

CALL HIM DEMON

Chapter 1. Wrong Uncle

A LONG TIME afterward she went back to Los Angeles and drove past Grandmother Keaton's house. It hadn't changed a great deal, really, but what had seemed an elegant mansion to her childish, 1920 eyes was now a big ramshackle frame structure, gray with scaling paint.

After twenty-five years the—insecurity—wasn't there any more, but there still persisted a dull, irrational, remembered uneasiness, an echo of the time Jane Larkin had spent in that house when she was nine, a thin, big-eyed girl with the Buster Brown bangs so fashionable then.

Looking back, she could remember too much and too little. A child's mind is curiously different from an adult's. When Jane went into the living-room under the green glass chandelier, on that June day in 1920, she made a dutiful round of the family, kissing them all. Grandmother Keaton and chilly Aunt Bessie and the four uncles. She did not hesitate—when she came to the new uncle—who was different.

The other kids watched her with impassive eyes. They knew. They saw she knew. But they said nothing just then. Jane realized she could not mention the—the trouble—either, until they brought it up. That was part of the silent etiquette of childhood. But the whole house was full of uneasiness. The adults merely sensed a trouble, something vaguely wrong. The children, Jane saw, *knew*. Afterward they gathered in the back yard, under the big date-palm. Jane ostentatiously fingered her new necklace and waited. She saw the looks the others exchanged—looks that said, 'Do you think she really noticed?' And finally Beatrice, the oldest, suggested hide-and-seek.

'We ought to tell her, Bee,' little Charles said.

Beatrice kept her eyes from Charles.

'Tell her what? You're crazy, Charles.'

Charles was insistent but vague.

'You know.'

'Keep your old secret,' Jane said. 'I know what it is, anyhow. *He's* not my uncle.'

'See?' Emily crowed. 'She did too see it. I told you she'd notice.'

'It's kind of funny,' Jane said. She knew very well that the man in the living-room wasn't her uncle and never had been, and he was pretending quite hard—hard enough to convince the grown-ups—that he had always been here. With the clear, unprejudiced eye of immaturity, Jane could see that he wasn't an ordinary grown-up. He was sort of—empty.

'He just came,' Emily said. 'About three weeks ago.'

'Three days,' Charles corrected, trying to help, but his temporal sense wasn't dependent on the calendar. He measured time by the yardstick of events, and days weren't standard size for him. They were longer when he was sick or when it rained, and far too short when he was riding the merry-go-round at Ocean Park or playing games in the back yard.

'It was three weeks,' Beatrice said.

'Where'd he come from?' Jane asked.

There were secret glances exchanged.

'I don't know,' Beatrice said carefully.

'He came out of a big round hole that kept going around,' Charles said. 'It's like a Christmas tree through there, all fiery.'

'Don't tell lies,' Emily said. 'Did you ever truly see that, Charles?'

'No. Only sort of.'

'Don't *they* notice?' Jane meant the adults.

'No,' Beatrice told her, and the children all looked toward the house and pondered the inscrutable ways of grown-ups. 'They act like he's always been here. Even Granny. Aunt Bessie said he came before / did. Only I knew that wasn't right.'

'Three weeks,' Charles said, changing his mind.

'He's making them all feel sick,' Emily said. 'Aunt Bessie takes aspirins all the time.'

Jane considered. On the face of it, the situation seemed a little silly. An uncle three weeks old? Perhaps the adults were merely pretending, as they sometimes did, with esoteric adult motives. But somehow that didn't seem quite the answer. Children are never deceived very long about such things.

Charles, now that the ice was broken and Jane no longer an outsider, burst suddenly into excited gabble.

'Tell her, Bee! The real secret—you know. Can I show her the Road of Yellow Bricks? Please, Bee? Huh?'

Then the silence again. Charles was talking too much. Jane knew the Road of Yellow Bricks, of course. It ran straight through Oz from the Deadly Desert to the Emerald City.

After a long time Emily nodded.

'We got to tell her, you know,' she said. 'Only she might get scared. It's so dark.'

'You were scared,' Bobby said. 'You cried, the first time.'

'I didn't. Anyhow it—it's only make believe.'

'Oh, no!' Charles said. 'I reached out and touched the crown last time.'

'It isn't a crown,' Emily said. 'It's *him*, Ruggedo.'

Jane thought of the uncle who wasn't a real uncle—who wasn't a real person. 'Is *he* Ruggedo?' she asked.

The children understood.

'Oh, no,' Charles said. 'Ruggedo lives in the cellar. We give him meat. All red and bluggy. He *likes* it! Gobble, gobble!'

Beatrice looked at Jane. She nodded toward the clubhouse, which was a piano-box with a genuine secret lock. Then, somehow, quite deftly, she shifted the conversation onto another subject. A game of cowboys-and-Indians started presently and Bobby, howling terribly, led the route around the house.

The piano-box smelled pleasantly of acacia drifting through the cracks. Beatrice and Jane, huddled together in the warm dimness, heard diminishing Indian-cries in the distance. Beatrice looked curiously adult just now.

'I'm glad you came, Janie,' she said. "The little kids don't understand at all. It's pretty awful.'

'Who is he?'

Beatrice shivered. 'I don't know. I think he lives in the cellar.' She hesitated. 'You have to get to him through, the attic, though. I'd be awfully scared if the little kids weren't so—so—they don't seem to mind at all.'

'But Bee. Who *is* he?'

Beatrice turned her head and looked at Jane, and it was quite evident then that she could not or would not say. There was a barrier. But because it was important, she tried. She mentioned the Wrong Uncle.

"I think Ruggedo's the same as him. I know he is, really. Charles and Bobby say so—and they know. They know better than I do. They're littler . . . It's hard to explain, but—well it's sort of like the Scoodlers. Remember?'

The Scoodlers. That unpleasant race that dwelt in a cavern on the road to Oz and had the conventional ability to detach their heads and hurl them at passersby. After a moment the parallel became evident. A Scoodler could have his head in one place and his body in another. But both parts would belong to the same Scoodler.

Of course the phantom uncle had a head and a body both. But Jane could understand vaguely the possibility of his double nature, one of him moving deceptively through the house, focus of a strange malaise, and the other nameless, formless, nesting in a cellar and waiting for red meat. . . .

'Charles knows more than any of us about it,' Beatrice said. 'He was the one who found out we'd have to feed R-Ruggedo. We tried different things, but it has to be raw meat. And if we stopped—something awful would happen. We kids found that out.'

It was significant that Jane didn't ask how. Children take their equivalent of telepathy for granted.

'They don't know,' Beatrice added. 'We can't tell them.'

'No,' Jane said, and two girls looked at one another, caught in the terrible, helpless problem of immaturity, the knowledge that the mores of the adult world are too complicated to understand, and that children must walk warily.

Adults are always right. They are an alien race.

Luckily for the other children, they had come upon the Enemy in a body. One child alone might have had violent hysterics. But Charles, who made the first discoveries, was only six, still young enough so that the process of going insane in that particular way wasn't possible for him. A six-year-old is in a congenitally psychotic state; it is normal to him.

'And they've been sick ever since he came,' Beatrice said.

Jane had already seen that. A wolf may don sheepskin and slide unobserved into a flock, but the sheep are apt to become nervous, though they can not discover the source of their discomfort.

It was a matter of mood. Even he showed the same mood—uneasiness, waiting, sensing that something was wrong and not knowing what—but with *him* it was simply a matter of camouflage. Jane could tell he didn't want to attract attention by varying from the arbitrary norm he had chosen—that of the human form.

Jane accepted it. The uncle who was—empty—the one in the cellar called Ruggedo, who had to be fed regularly on raw meat, so that Something wouldn't happen. . . .

A masquerader, from somewhere. He had power, and he had limitations. The obvious evidences of his power were accepted without question.

Children are realists. It was not incredible to them, for this hungry, inhuman stranger to appear among them—for here he was. He came from somewhere. Out of time, or space, or an inconceivable place. He never had any human feelings; the children sensed that easily. He pretended very cleverly to be human, and he could warp the adult minds to implant artificial memories of his existence. The adults thought they remembered him. An adult will recognize a mirage; a child will be deceived. But conversely, an intellectual mirage will deceive an adult, not a child.

Ruggedo's power couldn't warp their minds, for those were neither quite human nor quite sane, from the adult standpoint.

Beatrice, who was oldest, was afraid. She had the beginnings of empathy and imagination.

Little Charlie felt mostly excitement. Bobbie, the smallest, had already begun to be bored. . . .

Perhaps later Beatrice remembered a little of what Ruggedo looked like, but the others never did. For they reached him by a very strange road, and perhaps they were somewhat altered themselves during the time they were with him. He accepted or rejected food; that was all. Upstairs, the body of the Scoodler pretended to be human, while the Scoodler's head lay in that little, horrible nest he had made by warping space, so he was invisible and intangible to anyone who didn't know how to find the Road of Yellow Bricks.

What was he? Without standards of comparison—and there are none, in this world—he cannot be named. The children thought of him as Ruggedo. But he was not the fat, half-comic, inevitably frustrated Gnome King.

He was never that.

Call him demon.

As a name-symbol, it implies too much and not enough. But it will have to do. By the standard of maturity he was monster, alien, super-being. But because of what he did, and what he wanted—call him demon.

Chapter 2. Raw, Red Meat

ONE afternoon, a few days later, Beatrice hunted up Jane. 'How much money have you got, Janie?' she asked. 'Four dollars and thirty-five cents,' Jane said, after investigation. 'Dad gave me five dollars at the station. I bought some popcorn and—well—different things.'

'Gee, I'm glad you came when you did.' Beatrice blew out a long breath. Tacitly it was agreed that the prevalent socialism of childhood clubs would apply in this more urgent clubbing together of interests. Jane's small hoard was available not for any individual among them, but for the good of the group. 'We were running out of money,' Beatrice said. 'Granny caught us taking meat out of the icebox and we don't dare any more. But we can get a lot with your money.'

