

# Emerson

John Grantland looked across at his old friend's son intently and unhappily. Finally he sighed heavily and leaned back in his swivel chair. He lighted his pipe thoughtfully. Two slow puffs of smoke rose before he spoke.

"I'm a patent attorney, Dwight Edwards, and I'm at your disposal, as such, to do your bidding and help you to secure that patent you want. As you know, I'm also a civil-and-commercial-law expert of some standing in connection with that work. I can get that patent; I know it is patentable and unpatented as yet. But before I start proceedings, I have to tell you something, Dwight.

"You have enough to live on the rest of your life, a brilliant mind to increase it, a scientific ability to keep you occupied and useful to the world. This invention is not useful to the world. If you were a poor man, I would not hesitate in making the patent applications, because some wiser men, with more money, would buy it up and destroy the thing. But you aren't poor, and you would hold out till the thing was developed and going."

"But—but Mr. Grantland, it's a thing the world needs! We have a fast-vanishing gasoline reserve—a coal supply being drawn on endlessly and recklessly. We need a new source of power, something to make the immense water-power supplies in inaccessible regions available. The system would do that, and conserve those vanishing resources, run automobiles, planes, even small factories and homes—"

"It would destroy our greatest resource, the financial structure of the nation. A resource is not a resource unless it is available, and only the system makes it available. The system is more valuable, more important to human happiness than any other resource, because it makes all others available.

"I know your natural desire, to develop and spread that system for canning and distributing electricity. It's a great invention. But—"

"But," the younger man said somewhat bitterly, "you feel that any really great, any important invention should be destroyed. There must be, you are saying, no real improvement, only little gadgets. There must be no Faradays who discover principles, only Sam Browns who invent new can openers and better mousetraps."

Grantland laid down his pipe and leaned back in his chair silently.

Bitterly, the younger man was gathering his papers.

"Dwight," said Grantland at length, "I think I'll do best if I tell you of one invention that I have in my files here. I have shown these papers to just one other man than the men who made them. Curiously, he was your father. He—"

"My father? But he was not an inventor—he was a psychiatrist, utterly uninterested—"

"He was vitally interested in this. He saw the apparatus they made, and he helped me dismantle it, secretly, and destroy the tube Hugh Kerry and Robert Darnell made. That was twenty-two years ago, and it was something of a miracle I had, at the age of thirty-six, the sense to do that.

Tin going to tell you mighty vague things and mighty vague principles, because you're too keen. It isn't very safe to tell you this, but I believe you will keep a promise. You must swear two things before I tell you the story: First, that you will not put that surprisingly acute mind of yours to work on what I say, because I cannot tell what clues I may give. I understand too little to know how much I understood; second, of course, that you will not spread this unpleasant story."

The young man put down his papers, looked curiously at John Grantland. "I agree to that, Mr. Grantland."

Grantland stuffed his pipe thoughtfully in silence. "Hugh Kerry and Bob Darnell were one of those fortuitous miracles, where the right combination came together. Hugh Kerry was the greatest mathematician the world has seen, at thirty-two."

"I have heard of him; I've used his analytical methods. He died at thirty-three, didn't he?"

"I know," said Grantland. "The point is—so did Bob Darnell. Bob Darnell was something like Edison, on a higher level. Edison could translate theory into metal and glass and matter. Darnell could do that, but he didn't work with steel and copper and glass. He worked with atoms and electrons and radiation as familiarly as Edi-

son worked with metal. And Darnell didn't work from theory; he worked from mathematics that no theory could be defined for.

"That was the pair the shifting probabilities of space time brought together—and separated. You've never heard of Darnell, because he did only one thing, and that one thing is on paper there, in that steel vault. In the first place, it is in a code that is burned into my memory, and not on paper. In the second place, it is safe because every equation in it is wrong, because we couldn't code equations easily, and the book

that gave them right is out of print, forgotten.

"They came into my office first because they lived nearby, and I'd gone to the same school. I hadn't much of a reputation then, of course. That was when you were just about getting into the sixth grade, Dwight—a good number of years ago.

"They had the tube then. They called it the PTW tube—Probability Time Wave. They'd been trying to make a television set that would see through walls—a device that would send out its own signals and receive them back as images.

