

“Greater Than Gods”

by

Catherine L. Moore

Astounding Science Fiction

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BLACK DESTROYER by A. E. Van Vogt

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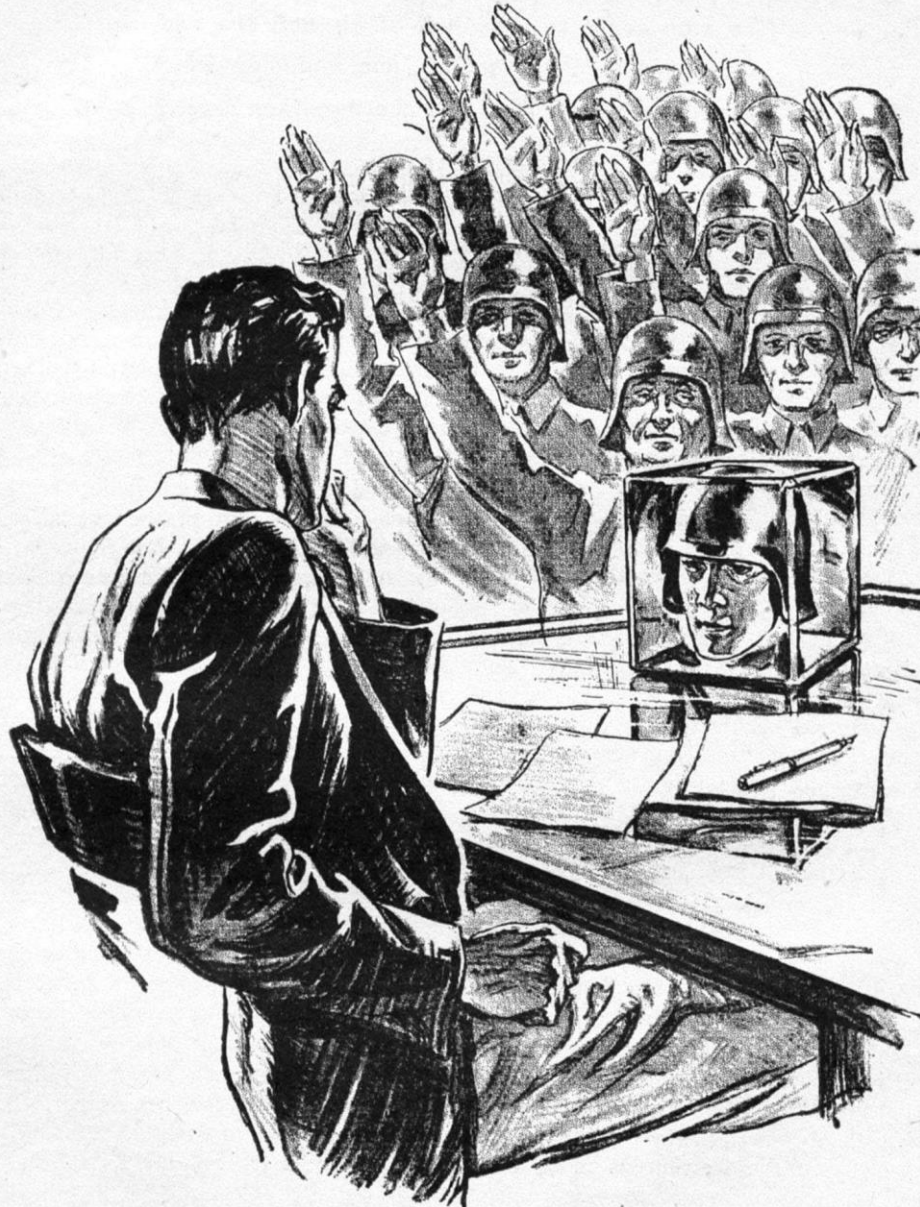
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GREATER THAN GODS



By C. L. MOORE

GREATER THAN GODS

If a man could see the end of his act, the end that comes at the far end of Time, and know what it meant—would men be greater than gods?

By C. L. Moore

Illustrated by Schneeman

THE desk was glass-clear steel, the mirror above it a window that opened upon distance and sight and sound whenever the televisor buzzer rang. The two crystal cubes on the desk were three-dimensional photographs of a sort undreamed of before the Twenty-third Century dawned. But between them on the desk lay a letter whose message was older than the history of writing itself.

"My darling—" it began in a man's strongly slanting handwriting. But there Bill Cory had laid down his pen and run despairing fingers through his hair, looking from one crystal-cubed photograph to the other and swearing a little under his breath. It was fine stuff, he told himself savagely, when a man couldn't even make up his mind which of two girls he wanted to marry. Biology House of Science City, that trusted so faithfully the keenness and clarity of Dr. William Cory's decisions, would have shuddered to see him now.

For the hundredth time that afternoon he looked from one girl's face to the other, smiling at him from the crystal cubes, and chewed his lip unhappily. On his left, in the translucent block that had captured an immortal moment when dark Marta Mayhew smiled, the three-dimensional picture looked out at him with a flash of violet eyes. Dr. Marta Mayhew of Chemistry House, ivory

whiteness and satin blackness. Not at all the sort of picture the mind conjures up of a leading chemist in Science City which houses the greatest scientists in the world.

Bill Cory wrinkled his forehead and looked at the other girl. Sallie Carlisle dimpled at him out of the crystal, as real as life itself to the last flying tendrils of fair curls that seemed to float on a breeze frozen eternally into glass. Bill reached out to turn the cube a little, bringing the delicate line of her profile into view, and it was as if time stood still in the crystalline deeps and pretty Sallie in the breathing flesh paused for an eternal moment with her profile turned away.

After a long moment Bill Cory sighed and picked up his pen. After the "*Darling*" of the letter he wrote firmly, "*Sallie*."

"Dr. Cory," hesitated a voice at the door. Bill looked up, frowning. Miss Brown blinked at him nervously behind her glasses. "Dr. Ashley's—"

"Don't announce me, Brownie," interrupted a languid voice behind her. "I want to catch him loafing. Ah, Bill, writing love letters? May I come in?"

"Could I stop you?" Bill's grin erased the frown from his forehead. The tall and tousled young man in the doorway was Charles Ashley, head of Telepathy House, and though their ac-

quaintance had long been on terms of good-natured insult, behind it lay Bill's deep recognition of a quality of genius in Ashley that few men ever attain. No one could have risen to the leadership of Telepathy House whose mind did not encompass many more levels of infinite understanding than the ordinary mind even recognizes.

"I've worked myself into a stupor," announced the head of Telepathy House, yawning. "Come on up to the Gardens for a swim, huh?"

"Can't." Bill laid down his pen. "I've got to see the pups—"

"Damn the pups! You think Science City quivers every time those little mutts yap! Let Miss Brown look after 'em. She knows more than you do about genetics, anyhow. Some day the Council's going to find it out and you'll go back to working for a living."

"Shut up," requested Bill with a grin. "How are the pups, Miss Brown?"

"Perfectly normal, doctor. I just gave them their three o'clock feeding and they're asleep now."

"Do they seem happy?" inquired Ashley solicitously.

"That's right, scoff," sighed Bill. "Those pups and I will go ringing down the corridors of time, you mark my words."

ASHLEY NODDED, half seriously. He knew it might well be true. The pups were the living proof of Bill's success in prenatal sex determination—six litters of squirming maleness with no female among them. They represented the fruit of long, painstaking experiments in the X-ray bombardment of chromosomes to separate and identify the genes carrying the factors of sex determination, of countless failures and immeasurable patience. If the pups grew into normal dogs—well, it would be one long, sure stride nearer the day when, through Bill's own handiwork, the world would be perfectly balanced be-

tween male and female in exact proportion to the changing need.

Miss Brown vanished with a shy, self-effacing smile. As the door closed behind her, Ashley, who had been regarding the two photograph cubes on Bill's desk with a lifted eyebrow, arranged his long length on the couch against the wall and was heard to murmur: "Eenie meenie minie mo. Which is it going to be, Will-yum?"

They were on terms too intimate for Bill to misunderstand, or pretend to.

"I don't know," he admitted miserably, glancing down in some hesitation at the letter beginning, "*My darling Sallie—*"

Ashley yawned again and fumbled for a cigarette. "You know," he murmured comfortably, "it's interesting to speculate on your possible futures. With Marta or Sallie, I mean. Maybe some day somebody will find a way to look ahead down the branching paths of the future and deliberately select the turning points that will carry him toward the goal he chooses. Now if you could know beforehand where life with Sallie would lead, or life with Marta, you might alter the whole course of human history. That is, if you're half as important as you think you are."

"Huh-uh," grunted Bill. "If you predicate a fixed future, then it's fixed already, isn't it? And you'd have no real choice."

Ashley scratched a match deliberately and set his cigarette aglow before he said: "I think of the future as an infinite reservoir of an infinite number of futures, each of them fixed, yet malleable as clay. Do you see what I mean? At every point along our way we confront crossroads at which we make choices among the many possible things we may do the next moment. Each crossroad leads to a different future, all of them possible, all of them fixed, waiting for our choice to give them reality. Perhaps there's a—call it

a Plane of Probability—where all these possible results of our possible choices exist simultaneously. Blueprints of things to come. When the physical time of matter catches up with, and fills in, any one particular plan, it becomes fixed in the present.