Neither of them thought of the inevitable time when that fund would be exhausted. Four dollars and thirty-five cents seemed fabulous, in that era. And they needn't buy expensive meat, so long as it was raw and bloody.

They walked together down the acacia-shaded street with its occasional leaning palms and drooping pepper-trees. They bought two pounds of hamburger and improvidently squandered twenty cents on sodas.

When they got back to the house, Sunday lethargy had set in. Uncles Simon and James had gone out for cigars, and Uncle Lew and Bert were reading the papers, while Aunt Bessie crocheted. Grandmother Keaton read 'Young's Magazine', diligently seeking spicy passages. The two girls paused behind the beaded portieres, looking in.

'Come on, kids,' Lew said in his deep, resonant voice. 'Seen the funnies yet? Mutt and Jeff are good. And Spark Plug——'

'Mr. Gibson is good enough for me,' Grandmother Keaton said. 'He's a real artist. His people look like people.'

The door banged open and Uncle James appeared, fat, grinning, obviously happy from several beers. Uncle Simon paced him like a personified conscience.

'At any rate, it's quiet,' he said, turning a sour glance on Jane and Beatrice. 'The children make such a rumpus sometimes I can't hear myself think.'

'Granny,' Beatrice asked, 'where are the kids?'

'In the kitchen, I think, dear. They wanted some water for something.'

'Thanks.' The two girls went out, leaving the room filled with a growing atmosphere of sub-threshold discomfort. The sheep were sensing the wolf among them, but the sheepskin disguise was sufficient. They did not know. . . .

The kids were in the kitchen, busily painting one section of the comics with brushes and water. When you did that, pictures emerged. One page of the newspaper had been chemically treated so that moisture would bring out the various colors, dull pastels, but singularly glamorous, in a class with the Japanese flowers that would bloom in water, and the Chinese paper-shelled almonds that held tiny prizes.

From behind her, Beatrice deftly produced the butcher's package.

'Two pounds,' she said. 'Janie had some money, and Merton's was open this afternoon. I thought we'd better. . . .'

Emily kept on painting diligently. Charles jumped up.

'Are we going up now, huh?'

Jane was uneasy. 'I don't know if I'd better come along. j__'

'I don't want to either,' Bobby said, but that was treason. Charles said Bobby was scared.

'I'm not. It just isn't any fun. I want to play something else.'

'Emily,' Beatrice said softly. 'You don't have to go this time.'

'Yes I do.' Emily looked up at last from her painting. 'I'm not scared.'

'I want to see the lights,' Charles said. Beatrice whirled on him.

'You tell such lies, Charles! There aren't any lights.'

'There are so. Sometimes, anyhow.'

There aren't.'

'There are so. You're too dumb to see them. Let's go and feed him'

It was understood that Beatrice took command now. She was the oldest. She was also, Jane sensed, more afraid than the others, even Emily.

They went upstairs, Beatrice carrying the parcel of meat. She had already cut the string. In the upper hall they grouped before a door.

'This is the way, Jane,' Charles said rather proudly. 'We gotta go up to the attic. There's a swing-down ladder in the bathroom ceiling. We have to climb up on the tub to reach.'

'My dress,' Jane said doubtfully.

'You won't get dirty. Come on.'

Charles wanted to be first, but he was too short. Beatrice climbed to the rim of the tub and tugged at a ring in the ceiling. The trap-door creaked and the stairs ascended slowly, with a certain majesty, beside the tub. It wasn't dark up there. Light came vaguely through the attic windows.

'Come on, Janie,' Beatrice said, with a queer breathlessness, and they all scrambled up somehow, by dint of violent acrobatics.

The attic was warm, quiet and dusty. Planks were laid across the beams. Cartons and trunks were here and there.

Beatrice was already walking along one of the beams. Jane watched her.

Beatrice didn't look back; she didn't say anything. Once her hand groped out behind her: Charles, who was nearest, took it. Then

Beatrice reached a plank laid across to another rafter. She crossed it. She went on—stopped—and came back, with Charles.

'You weren't doing it right,' Charles said disappointedly. 'You were thinking of the wrong thing.'

Beatrice's face looked oddly white in the golden, faint light.

Jane met her cousin's eyes. 'Bee——'

'You have to think of something else,' Beatrice said quickly. 'It's all right. Come on.'

Charles at her heels, she started again across the plank. Charles was saying something, in a rhythmic, mechanical monotone: *'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks—'*

Beatrice disappeared.

'Seven, eight, lay them—'

Charles disappeared.

Bobby, his shoulders expressing rebelliousness, followed. And vanished.

Emily made a small sound.

'Oh—*Emily!*' Jane said.

But her youngest cousin only said, 'I don't want to go down there, Janie.'

'You don't have to.'

'Yes, I do,' Emily said. 'I'll tell you what. I won't be afraid if you come right after me. I always think there's something coming up behind me to grab—but if you promise to come right after, it'll be all right.'

'I promise,' Jane said.

Reassured, Emily walked across the bridge. Jane was watching closely this time. Yet she did not see Emily disappear. She was suddenly—gone. Jane stepped forward, and stopped as a sound came from downstairs.

'fane!' Aunt Bessie's voice, *'fane!'* It was louder and more peremptory now. 'Jane, where are you? Come here to me!'

Jane stood motionless, looking across the plank bridge. It was quite empty, and there was no trace of Emily or the other children.

The attic was suddenly full of invisible menace. Yet she would have gone on, because of her promise, if—

'fane!'

Jane reluctantly descended and followed the summons to Aunt Bessie's bedroom. That prim-mouthed woman was pinning fabric and moving her lips impatiently.

'Where on earth have you been, Jane? I've been calling and calling.'

'We were playing,' Jane said. 'Did you want me, Aunt Bessie?'

'I should say I did,' Aunt Bessie said. 'This collar I've been crocheting. It's a dress for you. Come here and let me try it on. How you grow, child!'

And after that there was an eternity of pinning and wriggling, while Jane kept thinking of Emily, alone and afraid somewhere in the attic. She began to hate Aunt Bessie. Yet the thought of rebellion or escape never crossed her mind. The adults were absolute monarchs. As far as relative values went, trying on the collar was more important, at this moment, than anything else in the world. At least, to the adults who administered the world.

While Emily, alone and afraid on the bridge that led to—elsewhere. . . .

The uncles were playing poker. Aunt Gertrude, the vaudeville actress, had unexpectedly arrived for a few days and was talking with Grandmother Keaton and Aunt Bessie in the living-room. Aunt Gertrude was small and pretty, very charming, with bisque delicacy and a gusto for life that filled Jane with admiration. But she was subdued now.

'This place gives me the creeps,' she said, making a dart with

her folded fan at Jane's nose. 'Hello, funny[^]face. Why aren't you playing with the other kids?'

'Oh, I'm .tired/ Jane said, wondering about Emily. It had been nearly an hour since—

'At your age I was never tired,' Aunt Gertrude said. 'Now look at me. Three a day and that awful straight man I've got—Ma, did I tell you——' The voices pitched lower.

Jane watched Aunt Bessie's skinny fingers move monotonously as she darted her crochet hook through the silk.

'This place is a morgue,' Aunt Gertrude said suddenly.. 'What's wrong with everybody? Who's dead?'

'It's the air,' Aunt Bessie said. 'Too hot the year round.' 'You play Rochester in winter, Bessie my girl, and you'll be glad of a warm climate. It isn't that, anyway. I feel like—mm-m —it's like being on stage after the curtain's gone up.' 'It's your fancy,' her mother said.

'Ghosts,' Aunt Gertrude said, and was silent. Grandmother Keaton looked sharply at Jane. 'Come over here, child,' she said.

Room was made on the soft, capacious lap that had held so many youngsters.

Jane snuggled against the reassuring warmth and tried to let her mind go blank, transferring all sense of responsibility to Grandmother Keaton. But it wouldn't work. There was something wrong in the house, and the heavy waves of it beat out from a center very near them.

The Wrong Uncle. Hunger and the avidity to be fed. The nearness of bloody meat tantalizing him as he lay hidden in his strange, unguessable nest elsewhere—otherwhere—in that strange place where the children had vanished.

He was down there, slaving for the food; he was up here, empty, avid, a vortex of hunger very nearby.

He was double, a double uncle, masked but terrifyingly clear. . . .

Jane closed her eyes and dug her head deeper into Grandmother Keaton's shoulder.

Aunt Gertrude gossiped in an oddly tense voice, as if she sensed wrongness under the surface and was frightened subtly.

'I'm opening at Santa Barbara in a couple of days, Ma,' she said. 'I—what's wrong with this house, anyhow? I'm as jumpy as a cat today!—and I want you all to come down and catch the first show. It's a musical comedy. I've been promoted.'

'I've seen the "Prince of Pilsen" before,' Grandmother Keaton said.

'Not with me in it. It's my treat. I've engaged rooms at the hotel already. The kids have to come, too. Want to see your auntie act, Jane?' Jane nodded against her grandmother's shoulder.

'Auntie,' Jane said suddenly. 'Did you see all the uncles?'

'Certainly I did.'

'All of them? Uncle James and Uncle Bert and Uncle Simon and Uncle Lew?'

'The whole kaboodle. Why?'

'I just wondered.'

So Aunt Gertrude hadn't noticed the Wrong Uncle either. She wasn't truly observant, Jane thought.

'I haven't seen the kids, though. If they don't hurry up, they won't get any of the presents I've brought. You'd never guess what I have for you, Janie.'

But Jane scarcely heard even that exciting promise. For suddenly the tension in the air gave way. The Wrong Uncle who had been a vortex of hunger a moment before was a vortex of ecstasy now. Somewhere, somehow, at last Ruggedo was being fed.

Somewhere, somehow, that other half of the double uncle was devouring his bloody fare. ...

Jane was not in Grandmother Keaton's lap any more. The room was a spinning darkness that winked with tiny lights— Christmas tree lights, Charles had called them—and there was a core of terror in the center of the whirl. Here in the vanished room the Wrong Uncle was a funnel leading from that unimaginable nest where the other half of him dwelt, and through the funnel, into the room, poured the full ecstatic tide of his satiety.