"They went wrong, something about trying for the fourth-dimensional approach and slipping into a higher dimension. They said that Einstein's curved space theory was wrong, and it was the ten-dimensional multiple theory that was right.

"But you said something about Faradays and Sam Browns. That invention I suppressed was something so enormous, Dwight, that anything that ever has or ever will be invented is picayunish squabbling beside it. It was the greatest tower looming on the road of progress. It loomed above all other things as the sun looms greater than earth. It was the greatest thing that ever was or will be, because it necessarily incorporated the discovery of everything that ever will be or can be."

"What—what could be so great? The power of the atom—"

"That was one of the lesser things it incorporated, Dwight. It would have meant that, in a year or so, and the secret of gravity, of interplanetary, interstellar flight, the conquest of age, and eternal life. Everything you can dream of, John, and all the things that any man ever will dream of.

"They knew all that when they came to me. They explained it all, and because I couldn't believe—they showed me. You cannot conceive of such a thing—anything—so inconceivably far-reaching in scope? I'm not surprised. They told me what I have told you, and but that they said it all in such quiet, assured voices, with such perfect and absolute confidence, I'd have called them liars and put

it down to the vain boasting of the Sam Brown you mentioned, with his mighty new mousetrap and his miraculous can opener—the invention of the ages.

"It's simple when you know the answer, to see how true was their every claim. Their television slipped. It slipped aside, into some higher dimension, they guessed, and instead of penetrating the walls and the buildings through that fourth dimension they sought, they decided it had slipped out and beyond space and time, and looked back to review it, a mighty pageant of incredible history—the history that was to be.

"You see, in that was the incredible and infinite scope of the thing, because it showed, in the past, all that had been, the infinite sweep and march of all time from the creation to the present

"But then the ordered ranks broke, for, from the present to the other end of infinity, no single thing or any circumstance is immutably fixed. Their PTW tube caught and displayed every possibility that was ever to exist. And somewhere in that vast sweep of probability, every possible thing existed. Somewhere, the wildest dream of the wildest optimist was, and became fact.

"On that screen tube I saw the sun born, and on it I saw the sun die a million deaths. I saw them move planets, and I saw the planets moving in birth. I saw life created, and I saw it created again in test tubes and laboratories. I saw man arise—and I saw men and women more perfect in body and mind than the dream of Praxiteles created from acetylene and ammonia. Because somewhere in the realms of possibility, remote or so near as to be probable, those dreams of every scientist came true, and with them, the unguessed dreams of unguessable intellects.

"Hugh Kerry and Bob Darnell came to me when the thing was new, and they faintly conceived of its possibilities. That was in 1950. And in five days the world would have known and been at their feet—but for two things—three, really. First, because the thing, they knew, was imperfect, and, what they didn't know, was severely limited. Second, because they had begun to trace their own life tracks, and were worried, even then. I caught some of that worry from them and held back. I never let them cast for my life tracks. Today I do not know what will come tomorrow. Third, and what was perhaps the determining reason, they were still poor, but growing rich rapidly by the information that machine brought them of the little, everyday things that were to be two days ahead.

"You could pile up an enormous fortune, Dwight, if you just knew with a probability of eighty-five on their scale of *a*. hundred, what

tomorrow and tomorrow would bring. They did, and first the number pool hated them and refused their business, then the betting rings refused their bets, and finally, even the stock market began to act unfavorably. Because they won, of course.

"But before then, they had begun to forget that, and concentrated on the life tracks the machine showed them.

"I said the machine was limited. It was limited by two factors: one was the obvious difficulty of seeing

the forest and the shape of the forest when in the middle of it. They were in the middle of the parade, and there they must stay. They could not see the near fu-ture clearly, for the near forest was hidden by the trees. The far fu-ture they could see like a vast marching column that split and diverged slowly. They saw no individual figure, only the blended mass of the march to infinity.

"At a year, the parade began to blend, and the features were lost by the establishment of the trend. But, at two days, two weeks, their screen showed a figure blurred and broken by the splitting im-ages that broke away, each following its own line of possible devel-opment.