"But before time has caught up with it, while our choice at the crossroads is still unmade, an infinite number of possible futures must exist as it were in suspension, waiting for us in some unimaginable, dimensionless infinity. Can you imagine what it would be like to open a window upon that Probability Plane, look out into the infinities of the future, trace the consequences of future actions *before* we make them? We could mold the destiny of mankind! We could do what the gods must do, Bill! We'd be greater than gods! We could look into the Cosmic Mind—the very brain that planned us—and of our own will choose among those plans!"

"Wake up, Ash," said Bill softly.

"You think I'm dreaming? It's not a new idea, really. The old philosopher, Berkeley, had a glimpse of it when he taught his theories of subjective idealism, that we're aware of the cosmos only through a greater Awareness all around us, an infinite mind—

"Listen, Bill. If you vision these . . . these blueprints of possible futures, you've got to picture countless generations, finite as ourselves, existing simultaneously and completely in all the circumstances of their entire lives—yet all of them still unborn, still even uncertain of birth if the course of the present is diverted from their particular path. To themselves, they must seem as real as we to each other.

"Somewhere on the Plane of Probability, Bill, there may be two diverging lines of your descendants, unborn generations whose very existence hinges on your choice here at the crossroads. Projections of yourself, really, their lives and deaths trembling in the bal-

ance. Think well before you choose!"

Bill grinned. "Suppose you go back to the Slum and dope out a way for me to look into the Cosmic Plan," he suggested.

Ashley shook his head.

"Wish I could. Boy, would you eat that word 'Slum' then! Telepathy House wouldn't be the orphan child around the City any longer if I could really open a window onto the Probability Plane. But I wouldn't bother with you and your pint-sized problems. I'd look ahead into the future of the City. It's the heart of the world, now. Some day it may rule the world. And we're biased, you know. We can't help being. With all the sciences housed here under one city-wide roof, wielding powers that kings never dreamed of—No, it may go to our heads. We may overbalance into . . . into . . . well, I'd like to look ahead and prevent it. And if this be treason—" He shrugged and got up. "Sure you won't join me?"

"Go on—get out. I'm a busy man."

"So I see." Ashley twitched an eyebrow at the two crystal cubes. "Maybe it's good you can't look ahead. The responsibility of choosing might be heavier than you could bear. After all, we aren't gods and it must be dangerous to usurp a god's prerogative. Well, see you later."

BILL LEANED in the doorway watching the lounging figure down the hall toward the landing platform where crystal cars waited to go flashing along the great tubes which artery Science City. Beyond, at the platform's edge, the great central plaza of the City dropped away in a breath-taking void a hundred stories deep. He stood looking out blind-eyed, wondering if Sallie or Marta would walk this hall in years to come.

Life would be more truly companionship with Marta, perhaps. But did a family need two scientists? A man

wanted relaxation at home, and who could make life gayer than pretty Sallie with her genius for entertainment, her bubbling laughter? Yes, let it be Sallie. If there were indeed a Probability Plane where other possible futures hung suspended, halfway between waking and oblivion, let them wink out into nothingness.

He shut the door with a little slam to wake himself out of the dream, greeting the crystal-shrined girl on his desk with a smile. She was so real—the breeze blowing those curls was a breeze in motion. The lashes should flutter against the soft fullness of her lids—

Bill squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head to clear it. There was something wrong—the crystal was clouding—

A ringing in his ears grew louder in company with that curious blurring of vision. From infinitely far away, yet strangely in his own ears, a tiny voice came crying. A child's voice calling, "Daddy. . . daddy!" A girl's voice, coming nearer, "Father—" A woman's voice saying over and over in a smooth, sweet monotone, "Dr. Cory. . . Dr. William Cory—"

Upon the darkness behind his closed lids a streaked and shifting light moved blurrily. He thought he saw towers in the sun, forests, robed people walking leisurely—and it all seemed to rush away from his closed eyes so bewilderingly—he lifted his lids to stare at—

To stare at the cube where Sallie smiled. Only this was not Sallie. He gaped with the blankness of a man confronting impossibilities. It was not wholly Sallie now, but there was a look of Sallie upon the lovely, sun-touched features in the cube. All of her sweetness and softness, but with it—something more. Something familiar. What upon this living, lovely face, with its level brown eyes and courageous mouth, reminded Bill of—himself?

His hands began to shake a little. He

thrust them into his pockets and sat down without once taking his eyes from the living stare in the cube. There was amazement in that other stare, too, and a half-incredulous delight that brightened as he gazed.

Then the sweet curved lips moved—lips with the softness of Sallie's closing on the firm, strong line of Bill's. They said distinctly, in a sound that might have come from the cube itself or from somewhere deep within his own brain: "Dr. Cory . . . Dr. Cory, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," he heard himself saying hoarsely, like a man talking in a dream. "But—"

The face that was Sallie's and his blended blazed into joyful recognition, dimples denting the smooth cheeks with delicious mirth. "Oh, thank Heaven it is you! I've reached through at last. I've tried so hard, so long—"

"But who . . . what—" Bill choked a little on his own amazement and fell silent, marveling at the strange warm tenderness that was flooding up in him as he watched this familiar face he had never seen before. A tenderness more melting and protective and passionately selfless than he had ever imagined a man could feel. Dizzy with complete bewilderment, too confused to wonder if he dreamed, he tried again. "Who are you? What are you doing here? How did—"

"But I'm not there—not really." The sweet face smiled again, and Bill's heart swelled until his throat almost closed with a warmth of pride and tenderness he was too dizzy to analyze now. "I'm here—here at home in Eden, talking to you across the millennium! Look—"

SOMEHOW, until then he had not seen beyond her. Sallie's face had smiled out of a mist of tulle, beyond which the cube had been crystal-clear. But behind the face which was no longer wholly Sallie's, a green hillside filled the

cube. And, very strangely, it had no look of smallness. Though the cube's dimensions confined it, here was no miniature scene he gazed upon. He looked through the cube as through a window, out into a forest glade where upon a bank of green myrtle at the foot of a white garden wall a little group of tanned men and women reclined in a circle with closed eyes, lying almost like corpses on the dark, glossy leaves. But there was no relaxation in them. Tensity more of the spirit than the body knit the group into a whole, focused somehow upon the woman in the circle's center—this fair-haired woman who leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, chin in hand, staring brown-eyed and tensely into space—into Bill Cory's eyes. Dimly he realized that his perception had expanded as he stared. Awareness now of a whole countryside beyond her, just over the garden wall, made this cube that had housed Sallie's careless smile a window indeed, opening upon distance in space and time far outside his imagining.

He knew he was dreaming. He was sure of it, though the memory of what Ashley had been saying hovered uneasily in the back of his mind, too elusive now to be brought consciously into view. But in this impossible dream he clenched his hands hard in his pockets, taking a firm hold upon reality.

"Just who are you, and what do you want? And how did you—?"

She chose to answer the last question first, breaking into it as if she could read his thoughts as she knelt staring on the myrtle leaves.

"I speak to you along an unbroken cord between us—father. Thousands of times removed, but—father. A cord that runs back through the lives that have parted us, yet which unite us. With the help of these people around me, their full mental strength supplementing mine, we've established contact at last, after so many failures, so much groping in

mysteries which even I understand only partly, though my family for generations has been trained in the secrets of heredity and telepathy."

"But why—"

"Isn't the fact of achievement an end in itself? Success in establishing a two-way contact with the past, in talking to one's own ancestors—do I need more reason for attempting that than the pure joy of achieving it? You wonder why you were chosen. Is that it? Because you are the last man in a direct line of males to be born into my family before the blessed accident that saved the world from itself.

"Don't look so bewildered!" Laughter bubbled from the cube—or was it a sound in his own brain? "You aren't dreaming! Is it so incredible that along the unbroken cord of memories which links your mind to mine the current might run backward against the time flow?"

"But who are you? Your face—it's like—"

"My face is the face of the daughter that Sallie Cory bore you, thousands of years ago. That resemblance is a miracle and a mystery beyond all understanding—the mystery of heredity which is a stranger thing than the fact of our communication. We have wondered among ourselves if immortality itself—but no, I'll have mercy on you!"

This bewilderingly beloved face that had darkened with mystical brooding, flashed suddenly alive again with swift laughter, and hearing it, catching a lift of the brows that was his and a quirk of the soft lips that was Sallie's own, Bill made no effort to stem the tide of warm affection rising higher and higher in him. It was himself looking out of this cube through Sallie's brown eyes—himself exultant in achievement for the simple sake of achieving. She had called him father. Was this a father's love, selfless, unfathomable, for a lovely and beloved daughter?

"Don't wonder any more," laughed the voice in his ears. "Look—here's the past that lies between us. I want you to understand what parts your world from mine."

SOFTLY the myrtle glade and the lovely smiling face that blended Sallie and Bill melted into the depths of a cloud forming inside the three dimensions of the cube. For a moment—nothing. Then motion was lifting behind the mist, shouldering the veils aside. Three-dimensional space seemed to open up all around him—

He saw a wedding procession coming down a church aisle toward him, Sallie smiling mistily through a cloud of silver tulle. And he knew at the sight of her that though it was only chance which had chosen her instead of dark Marta Mayhew, he could come to love Sallie Carlisle Cory with an intensity almost frightening.