Somehow in this instant Jane was very near the other children who must stand beside that spinning focus of darkness. She could almost sense their presence, almost put out her hand to touch theirs.

Now the darkness shivered and the bright, tiny lights drew together, and into her mind came a gush of impossible memories. She was too near *him*. And he was careless as he fed. He was not guarding his thoughts. They poured out, formless as an animal's filling the dark. Thoughts of red food, and of other times and places where that same red food had been brought him by other hands.

It was incredible. The memories were not of earth, not of this time or place. He had traveled far, Ruggedo. In many guises. He remembered now, in a flow of shapeless fissions, he remembered tearing through furred sides that squirmed away from his hunger, remembered the gush of hot sweet redness through the fur.

Not the fur of anything Jane had ever imagined before. . . .

He remembered a great court paved with shining things, and something in bright chains in the center, and rings of watching eyes as he entered and neared the sacrifice.

As he tore his due from its smooth sides, the cruel chains clanked around him as he fed. . . .

Jane tried to close her eyes and not watch. But it was not with

eyes that she watched. And she was ashamed and a little sickened because she was sharing in that feast, tasting the warm red sweetness wide Ruggedo in memory, feeling the spin of ecstasy through her head as it spun through his.

'Ah—the kids are coming now,' Aunt Gertrude was saying from a long way off.

Jane heard her dimly, and then more clearly, and then suddenly Grandmother Keaton's lap was soft beneath her again, and she was back in the familiar room. 'A herd of elephants on the stairs, eh?' Aunt Gertrude said.

They were returning. Jane could hear them too now. Really, they were making much less noise than usual. They were subdued until about half-way down the stairs, and then there was a sudden outburst of clattering and chatter that rang false to Jane's ears. The children came in, Beatrice a little white, Emily pink and puffy around the eyes. Charles was bubbling over with repressed excitement, but Bobby, the smallest, was glum and bored. At sight of Aunt Gertrude, the uproar redoubled, though Beatrice exchanged a quick, significant glance with Jane.

Then presents and noise, and the uncles coming back in; excited discussion of the trip to Santa Barbara—a strained cheeriness that, somehow, kept dying down into heavy silence.

None of the adults ever really looked over their shoulders, but —the feeling was of bad things to come.

Only the children—not even Aunt Gertrude—were aware of the complete *emptiness* of the Wrong Uncle. The projection of a lazy, torpid, semi-mindless entity. Superficially he was as convincingly human as if he had never focused his hunger here under this roof, never let his thoughts whirl through the minds of the children, never remembered his red, dripping feasts of other times and places.

He was very sated now. They could feel the torpor pulsing out in slow, drowsy waves so that all the grown-ups were yawning and wondering why. But even now he was empty. Not real. The 'Nobody-there' feeling was as acute as ever to all the small, keen, perceptive minds that saw him as he was.

Chapter 3. Sated Eater

LATER, at bedtime, only Charles wanted to talk about the matter. It seemed to Jane that Beatrice had grown up a little since the early afternoon. Bobby was reading 'The Jungle Book,' or pretending to, with much pleased admiration of the pictures showing Shere Khan, the tiger. Emily had turned her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep.

'Aunt Bessie called me,' Jane told her, sensing a faint reproach.

'I tried as soon as I could to get away from her. She wanted to try that collar thing on me.'

'Oh.' The apology was accepted. But Beatrice still refused to talk. Jane went over to Emily's bed and put her arm around the little girl.

'Mad at me, Emily?'

'No.'

'You are, though. I couldn't help it, honey.'

'It was all right,' Emily said, 'I didn't care.'

'All bright and shiny,' Charles said sleepily. 'Like a Christmas tree.'

Beatrice whirled on him. 'Shut up!' she cried 'Shut up, Charles! Shut up, shut up, *shut up* !'

Aunt Bessie put her head into the room.

'What's the matter, children?' she asked.

'Nothing, Auntie,' Beatrice said. 'We were just playing.'

Fed, temporarily satiated, it lay torpid in its curious nest. The house was silent, the occupants asleep. Even the Wrong Uncle slept, for Ruggedo was a good mimic.

The Wrong Uncle was not a phantasm, not a mere projection of Ruggedo. As an amoeba extends a pseudopod toward food, so Ruggedo had extended and created the Wrong Uncle. But there the parallel stopped. For the Wrong Uncle was not an elastic extension that could be withdrawn at will. Rather, he—it—was a permanent limb, as a man's arm is. From the brain through the neural system the message goes, and the arm stretches out, the fingers constrict—and there is food in the hand's grip.

But Ruggedo's extension was less limited. It was not permanently bound by rigid natural laws of structure, function. An arm may be painted black. And the Wrong Uncle looked and acted human, except to clear immature eyes.

There were rules to be followed, even by Ruggedo. The natural laws of a world could bind it to a certain extent. There were cycles. The life-span of a moth-caterpillar is run by cycles, and before it can spin its cocoon and metamorphose, it must eat—eat—eat. Not until the time of change had come can it evade its current incarnation. Nor could Ruggedo change, now, until the end of its cycle had come. Then there would be another metamorphosis, as there had already, in the unthinkable eternity of its past, been a million curious mutations.

But, at present, it was bound by the rules of its current cycle. The extension could not be withdrawn. And the Wrong Uncle was a part of it, and it was a part of the Wrong Uncle.

The Scoodler's body and the Scoodler's head. Through the dark house beat the unceasing, drowsy waves of satiety—slowly, imperceptibly quickening toward that nervous pulse of avidity that always came after the processes of indigestion and digestion had been completed.

Aunt Bessie rolled over and began to snore. In another room, the Wrong Uncle, without waking, turned on his Back and also snored.

The talent of protective mimicry was well developed. ...

It was afternoon again, though by only half an hour, and the pulse in the house had changed subtly in tempo and mood.

'If we're going up to Santa Barbara,' Grandmother Keaton had said, 'I'm going to take the children down to the dentist today. Their teeth want cleaning, and it's hard enough to get an appointment with Dr. Hover for one youngster, not to mention four. Jane, your mother wrote me you'd been to the dentist a month ago, so you needn't go.'

After that the trouble hung unspoken over the children. But no one mentioned it. Only, as Grandmother Keaton herded the kids out on the porch, Beatrice waited till last. Jane was in the doorway, watching. Beatrice reached behind her without looking, fumbled, found Jane's hand, and squeezed it hard. That was all.

But the responsibility had been passed on. No words had been needed. Beatrice had said plainly that it was Jane's job now. It was her responsibility.

She dared not delay too long. She was too vividly aware of the rising tide of depression affecting the adults. Ruggedo was getting hungry again.

She watched her cousins till they vanished beneath the pepper-trees, and the distant rumble of the trolley put a period to any hope of their return. After that, Jane walked to the butcher shop, and bought two pounds of meat. She drank a soda. Then she came back to the house.

She felt the pulse beating out faster.

She got a tin pan from the kitchen and put the meat on it, and slipped up to the bathroom. It was hard to reach the attic with her burden and without help, but she did it. In the warm stillness beneath the roof she stood waiting, half-hoping to hear Aunt Bessie call again and relieve her of this duty. But no voice came.

The simple mechanics of what she had to do were sufficiently prosaic to keep fear at a little distance. Besides, she was scarcely nine. And it was not dark in the attic.

She walked along the rafter, balancing, till she came to the plank bridge. She felt its resilient vibration underfoot.

'One, two, buckle my shoe, Three, four, knock at the door, Five, six, pick up sticks, Seven, eight—'

She missed the way twice. The third time she succeeded. The mind had to be at just the right pitch of abstraction. . . . She crossed the bridge, and turned, and—

It was dim, almost dark, in this place. It smelled cold and hollow, of the underground. Without surprise she knew she was deep down, perhaps beneath the house, perhaps very far away from it. That was as acceptable to her as the rest of the strangeness. She felt no surprise.

Curiously, she seemed to know the way. She was going into a tiny enclosure, and yet at the same time she wandered for awhile through low-roofed, hollow spaces, endless, very dim, smelling of cold and moisture. An unpleasant place to the mind, and a dangerous place as well to wander through with one's little pan of meat.

It found the meat acceptable.

Looking back later, Jane had no recollection whatever of *it*. She did not know how she had proffered the food, or how it had been received, or where in that place of paradoxical space and smallness *it* lay dreaming of other worlds and eras.

She only knew that the darkness spun around her again, winking with little lights, as it devoured its food. Memories swirled from its mind to hers as if the two minds were of one fabric. She saw more clearly this time. She saw a great winged thing caged in a glittering pen, and she remembered as Ruggedo remembered, and leaped with Ruggedo's leap, feeling the wings buffet about her and feeling her rending hunger rip into the body, and tasting avidly the hot, sweet, salty fluid bubbling out.

It was a mixed memory. Blending with it, other victims shifted beneath Ruggedo's grip, the feathery pinions becoming the beast of great clawed arms and the writhe of reptilian liness. All his victims became one in memory as he ate.

One flash of another memory opened briefly toward the last. Jane was aware of a great swaying garden of flowers larger than

herself, and of cowered figures moving silently among them, and of a victim with showering pale hair lying helpless upon the lip of one gigantic flower, held down with chains like shining blossoms. And it seemed to Jane that she herself went cowered among those silent figures, and that he—it—Ruggedo—in another guise walked beside her toward the sacrifice.

It was the first human sacrifice he had recalled. Jane would have liked to know more about that. She had no moral scruples, of course. Food was food. But the memory flickered smoothly into another picture and she never saw the end. She did not really need to see it. There was only one end to all these memories. Perhaps it was as well for her that Ruggedo did not dwell over-long on that particular moment of all his bloody meals.

'Seventeen, eighteen, Maids in waiting, Nineteen, twenty—'

She tilted precariously back across the rafters, holding her empty pan. The attic smelled dusty. It helped to take away the reek of remembered crimson from her mind. ...