"Look. A vision of me in the future by only ten minutes will show me in a thousand lifecourses. Primarily, there are two; I may live, or die. But even those two instantly became a thousand, for I may die now, or at any later instant. I may die by the falling of the building or the stoppage of my heart, by an assassin's bullet, by the knife of a disgruntled inventor. They are improbable, and their fu-ture images would, on Bob Darnell's screen, have been dim, and ghostly. The world might end in that ten minutes, so destroy me. That must be there, for it is possible, a very faint image, so shad-owy it is scarcely visible.

"If I live, a thousand courses are open: I may sit here, smoking peacefully; the telephone may ring; a fire may break out. Probably I shall continue to sit, and smoke—so strong and solid on the screen is an image of myself sitting, smoking. But shading from it ever lighter, black and gray to faintest haziness, is each of those other possibilities.

"That confused them, made exact work difficult. To get their re-ports of the markets, they had to determine with an absolute rigor that the next day's paper should be put on a certain stand, spread to the page they wanted, and, come hell or high water, they would yet put that paper there, and not move it so much as a hairbreadth. The image became probable, highly probable. Its ghost images faded. They read it.

"And there's one other fault. I know the reason I'd rather not give it. Just take this for one of the facts of that invention that by the very stuff of space, time shall never be overcome. The place they might determine, or the time, with absolute exactitude, but never would they ever know both for any given event.

"And the third day they cast for their future tracks. The near fu-ture was a confused haze, but I was with them when they sought in the future far enough for the haze to go. Laughing, elated, they cast a hundred years ahead, when, Bob Darnell said, Til be a man with my long white beard looped through my trousers and over my shoulders for suspenders!"

"They started their machine, and set the control for probabilities in a very low range, for the chance of Bob Darnell's living to one hundred and thirty-three years of age was remote. They had a de-vice on their machine that would automatically sweep the future, till it found a lane that was occupied, a track that was not dead, in which Bob Darnell still lived. It was limited in speed—but not greatly, for each second it looked down five hundred thousand tracks."

"Reaction speed of a photocell," said the young man slowly. "I know."

"Dwight, try not to know," pleaded Grantland. "I mean to give fio such hints—but only what is needed to understand."

"If you say two times two—can you expect me to omit a mental four?" asked the young man. "Five hundred thousand a second is the reaction of a photocell. What is there in this invention that demands its suppression?"

"That is part of it. Five hundred thousand tracks a second it swept, and an hour passed, and another, and Darnell laughed at it.

"I guess I'm not due for a long, full life," he said.

"And just then the machine clicked his answer. When we saw the image on the screen, we thought the range was wrong, for the Bob Darnell on the screen was a healthier, stronger, sounder man than the Bob Darnell beside me.

"He was tanned and lean and muscular; his hair was black as night, and his hands were muscular and firm-fleshed. He looked thirty, not a hundred and thirty. But his eyes were old, they were old as the hills, and keen with a burning vigor as they seemed to concentrate on us. Slowly he smiled, and firm, even teeth appeared between his lips.

: "Darnell whistled softly. They've licked old age,' he almost whis-pered.

"Evidently they had. Hugh spoke. 'They probably found it in some future age with this machine,' he whispered tensely. 'You're one keen old gentleman, Bob.'

"'But that's not a good chance for life apparently,' Damell said. *I wonder how I can choose the course that leads me there?*'

"'Live a clean life, drink nothing but water/ Kerry said. Turn on, O time, in your flight. Let's see what else we have.'

"Darnell started the machine again—and it stopped almost in-stantly. One of Darnell's other tracks appeared. He'd gotten there that time with no outside aid, and he was horrible. 'Ah-h-h—' said Bob distastefully. I like the other way better. That face—turn it along, Hugh.'

The mean, rheumy-eyed, incredibly seamed face disappeared; the screen went blank. And it stayed blank. Those were Bob's only tracks at that age. \*Not too bad,' he said, though, I didn't think I had a chance in the world.'

"'Let's see what we get at ten years,' Hugh suggested. That's more to the point.'

"'We'll wait all night getting through them,' objected Bob. T3ut , well take a few. Better start with about seventy probability. Ten years is long enough for me to die in, perhaps, so that ought to be fairly high.'

"They started again. And it ran for an hour—two hours. Bob Dar-nell had stopped laughing now, because he

didn't like that blank and stubborn assurance that he had a mighty slim chance of living ten years more. Two hours and a half and it was beginning to tell on Darnell. 'Looks like I guessed too high,' was all he said.