He saw time go by with a swiftness like thought itself, events telescoping together with no sense of confusion, moving like memories through his mind, clear, yet condensed into split seconds. He was watching his own future, seeing a life that revolved around Sallie as the center of existence. He saw her flashing in and out of his laboratory as he worked, and whenever she entered, the whole room seemed to light up; whenever she left, he could scarcely work for the longing to follow.

He saw their first quarrel. Sallie, spinning in a shimmer of bright glass-silk as soft as gossamer, dimpled at the self which in this waking dream was more vividly Bill Cory than the Bill who watched. "See, darling, aren't I heavenly?" And he heard himself answering, "Edible, darling! But isn't that stuff expensive?"

Sallie's laughter was light. "Only fifteen hundred credits. That's dirt-cheap for a Skiparelle model."

He gasped. "Why Sallie, that's more

than we're allowed for living expenses! I can't—"

"Oh, daddy'll pay for it if you're going to be stingy. I only wanted—"

"I'll buy my wife's clothes." Bill was grim. "But I can't afford Paris fashions, darling."

Sallie's pretty underlip pouted alarmingly. Tears sparkled in the soft brown eyes she lifted to his, and his heart melted almost painfully in one hopeless rush.

"Don't cry, sweetheart! You can keep it, just this once. But we'll have to make it up next month. Never again, Sallie, understand?"

Her nod was bright and oblivious as a child's.

But they didn't make it up. Sallie loved partying, and Bill loved Sallie, and nowadays there was much more hilarity than work going on behind the door in Biology House marked "Dr. William Vincent Cory." The television's panels were tuned to orchestras playing strong rhythm now, not to lectures and laboratory demonstrations as of old.

No man can do two jobs well. The work on sex determination began to strike snags in the path that had seemed almost clear to success, and Bill had so little time any more to smooth them out. Always Sallie was in the back of his mind, sweet, smiling, adorable.

Sallie wanted the baby to be born in her father's home. It was a lovely place, white-walled on low green hills above the Pacific. Sallie loved it. Even when little Sue was big enough to travel she hated to think of leaving. And the climate was so wonderful for the baby there—

Anyhow, by then the Council had begun to frown over Bill Cory's work. After all, perhaps he wasn't really cut out to be a scientist—Sallie's happiness was more important than any man's job, and Sallie could never be really happy in Science City.

The second baby was a girl, too.

There were a lot of girls being born nowadays. The telenews broadcasters joked about it. A good sign, they said. When a preponderance of boys was born, it had always meant war. Girls should bring peace and plenty for the new generation.

Peace and plenty—that was what mattered most to Bill and Sallie Cory now. That and their two exquisite daughters and their home on the green Pacific hills. Young Susan was growing up into a girlhood so enchanting that Bill suffused with pride and tenderness every time he thought of her. She had Sallie's beauty and bloneness, but there was a resolution in her that had been Bill's once, long ago. He liked to think of her, in daydreams, carrying on the work that he would never finish now.

Time ran on, years telescoping pleasantly into uneventful years. Presently the Cory girls were growing up . . . were married . . . were mothers. The grandchildren were girls, too. When Grandfather Cory joined his wife in the little graveyard on the sea-turned hill beyond the house, the Cory name died with him, though there was in his daughter's level eyes and in her daughter's look of serene resolution something more intrinsically Bill Cory than his name. The name might die, but something of the man who had borne it lived on in his descendants.

GIRLS CONTINUED to outnumber boys in the birth records as the generations passed. It was happening all over the world, for no reason that anyone could understand. It didn't matter much, really. Women in public offices were proving very efficient; certainly they governed more peacefully than men. The first woman president won her office on a platform that promised no war so long as a woman dwelt in the White House.

Of course, some things suffered under the matriarchy. Women as a sex are

not scientists, not inventors, not mechanics or engineers or architects. There were men enough to keep these essentially masculine arts alive—that is, as much of them as the new world needed. There were many changes. Science City, for instance. Important, of course, but not to the extent of draining the country dry to maintain it. Life went on very nicely without too much machinery.

The tendency was away from centralized living in these new days. Cities spread out instead of up. Skyscrapers were hopelessly old-fashioned. Now parklands and gardens stretched between low-roofed houses where the children played all day. And war was a barbarous memory from those nightmare years when men still ruled the world.

Old Dr. Phillips, head of the dwindling and outmoded Science City, provoked President Wiliston into a really inspiring fury when he criticized the modern tendency toward a non-mechanized rural civilization. It happened on the telenews, so that half the world heard it.

"But Madam President," he said, "don't you realize where we're heading? The world's going backward! It's no longer worth while for our best minds to attempt bettering living conditions. We're throwing genius away! Do you realize that your cabinet yesterday flatly rejected the brilliant work of one of our most promising young men?"

"I do!" Alice Wiliston's voice rang with sudden violence over half the world. "That 'brilliant work,' as you call it, was a device that might have led to war! Do you think we want that? Remember the promise that the first woman president made the world, Dr. Phillips! So long as we sit in the White House there will be no need for war!"

And Elizabeth of England nodded in London; Julianna VII smiled into her Amsterdam telenews screen. While women ruled, war was outlawed. Peace

and ease and plenty would dominate civilization, leisure for cultivation of the arts, humankind coming into its own at last, after so many ages of pain and blood and heartbreak.

Years telescoped into centuries of peace and plenty in a garden world. Science had turned its genius to the stabilization of the climate so that nowhere was shelter necessary from cold or storms; food was freely abundant for all. The Garden that Adam and Eve forfeited in the world's beginning had returned again to their remotest descendants, and the whole earth was Eden.

And in this world that no longer demanded the slightest physical effort, mankind was turning to the cultivation of the mind. In these white, low-roofed houses set among garden parks, men and women increasingly adventured into the realms beyond the flesh, exploring the mysteries of the mind.

Bill Cory, leaning forward in his chair, had lost all identity with himself. He was simply a consciousness watching time unfold before him. The gravestone that bore his name on the California hillside had long since sunk into the sod, but if there is immortality at all, Bill Cory watched himself move forward through the centuries, down the long, expanding line of his descendants. Now and again, startlingly, his own face looked briefly at him from some far-away child of his remote grandchildren. His face, and Sallie's.

He saw pretty Sue come and go like reflections in a mirror. Not always Sue unmistakably and completely—sometimes only her brown eyes lighted the face of a many-times-great-granddaughter; sometimes the lift of her smile or the tilt of her pretty nose alone was familiar to him in a strange face. But sometimes Sue herself, perfect to the last detail, moved through the remote future. And every time he saw those familiar features, his heart contracted

with an ache of tenderness for the daughter he yet might never have.

It was for these beloved Susans that he was becoming uneasy as he watched time go by in this lazy paradise world. People were slowing mentally and physically. What need any more for haste or trouble? Why worry because certain unimportant knowledge was being lost as time went on? The weather machines, the food machines were eternal; what else really mattered? Let the birth rate decline, let the dwindling race of the inventive and the ambitious fade like the anachronism it was. The body had taken mankind as far as it could; the mind was the vehicle for the future. In the vast reaches of infinity were fields aplenty for the adventurous spirit. Or one could simply drowse the days away—

CLOUDS thickened softly across the dreamy vistas of Eden. Bill Cory leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with both hands. The hands were shaking, and he stared at them a little stupidly, still half lost in the wonder of what he had seen, in the strange welter of emotions that still warred in him—the memory of Sallie and his strong love for her, the memory of Sue's sweetness, the memory of pride in them both. And in the queer feeling that it had been himself in those many daughters of his through the ages, striving so hard for world peace to the ultimate end that mankind might achieve—*ruin*.

For it was wrong—it was bad. The whole world. The race of man was too splendid, too capable of working miracles, to end on a myrtle bank dreaming about abstractions. He had just seen a decadent, indolent, civilization going down the last incline into oblivion as a result—yes, as a direct result—of his own action. He'd seen himself sinking into a fat, idle old age, without honor of achievement.

Suddenly and desperately he hoped

that Ashley had been right—that this was not the inevitable and changeless future. If he tore up the letter lying on his desk now, if he never married Sallie, would not his work be finished successfully some day, and the catastrophe of unbalanced births avoided? Or could a man change his ordained future?

Almost fearfully he reached for the letter lying beside that clouded cube in which the years had mirrored themselves. Would he be able to take the letter up and rip it across—like this? The sound of tearing paper reassured him. So far, at least, he was still a free agent.

And knowing that, suddenly he was sorry. Not to marry Sallie, with her bubbling laugh. Never to see young Sue growing into beauty and courage and sweetness. Old age without achievement, had he said to himself a moment ago? Sue herself was achievement enough for any man. Sue and those other Susans down the long line of his descendants, incarnating again and again all that was finest in him, eternal as life itself through millenniums.

He did not want to meet again the brown eyes of this latest Susan who had come to him in the depths of the cube. While he looked, his reason was lost in his love for her, and not even against reason could he believe the world which had produced her to be anything but perfect, simply because this beloved daughter moved and breathed in it.

But the letter was torn. He would never marry Sallie if he could help himself. The cost was too high, even for such a reward as Sue. And an almost tremulous awe broke over him in a sudden tide as he realized what he was doing. This was what Ashley had dreamed of—opening a window into the Plane of Probability and learning enough to force the Cosmic Mind out of its course. Changing the shape of his own future and that of all man-

kind. Greater than gods—but he was no god. And Ashley had warned him that it might be dangerous to usurp a god's prerogative. Suddenly he was afraid.