When the children came back, Beatrice said simply, 'Did you?' and Jane nodded. The taboo still held. They would not discuss the matter more fully except in case of real need. And the drowsy, torpid heat in the house, the psychic emptiness of the Wrong Uncle, showed plainly that the danger had been averted again—for a time. . . .

'Read me about Mowgli, Granny,' Bobby said. Grandmother Keaton settled down, wiped and adjusted her spectacles, and took up Kipling. Presently the other children were drawn into the charmed circle. Grandmother spoke of Shere Khan's downfall—of the cattle driven into the deep gulch to draw the tiger—and of the earth-shaking stampede that smashed the killer into bloody pulp.

'Well,' Grandmother Keaton said, closing the book, 'that's the end of Shere Khan. He's dead now.'

'No he isn't,' Bobby roused and said sleepily.

'Of course he is. Good and dead. The cattle killed him.'

'Only at the end, Granny. If you start reading at the beginning again, Shere Khan's right there.'

Bobby, of course, was too young to have any conception of death. You were killed sometimes in games of cowboys-and-Indians, an ending neither regrettable nor fatal. Death is an absolute term that needs personal experience to be made understandable.

Uncle Lew smoked his pipe and wrinkled the brown skin around his eyes at Uncle Bert, who bit his lips and hesitated a long time between moves. But Uncle Lew won the chess game anyway. Uncle James winked at Aunt Gertrude and said he thought he'd take a walk, would she like to come along? She would.

After their departure, Aunt Bessie looked up, sniffed.

'You just take a whiff of their breaths when they come back, Ma,' she said. 'Why do you stand for it?'

But Grandmother Keaton chuckled and stroked Bobby's hair. He had fallen asleep on her lap, his hands curled into small fists, his cheeks faintly flushed.

Uncle Simon's gaunt figure stood by the window.

He watched through the curtains, and said nothing at all.

'Early to bed,' Aunt Bessie said, 'if we're going to Santa Barbara in the morning, children!'

And that was that.

Chapter 4. End of the Game

BY morning Bobby was running a temperature, and Grandmother Keaton refused to risk his life in Santa Barbara. This made Bobby very sullen, but solved the problem the children had been wondering about for many hours. Also, a telephone call from Jane's father said that he was arriving that day to pick up his daughter, and she had a little brother now. Jane, who had no illusions about the stork, was relieved, and hoped her mother wouldn't be sick any more now.

A conclave was held in Bobby's bedroom before breakfast.

'You know what to do, Bobby,' Beatrice said. 'Promise you'll do it?'

'Promise. Uh-huh.'

'You can do it today, Janie, before your father comes. And you'd better get a lot of meat and leave it for Bobby.'

'I can't buy any meat without money,' Bobby said. Somewhat reluctantly Beatrice counted out what was left of Jane's small hoard, and handed it over. Bobby stuffed the change under his pillow and pulled at the red flannel wound around his neck.

'It scratches,' he said. 'I'm not sick, anyway.'

'It was those green pears you ate yesterday,' Emily said very meanly. 'You thought nobody saw you, didn't you?'

Charles came in; he had been downstairs. He was breathless.

'Hey, know what happened?' he said. '*He* hurt his foot. Now he can't go to Santa Barbara. I bet he did it on purpose.'

'Gosh,' Jane said. 'How?'

'He said he twisted it on the stairs. But I bet it's a lie. He just doesn't want to go.'

'Maybe he *can't* go—that far,' Beatrice said, with a sudden flash of intuition, and they spoke no more of the subject. But Beatrice, Emily and Charles were all relieved that the Wrong Uncle was not to go to Santa Barbara with them, after all.

It took two taxis to carry the travelers and their luggage. Grandmother Keaton, the Wrong Uncle, and Jane stood on the front porch and waved. The automobiles clattered off, and Jane promptly got some money from Bobby and went to the butcher store, returning heavy-laden.

The Wrong Uncle, leaning on a cane, hobbled into the sun-parlor and lay down. Grandmother Keaton made a repulsive but healthful drink for Bobby, and Jane decided not to do what she had to do until afternoon. Bobby read 'The Jungle Book,' stumbling over the hard words, and, for the while, the truce held.

Jane was not to forget that day quickly. The smells were sharply distinct; the odor of baking bread from the kitchen, the sticky-sweet flower scents from outside, the slightly dusty, rich-brown aroma exhaled by the sun-warmed rugs and furniture.

Grandmother Keaton went up to her bedroom to cold-cream her hands and face, and Jane lounged on the threshold, watching.

It was a charming room, in its comfortable, unimaginative way. The curtains were so stiffly starched that they billowed out in

crisp whiteness, and the bureau was cluttered with fascinating objects—a pin-cushion shaped like a doll, a tiny red china shoe, with tinier gray china mice on it, a cameo brooch bearing a portrait of Grandmother Keaton as a girl.

And slowly, insistently, the pulse increased, felt even here, in this bedroom, where Jane felt it was a rather impossible intrusion. Directly after lunch the bell rang, and it was Jane's father, come to take her back to San Francisco. He was in a hurry to catch the train, and there was time only for a hurried conversation before the two were whisked off in the waiting taxi. But Jane had found time to run upstairs and say good-by to Bobby— and tell him where the meat was hidden.

'All right, Janie,' Bobby said. 'Good-by.'

She knew she should not have left the job to Bobby. A nagging sense of responsibility haunted her all the way to the railroad station. She was only vaguely aware of adult voices saying the train would be very late, and of her father suggesting that the circus was in town. . . .

It was a good circus. She almost forgot Bobby and the crisis that would be mounting so dangerously unless he met it as he had promised. Early evening was blue as they moved with the crowd out of the tent. And then through a rift Jane saw a small, familiar figure, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach. She *knew*.

Mr. Larkin saw Bobby in almost the same instant. He called sharply, and a moment later the two children were looking at one another, Bobby's plump face sullen.

'Does your grandmother know you're here, Bobby?' Mr. Larkin said.

'Well, I guess not,' Bobby said.

'You ought to be paddled, young man. Come along, both of you. I'll have to phone her right away. She'll be worried to death.'

In the drug store, while he telephoned, Jane looked at her cousin. She was suffering the first pangs of maturity's burden, the knowledge of responsibility misused.

'Bobby,' she said. 'Did you?'

'You leave me alone,' Bobby said with a scowl. There was silence.

Mr. Larkin came back. 'Nobody answered. I've called a taxi. There'll be just time to get Bobby back before our train leaves.'

In the taxi also there was mostly silence. As for what might be happening at the house, Jane did not think of that at all. The mind has its own automatic protections. And in any case, it was too late now. . . .

When the taxi drew up, the house was blazing with orange squares of windows in the dusk. There were men on the porch, and light glinted on a police officer's shield.

'You kids wait here,' Mr. Larkin said uneasily. 'Don't get out of the car.'

The taxi driver shrugged and pulled out a folded newspaper as Mr. Larkin hurried toward the porch. In the back seat Jane spoke to Bobby, her voice very soft.

'You didn't,' she whispered. It was not even an accusation.

'I don't care,' Bobby whispered back. 'I was tired of that game. I wanted to play something else.' He giggled. 'I won, anyhow,' he declared.

'How? What happened?'

'The police came, like I knew they would. *He* never thought of that. So I won.'

'But how?'

'Well, it was sort of like 'The Jungle Book.' Shooting tigers, remember? They tied a kid to a stake and, when the tiger comes—bang! Only the kids were all gone to Santa Barbara, and you'd gone too. So I used Granny. I didn't think she'd mind. She plays games with us a lot. And anyhow she was the only one left.'

'But Bobby, a kid doesn't mean a kid like us. It means a baby goat. And anyhow——'

'Oh!' Bobby whispered. 'Oh—well, anyhow, I thought Granny would be all right. She's too fat to run fast.' He grinned scornfully. '*He's* dumb,' he said. 'He should have known the hunters always come when you tie a kid out for the tiger. He doesn't know anything. When I told him I'd locked Granny in her room and nobody else was around, I thought he might guess.' Bobby looked crafty. 'I was smart. I told him through the window. I thought he might think about me being a kid. But he didn't. He went right upstairs—fast. He even forgot to limp. I guess he was pretty hungry by then.' Bobby glanced toward the swarming porch. 'Trobbly the police have got him now,' he added carelessly. 'It was easy as pie. I won.'

Jane's mind had not followed these fancies.

'Ts she dead?' she asked, very softly.

Bobby looked at her. The word had a different meaning for him. It had *no* meaning, beyond a phase in a game. And, to his knowledge, the tiger had never harmed the tethered kid.

Mr. Larkin was coming back to the taxi now, walking very slowly and not very straight.

Jane could not see his face. . . .

It was hushed up, of course, as much as possible. The children, who knew so much more than those who were shielding them,

were futilely protected from the knowledge of what had happened. As futilely as they in their turn, had tried to protect their elders. Except for the two oldest girls, they didn't particularly care. The game was over. Granny had had to go away on a long, long journey, and she would never be back.

They understood what *that* meant well enough.

The Wrong Uncle, on the other hand, had had to go away too, they were told, to a big hospital where he would be taken care of all his life.

This puzzled them all a little, for it fell somewhat outside the limits of their experience. Death they understood very imperfectly, but this other thing was completely mystifying. They didn't greatly care, once their interest faded, though Bobby for some time listened to readings of 'The Jungle Book' with unusual attention, wondering if this time they would take the tiger away instead of killing him on the spot. They never did, of course. Evidently in real life tigers were different.

...

For a long time afterward, in nightmares, Jane's perverse imagination dwelt upon and relived the things she would not let it remember when she was awake. She would see Granny's bedroom as she had seen it last, the starched curtains billowing, the sunshine, the red china shoe, the doll pin-cushion. Granny, rubbing cold cream into her wrinkled hands and looking up more and more nervously from time to time as the long, avid waves of hunger pulsed through the house from the thing in its dreadful hollow place down below.

It must have been very hungry. The Wrong Uncle, pretending to a wrenched ankle downstairs, must have shifted and turned upon the couch, that hollow man, empty and blind of everything but the need for sustenance, the one red food he could not live without. The empty automaton in the sunporch and the ravenous being in its warp below pulsing with one hunger, ravening for one food. . . .

