke it open. The cartridges were blanks.

"All hunters are required to return their weapons after they've come back from expeditions," Archer said pedantically. "ILC's policy is to avoid irritation, so nobody tried to take that pistol away from you at Uganda Station. However, blank cartridges were substituted. Lawson knew what would happen. It took him seven hours of fast calculation and logic to work out the inevitable probability, including the psychological factor that involved your

personal reactions—but you see the result. You can't kill him. He can always work out what's going to happen.”

“Man, you can't—” Ferguson found himself becoming incoherent. He stopped, drew a painfully long breath, and began again, with an attempt at control. “You can't be such a fool! Maybe I've failed to kill Lawson—alone. But that doesn't mean that both of us, together . . . the resources of ILC . . . the whole human race would band together to destroy Lawson if they knew—”

“Why should they destroy him?”

“Self-preservation!”

“That instinct failed the race,” Archer said softly, “when it made the first atomic bomb. Status quo is only a stop-gap. The single answer now is not a new control for atomics, but a new kind of man. A mature man.”

“The mature gorilla—”

Archer interrupted. “Yes, I know. You've had that phobia in mind for a long time. But you're thinking like an immature gorilla yourself, aren't you?”

“Of course I am. The whole race is at that stage. That's what frightens me. Our entire culture is based on progress rising out of competition and co-operation. If a really mature mind should take over, all progress would stop.”

“You really don't see the answer to that?” Archer said.

Ferguson opened his mouth for what he realized would be only repetition. He wasn't getting anywhere with Archer; he was making no impression. All he could do was repeat what he had already said. “Like a child,” he thought wildly. “Repetition, not logical argument. Only —”

They could no longer communicate with one another. It was as though Archer had changed over to a new and incomprehensible standard of thinking. The barrier between them was as tangible as the surface of a television screen. They could see one another through it, but they could no longer touch.

Ferguson's shoulders sagged a trifle as he gave up the attempt at communication. He turned toward the door, hesitating. He glanced back with a new wariness at this man who was suddenly an enemy.

What, he wondered, were Archer's orders from Lawson? Surely they couldn't afford to let him go. He groped in vain for an understandable parallel. In this situation a normal human would have shot him as he went out the door, or locked him safely away where he could do them no harm. But Lawson had never operated with normal human weapons like these. Lawson's weapons—

Archer said suddenly, “You're free to go whenever you like. One thing, though. Listen, Ferguson. Lawson tried to take out another policy with your company today, and was turned down. It looked like a poor risk. I thought you ought to know.”

Ferguson could read nothing in Archer's face. The barrier still stood between them. He thought there was more than met the ear behind that statement, but he knew that he could only wait. He went out through the door and down the walk, in the bright yellow sunshine of his familiar world. It was a world that depended on him for its salvation. And a world he could not save because it would not heed his warning.

Flickers of hope rose irrationally in his mind. Had Archer, after all, been trying to tell him that Lawson was fallible? If ILC had refused a policy, it might mean that their suspicions were

roused at last. It might mean that he had not lost the battle after all. Perhaps they would listen now. Rapidly he began to calculate how long it would take him to get back to headquarters—

But between him and his calculations kept swimming the recollection of the liner *Nestor* and the derelict warhead, moving closer and closer in uncharted space toward the rendezvous that only Lawson had foreseen.

Two hours later Ferguson closed the door of his office behind his secretary's somewhat indignant back, and glanced with a sigh of relief around the small, empty room. He knew he hadn't done his cause any good by his unswerving course through the building, brushing aside the surprised greetings of what friends he had left after the last two years. The most important thing in the world just now was solitude. He locked the door and turned to his private visor screen.

"Get me the current file on Benjamin Lawson," he said. "Recently he applied for a policy that was refused. I want to know why." He waited impatiently, drumming on the resilient plastic frame with unsteady fingers.

"Hello, Mr. Ferguson," the screen said pleasantly. "Glad you're back. There's been nothing new on Lawson since you left, but I'll send the file up right away."

"Don't bother, then. I want to know about this new policy. Hurry it up, can't you?" He heard his voice rise shrilly, and with an effort forced it to more normal tones.

There was a moment's silence. Then the face said, with a shade of embarrassment, "Sorry, Mr. Ferguson; that seems to be under TS."

"What do you mean?" he asked irritably, and before she could speak—"Never mind, never mind. Thanks." He snapped the switch.

They had never pulled TS on him before. Top Secret stuff was technically limited to the three highest-ranking officers of the company, though actually staff members of Ferguson's rank honored such rules more by their breach than by their observance.

I mustn't let it throw me, he said silently. *I can't let it throw me*. And after a moment he knew what he could do. There were three men whose television screens would automatically reply to a TS query. He made two calls before he found an empty office. It was lunch time, fortunately for him.

He unlocked his door, went down the corridor to the emergency stairs, and climbed three floors. On the way he formulated a plausible enough tale, but he didn't need to use it. By a stroke of better luck than had attended him so far, the first vice president's office was empty. He closed and locked the door behind him, and switched on the screen for one-way visual.

"Give me the latest TS on Benjamin Lawson."

"Well, that's that," Archer said.

Lawson lay back in his chair, lifted the trumpet to his lips, and blew a long clear note at the ceiling. It might have been a note of derision at the human race, but Archer did not choose to read that into it. He knew Lawson too well—or he thought he did.