He looked away from that cube which held his future, and across from it on his desk the violet eyes of Marta Mayhew caught his, fixed in their changeless smile. She was a girl, he thought, he remembered from half a lifetime ago, so much had happened since he glanced last into her face. Dark and lovely she was, her eyes meeting his almost as if there were vision behind their deep, long stare. Almost as if—

LIGHT FLARED out in one white, blinding sheet that blotted out the cube and the violet-eyed face and the room around him. Involuntarily Bill clapped his hands to his eyes, seeing behind the darkness of his lids a dazzle of blurring colors. It had happened too quickly for wonder—he was not even thinking as he opened his eyes and looked into the cube where Marta's gaze had met him a moment before.

And then a great tide of awe and wonder came washing up into his consciousness, and he knew that Ashley had been right. There was an alternative future. There comes a point beyond which bewilderment and shock no longer affect the human brain, and Bill was outside wondering now, or groping for logical explanations. He only knew that he stood here staring into the cube from which Marta's eyes had smiled at him so short an instant ago—

They were still Marta's eyes, deep-colored in a boy face almost Bill's own, feature for feature, under a cap of blue steel. Somehow that other future had come to him, too. He was aware of a sudden urgent wonder *why* they had come so nearly together, though neither could be conscious of the other— But things were moving in the depths of the cube.

Behind the boy's face, three-dimensional perspective had started vividly back from the crystal surfaces, as if the cube were a wide window flung suddenly open upon a new world. In that world, a place of glass and shining chromium, faces crowded as if indeed at an open window, peering into his room. Steel-helmed faces with staring eyes. And foremost among them, leaning almost through the opened window into his own past, the steel-capped boy whose features were Bill's looked eagerly out, the sound of quickened breath through his lips a soft, clear sound in the room. They were Bill's lips, Bill's features—but Marta's gentle courage had somehow grown masculine in the lines of the boy's face, and her eyes met Bill's in his.

In the instant before those parted lips spoke, Bill knew him, and his throat closed on an unuttered cry of recognition—recognition of this face he had never seen before, yet could not mistake. The deep welling of love and pride in his heart would have told him the boy's identity, he thought, had he not known at sight who he was—would be—might one day be—

He heard his own voice saying doubtfully, "Son—?"

But if the boy heard he must not have understood. He was handicapped by no such emotion as stirred Bill. His clipped, metallic voice spoke as clearly as if indeed through an opened window: "Greetings from the United World, William Vincent Cory! Greetings from the Fifteenth Leader in the Fifth New Century, A. G."

Behind the disciplined, stern-featured young face others crowded, men with steel-hard features under steel caps. As the boy's voice paused, a dozen right arms slanted high, a dozen open palms turned forward in a salute that was old when Caesar took it in ancient Rome. A dozen voices rolled out in clipped ac-

cents, "Greetings, William Vincent Cory!"

Bill's bewildered stammer was incoherent, and the boy's face relaxed a little into a smile. He said: "We must explain, of course. For generations our scientists have been groping in the past, Dr. Cory. This is our first successful two-way contact, and for its demonstration to our Council, connection with you were selected as the most appropriate and fitting contact possible. Because your name is holy among us; we know all there is to know of your life and work, but we have wished to look upon your face and speak to you of our gratitude for molding mankind into the patterns of the United World.

"As a matter of record, I have been instructed to ask first at what point we have intersected the past. What date is it in your calendar?"

"Why, it's July 7, 2240," Bill heard his own voice stammer a little as he answered, and he was conscious of a broad and rather foolish grin overspreading his face. He couldn't help it. This was his boy—the child who wouldn't be born for years yet, who might, really, never be born. Yet he knew him, and he couldn't help smiling with pride, and warm, delighted amusement. So stern-faced, so conscious of his own responsibility! Marta's son and his—only of course it couldn't be, exactly. This scene he looked into must be far ahead in time—

"Twenty-two forty!" exclaimed the boy who was not his son. "Why, the Great Work isn't even finished yet then! We're earlier than we knew!"

"Who are you, son?" Bill couldn't keep the question back any longer.

"I'm John Williams Cory IV, sir," said the boy proudly. "Your direct descendant through the Williams line, and—First in the Candidates Class." He said it proudly, a look of almost worshipping awe lighting his resolute young face. "That means, of course, that I

shall be the Sixteenth Leader when the great Dunn retires, and the sixth Cory—the sixth, sir!—to be called to that highest of all human stations, the Leadership!” The violet eyes so incongruous in that disciplined young face blazed with almost fanatic exaltation.

Behind him, a heavy-faced man moved forward, lifting the Roman salute, smiling wintrily beneath his steel helmet.

“I am Dunn, sir,” he said in a voice as heavy as his features. “We’ve let Candidate Cory contact you because of the relationship, but it’s my turn now to extend greetings from the System you made possible. I want to show it to you, but first let me thank you for founding the greatest family the United World has ever known. No other name has appeared more than twice on the great rôle of Leaders, but we have had five Corys—and the finest of them all is yet to come!”

Bill saw a wave of clear red mount his boy’s proud, exalted face, and his own heart quickened with love and pride. For this was his son, by whatever name he went here. The memory of his lovely daughter had been drowned out momentarily in the deep uprushing of pride in this tall, blue-eyed boy with his disciplined face and his look of leashed eagerness. There was drive and strength and power of will in that young face now.

He scarcely heard Dunn’s heavy voice from the room beyond the cube, so eagerly was he scanning the face of this son he yet might never have, learning almost hungrily the already familiar features, at once hard and eager and exultant. That mouth was his, tight and straight, and the cheeks that creased with deep hollows when he smiled, but the violet eyes were his mother’s eyes, and the gentle inflexibility of Marta’s courage at once strengthened and softened the features that were Bill’s own. The best of them both was here, shining

now with something more than either had ever known—an almost fanatic devotion to some stern purpose as exalting as worship, as inflexible as duty—

“Your own future, sir,” Dunn was saying. “But our past, of course. Would you like to see it, Dr. Cory, so that you may understand just how directly we owe to you all that our world is today?”

“Yes—v-very much.” Bill grinned at his own stammer, suddenly light-hearted and incredulous. All this was a dream. He knew that, of course. Why, the very coincidences in it proved that. Or—were they coincidences? Desperately he tried to clarify the thought taking form in his mind, a terrifyingly vast thought, terrifyingly without explanation. And yet it must be a dream—If it were real, then there was more than chance here. It could be no accident that these two children of his, groping blindly in the dark for contact with him, had succeeded at so nearly the same moment. There would be reason behind it, reason too vast for comprehension. He parted his lips to speak, but Dunn was already speaking.

“Look then, William Vincent Cory! Watch your own greatness unfolding in the years that lie ahead.”

Hazily the scene in the cube blurred. The beloved, blue-eyed face of the boy he might never have, faded as a dream fades—a dream fading in a dream, he thought dimly—

THIS TIME it was Marta coming down the church aisle toward him, looking like a violet-eyed madonna coifed and veiled in white lace. He knew that he did not love her, now. His heart was still sore with the memory of Sallie. But love would come; with a woman like this it could not but come. There was tenderness and humor and passion on that raptly lifted face, and a strength that would call out the strength in him, not a weakness such as dimpled in Sal-

lie's face to evoke an underlying weakness in himself. For weakness was in him. He knew it. It would depend upon the woman who shared his life which quality overcame the other.

Life would be good with Marta. He saw it unfolding before him in a long succession of days, work and play and companionship that brought out the best in both. And the memory of the strange vision in which he thought he loved Sallie faded. This was the woman he loved. Her courage and humor, her violet eyes bright with pride of him—

Life went by—clear, condensed, swift. He saw his own work moving steadily toward success, Marta's eager encouragement tiding him over the low ebbs when difficulties threatened. She was so full of pride in her brilliant young husband that her enthusiasm almost ran away with her. It was she who insisted upon making the discovery public.

"I want to flaunt you before the world!" she urged. "Let's report to the Council now, darling. Aw, please, Bill!"

"We're not ready yet," he protested feebly. "Let's wait—"

"What for? Look." She shook a record sheet under his nose. "A hundred per cent success in the last dozen experiments! What more do you want? It's time to make an official report—announce what you're doing to the world! You've been all the way from fruit flies to monkeys. You'll have to make a report to the Council anyhow before you can take the next step. And remember, darling, when you come to that, I'm first in line as a candidate."

He seized her shoulders in a heavy grip, frowning down into the eagerness of her lifted face. "There'll be no guinea pigs in this family! When Junior Cory comes into the world he—or she—will do it without benefit of X rays. Understand?"

"But darling, I thought the whole idea

AST—10

was to give parents their choice of boys or girls in the family."

"The thing's not perfected yet to the point where I'd want to risk my own wife. And anyhow . . . anyhow, I've got a funny notion I'd rather just take what comes. Don't know why, exactly, but—"

"Bill, I do believe you're superstitious! Well, we'll fight that out later. But right now, you're going to make a full report of your success to the Council, and I'm going to be the proudest wife in the City. And that's final!"

So the report was made public. It created a tremendous furor; the world clamored for the magical stuff that would put the molding of the future into their hands. Bill Cory blushed and grinned for a delighted public in the telenews screens, promising the great gift soon, and Marta glowed with vicarious pride.