It had been very wise of Bobby to speak through the window when he delivered his baited message.

Upstairs in the locked room, Granny must have discovered presently that she could not get out. Her fat, mottled fingers, slippery from cold-creaming, must have tugged vainly at the knob.

Jane dreamed of the sound of those footsteps many times. The tread she had never heard was louder and more real to her than any which had ever sounded in her ears. She knew very surely how they must have come bounding up the stairs, thump, thump, thump, two steps at a time, so that Granny would look up in alarm, knowing it could not be the uncle with his wrenched ankle. She would have jumped up then, her heart knocking, thinking wildly of burglars.

It can't have lasted long. The steps would have taken scarcely

the length of a heartbeat to come down the hall. And by now the house would be shaking and pulsing with one triumphant roar of hunger almost appeased. The thumping steps would beat in rhythm to it, the long quick strides coming with dreadful purposefulness down the hall. And then the key clicking in the lock. And then——

Usually then Jane awoke. ...

A little boy isn't responsible. Jane told herself that many times, then and later. She didn't see Bobby again very often, and when she did he had forgotten a great deal; new experiences had crowded out the old. He got a puppy for Christmas, and he started to school. When he heard that the Wrong Uncle had died in the asylum he had to think hard to remember who they meant, for to the younger children the Wrong Uncle had never been a member of the family, only a part in a game they had played and won. Gradually the nameless distress which had once pervaded the household faded and ceased. It was strongest, most desperate, in the days just after Granny's death, but everyone attributed that to shock. When it died away they were sure.

By sheer accident Bobby's cold, limited logic had been correct. Ruggedo would not have been playing fair if he had brought still another Wrong Uncle into the game, and Bobby had trusted him to observe the rules. He did observe them, for they were a law he could not break.

Ruggedo and the Wrong Uncle were parts of a whole, in-dissolubly bound into their cycle. Not until the cycle had been successfully completed could the Wrong Uncle extension be retracted or the cord broken. So, in the end, Ruggedo was helpless.

In the asylum, the Wrong Uncle slowly starved. He would not touch what they offered. He knew what he wanted, but they would not give him that. The head and the body died together, and the house that had been Grandmother Keaton's was peaceful once more.

If Bobby ever remembered, no one knew it. He had acted with perfect logic, limited only by his experience. If you do something sufficiently bad, the policeman will come and get you. And he was tired of the game. Only his competitive instinct kept him from simply quitting it and playing something else.

As it was, he wanted to win—and he had won.

No adult would have done what Bobby did—but a child is of a different species. By adult standards, a child is not wholly sane.

Because of the way his mind worked, then—because of what he did, and what he wanted——

Call him demon.

10. THE PIPER'S SON

The Green Man was climbing the glass mountains, and hairy, gnomish faces peered at him from crevices. This was only another step in the Green Man's endless, exciting odyssey. He'd had a great many adventures already—in the Flame Country} among the Dimension Changers, with the City Apes who sneered endlessly while their blunt, clumsy fingers fumbled at deathrays. The trolls, however, were masters of magic, and were trying to stop the Green Man with spells. Little whirlwinds of force spun underfoot, trying to trip the Green Man, a figure of marvelous muscular development, handsome as a god, and hairless from head to foot, glistening pale green. The whirlwinds formed a fascinating pattern. If you could thread a precarious path among them—avoiding the pale yellow ones especially—you could get through.

And the hairy gnomes watched malignantly, jealously, from their crannies in the glass crags.

Al Burkhalter, having recently achieved the mature status of eight full years, lounged under a tree and masticated a grass blade.

He was so immersed in his daydreams that his father had to nudge his side gently to bring comprehension into the half-closed eyes. It was a good day for dreaming, anyway—a hot sun and a cool wind blowing down from the white Sierra peaks to the east.

Timothy grass sent its faintly musty fragrance along the channels of air, and Ed Burkhalter was glad that his son was second-generation since the Blowup. He himself had been born ten years after the last bomb had been dropped, but secondhand memories

can be pretty bad too.

'Hello, Al,' he said, and the youth vouchsafed a half-lidded glance of tolerant acceptance.

'Hi, Dad.'

'Want to come downtown with me?'

'Nope,' Al said, relaxing instantly into his stupor.

Burkhalter raised a figurative eyebrow and half turned. On an impulse, then, he did something he rarely did without the tacit permission of the other party; he used his telepathic power to reach into Al's mind. There was, he admitted to himself, a certain hesitancy, a subconscious unwillingness on his part, to do this, even though Al had pretty well outgrown the nasty, inhuman formlessness of mental babyhood. There had been a time when Al's mind had been quite shocking in its alienage. Burkhalter remembered a few abortive experiments he had made before Al's birth; few fathers-to-be could resist the temptation to experiment with embryonic brains, and that had brought back nightmares Burkhalter had not had since his youth. There had been enormous rolling masses, and an appalling vastness, and other things. Prenatal memories were ticklish, and should be left to qualified mnemonic psychologists.

But now Al was maturing, and daydreaming, as usual, in bright colors. Burkhalter, reassured, felt that he had fulfilled his duty as a monitor and left his son still eating grass and ruminating.

Just the same, there was a sudden softness inside of him, and the aching, futile pity he was apt to feel for helpless things that were as yet unqualified for conflict with that extraordinarily complicated business of living. Conflict, competition, had not died out when war abolished itself; the business of adjustment even to one's surroundings was a conflict, and conversation a duel. With Al, too, there was a double problem. Yes, language was in effect a tariff wall, and a Baldy could appreciate that thoroughly, since the wall didn't exist between Baldies.

Walking down the rubbery walk that led to town center, Burkhalter grinned wryly and ran lean fingers through his well-kept wig. Strangers were very often surprised to know that he was a Baldy, a telepath. They looked at him with wondering eyes, too courteous to ask how it felt to be a freak, but obviously avid. Burkhalter, who knew diplomacy, would be quite willing to lead the conversation.

'My folks lived near Chicago after the Blowup. That was why.'

'Oh.' Stare. 'I'd heard that was why so many——' Startled pause.

'Freaks or mutations. There were both. I still don't know which class I belong to,' he'd add disarmingly.

'You're no freak!' They didn't protest too much.

'Well, some mighty queer specimens came out of the radioactive-affected areas around the bomb-targets. Funny things happened to the germ plasm. Most of 'em died out; they couldn't reproduce; but you'll still find a few creatures in sanitariums—two heads, you know. And so on.'

Nevertheless they were always ill at ease. 'You mean you can read my mind—now?'

T could, but I'm not. It's hard work, except with another tele-path. And we Baldies—well, we don't, that's all.' A man with abnormal muscle development wouldn't go around knocking people down. Not unless he wanted to be mobbed. Baldies were always sneakily conscious of a hidden peril: lynch law. And wise Baldies didn't even imply that they had an ... extra sense. They just said they were different, and let it go at that.

But one question was always implied, though not always mentioned. 'If I were a telepath, I'd ... how much do you make a year?'

They were surprised at the answer. A mindreader certainly could make a fortune, if he wanted. So why did Ed Burkhalter stay a semantics expert in Modoc Publishing Town, when a trip to one of the science towns would enable him to get hold of secrets that would get him a fortune?

There was a good reason. Self-preservation was a part of it. For which reason Burkhalter, and many like him, wore toupees. Though there were many Baldies who did not.

Modoc was a twin town with Pueblo, across the mountain barrier south of the waste that had been Denver. Pueblo held the presses, photolinotypes, and the machines that turned scripts into books, after Modoc had dealt with them. There was a helicopter distribution fleet at Pueblo, and for the last week Oldfield, the manager, had been demanding the manuscript of 'Psychohistory,' turned out by a New Yale man who had got tremendously involved in past emotional problems, to the detriment of literary clarity. The truth was that he distrusted Burkhalter. And Burkhalter, neither a priest nor a psychologist, had to become both without admitting it to the confused author of 'Psychohistory.'

The sprawling buildings of the publishing house lay ahead and below, more like a resort than anything more utilitarian. That had been necessary. Authors were peculiar people, and often it was necessary to induce them to take hydrotherapeutic treatments before they were in shape to work out their books with the semantic experts. Nobody was going to bite them, but they didn't realize that, and either cowered in corners, terrified, or else blustered their way around, using language few could understand. Jem Quayle, author of 'Psychohistory,' fitted into neither group; he was simply baffled by the intensity of his own research. His personal history had qualified him too well for emotional involvements with the past—and that was a serious matter when a thesis of this particular type was in progress.

Dr. Moon, who was on the Board, sat near the south entrance, eating an apple which he peeled carefully with his silver-hiked dagger. Moon was fat, short, and shapeless; he didn't have much hair, but he wasn't telepath; Baldies were entirely hairless. He gulped and waved at Burkhalter.

'Ed . . . urp . . . want to talk to you.'

'Sure,' Burkhalter said, agreeably coming to a standstill arid rocking on his heels. Ingrained habit made him sit down beside the Boardman; Baldies, for obvious reasons, never stood up when non-telepaths were sitting. Their eyes met now on the same level.

Burkhalter said, 'What's up?'

'The store got some Shasta apples flown in yesterday. Better

tell Ethel to get some before they're sold out. Here.' Moon watched his companion eat a chunk, and nod.

'Good. I'll have her get some. The copter's laid up for today, though; Ethel pulled the wrong gadget.'

'Foolproof,' Moon said bitterly. 'Huron's turning out some sweet models these days; I'm getting my new one from Michigan.

Listen, Pueblo called me this morning on Quayle's book.'

'Oldfield?'

'Our boy,' Moon nodded. 'He says can't you send over even a few chapters.'

Burkhalter shook his head. 'I don't think so. There are some abstracts right in the beginning that just have to be clarified, and Quayle is——' He hesitated.

'What?'