"Then we got a track. It was Bob Darnell, all right, but his face was round and soft and flatulent, and he lay on a soft rubber floor on his back, with a little pair of trunks on, and he was grinning senselessly with a blank, stupid face at a male nurse who was feed-ing him some kind of gruel that he slobbered and spilled down his fat, soft cheeks. There wasn't any mind at all behind the full, round eyes.

"It took us about ten seconds to take in that scene that was some-thing like ten years in the future. Then Bob spoke, and his voice was flat and strained. Td say that was *dementia praecox*, and I'd say that damned machine was wrong, because I'm not going to be that way. I'm going to be dead first. It's the nastiest form of insanity I can think of offhand. Start that thing up, Hugh.'

"The trails got closer together there. We got another one in half an hour, and all that half hour we stood in absolute silence in the

dim laboratory, while the machine clicked and hummed, and the screen writhed and flickered with blankness, because neither of us could think of anything to say to Bob, and Bob was too busy think-ing to say anything.

"Then the machine stopped again. It didn't take so long to un-derstand that scene. Hugh started it on again. It found seven trails like that in the next hour. Then it found a sane trail, more or less, but it was a Bob Darnell who had gone through insanity. He wasn't actually insane, but his nervous system was broken.

" 'Evidently you recover,' I said, trying to be hopeful.

"Bob grinned—unpleasantly. He shook his head. You don't recover. If you do—it wasn't *dementia praecox*. *Praecox* is an insan-ity that is simply a slow disintegration of the mind; it gets tired of worry and trouble, and decides the easiest way out is to go back to childhood, when there weren't any worries or troubles. But it goes back and discovers again the worries children have, and keeps going back and back, seeking the time when there were no troubles —and generally is stopped by pneumonia or tuberculosis or hemor-rhage of the atrophied brain.

" 'But it never recovers, and it's the most ghastly form of insanity there is, because it is hopeless. It turns a strong, sound man into a helpless, mindless infant. It's not like idiocy, because an idiot never grew up. This grows up, all right—and then grows down, lower than anything normal could be.

" 'That's just one path where I had a nervous breakdown and got over it. That one—why it might lead to the one-hundred-and-thirty-four-year-old track. But just—go on, Hugh.'

"Hugh went on—on and on, and we found three sound, sane tracks.

"I don't have to go into more detail. I think you can understand Darnell's feelings. We tried at five years, and a few more tracks showed up. At two years, that first night, we found eighteen tracks, and eleven of them were insane, and seven sane. We named the two-year tracks with the Greek alphabet.

"The track Bob wanted, the long track that took him to a hun-dred and thirty-four, and beyond, clear out to a point where he merged in the march of the infinite future, was his tau track. The alpha, beta, gamma, delta—all those were quite insane, and quite horrible. That meant that, by far, the greater probability led to the unpleasant tracks.

" 'Hugh, I guess, it's your turn, if you want to try,' said Bob finally. We'll have to check these more carefully later.'

" 'I think I do want to know,' Hugh said. "But maybe Grantland would like to go now. He can't be here all the time.'

" 'No, thank Heaven,' I said, I can't, and I don't want to know my tracks. Bob, I think one of the best ways to strike that tau track is to destroy this machine now.'

"Bob stared at me, then grinned lopsidedly. I can't now, John. For one thing, I have no right to; it means too much to the world. For another, I've got to find what decisions will put me on that long track. I made this thing because I knew I couldn't live to see that long march we've already seen, leading on to the infinity even this can't reach. Now, by all that is to be, I've got to find how I can reach that time!'

" 'By all that is to be, Bob, I know in my bones you won't, if this machine endures.'

"Bob grinned and shook his head at me.

" 'I can't, John,' he said.

"And Hugh started the machine down his trails. He'd set it for a hundred years, like Darnell, at a slightly higher figure than had disclosed the far end of Bob's tau track. We picked up Hugh's ' pretty quickly, and he, too, looked sound and healthy. But he had no second trail—one chance to live to be a hundred and thirty-three.

" 'I'm about as good on long life as you, Bob,' he said, 'if some-body helps me, but I guess I can't make it alone.'