By the time he had made his first experiment with a human subject, the puppies which were the result of his first successful mammalian experiment were beginning to worry him a little. Miss Brown was the first to notice it. She came in from the kennels one day with a frown behind her steel-rimmed spectacles.

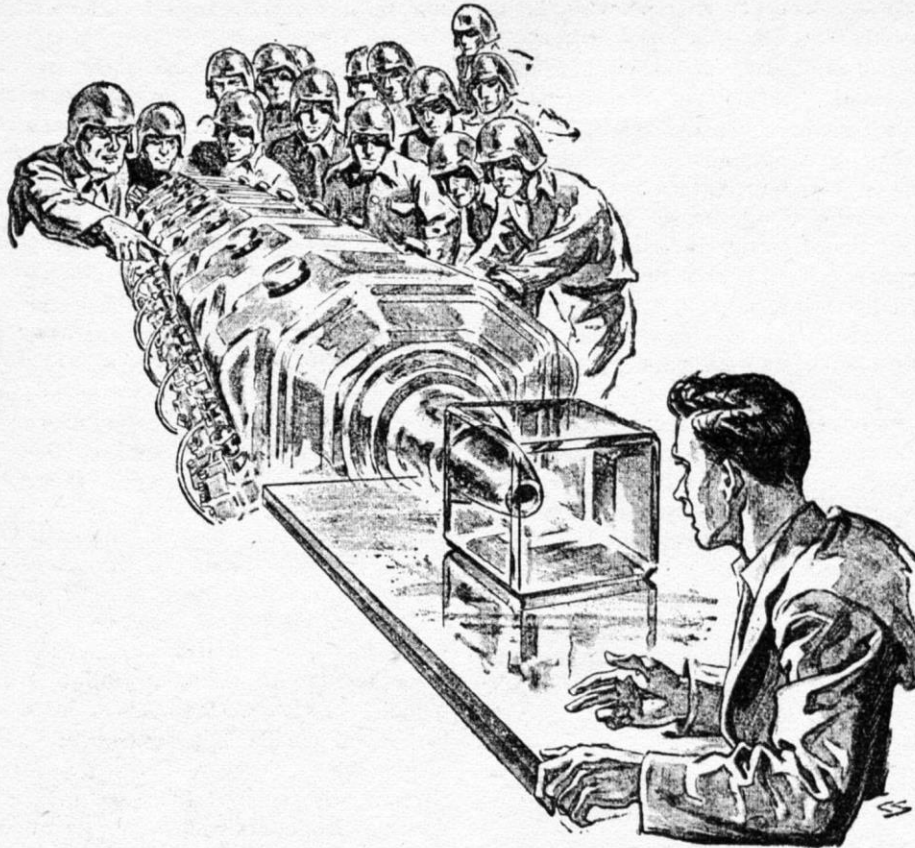
"Dr. Cory, has someone been training those dogs?"

"Training them?" Bill looked up, puzzled. "Of course not. Why?"

"Well, they've got the makings of the finest trained dogs on Earth. Either the whole lot of them is exceptionally intelligent or . . . or . . . something. They just fall over each other obeying every command you can make clear to them."

Bill straightened from his microscope. "Um-m-m . . . funny. Usually one or two dogs in a litter are more intelligent and obedient than the rest. But to have every one in six litters a canine genius is something pretty queer. What do you make of it?"

"I wouldn't call it genius, exactly. As



*Beyond one cube, as real as he himself, seemingly,
he saw that world of iron and blood and—triumph!*

I say, I'm not sure if it's unusual intelligence or . . . well, maybe a strong strain of obedience, or lack of initiative, or . . . it's too soon to say. But they're not normal dogs, Dr. Cory."

IT WAS too soon to say. Tests simply showed the pups to be extraordinarily amenable to training, but what quality in them made this so was difficult to determine. Bill was not sure just what it implied, but an uneasiness in him woke and would not be quieted.

The first "X-ray" babies began to be born. Without exception they were fine, strong, healthy infants, and without exception of the predetermined sex. The Council was delighted; the parents

were delighted; everyone was delighted except Bill. The memory of those oddly obedient pups haunted him—

Within three years the Cory System was available to the public. The experimental babies had made such an excellent showing that, in the end, Bill gave in to the insistent world, though something in the recesses of his mind urged delay. Yet he couldn't explain it. The babies were all healthy, normal, intelligent children. Unusually amenable to authority, yes, but that was an asset, not a liability.

Presently all over the world the first crops of Cory System babies began to appear, and gradually Bill's misgivings faded. By then Bill Junior had arrived

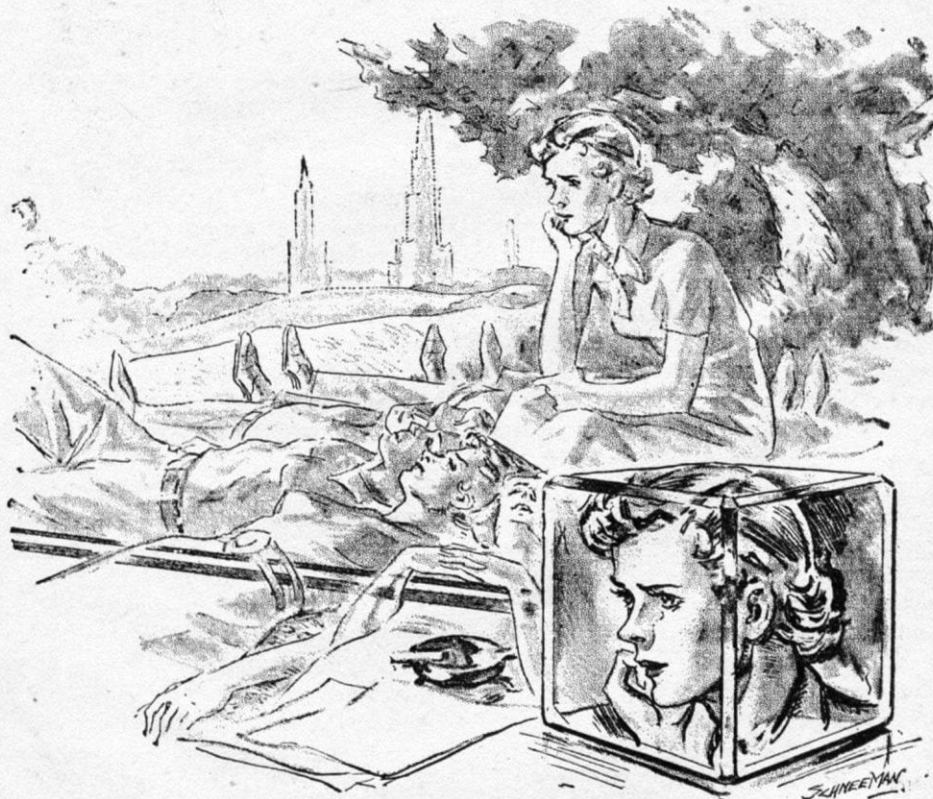
to take his mind off other people's children, but even now he was obscurely glad that little Bill was a boy on his own initiative, not because his parents had forced masculinity upon him. There was no rhyme or reason to Bill's queer obsession that his own child should not be a product of the X-ray system, but he had been firm about it.

And in later years he had reason to be glad. Bill Jr. grew up fast. He had Marta's violet eyes and his father's darkly blond hair, and a laughing resolution all his own. He was going to be an architect, and neither his mother's shocked protest at this treason to the family profession, nor Bill's not wholly concealed disappointment could swerve him. But he was a good lad. Between

school terms he and his father had entirely marvelous vacations together, and for Bill the world revolved about this beloved, talented, headstrong youngster whose presence upon Earth seemed reason enough for Bill's whole existence.

He was glad, even, that the boy *was* stubborn. For there could be no question now about a weakness in the children of the Cory System births. In all ways but one they were quite normal, it was true, but initiative seemed to have been left out of them. It was as if the act of predetermining their sex had robbed them of all ability to make any decisions of their own. Excellent followers they were—but no leaders sprang up among them.

And it was dangerous to fill with



Yet the world of the other cube. There was peace and thought and—a slow, comfortable decay!

unquestioning followers of the strongest man a world in which General George Hamilton controlled the United States. He was in his fourth term as president as the first great group of Cory System children came to maturity. Fiercely and sincerely he believed in the subjugation of the many to the State, and this new generation found in him an almost divinely inspired leader.

General George dreamed of a United World in which all races lived in blind obedience and willing sacrifice for the common good. And he was a man to make his dreams come true. Of course, he admitted, there would be opposition at first. There might be bloody wars, but in his magnificent dreams he believed sincerely that no price could be too high, that the end justified any means necessary to achieve it. And it seemed like the cooperation of Heaven itself to find almost an entire generation coming into adulthood ready to accept his leadership implicitly.

He understood why. It was no secret now what effect the Cory System had upon the children it produced. They would follow the strongest leader with blind faith. But upon this one generation of followers General George knew he could build a future that would live after him in the magnificent fulfillment of his most magnificent dreams. For a war lord needs a nation of soldiers, a great crop of boy babies to grow into armies, and surprisingly few saw the real motive behind General George's constant cry for boys, boys, boys—huge families of them. Fathers of many sons were feted and rewarded. Everybody knew there was the certainty of war behind this constant appeal for families of sons, but comparatively few realized that since the best way to be sure of boys was the use of the Cory System, the whole new generation would be blind followers of the strongest leader, just as their fathers were. Perhaps the Cory System might have died of its

own great weakness, its one flaw, had not General George so purposefully demanded sons of his followers.