Burkhalter thought about the Oedipus complex he'd uncovered in Quayle's mind, but that was sacrosanct, even though it kept Quayle from interpreting Darius with cold logic. 'He's got muddy thinking in there. I can't pass it; I tried it on three readers yesterday, and got different reactions from all of them. So far "Psychohistory" is all things to all men. The critics would lambaste us if we released the book as it is. Can't you string Oldfield along for a while longer?'

'Maybe,' Moon said doubtfully. 'I've got a subjective novella I could rush over. It's light vicarious eroticism, and that's harmless; besides, it's semantically O.K.'d. We've been holding it up for an artist, but I can put Duman on it. I'll do that, yeah. I'll shoot the script over to Pueblo and he can make the plates later. A merry life we lead, Ed.'

'A little too merry sometimes,' Burkhalter said. He got up, nodded, and went in search of Quayle, who was relaxing on one of the sun decks.

Quayle was a thin, tall man with a worried face and the abstract air of an unshelled tortoise. He lay on his flexiglass couch, direct sunlight toasting him from above, while the reflected rays sneaked up on him from below, through the transparent crystal.

Burkhalter pulled off his shirt and dropped on a sunner beside Quayle. The author glanced at Burkhalter's hairless chest and half-formed revulsion rose in him: *A Baldy ... no privacy ... none of his business ... fake eyebrows and lashes; he's still a——* Something ugly, at that point.

Diplomatically Burkhalter touched a button, and on a screen overhead a page of 'Psychohistory' appeared, enlarged and easily readable. Quayle scanned the sheet. It had code notations on it, made by the readers, recognized by Burkhalter as varied reactions to what should have been straight-line explanations. If three readers had got three different meanings out of that paragraph—well, what *did* Quayle mean? He reached delicately into the mind, conscious of useless guards erected against intrusion, mud barricades over which his mental eye stole like a searching, quiet wind. No ordinary man could guard his mind against a Baldy. But Baldies could guard their privacy against intrusion by other telepaths—adults, that is. There was a psychic selector band, Here it came. But muddled a bit. *Darius*: that wasn't simply a word; it wasn't a picture, either; it was really a second *life*. But scattered, fragmentary. Scraps of scent and sound, and memories, and emotional reactions. Admiration and hatred. A burning impotence. A black tornado, smelling of pine, roaring across a map of Europe and Asia. Pine scent stronger now, and horrible humiliation, and remembered pain . . . eyes . . . *Get out!*

Burkhalter put down the dictograph mouthpiece and lay looking up through the darkened eye-shells he had donned. 'T got out as soon as you warned me to,' he said. 'I'm still out.'

Quayle lay there, breathing hard. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Apologies. Why you don't ask a duello——'

'I don't want to duel with you,' Burkhalter said. 'I've never put blood on my dagger in my life. Besides, I can see your side of it. Remember, this is my job, Mr. Quayle, and I've learned a lot of things—that I've forgotten again.'

'It's intrusion; I suppose. I tell myself that it doesn't matter, but my privacy—is important.'

Burkhalter said patiently, 'We can keep trying it from different angles until we find one that isn't too private. Suppose, for example, I asked you if you admired Darius.'

Admiration . . . and pine scent . . . and Burkhalter said quickly, 'I'm out. O.K.?' s,

'Thanks,' Quayle muttered. He turned on his side, away from the other man. After a moment he said, 'That's silly—turning over, I mean. You don't have to see my face to know what I'm thinking.'

'You have to put out the welcome mat before I walk in,' Burkhalter told him.

'I guess I believe that. I've met some Baldies, though, that were . . . that I didn't like.'

'There's a lot on that order, sure. I know the type. The ones who don't wear wigs.'

Quayle said, 'They'll read your mind and embarrass you just for the fun of it. They ought to be—taught better.'

Burkhalter blinked in the sunlight. 'Well, Mr. Quayle, it's this way. A Baldy's got his problems, too. He's got to orient himself to a world that isn't telepathic; and I suppose a lot of Baldies rather feel that they're letting their specialization go to waste. There *are* jobs a man like me is suited for——'

'*Man!*' He caught the scrap of thought from Quayle. He ignored it, his face as always a mobile mask, and went on.

'Semantics have always been a problem, even in countries speaking only one tongue. A qualified Baldy is a swell interpreter. And, though there aren't any Baldies on the detective forces, they often work with the police. It's rather like being a machine that can do only a few things.'

'A few things more than humans can,' Quayle said.

Sure, Burkhalter thought, if we could compete on equal footing with nontelepathic humanity. But would blind men trust one who could see? Would they play poker with him? A sudden, deep bitterness put an unpleasant taste in Burkhalter's mouth. What was the answer? Reservations for Baldies? Isolation? And would a nation of blind men trust those with vision enough for that? Or would they be dusted off—the sure cure, the check-and-balance system that made war an impossibility.

He remembered when Red Bank had been dusted off, and maybe that had been justified. The town was getting too big for its boots, and personal dignity was a vital factor; you weren't willing to lose face as long as a dagger swung at your belt. Similarly, the thousands upon thousands of little towns that covered America, each with its peculiar speciality—helicopter manufacture for Huron and Michigan, vegetable farming for Conoy and Diego, textiles and education and art and machines—each little town had a wary eye on all the others. The science and research centers were a little larger; nobody objected to that, for technicians never made war except under pressure; but few of the towns held more than a few hundred families. It was check-and-balance in a most efficient degree; whenever a town showed signs of wanting to become a city—thence, a capital, thence, an imperialistic empire—it was dusted off. Though that had not happened for a long while. And Red Bank might have been a mistake.

Geopolitically it was a fine setup; sociologically it was acceptable, but brought necessary changes. There was subconscious swashbuckling. The rights of the individual had become more highly regarded as decentralization took place. And men learned. They learned a monetary system based primarily upon barter. They learned to fly; nobody drove surface cars. They learned new things, but they did not forget the Blowup, and in secret places near every town were hidden the bombs that could utterly and fantastically exterminate a town, as such bombs had exterminated the cities during the Blowup.

And everybody knew how to make those bombs. They were beautifully, terribly simple. You could find the ingredients anywhere and prepare them easily. Then you could take your helicopter over a town, drop an egg overside—and perform an erasure.

Outside of the wilderness malcontents, the maladjusted people found in every race, nobody kicked. And the roaming tribes never raided and never banded together in large groups—for fear of an erasure.

The artisans were maladjusted too, to some degree, but they weren't antisocial, so they lived where they wanted and painted, wrote, composed, and retreated into their own private worlds. The scientists, equally maladjusted in other lines, retreated to their slightly larger towns, banding together in small universes, and turned out remarkable technical achievements.

And the Baldies—found jobs where they could.

No non-telepath would have viewed the world environment quite as Burkhalter did. He was abnormally conscious of the human element, attaching a deeper, more profound significance to those human values, undoubtedly because he saw men in more than the ordinary dimensions. And also, in a way—and inevitably—he looked at humanity from outside.

Yet he was human. The barrier that telepathy had raised made men suspicious of him, more so than if he had had two heads—then they could have pitied. As it was——

As it was, he adjusted the scanner until new pages of the typescript came flickering into view above. 'Say when,' he told Quayle. Quayle brushed back his gray hair. 'I feel sensitive all over,' he objected. 'After all, I've been under a considerable strain correlating my material.'

'Well, we can always postpone publication.' Burkhalter threw out the suggestion casually, and was pleased when Quayle didn't nibble. He didn't like to fail, either.

'No. No, I want to get the thing done now.'

'Mental catharsis——'

'Well, by a psychologist, perhaps. But not by——'

'—a Baldy. You know that a lot of psychologists have Baldy helpers. They get good results, too.'

Quayle turned on the tobacco smoke, inhaling slowly. 'I suppose ... I've not had much contact with Baldies. Or too much—without selectivity. I saw some in an asylum once. I'm not being offensive, am I?'

'No,' Burkhalter said. 'Every mutation can run too close to the line. There were lots of failures. The hard radiations brought about one true mutation: hairless telepaths, but they didn't all hew true to the line. The mind's a queer gadget—you know that. It's a colloid balancing, figuratively, on the point of a pin. If there's any flaw, telepathy's apt to bring it out. So you'll find that the Blowup caused a hell of a lot of insanity. Not only among the Baldies, but among the other mutations that developed then. Except that the Baldies are almost always paranoidal.'

'And dementia praecox,' Quayle said, finding relief from his own embarrassment in turning the spotlight on Burkhalter.

'And d.p. Yeah. When a confused mind acquires the telepathic instinct—a hereditary bollixed mind—it can't handle it all. There's disorientation. The paranoia group retreat into their own worlds, and the d.p.'s simply don't realize that *this* world exists. There are distinctions, but I think that's a valid basis.'

'In a way,' Quayle said, 'it's frightening. I can't think of any historical parallel.'

'No.'

'What do you think the end of it will be?'

'I don't know,' Burkhalter said thoughtfully. 'I think we'll be assimilated. There hasn't been enough time yet. We're specialized in a certain way, and we're useful in certain jobs.'

'If you're satisfied to stay there. The Baldies who won't wear wigs——'

'They're so bad-tempered I expect they'll all be killed off in duels eventually,' Burkhalter smiled. 'No great loss. The rest of us, we're getting what we want—acceptance. We don't have horns or halos.'

Quayle shook his head. 'I'm glad, I think, that I'm not a tele-path. The mind's mysterious enough anyway, without new doors opening. Thanks for letting me talk. I think I've got part of it talked out, anyway. Shall we try the script again?'

'Sure,' Burkhalter said, and again the procession of pages flickered on the screen above them. Quayle did seem less guarded; his thoughts were more lucid, and Burkhalter was able to get at the true meanings of many of the hitherto muddy statements. They worked easily, the telepath dictating rephrasings into his dictograph, and only twice did they have to hurdle emotional tangles. At noon they knocked off, and Burkhalter, with a friendly nod, took the dropper to his office, where he found some calls listed on the visor. He ran off repeats, and a worried look crept into his blue eyes.