" 'Well, I'm not interested in going it alone myself,' Bob replied. It's not a hell of a lot better than some of those other things we've seen. Let's get closer home.'

"They tried the ten-year track. And on Hugh Kerry's trails, the machine clicked and hummed for a long, long time, and Kerry began to look paler and paler in the light from that wavering screen, because he didn't even have a chance of insane life.

" 'Let's leave it for the night,' said Hugh finally. *Its* eight o'clock, and I'm hungry as a wolf. We can leave it running on the recorder, and come back after supper, maybe.'

"We came back after supper. It was ten, then. And the machine was still clicking and humming.

"We went home for the night. You see, reasonably enough, Hugh had assumed that he had a fair chance of living ten years, but he didn't, of course. The machine was examining nearly two billion chances every hour it ran—and finding them blank.

"Hugh was down at seven the next morning. I got there at ten and found Bob and Hugh sitting very quiet, trying to smoke. The

machine was still humming and clicking, and there wasn't a thing at all on the recorder.

"'Looks like I'm not slated for a long life,' Hugh greeted me unhappily, trying to grin. 'It hasn't found—thank Heaven!' The machine stopped suddenly.

I "It was Hugh, quite hale and sound, his hair a bit gray, his eyes a bit sunken, his face a bit lined, but sane—and sound.

"That's what we called the tau track,' said Bob after a minute of examination. 'You make a hundred-year mark on the first try.'

"'In other words,' said Kerry softly, 'I've got about as much chance of living ten years as I have of living a hundred. Yes. That's

; a good way to put it. A hell of a chance. What does it say at two < years?'

I "It took a long time, because we didn't want to start on the low probabilities, of course, and there just weren't any good ones. We didn't find anything very quickly. Eventually we knew he had three sane and one insane at ten years, and eleven altogether at two years —three insane. And they were all of them so far down in probability, they started working right away.

"But the thing that brought home the need of haste was that when we looked, just for a moment, at Bob's two-year trails—two of the sane, and five insane trails had vanished! They had been eliminated by decisions made since the previous evening. I knew, Bob and Hugh knew, what the decision was, but we didn't say anything. He had decided to look at Hugh's trails in that time, and found those few trails. They cut off at one year, we found, so they had to work on them. That, you see, reduced Bob Darnell's chances of finding the right trail—the tau trail that wasn't in tau position any more, but, thank Heaven, still existed.

\* "It's not so hard, though,' said Kerry. \*We need only look to see what developments we make tomorrow, and tomorrow's tomorrow,

I to find how to perfect this machine, to eliminate the near-future images. We'll get it.'

"I had my business that I was trying to build up, so I had to leave them. I couldn't see them for five days, because I had to appear out in St. Louis, and stop over in Washington.

. "When I got back I went around to see them, though it was nearly eleven o'clock. They were at it.

i\* "We've made some progress,' Hugh said. We've both mapped our trails carefully till they vanish in the near-future mists. We'll be

able to hit that long trail for Bob fairly easily, but—I'm afraid I'll have to give mine up,' he said, his face twitching just a little.

"H-Has your long trail been eliminated by a decision?\*' I asked.

"'Hm-m-m—in a sense. I located one of its decision points by luck. It's only about a month away, apparently. It is less, I believe, but we can't tell. I took a snap view of the trail, and hit what is evidently a decision point on it. What you didn't know is that twenty-seven years of that long trail is hopeless paralysis in pain. I apply for euthanasia four times unsuccessfully. Since I know where that trail leads, and still apply for that—why, I think I don't want it, anyway. But the trouble is, really, that the decision point I snapped, by sheer luck, is an automobile accident.

"We've been trying to take instantaneous exposures of the trails, in the near future, to eliminate the blurring. We can do it by using a blurred image to get space coordinates and snapping the controls into lock position. The time register is automatically thrown out of gear, so we have only a vague idea of time. We know it's this year— but whether it's late this month, or early next, I don't know. We can't know.'

"'But the accident—'

"I'd go through with it, perhaps—if I had some control. But Tom Phillips is driving. If I drive, of course, that's a different track altogether. He has my fate in his hands—and I can't bring myself to take it.'

"'Have you told Tom?\*' I asked.