GENERAL GEORGE died before the first great war was over. His last words, gasped in the bursting tumult of a bomb raid over Washington were, "Carry on—unite the world!" And his vice-president and second in command, Phillip Spaulding, was ready to snatch up the falling torch and light the world to union.

Half the United States lay in smoking ruins before the Great War ended. But General George had builded well upon that most enduring of all foundations—the faith of men. "Be fruitful and multiply," was a command his followers had obeyed implicitly, and Spaulding had mighty resources of human brawn and human obedience to draw upon.

The great general had died gladly for his dream, and he had not died in vain. Half the world was united under his starry banners within a decade after his death; the United World of his vision came into being less than fifty years later.

With peace and blind faith and prosperity, Science City indeed came into its own. And because a taste of power had made the Leaders hungry, the eyes of the City turned upward toward starry space. During the command of the Fourth Leader after the immortal General George, the first successful space voyage was achieved. The first living man stood knee-deep in the dead pumice dust of the moon and a mighty forward stride for mankind was recorded.

It was only a step. Mars came next, three generations later. After a brief and bloody war, its decadent inhabitants surrendered and the Seventh Leader began to have giddily intoxicating dreams of a United Solar System—

Time telescoped by. Generation melted into generation in changing tides

over a world population that seemed unaltering in its by now age-old uniforms of George Blue. And in a sense they were unaltering. Mankind was fixed in a mold—a good enough mold for the military life of the U. W.—the United World. The Cory System had long ago become compulsory, and men and women were produced exactly in the ratio that the Leaders decreed. But it was significant that the Leader class came into the world in the old haphazard fashion of the days before the legendary Dr. Cory's discovery.

The name of Cory was a proud one. It had long been a tradition in that famous family that the founder's great System should not be used among themselves. They were high among the Leader class. Several of the Leaders had borne the surname of Cory, though the office of course was not hereditary, but passed after rigid training and strict examination to the most eligible of the Candidates Class when an old Leader passed his prime.

And among the mighty Corys, family resemblance was strong. Generations saw the inevitable dilution of the original strain, but stubbornly through the years the Cory features came and went. Sometimes only the darkly blond hair of the first great Bill, sometimes the violet eyes which his pretty Marta had bequeathed her son, sometimes the very face of young Bill Jr. himself, that had roused an ache of pride and love in his father's heart whenever he saw those beloved features.

The Cory eyes looked now upon two worlds, triumphantly regimented to the last tiny detail. Mankind was proving his supremacy over himself—over his weaknesses and his sentimental, selfish desires for personal happiness as opposed to the great common good. Few succumbed to such shameful yearnings, but when they did, every man was a spy against his neighbor, as stern as the

Leader himself in crushing these threats to the U. W.'s strength. It should be the individual's holiest and most mystically passionate dream to sacrifice his happiness for the Leader and the U. W., and the Leader and the United World lived for the sole purpose of seeing that he did.

Marvelous was the progress of mankind. The elements had long since been conquered; the atom had yielded up its incalculable power in the harness of the machines, space itself was a highway for the vehicles of the U. W.

Under the blue-black skies of Mars, mankind's checkerboard cities patterned the hot red soil; under the soft gray clouds of Venus, those roofed and checkered cities spread from a common center through jungles steaming in more than tropic heat. Many-mooned Jupiter was drawing the covetous eyes of the Leaders in their sky-high cities of glass and steel.

And moving through these patterned cities upon three worlds, the followers of the Leader went about their ways, resolute, unfaltering, their faces set in one pattern of determination.

It was not a happy pattern. There was little laughter here; the only emotion upon the serious faces, aside from the shadow of that same exaltation that blazed in the Leader's eyes, was a subtle furtiveness, a sidelong quality that by intuition seemed to distrust its neighbors. Bill recognized it. Every man's duty was to sacrifice for the Cause not only his personal desires and happiness, but his personal honor as well; he must keep relentlessly alert for traitorous weakness in his friends, his associates, his own family.

Mistily the panorama of the centuries began to melt into itself, to fade, while behind it a blue-eyed face, helmed in blue steel, took form to smile straight into Bill's eyes. A tense, expectant smile, supremely confident.

BILL SAT BACK and breathed deeply, avoiding for a moment the proudly smiling face of his son. "I'm—there!" he was thinking. "That was me being born again and again, working with all my heart to crush out human happiness— But there was Sue, too, generations of her—yes, and of me—working just as sincerely toward an opposite goal, a world without war. Either way they've got me. If I don't finish my work, the world unbalances toward matriarchy; if I do, mankind turns into a machine. It's bad. Either way it's bad—"

"The doctor is almost overwhelmed at the realization of his own greatness," Dunn's voice murmured from the window into the future. Bill recognized it for a sort of apology, and sat up with an effort to meet the pride-bright eyes of the boy who one day might be his son. There was nothing but happy expectancy of praise on the boy's face, but Dunn must have read a little doubt in Bill's, for he said heavily, as if to overwhelm that doubt:

"We build toward one common end, all of us—we have no thought for any smaller purpose than the conquest of the Solar System for the mighty race of man! And this great purpose is yours no less than ours, Dr. Cory."

"Manpower is what counts, you know, sir." Young Billy's voice took up the tale as Dunn's died. "We've got tremendous reserves, and we're piling up still more. Lots of room yet on Mars to fill up, and Venus is almost untouched yet. And after that, we'll breed men and women adapted to Jupiter's gravity, perhaps . . . oh, there'll be no end to our power, sir! We'll go on and on— Who knows? There may come a day when we're a United Universe!"

For an instant, hearing the young voice shake with eagerness, Bill doubted his own doubtfulness. The mighty race of man! And he was part of it, living in this far-off future no less than he

lived now in the flesh, in the burning ardor of this iron-faced boy. For a moment he forgot to be amazed and incredulous that he stood in the Twenty-third Century and looked as if through a window into the Thirtieth, talking with the unborn descendant of his yet unconceived son. For this moment it was all accomplished reality, a very magnificent and blood-stirring present achieved directly through his own efforts.

"Father . . . father!" The voice was sweet and high in the core of his brain. And memory came back in an overwhelming rush that for an instant drowned out everything but a father's awareness of special love for a favorite daughter.

"Yes, Susan . . . yes, dear." He murmured it aloud, swinging around toward the cube that housed his other future. Sue leaned forward upon her knees among the myrtle leaves, her brown eyes wide and a little frightened upon his. There was a crease between her winged brows that dented Bill's own forehead as he faced her. For a moment it was almost as if each of them looked into a mirror which reflected the features of the other, identical in nearly every detail. Then Sallie's smile dimpled the cheeks of her far-descended daughter, and Sue laughed a small, uneasy laugh.

"What is it, father? Is something wrong?"

He opened his lips to speak—but what could he say? What could he possibly say to her, who did not even dream that her own time was anything but inevitable? How could he explain to a living, warmly breathing woman that she did not exist, might never exist?

He stared at her unhappily, groping for words he could not find. But before he spoke—

"Dr. Cory, sir— Is anything wrong?" He turned back to Billy with a harried crease between his brows and then stared wildly from one face to the other. How

could they help hearing one another? But obviously Billy, from his window into the present, saw simply the cube that held Sallie's immortal smile, while Sue, from hers, looked upon Marta's changeless face. It seemed to Bill that the boy and the girl had spoken in voices almost identical, using words nearly the same, though neither was aware of the other. How could they be? They could not even exist simultaneously in the same world. He might have one of these beloved children or the other; not both. Equally beloved children, between whom he must choose—and how could he choose?

"Father—" said Sue on a rising inflection of alarm. "There *is* something wrong. I . . . feel it in your mind—Oh, what is it, father?"

Bill sat speechless, staring from one face to the other of these mutually exclusive children. Here they stood, with their worlds behind them, looking anxiously at him with the same little crease between the brows of each. And he could not even speak to either without convincing the other he was a madman talking to empty air. He wanted insanely to laugh. It was a deadlock beyond all solution. Yet he must answer them—he must make his choice—

AS HE SAT there groping in vain for words, a curious awareness began to take shape in his mind. How strange it was that these two should have been the ones to reach him, out of all the generations behind each that had been searching the past. And why had they established contact at so nearly the same time, when they had all his life span to grope through, hunting him for such different reasons, in such different ways? There was more than accident here, if all this were not a dream—

Billy and Sue—so similar despite the wide divergence of their words, a wider divergence than the mind can well grasp, for how can one measure the distance

between mutually incompatible things? Billy who was all of Bill Cory that was strong and resolute and proud; Sue, who incarnated his gentler qualities, the tenderness, the deep desire for peace. They were such poles apart—why, *they were the poles!* The positive and negative qualities that, together, made up all that was best in Bill Cory. Even their worlds were like two halves of a whole; one all that was strong and ruthless, the other the epitome of gentle, abstract idealism. And both were bad, as all extremes must be.