He talked with Dr. Moon in a booth at luncheon. The conversation lasted so long that only the induction cups kept the coffee hot, but Burkhalter had more than one problem to discuss. And he'd known Moon for a long time. The fat man was one of the few who were not, he thought, subconsciously repelled by the fact that Burkhalter was a Baldy.

'I've never fought a duel in my life, Doc. I can't afford to.'

'You can't afford not to. You can't turn down the challenge, Ed. It isn't done.'

'But this fellow Reilly—I don't even know him.'

'I know of him,' Moon said. 'He's got a bad temper. Dueled a lot.'

Burkhalter slammed his hand down on the table. 'It's ridiculous. I won't do it!'

'Well,' Moon said practically, 'your wife can't fight him. And

if Ethel's been reading Mrs. Reilly's mind and gossiping, Reilly's got a case.'

'Don't you think we know the dangers of that?' Burkhalter asked in a low voice. 'Ethel doesn't go around reading minds any more than I do. It'd be fatal—for us. And for any other Baldy.'

'Not the hairless ones. The ones who won't wear wigs. They——'

'They're fools. And they're giving all the Baldies a bad name. Point one, Ethel doesn't read minds; she didn't read Mrs. Reilly's. Point two, she doesn't gossip.'

'La Reilly is obviously an hysterical type,' Moon said. 'Word got around about this scandal, whatever it was, and Mrs. Reilly remembered she'd seen Ethel lately. She's the type who needs a scapegoat anyway. I rather imagine she let word drop herself, and had to cover up so her husband wouldn't blame her.'

'I'm not going to accept Reilly's challenge,' Burkhalter said doggedly.

'You'll have to.'

'Listen, Doc, maybe——'

'What?'

'Nothing. An idea. It might work. Forget about that; I think I've got the right answer. It's the only one, anyway. I can't afford a duel and that's flat.'

'You're not a coward.'

'There's one thing Baldies are afraid of,' Burkhalter said, 'and that's public opinion. I happen to know I'd kill Reilly. That's the reason why I've never dueled in my life.'

Moon drank coffee. 'Hm-m-m. I think——'

'Don't. There was something else. I'm wondering if I ought to send Al off to a special school.'

'What's wrong with the kid?'

'He's turning out to be a beautiful delinquent. His teacher called me this morning. The playback was something to hear. He's talking funny and acting funny. Playing nasty little tricks on his friends—if he has any left by now.'

'All kids are cruel.'

'Kids don't know what cruelty means. That's why they're cruel; they lack empathy. But Al's getting——' Burkhalter gestured helplessly. 'He's turning into a young tyrant. He doesn't seem to give a care about anything, according to his teacher.'

'That's not too abnormal, so far.'

'That's not the worst. He's become very egotistical. Too much so. I don't want him to turn into one of the wigless Baldies you were mentioning,' Burkhalter didn't mention the other possibility; paranoia, insanity.

'He must pick things up somewhere. At home? Scarcely, Ed. Where else does he go?'

'The usual places. He's got a normal environment.'

'I should think,' Moon said, 'that a Baldy would have unusual opportunities in training; a youngster. The mental rapport— eh?'

'Yeah. But—I don't know. The trouble is,' Burkhalter said almost inaudibly, 'I wish to God I wasn't different. We didn't ask to be telepaths. Maybe it's all very wonderful in the long run, but I'm one person, and I've got my own microcosm. People who deal in long-term sociology are apt to forget that. They can figure out the answers, but it's every individual man—or Baldy—who's got to fight his own personal battle while he's alive. And it isn't as clear-cut as a battle. It's worse; it's the necessity of watching yourself every second, of fitting yourself into a world that doesn't want you.'

Moon looked uncomfortable. 'Are you being a little sorry for yourself, Ed?'

Burkhalter shook himself. 'I am, Doc. But I'll work it out.'

'We both will,' Moon said, but Burkhalter didn't really expect much help from him. Moon would be willing, but it was horribly different for an ordinary man to conceive that a Baldy was—the same. It was the difference that men looked for, and found. Anyway, he'd have to settle matters before he saw Ethel again. He could easily conceal the knowledge, but she would recognize a mental barrier and wonder. Their marriage had been the more ideal because of the additional rapport, something that compensated for an inevitable, half-sensed estrangement from the rest of the world.

'How's "Psychohistory" going?' Moon asked after a while.

'Better than I expected. I've got a new angle on Quayle. If I talk about myself, that seems to draw him out. It gives him enough confidence to let him open his mind to me. We may have those first chapters ready for Oldfield, in spite of everything.'

'Good. Just the same, he can't rush us. If we've got to shoot out books that fast, we might as well go back to the days of semantic confusion. Which we won't!'

'Well,' Burkhalter said, getting up, 'I'll smooch along. See you.'

'About Reilly——'

'Let it lay.' Burkhalter went out, heading for the address his visor had listed. He touched the dagger at his belt. Dueling wouldn't do for Baldies, but——

A greeting thought crept into his mind, and, under the arch that led into the campus, he paused to grin at Sam Shane, a New Orleans area Baldy who affected a wig of flaming red. They didn't bother to talk.

Personal question, involving mental, moral and physical well-being.

A satisfied glow. And you, Burkhalter? For an instant Burkhalter half-saw what the symbol of his name meant to Shane.

Shadow of trouble.

A warm, willing anxiousness to help. There was a bond between Baldies.

Burkhalter thought: But everywhere I'd go there'd be the same suspicion. We're freaks.

More so elsewhere, Shane thought. There are a lot of us in Modoc Town. People are invariably more suspicious where they're not in daily contact with—Us.

The boy——

I've trouble too, Shane thought. It's worried me. My two girls——

Delinquency?

Yes.

Common denominators?

Don't know. More than one of Us have had the same trouble with our kids.

Secondary characteristic of the mutation? Second generation emergence?

Doubtful, Shane thought, scowling in his mind, shading his concept with a wavering question. We'll think it over later. Must go.

Burkhalter sighed and went on his way. The houses were strung out around the central industry of Modoc, and he cut through a park toward his destination. It was a sprawling curved building, but it wasn't inhabited, so Burkhalter filed Reilly for future reference, and, with a glance at his timer, angled over a hillside toward the school. As he expected, it was recreation time, and he spotted Al lounging under a tree, some distance from his companions, who were involved in a pleasantly murderous game of Blowup.

He sent his thought ahead.

The Green Man had almost reached the top of the mountain. The hairy gnomes were pelting on his trail, most unfairly shooting sizzling light-streaks at their quarry, but the Green Man was agile enough to dodge. The rocks were leaning——
'Al.'

——inward, pushed by the gnomes, ready to——

'Al!' Burkhalter sent his thought with the word, jolting into the boy's mind, a trick he very seldom employed, since youth was practically defenseless against such invasion.

'Hello, Dad,' Al said, undisturbed. 'What's up?'

'A report from your teacher.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'She told me what it was. Listen, kid. Don't start getting any funny ideas in your head.'

'I'm not.'

'Do you think a Baldy is better or worse than a non-Baldy?'

Al moved his feet uncomfortably. He didn't answer.

'Well,' Burkhalter said, 'the answer is both and neither. And here's why. A Baldy can communicate mentally, but he lives in a world where most people can't.'

'They're dumb,' Al opined.

'Not so dumb, if they're better suited to their world than you are. You might as well say a frog's better than a fish because he's amphibian.' Burkhalter briefly amplified and explained the terms telepathically.

'Well ... oh, I get it, all right.'

'Maybe,' Burkhalter said slowly, 'what you need is a swift kick in the pants. The thought wasn't so hot. What was it again?'

Al tried to hide it, blanking out. Burkhalter began to lift the barrier, an easy matter for him, but stopped. Al regarded his father in a most unfilial way—in fact, as a sort of boneless fish That had been clear.

'If you're so egotistical,' Burkhalter pointed out, 'maybe you can see it this way. Do you know why there aren't any Baldies in key positions?'

'Sure I do,' Al said unexpectedly. "They're afraid.'

'Of what, then?'

'The——' That picture had been very curious, a commingling of something vaguely familiar to Burkhalter. 'The non-Baldies.'

'Well, if we took positions where we could take advantage of our telepathic function, non-Baldies would be plenty envious—especially if we were successes. If a Baldy even invented a better mousetrap, plenty of people would say he'd stolen the idea from some non-Baldy's mind. You get the point?'

'Yes, Dad.' But he hadn't. Burkhalter sighed and looked up. He recognized one of Shane's girls on a nearby hillside, sitting alone against a boulder. There were other isolated figures here and there. Far to the east the snowy rampart of the Rockies made an irregular pattern against blue sky.

'Al,' Burkhalter said, 'I don't want you to get a chip on your shoulder. This is a pretty swell world, and the people in it are, on the whole, nice people. There's a law of averages. It isn't sensible for us to get too much wealth or power, because that'd militate against us—and we don't need it anyway. Nobody's poor. We find our work, we do it, and we're reasonably happy. We have some advantages non-Baldies don't have; in marriage, for example. Mental intimacy is quite as important as physical. But I don't want you to feel that being a Baldy makes you a god. It doesn't. I can still,' he added thoughtfully, 'spank it out of you, in case you care to follow out that concept in your mind at the moment.'

Al gulped and beat a hasty retreat. 'I'm sorry. I won't do it again.'

'And keep your hair on, too. Don't take your wig off in class. Use the stickum stuff in the bathroom closet.'

'Yes, but . . . Mr. Venner doesn't wear a wig.'

'Remind me to do some historical research with you on zoot-suiters,' Burkhalter said. 'Mr. Venner's wiglessness is probably his only virtue, if you consider it one.'

'He makes money.'

'Anybody would, in that general store of his. But people don't buy from him if they can help it, you'll notice. That's what I mean by a chip on your shoulder. He's got one. There are Baldies like Venner, Al, but you might, sometimes, ask the guy if he's happy. For your information, I am. More than Venner, anyway. Catch?'