"'Not yet, but I'm expecting him over. I sent a note around that he ought to get today or tomorrow, I—'

"The telephone rang, Hugh answered it. Tom Phillips was on the other end. He had the note, luckily, as

he was packing then to drive up to Boston. He wanted Hugh to come over and tell him the story, or whatever it was Hugh wanted him for. Naturally, it would do no good if Tom couldn't see the machine; so, by dint of nearly fifteen minutes arguing, Hugh got him to come over.

"Whew—if I hadn't been so afraid of riding with Tom, I would have gone over, at that," said Hugh, mopping his head. "He's a stub-born cuss when he gets an idea. I hope I can—eh? What, Bob?"

"Bob Darnell, in the laboratory, had called something.

"What is it, Bob?" Hugh asked, going over.

"I went over, too. 'Oh, hello, John. I didn't know you were back. Patent go through all OK?'"

"Tine," I answered, "Everything's in order. What was it you wanted to tell Hugh?"

"\*Yes—just told me. He had just finished calling Tom Phillips when you called him."

"What! God! I called him—because his long track vanished while I was looking at it then! That was a decision point!"

"We looked eagerly. It was gone, all right. And suddenly Hugh stiffened. 'Bob,' he said, 'I'm afraid; I'm scared as hell—because maybe that was a decision point, because I didn't go over for Tom. I'm going to—'"

"He went, too—to call up Tom Phillips. But he was too late then, and he never got him. Tom hadn't seen a gravel truck smashing down a side street, hidden from him by a stopped trolley car.

"I was supposed to go over for him," was all Hugh could say. "But how was I to know? We didn't know the time accurately. We couldn't, could we, Bob? I didn't know—I didn't know—!"

"But to the day of his death, he could not shake the feeling that he had brought Tom Phillips out to be killed, almost deliberately. It meant nothing that he had called him to warn him. He had called him out to death. He had been slow in his warning.

"A week later they had mapped their future trails; they had every decision point mapped, and noted; they knew every move that they must make to take them down those trails that led to that maximum of Me each was granted. Every decision, every turn and branch of the road that led to happiness, success—except those they must make in the next ten months.

"From a high peak they could see the road that led off across the broad fields of the open country to the distant city of life they sought. But the tangled, snarled traffic of the nearby city where they were, obscured the little alleys and twisting, crooked streets of the near future in an inextricable maze.

"We'll get it, though," Hugh said confidently. "We're getting it better and better now. We've found a system that will work, we think. You see, if today we can see what we will develop tomorrow, we will be a day ahead, and then if we see what comes the day after, we'll be two days. In a week we should have the thing solved. It is only that it becomes so annoying to remember—this may be the decision day, and I do not know it. And Bob is working hard to find my decisions, because I have so few lines beyond this December, apparently. He has plenty of sound lines leading on through next year.

"That seems to make my case the more imperative, for I do not want to die when life is so near. Yet we cannot know even this, for the paths twine and twist, and it may be that my decision point to the long trail I seek is in December. And, similarly, it may be that the decision point Bob seeks—is tomorrow. We cannot guess, we

cannot know, who is in the more desperate position, the more immediately threatened state.

"But tomorrow we will advance faster, because we have determined as inflexibly as our determination to place that newspaper on the stand, that we shall hereafter, invariably, put on the blackboard there the discoveries of the day, and the progress made. That, we think, will clear up the images."

"Will clear up the images?" I asked in some surprise. Because, you remember, Dwight, that it instantly cleared up the newspaper images.

"Hugh looked a little worried.

"Will," he replied. "You see, it didn't so very much at first, for some reason. I can't quite— But at any rate, by watching our progress that we are to make, we will make swift advance to the discovery of the secret, and long life."

"It seemed so clear, so true, so logical. If they could steal the inventions of a million years in the future, could they not spy on their own progress of the next day and the next? So simple, so logical an advance.

"But they missed one thing. There were many, many things they could try, and though they inflexibly determined that they would write on the blackboard the progress of the day, and did, the blackboard was blurred white and gray on the screen. For each of the thousand things they might try was there, you see, and from the first day two probabilities entered; that they deciphered, and tried one of those courses, and that they did not decipher the next day's work, and had to develop it directly.