And if he could understand the purpose behind the fact that these two poles of human destiny had reached back in their own pasts to find him at the same moment—if he could understand why the two halves of his soul, split into positive and negative entities, stood here clothed almost in his own flesh to torture him with indecision, perhaps—

He could not choose between them, for there was no choice, but there was a deeper question here than the simple question of conduct. He groped for it blindly, wondering if the answer to everything might not lie in the answer to that question. For there was purpose here vaster than anything man has words for—something loomed behind it to shadowy heights that made his mind reel a little as he tried to understand.

He said inadequately to both his staring children: "But why . . . how did you . . . at this very moment out of all time—"

To Billy it was mere gibberish, but Sue must have understood the question in his mind, for after a moment, in a puzzled murmur, she said:

"I—don't know, exactly. There *is* something here beyond the simple fact of success. I . . . I feel it—I can sense something behind my own actions that . . . that frightens me. Something guiding and controlling my own mind— Oh, father, father, I'm afraid!"

Every protective instinct in him



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leaped ahead of reason in Bill's instant, "Don't be frightened, honey! I won't let anything happen to you!"

"Dr. Cory!" Young Billy's voice cracked a little in horror at what must have sounded to him like raving madness. Behind him, staring faces went tense with bewilderment. Above their rising murmurs Sue wailed, "Father!" in a frightened echo to Billy's, "Dr. Cory, are you ill, sir?"

"Oh, wait a minute, both of you!" said Bill wildly. And then in a stammer, to stop Billy's almost hysterical questions, "Your . . . your sister— Oh, Sue, honey, I hear you! I'll take care of you! Wait a minute!"

In the depths of the cube the boy's face seemed to freeze, the eyes that were Marta's going blank beneath the steel cap, Bill's very mouth moving stiffly with the stiffness of his lips.

"But you never had a daughter—"

"No, but I might have, if—I mean, if I'd married Sallie of course you'd never even— Oh, God!" Bill gave it up and pressed both hands over his eyes to shut out the sight of the boy's amazed incredulity, knowing he'd said too much, yet too numbed and confused now for diplomacy. The only clear idea in his head was that he must somehow be fair to both of them, the boy and the girl. Each must understand why he—

"Is the doctor ill, Candidate Cory?"

Dunn's voice was heavy from the cube.

Bill heard the boy's voice stammering: "No—that is, I don't—" And then, faltering, more softly: "Leader, was the great doctor ever—mad?"

"Good God, boy!"

"But—speak to him, Leader!"

Bill looked up haggardly as Dunn's voice rolled out with the sternness of a general addressing armies. "Pull yourself together, sir! You never had a daughter! Don't you remember?"

Bill laughed wildly. "Remember? I've never even had a son yet! I'm not married—not even engaged! How can I remember what hasn't happened?"

"But you *will* marry Marta Mayhew!"

You did marry her! You founded the great line of Corys and gave the world your—"

"Father . . . father! What's wrong?" Sue's sweet wail was in his ears. He glanced toward her window momentarily, seeing the terror in the soft brown eyes that stared at him, but he could only murmur: "Hush, darling—wait, please!" before he faced the Leader and said with a strong effort at calmness, "None of all that has happened—yet."

"But it will—it must—it *did!*"

"Even if I never married Marta, never had a son?"

Dunn's dark face convulsed with a grimace of exasperated anger.

"But good Lord, man, look here!" He seized Billy's blue-uniformed shoulders with both hands, thrusting him forward. "You did have a son! This is his descendant, the living likeness of young Cory Junior! This world . . . I myself . . . all of us . . . we're the result of that marriage of yours! And you never had a daughter! Are you trying to tell us we don't exist? Is this a . . . a dream I'm showing you?" And he shook the boy's broad young shoulders between his hands. "You're looking at us, hearing us, talking to us! Can't you see that you must have married Marta Mayhew?"

"Father, I want you! Come back!" Sue's wail was insistent.

Bill groaned. "Wait a minute, Dunn." And then, turning, "Yes, honey, what is it?"

ON HER KNEES among the myrtle leaves Sue leaned forward among the sun-flecked shadows of her cool green glade, crying: "Father, you won't . . . you can't believe them? I heard . . . through your ears I heard them, and I can understand a little through your mind linked with mine. I can understand what you're thinking . . . but it can't be true! You're telling yourself

that we're still on the Probability Plane . . . but that's just a theory! That's nothing but a speculation about the future! How could I be anything but real? Why, it's silly! Look at me! Listen to me! Here I am! Oh, don't let me go on thinking that maybe . . . maybe you're right, after all. But it *was* Sallie Carlisle you married, wasn't it, father? Please say it was!"

Bill gulped. "Wait, honey. Let me explain to them first." He knew he shouldn't have started the whole incredible argument. You can't convince a living human that he doesn't exist. They'd only think him mad. Well—Sue might understand. Her training in metaphysics and telepathy might make it possible. But Billy—

He turned with a deep breath and a mental squaring of shoulders, determined to try, anyhow. For he must be fair. He began: "Dunn, did you ever hear of the Plane of Probability?"

At the man's incredulous stare he knew a dizzy moment of wonder whether he, too, lived in an illusion as vivid as theirs, and in that instant the foundations of time itself rocked beneath his feet. But he had no time now for speculation. Young Billy must understand, no matter how mad Dunn believed him, and Sue must know why he did what he must do—though he didn't understand himself, yet, what that would be. His head was ringing with bewilderment.

"The . . . the Plane of Probability?" In Dunn's eyes upon his he saw a momentary conviction flare that, reality or not, and history be damned, this man was mad. And then, doubtfully, the Leader went on, "Hm-m-m . . . yes, somewhere I *have* heard— Oh, I remember. Some clap-trap jargon the old Telepathy House fakers used to use before we cleared them out of Science City. But what's that nonsense got to—"

"It's not nonsense." Bill closed his

eyes in a sudden, almost intolerable longing for peace, for time to think what he must do. But no, the thing must be settled now, without time for thinking. And perhaps that was the best way, after all. A man's brain would crack if he paused to think out this madness. Only he must say something to young Billy— And what could he say? How could he face either of these beloved children and, to their uncomprehending, pleading faces, refuse them life? If he could only break the connection that riveted them all into a sort of triple time balance— But he couldn't. He must make it clear to Billy—

"It's not nonsense," he heard his own voice repeating wildly. "The future—you and your world—is a probability only. I'm a free agent. If I never marry Marta, never perfect the sex-determination idea, the probable future shifts to . . . to another pattern. *And that as bad as yours, or worse!*" he finished to himself.

"Is he mad?" Billy's voice was a whisper in the screen.

The Leader said as if to himself, in an awed and stumbling voice, "I don't . . . I can't . . . the thing's preposterous! And yet he *is* unmarried, the Great Work's still unfinished. Suppose he never— But we're real! We're flesh and blood, aren't we? He stamped a booted foot on the floor as if to test the foundations of his world. "We're descended in an unbroken line from this . . . this madman. Lord in heaven, are we all mad?"

"Father! Come back!" Sue's voice shrilled in Bill's ears. He turned desperately, glad *is* to escape the haunted stares from that other window even though he must face hers. She had risen to her feet among the myrtle leaves. The glade was cool and still about her in this lazy, sunlit world of her own future. She was crying desperately, "Don't listen, father! I can feel the confusion in your mind. I know

what they're saying! But they aren't real, father—they can't be! You never had a son, don't you remember? All this you're saying is just . . . just talk, isn't it? That silly stuff about the Probability Plane—it's nothing but speculation! Oh, say it is, father! We've got such a lovely world, we love living so . . . I want to live, father! I *am* real! We've fought so hard, for so many centuries, for peace and happiness and our beautiful garden world. Don't let it snuff out into nothingness! But"—she laughed uncertainly—"how could you, when it's all around us, and has been for thousands of years? I . . . oh, father!" Her voice broke on a little quivering gulp that made Bill's heart quiver with it, and he ached intolerably with the rising of her tears. She was his to protect and cherish, forever. How could he—

"Dr. Cory—do you hear me? Oh, please listen!" Young Billy's familiar voice reached out to him from that other future. He glanced toward him once, and then put his hands to his ears and whirled from them both, the two voices mingling in an insane chaos of pleading.

SUE ON HER myrtle bank in a future immeasurably far ahead, child of a decadent world slipping easily down the slope of oblivion.

Billy's world might be as glorious as he believed, but the price was too high to pay for it. Bill remembered the set, unsmiling faces he had seen in the streets of that world. These were men his own work had robbed of the initiative that was their birthright. Happiness was their birthright, too, and the power to make the decisions that determined their own futures.

No, not even for such achievements as theirs must mankind be robbed of the inalienable right to choose for himself. If it lay in Bill Cory's power to outlaw a system which destroyed men's freedom and honor and joy, even for

such an end as mankind's immortal progress, he had no choice to make. The price was too high. Confusedly he remembered something out of the dim past: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul. . . .?"

But—the alternative. Bill groaned. Happiness, peace, freedom, honor—yes, Sue's world had all that Billy's lacked. And to what end? Indolence and decadence and extinction for the great race that Billy's civilization would spread gloriously among the stars.

"But I'm thinking of choice," groaned Bill to himself. "And I haven't got any choice! If I marry Sallie and don't finish my work—one future follows. If I marry Marta and do finish it, the other comes. And both are bad—but what can I do? Man or mankind; which has the stronger claim? Happiness and extinction—or unhappiness and splendid immortality; which is better?"