"It's a pity," Archer went on. "I was sorry we had to do it, but he wouldn't leave us any other out."

"Does it bother you?" Lawson asked, squinting at him over the rim of the trumpet's horn. Reflected in the brass Archer saw his own distorted face and the shadow of worry on it.

"I suppose it does, a little," he said. "But it couldn't be helped."

"It's not as if we'd planted a booby-trap on him," Lawson pointed out. "We only arranged for him to know the truth."

Archer laughed shortly. “Misused semantics. Truth sounds innocuous, doesn’t it? And yet it’s the deadliest thing you could ask any human to face. Or any superhuman, either, I should think.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me superhuman,” Lawson said. “You sound like Ferguson. I hope *you* don’t think I want to conquer the world.”

“I tried to tell him you didn’t, but by then he was seeing a superman behind every tree, and there was nothing I could say that would make sense to him.”

Lawson slid further down into the chair and ran through a brief series of riffs. The room was full of clear resonance for a moment. Before it died away Lawson put aside the trumpet and said, “I don’t suppose it would make sense to anybody brought up on anthropomorphic thinking.”

“I know. It took me a long time to come around. And I suppose it was only by identifying my interests with yours that I was able to see it.”

“Ferguson went to extremes, but the two things he was so afraid of are the conclusions any anthropomorphic thinker would arrive at if he knew the truth about me and the other eighty in the crèches. He was perfectly right, as far as he went, about the parallel between gorilla and human maturation, of course. The immature gorilla is naturally a gregarious, competitive critter. That’s part of its growing up. That’s progress, if you like. In the crèches, we kids used to think our football and baseball and skatch scores were the most important things in the world—the goal was to win. But the real idea was to develop us physically and teach us mental and social co-ordination, things we’d need when we grew up. You don’t see grown men taking things like that so seriously.”

Archer said, “Yes—but try making Ferguson see the parallel! Or any other anthropomorphic thinker.”

“Progress as men see it,” Lawson said pedantically, “is not an end in itself; it is as much a means to an end as any schoolboy’s game.”

Archer grinned. “Paragraph 1, Chapter 1, Primer for the New Race,” he suggested. “There’s no use trying to explain that to Ferguson. He has a big blind spot on that side of his mind. His whole culture’s based on the idea of competition and progress. It’s his god. He’d fight to the last ditch before he’d admit his . . . his football score isn’t the last great hope of the race of men.”

“He has fought to the last ditch,” Lawson said. “He’s in it now. We can dismiss Ferguson.” He regarded his trumpet thoughtfully and said, “Paragraph 1, Sentence 2. When the end has been achieved, the means is no longer of any value. We know this is so, but never try to tell it to a human.” He paused and winked at Archer. “Your case is the exception, of course,” he observed politely. “Paragraph 1. Sentence 3. Never blame the human for that. We can’t expect him to admit that his whole culture is no more than a childish game to which there must be an end if the game is to serve any purpose. Never look down on humans—they laid the foundations for us to build on, and we know no more than they what shape that building will take.”

Archer was silent, a hint of deference in his manner. This was the only subject which he had ever seen Lawson approach seriously. “Paragraph 2,” Lawson went on, scowling at the trumpet. “Never attack a human except in self-defense and then destroy him quickly and completely. Humans think autistically; they will always be convinced you want to rule their world. Their egotism will never let them admit the truth. We have no need of their toys; we must put away childish things.”

There was a brief silence. Then Archer said, “We ought to get that primer on paper before very long; we’ll be needing it.”

“Maybe we ought to dedicate it to Ferguson,” Lawson suggested sardonically, as he picked up the trumpet and delicately fingered the keys.

The clear note of the horn vibrated through the room again.

“You make me think of Joshua,” Archer told him.

Lawson grinned. “Gabriel,” he said succinctly.

Ferguson leaned tensely toward the screen. It flickered, and a voice said, “Report on policy refused November 4th to applicant Benjamin Lawson—” The voice went on, and Ferguson listened for a stunned moment and then refused to listen.

This is the chain reaction, he told himself, in the deliberate, controlled silence of his mind, while the voice spoke on unheeded from the screen. This is the personal devil that every man has feared since the first Bomb fell. But we’ve watched for the wrong reaction. This is fission no one expected, fission between the old race and the new. No one knows but me—and Archer—and I’ll never be able to give the warning—

This was defeat. There was no use fighting any longer. He saw failure and disaster before him, the control of all Earth wrested from human hands and Lawson lording it like Nero over a populace of slaves. For Ferguson was an autistic thinker to the last. He saw Progress at full stop, and that was the last abyss of all, for beyond it his narrowing mind could see nothing but the dark. The last barriers of his defense went down, and he let himself listen to the words that the screen was repeating.

The screen said:

“Lawson desired to insure against the possibility of ILC officer Gregory Ferguson becoming insane. Since investigation shows that Ferguson has already exceeded the margin for error allowable for developing paranoid psychoses—”

Moving through uncharted space, the liner *Nestor* and the derelict warhead crashed once more in the infinite darkness of Gregory Ferguson’s mind. After that, there was white incandescence.

All thinking stopped.

THE END

[The end of *Margin for Error* by Henry Kuttner (as Lewis Padgett)]