"Three times they read that blackboard. Each time the next day's blackboard read: 'Did work shown by future image yesterday.' So, when they did read it, remember, they saw only a day's work done, and the day's work was yet to be done, though they knew what it must be. If you are a repairman and know that tomorrow you must change the clutch plates and put in new transmission gears, that knowledge does not eliminate the operation.

"They thought it might spare them the blind alleys. But one of those days' work was a blind alley that

they were forced to rip out the next.

I was called over one day, the third time they read that black-board, and they showed it to me. There were many, many images on it, and only one was legible, because it was very, very brief, and written very large.

"Hugh smiled lopsidedly at me when I came in. Well, John, I think we've found one of my decision points,' he said.

"What! Got those near futures cleared up?" I was immensely pleased. They'd advanced a lot, you know, since I first saw the instrument. Their near-future images were sometimes quite readable; their selectivity had been increased a thousandfold. But there was still a mistiness, a sort of basic mistiness.

"\*No,' Darnell interrupted. We read the blackboard. Come—you can see it.'

"I did. It was quite easy to read, because Hugh had always been the one to write on the board, and his writing was cramped and neat. On many of those images the writing was cramped and neat. But on many others it was a broad, looping scrawl—Darnell's hand. It said simply: 'Hugh Kerry killed today. May God have mercy on me.'

"I swallowed hard before I spoke. There's a lot of images there, Hugh.'

"Tes, but tfs a decision point. Bob has sworn, and determined by all that's holy, he'll write the full facts on the case tomorrow, and not that message. The message still sticks, and none other has appeared. It's a decision point—and may God have mercy on me, too, for I don't know what that decision must be. It won't even tell me whether to stay indoors here or stay out of here.'

"Dwight, that is the thing that pressed and pressed on them. It was like the old Chinese water torture, and each day was a drop of water that fell, and they were bound to the wheel of time that can-not stop or be stopped. They had now the vision to see across that wheel to another day and another age—but they could not slow that progress through time, nor speed it by a whit.

"The days must come, and they must go, for all their knowledge of time. And the sun that day sank, as it had a thousand thousand thousand times before, and would a thousand thousand thousand times again, and it rose on a new day. No force, nor will, nor wish could stay that progress; the day must come. And Hugh could not know, because the message was so stubborn, whether his decision lay in that laboratory or out in the open.

- "I could not leave them. Yet I had to, because time still went on, and the courts went on. I left, on a case I know not the faintest de- tail of, save that I fought it with a bitter determination to win, and \$ somehow won it.

\* "It was four thirty when I got back to the laboratory. Bob Darnell met me, and his face was white and tense. 'Hugh?' I asked.

"He's gone over to Teckno Products for some apparatus/ said Darnell quietly. 'He wouldn't let me go. He ought to be back. Come into the laboratory. I've been watching his trails.'

"I went with him into the laboratory where the rustle and hum of the machine, and the flickering, greenish light of the screen made it seem a sorcerer's lair of necromancy. Bob looked at the screen, then he turned to me with an unpleasant grin. 'It's blank, John. Those are Hugh Kerry's trails one year from today,' he said. He walked over to the blackboard very slowly, like an automaton, and picked up a piece of chalk. Slowly he erased the words on the slate, and in a round, broad scrawl he wrote: 'Hugh Kerry killed today. May God have mercy on *we*'

"Bob,' I said, 'Bob—that's the message you swore you wouldn't write. Erase it—wait till we know, till we know what happened to him so we can write the details. That may—'

"Save him?'" asked Bob bitterly. What matter now? He's dead now. But if you like, we can find the details. But nothing will do any good at all, because he's dead now, anyway. What good will it do to change that message? He's already taken the wrong trail, and reached the end, John. But I'll find out—'

"He called up the police. He asked if they knew what had hap-pened to Hugh Kerry, how he had been killed.

"The telephone was a noisy one, always had been, and I heard the answer where I stood. 'Hugh Kerry, eh? I have no report on any-one by that name. What makes you think he's been killed, and how?'"

"He must be dead by this time,' said Bob. 'Ask your men, please. I—what?'"

"The other desk man,' said the man on the telephone, 'just got a call, and he says if you're looking for a guy named Hugh Kerry, he was just killed by a girl driver at Fourteenth and Seventh. He stepped out from behind a parked car right- Say, who's calling?'"