"Cory—Dr. Cory!" It was Dunn's voice, heavy enough to break through the daze of bewilderment that shrouded Bill's brain. He turned. The Leader's iron-hard face under the steel helmet was settling into lines of fixed resolution. Bill saw that he had reached some decision, and knew a sudden, dazed admiration for the man. After all, he had not been chosen Leader for nothing.

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"It would mean wiping yourself out, you know," Bill reminded him as steadily as he could, searching the angry eyes of this man who must never have faced resolute opposition before, and wondering if the man had yet accepted a truth that must seem insanely impossible to him. He wanted overwhelmingly to laugh, and yet somewhere inside him a chilly conviction was growing that it might be possible for the children of his unborn son; in a future that would never exist, to blast him out of being. He said: "You and your whole world would vanish if I died."


"But not unavenged!" The Leader said it savagely, and then hesitated. "But what am I saying? You've driven me almost as mad as you! Look, man, try to be sensible! Can you imagine yourself dissolving into nothingness that never existed? Neither can I!"

"But if you could kill me, then how could your world ever have been born?" "To hell with all that!" exploded

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Dunn. "I'm no metaphysician! I'm a fighting man! I'll take the chance!"

"Please, Dr. Cory—" Billy pressed forward against the very surface of the cube, as if he could thrust himself back into his own past and lay urgent hands upon this man so like him, staring white-faced and stubborn into the future. Perhaps it was more than the desire for peace that spoke in his shaken voice. If Bill Cory, looking into that young face so like his own, had felt affection and recognition for it, then must not the boy know a feeling akin to it as he saw himself in Cory's features? Perhaps it was that subtle, strange identification between the two that made the boy's voice tremble a little as if with the first weakening of belief. When he spoke he seemed to be acknowledging the possibility of doubt, almost without realizing it. He said in that shaken, ardent voice:

"Please, try to understand! It's not death we're afraid of. All of us would die now, willingly, if our deaths could further the common good. What we can't endure to face is the death of our civilization, this marvelous thing that makes mankind immortal. Think of that, sir! This is the only right thing possible for you to do! Would we feel so strongly if we weren't *sure*? Can you condemn your own race to eternity on one small planet, when you could give them the universe to expand in and every good thing science can offer?"

"Father . . . father!" It was Sue again, frantic and far away.

BUT BEFORE Bill could turn to her, Dunn's voice broke in heavily over both the others. "Wait—I've made up my mind!" Billy fell back a little, turning to his Leader with a blaze of sudden hope. Bill stared. "As I see it," went on Dunn, "the whole preposterous question hinges on the marriage you make. Naturally I can't concede even to myself that you could possibly marry anyone

but the woman you *did* marry—but if you honestly feel that there's any question in your own mind about it, I'll settle it for you."

He turned to nod toward a corner of the room in which he stood that was outside Bill's range, and in a moment the blue-uniformed, staring crowd about him parted and a low, rakish barrel of blue-gleaming steel glided noiselessly forward toward that surface of the cube which was a window into the past-future that parted Bill and themselves. Bill had never seen anything like it before, but he recognized its lethal quality. It crouched streamlined down upon its base as if for a lunge, and its mouth facing him was a dark doorway for death itself. Dunn bent behind it and laid his hand upon a half-visible lever in its base.

"Now," he said heavily. "William Cory, there seems to be a question in your mind as to whether we could reach you with our weapons. Let me assure you that the force-beam which connects us can carry more than sight and sound into your world! I hope I shan't have to demonstrate that. I hope you'll be sensible enough to turn to that televisior screen in the wall behind you and call Marta Mayhew."

"M—Marta?" Bill heard the quiver in his voice. "Why—"

"You will call her, and in our sight and hearing you are going to ask her to marry you. That much choice is yours, marriage or death. Do you hear me?"

Bill wanted insanelly to laugh. Shotgun wedding from a mythical future—"You can't threaten me with that pop-gun forever," he said with a quaver of mirth he could not control. "How do you know I'll marry her once you're away?"

"You'll keep your word," said Dunn serenely. "Don't forget, Cory, we know you much better than you know yourself. We know your future far more completely than you saw it. We know

how your character will develop with age. Yes, you're an honorable man. Once you've asked her to marry you, and heard her say yes—and she will—you won't try to back out. No, the promise given and received between you constitutes a marriage as surely as if we'd seen the ceremony performed. You see, we trust your honor, William Cory."

"But—" Bill got no further than that, for explosively in his brain a sweet, high voice was sobbing:

"Father, father, what are you doing? What's happened? Why don't you speak to me?"

In the tension Bill had nearly forgotten Sue, but the sound of that familiar voice tore at him with sudden, almost intolerable poignancy. Sue—the promise to protect her had risen to his lips involuntarily at the very mention of danger. It was answer to an urgency rooted race-deep, the instinct to protect the helpless and the loved. For a moment he forgot the gun trained on him from the other window; he forgot Billy and the world behind him. He was conscious only of his daughter crying in terror for help—for help from him and for protection against him at once, in a dizzy confusion that made his head swim.

"Sue—" he began uncertainly.

"Cory, we're waiting!" Dunn's voice had an ominous undertone.

BUT THERE WAS a solution. He never knew just when he first became aware of it. A long while ago, perhaps, subconsciously, the promise of it had begun to take shape in his mind. He did not know when he first realized that—but he thought he knew whence it came. There was a sureness and a vastness about it that did not originate in himself. It was the Cosmic Mind indeed in which his own small soul was floundering, and out of that unthinkable

limitless Plan, along with the problem came at last the solution. (*There must be balance . . . the force that swings the worlds in their orbits can permit of no question without an answer—*)

There was no confusion here; there had never been. This was not chance. Purpose was behind it, and sudden confidence came flooding into him from outside. He turned with resolution so calm upon his face that Billy sighed and smiled, and Dunn's tense face relaxed.

"Thank God, sir," breathed Billy, "I knew you'd come to your senses. Believe me, sir, you won't be sorry."

"Wait," said Bill to them both, and laid his hand on the button beneath his desk that rang a bell in his laboratory. "Wait and see."

In three worlds and times, three people very nearly identical in more than the flesh alone—perhaps three facets of the same personality, who can say?—stood silent and tense and waiting. It seemed like a very long time before the door opened and Miss Brown came into the room, hesitating on the threshold with her calm, pleasant face questioning.

"You want me, Dr. Cory?"

Bill did not answer for a moment. He was pouring his whole soul into this last long stare that said good-by to the young son he would never know. For understanding from some vast and nameless source was flooding his mind now, and he knew what was coming and why it would be so. He looked across the desk and gazed his last upon Sue's familiar face so like his own, the fruit of a love he would never share with pretty Sallie. And then, drawing a deep breath, he gulped and said distinctly:

"Miss Brown, will you marry me?"

Dunn had given him the key—a promise given and received between this woman and himself would be irrevocable, would swing the path of the future into

a channel that led to no world that either Billy or Sue could know.

Bill got his first glimmer of hope for that future from the way the quiet woman in the doorway accepted his question. She did not stare or giggle or stammer. After one long, deep look into his eyes—he saw for the first time that hers were gray and cool behind the lenses—she answered calmly.

"Thank you, Dr. Cory. I shall be very happy to marry you."

AND THEN—it came. In the very core of his brain, heartbreak and despair exploded in a long, wailing scream of faith betrayed as pretty Sue, his beloved, his darling, winked out into the oblivion from which she would never now emerge. The lazy green Eden was gone forever; the sweet fair girl on her knees among the myrtle leaves had never been—would never be.

Upon that other window surface, in one last flash of unbearable clearness, young Billy's incredulous features stared at him. Behind that beloved, betrayed face he saw the face of the Leader twisting with fury. In the last flashing instant while the vanishing, never-to-exist future still lingered in the cube, Bill saw an explosion of white-hot violence glare blindingly from the gun mouth, a heat and violence that seared the very brain. Would it have reached him—could it have harmed him? He never knew, for it lasted scarcely a heartbeat before eternity closed over the vanishing world in

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Where that world had stretched so vividly a moment ago, now Marta's violet gaze looked out into the room through crystal. Across the desk Sallie's lovely, careless smile glowed changelessly. They had been gateways to the future—but the gates were closed. There would never be such futures now; there never had been. In the Cosmic Mind, the great Plan of Things, two half-formed ideas went out like blown candle flames.

And Bill turned to the gray-eyed woman in the doorway with a long, deep, shaken sigh. In his own mind as he faced her, thoughts too vast for formulation moved cloudily.

"I know now something no man was ever sure of before—our oneness with the Plan. There are many, many futures. I couldn't face the knowledge of another, but I think—yes, I believe, ours will be the best. She won't let me neglect the work we're doing, but neither will she force me to give it to the world unperfected. Maybe, between us, we can work out that kink that robs the embryo of determination, and then—who knows?"

"Who knows why all this had to happen? There was Purpose behind it—all of it—but I'll never understand just why. I only know that the futures are infinite—and that I haven't lost Billy or Sue. I couldn't have done what I did without being sure of that. I couldn't lose them, because they're me—the best of me, going on forever. Perhaps I'll never die, really—not the real me—until these incarnations of the best that's in me, whatever form and face and name they wear, work out mankind's ultimate destiny in some future I'll never see. There was reason behind all this. Maybe, after all, I'll understand—some day."

He said nothing aloud, but he held out his hand to the woman in the door and smiled down confidently into her cool, gray eyes.