"Thanks, officer. Robert Darnell calling, from One Forty-three East Eighty-seventh. I'm going right over to the scene—'

"We went over in my car, got there pretty quickly, but the am-bulance had already taken Hugh Kerry

and the girl driver away. We heard from her later. Hugh had simply walked right into the side of her car, practically tripped over her running board. She was in the hospital with hysterics then. She kept saying he looked so surprised—as though somebody had suddenly explained something to him. Somebody had, you see—a surprisingly easy answer to a complex problem.

"Bob Darnell tried to get his car, that Hugh had driven over to Teckno Products in, but the police picked him up. I wasn't a crimi-nal lawyer, and I had to go downtown and get Bill Poole, a class-mate of mine, to come and help him out.

"It was a bad problem, too, we found out. Three weeks before, Hugh Kerry had taken out a one-year-term insurance policy for a hundred thousand dollars. And it had a double-indemnity clause in case of accidental death. The insurance company was fighting for their two hundred thousand dollars, and the police were fighting for a murder charge. Because, you remember, Bob Darnell had said over the telephone: 'He must be dead by this time.'

"The time machine was too wild. We couldn't get any clear im-ages to show them anything to speak of. But, finally, they had to let Bob go, because it's awfully difficult to prove murder when a man is killed *in* an automobile accident at one end of town, and a man you're accusing is calling the police station from the other. And they never tried to involve the poor girl who was the direct instru-ment of death.

"I went back with Bob Darnell, when they released him. I was with him when he started up the machine, and looked at his trails. There were only five left, because Hugh Kerry's trails were gone, now, and they had crossed and intertwined with Bob DarnelTs, of course. The long trail was there, and one other sane trail—that ended in three years. The other three were all insane trails.

"Bob went to work harder than ever, and because I'd gotten behind in my work while Bob was tied up, I, too, had to go to work harder than ever. It was three weeks before I could even get around to *the* laboratory.

"Bob Darnell greeted me at the door when I came. He had one of those slip chains on the door, and opened it only a crack when he let me in. 'Those insurance people kept bothering me,' he ex-plaind. 'They want to see what I'm doing all the time. They aren't going to, though.'

"I looked at him, and his eyes and forehead were screwed up in worry and concentration.

"'John,' he said finally, 'you know it's too bad Hugh went after that apparatus Teckno was making. I got it and put it in, and they didn't make it right at all. I think maybe they're trying to make me order more so they can see how this works. I shouldn't have told the police about my chronoscope. But I put the apparatus in, and I think I got it in right, and, John, it makes the near-future images

better, but what do you think—it cuts out some of the long-range tracks. It won't show them all now.'

"His voice seemed quite annoyed, and rather petulant, I thought.

"'It won't?' I said, quite softly, I think. \*Let me see.'

"'No. It won't show them right. There are five. I saw 'em myself. But this thing won't work right. It cuts out four of them, and only shows one little short one. There's something wrong with it. I figured out what once, but I can't seem to remember any more. But I don't like Teckno any more, and I won't buy anything from 'em any more. I'm going to make 'em take this back.

"'Help me disconnect it, John? You remember how the chrono-scope works; I can't seem to find the connections since I put in the wrong stuff Teckno made. I've been so worried, John, with the in-surance company bothering me, and this not working right.'

"'It isn't working right, eh?' I asked. 'There's only one trail left? Well, you know, Bob, they change.'

"'No. There ought to be five trails. I know, 'cause I saw 'em,' he said decisively.

"So I went into the laboratory with him, and I looked at the screen, and there was only one trail, as he had said. It was as I had expected since I entered the house that day. I told Bob then that I couldn't help him any more, but that I had a friend who might be able to, though I wasn't sure. So I went away and brought your fa-ther, Dwight, who was, as I told you, the only other man who ever saw the chronoscope or the drawings of it.

"He helped me take it apart and break up the parts that might have been revealing."

John Grantland paused a long minute, his head sunk forward on his chest. He raised it slowly and added, as though an afterthought: "We were glad it was a very short track. It could have been so long—"

Dwight Edwards rose slowly, dropping his papers on Grantland's desk. He sighed as he turned away. "The world doesn't need all its Faradays, does it?" And as he walked through the door, "You'll take care of those papers for me—"