'Yes, Dad.' Al seemed submissive, but it was merely that. Burkhalter, still troubled, nodded and walked away. As he passed near the Shane girl's boulder he caught a scrap:— *at the summit of the Glass Mountains, rolling rocks back at the gnomes until*— He withdrew; it was an unconscious habit, touching minds that were sensitive, but with children it was definitely unfair. With adult Baldies it was simply the instinctive gesture of tipping your hat; one answered or one didn't. The barrier could be erected; there could be a blank-out; or there could be the direct snub of concentration on a single thought, private and not to be intruded on.

A copter with a string of gliders was coming in from the south: a freighter laden with frozen foods from South America, to judge by the markings. Burkhalter made a note to pick up an Argentine steak. He'd got a new recipe he wanted to try out, a charcoal broil with barbecue sauce, a welcome change from the short-wave cooked meats they'd been having for a week. Tomatoes, chile, mm-m—what else? Oh, yes. The duel with Reilly. Burkhalter absently touched his dagger's hilt and made a small, mocking sound in his throat. Perhaps he was innately a pacifist. It was rather difficult to think of a duel seriously, even though everyone else did, when the details of a barbecue dinner were prosaic in his mind.

So it went. The tides of civilization rolled in century-long waves across the continents, and each particular wave, though conscious of its participation in the tide, nevertheless was more preoccupied with dinner. And, unless you happened to be a thousand feet tall, had the brain of a god and a god's lifespan, what was the difference? People missed a lot—people like Venner, who was certainly a crank, not batty enough to qualify for the asylum, but certainly a potential paranoid type. The man's refusal to wear a wig labeled him as an individualist, but as an exhibitionist, too. If he didn't feel ashamed of his hairlessness, why should he bother to flaunt it? Besides, the man had a bad temper, and if people kicked him around, he asked for it by starting the kicking himself.

But as for Al, the kid was heading for something approaching delinquency. It couldn't be the normal development of childhood, Burkhalter thought. He didn't pretend to be an expert, but he was still young enough to remember his own formative years, and he had had more handicaps than Al had now; in those days, Baldies had been very new and very freakish. There'd been more than one movement to isolate, sterilize, or even exterminate the mutations.

Burkhalter sighed. If he had been born before the Blowup, it might have been different. Impossible to say. One could read history, but one couldn't live it. In the future, perhaps, there might be telepathic libraries in which that would be possible. So many opportunities, in fact—and so few that the world was ready to accept as yet. Eventually Baldies would not be regarded as freaks, and by that time real progress would be possible.

But people don't make history—Burkhalter thought. Peoples do that. Not the individual.

He stopped by Reilly's house again, and this time the man answered, a burly, freckled, squint-eyed fellow with immense hands and, Burkhalter noted, fine muscular co-ordination. He rested those hands on the Dutch door and nodded.

'Who's you, mister?'

'My name's Burkhalter.'

Comprehension and wariness leaped into Reilly's eyes. 'Oh. I see. You got my call?'

'I did,' Burkhalter said. 'I want to talk to you about it. May I come in?'

'O.K.' He stepped back, opening the way through a hall and into a spacious living-room, where diffused light filtered through glassy mosaic walls. 'Want to set the time?'

'I want to tell you you're wrong.'

'Now wait a minute,' Reilly said, patting the air. 'My wife's out now, but she gave me the straight of it. I don't like this business of sneaking into a man's mind; it's crooked. You should have told *your* wife to mind her business—or keep her tongue quiet.'

Burkhalter said patiently, 'I give you in my word, Reilly, that Ethel didn't read your wife's mind.'

'Does she say so?'

'I . . . well, I haven't asked her.'

'Yeah,' Reilly said with an air of triumph.

'I don't need to. I know her well enough. And . . . well, I'm Baldy myself.'

'I know you are,' Reilly said. 'For all I know, you may be reading my mind now.' He hesitated. 'Get out of my house. I like my privacy. We'll meet at dawn tomorrow, if that's satisfactory with you. Now get out.' He seemed to have something on his mind, some ancient memory, perhaps, that he didn't wish exposed.

Burkhalter nobly resisted the temptation. 'No Baldy would read——'

'Go on, get out!'

'Listen! You wouldn't have a chance in a duel with me!'

'Do you know how many notches I've got?' Reilly asked.

'Ever dueled a Baldy?'

'I'll cut the notch deeper tomorrow. Get out, d'you hear?'

Burkhalter, biting his lips, said, 'Man, don't you realize that in a duel I could read your mind?'

'I don't care . . . what?'

'I'd be half a jump ahead of you. No matter how instinctive your actions would be, you'd know them a split second ahead of time in your mind. And I'd know all your tricks and weaknesses, too. Your technique would be an open book to me. Whatever you thought of——'

'No.' Reilly shook his head. 'Oh, no. You're smart, but it's a phony set-up.'

Burkhalter hesitated, decided, and swung about, pushing a chair out of the way. 'Take out your dagger,' he said. 'Leave the sheath snapped on; I'll show you what I mean.'

Reilly's eyes widened. 'If you want it now——'

'I don't.' Burkhalter shoved another chair away. He undipped his dagger, sheath and all, from his belt, and made sure the little safety clip was in place. 'We've room enough here. Come on.'

Scowling, Reilly took out his own dagger, held it awkwardly, baffled by the sheath, and then suddenly feinted forward. But Burkhalter wasn't there; he had anticipated, and his own leather sheath slid up Reilly's belly.

'That,' Burkhalter said, 'would have ended the fight.'

For answer Reilly smashed a hard dagger-blow down, curving at the last moment into a throat-cutting slash. Burkhalter's free hand was already at his throat; his other hand, with the sheathed dagger, tapped Reilly twice over the heart. The freckles stood out boldly against the pallor of the larger man's face. But he was not yet ready to concede. He tried a few more passes, clever, well-trained cuts, and they failed, because Burkhalter had anticipated them. His left hand invariably covered the spot where Reilly had aimed, and which he never struck.

Slowly Reilly let his arm fall. He moistened his lips and swallowed. Burkhalter busied himself reclippping his dagger in place.

'Burkhalter,' Reilly said, 'you're a devil.'

'Far from it. I'm just afraid to take a chance. Do you really think being a Baldy is a snap?'

'But, if you can read minds——'

'How long do you think I'd last if I did any dueling? It would be too much of a set-up. Nobody would stand for it, and I'd end up dead. I can't duel, because it'd be murder, and people would know it was murder. I've taken a lot of cracks, swallowed a lot of insults, for just that reason. Now, if you like, I'll swallow another and apologize. I'll admit anything you say. But I can't duel with you, Reilly.'

'No, I can see that. And—I'm glad you came over.' Reilly was still white. 'I'd have walked right into a set-up.'

'Not my set-up,' Burkhalter said. 'I wouldn't have dueled. Baldies aren't so lucky, you know. They've got handicaps—like this.'

That's why they can't afford to take chances and antagonize people, and why we never read minds, unless we're asked to do so.'

'It makes sense. More or less.' Reilly hesitated. 'Look, I withdraw that challenge. O.K.?'

'Thanks,' Burkhalter said, putting out his hand. It was taken rather reluctantly. 'We'll leave it at that, eh?'

'Right.' But Reilly was still anxious to get his guest out of the house.

Burkhalter walked back to the Publishing Center and whistled tunelessly. He could tell Ethel now; in fact, he had to, for secrets between them would have broken up the completeness of their telepathic intimacy. It was not that their minds lay bare to each other, it was, rather, that any barrier could be sensed by the other, and the perfect *rappport* wouldn't have been so perfect.

Curiously, despite this utter intimacy, husband and wife managed to respect one another's privacy.

Ethel might be somewhat distressed, but the trouble had blown over, and, besides, she was a Baldy too. Not that she looked it, with her wig of fluffy chestnut hair and those long, curving lashes. But her parents had lived east of Seattle during the Blowup, and afterward, too, before the hard radiation's effects had been thoroughly studied.

The snow-wind blew down over Modoc and fled southward along the Utah Valley. Burkhalter wished he was in his copter, alone in the blue emptiness of the sky. There was a quiet, strange peace up there that no Baldy ever quite achieved on the earth's surface, except in the depths of a wilderness. Stray fragments of thoughts were always flying about, subsensory, but like the almost-unheard whisper of a needle on a phonograph record, never ceasing. That, certainly, was why almost all Baldies loved to fly and were expert pilots. The high waste deserts of the air were their blue hermitages.

Still, he was in Modoc now, and overdue for his interview with

Quayle. Burkhalter hastened his steps. In the main hall he met Moon, said briefly and cryptically that he'd taken care of the duel, and passed on, leaving the fat man to stare a question after him. The only visor call was from Ethel; the playback said she was worried about Al, and would Burkhalter check with the school. Well, he had already done so—unless the boy had managed to get into more trouble since then. Burkhalter put in a call and reassured himself. Al was as yet unchanged.

He found Quayle in the same private solarium, and thirsty. Burkhalter ordered a couple of dramzowies sent up, sincere had no objection to loosening Quayle's inhibitions. The gray-haired author was immersed in a sectional historical globe map, illuminating each epochal layer in turn as he searched back through time.

'Watch this,' he said, running his hand along the row of buttons. 'See how the German border fluctuates?' It fluctuated, finally vanishing entirely as semimodern times were reached. 'And Portugal. Notice its zone of influence? Now——' The zone shrank steadily from 1600 on, while other countries shot out radiating lines and assumed sea power.

Burkhalter sipped his dramzowie. 'Not much of that now.'

'No, since . . . what's the matter?'

'How do you mean?'

'You look shot.'

'I didn't know I showed it,' Burkhalter said wryly. 'I just finagled my way out of a duel.'

'That's one custom I never saw much sense to,' Quayle said. 'What happened? Since when can you finagle out?'

Burkhalter explained, and the writer took a drink and snorted. 'What a spot for you. Being a Baldy isn't such an advantage after all, I guess.'

'It has distinct disadvantages at times.' On impulse Burkhalter mentioned his son. 'You see my point, eh? I don't *know*, really, what standards to apply to a young Baldy. He is a mutation, after all. And the telepathic mutation hasn't had time to work out yet. We can't rig up controls, because guinea pigs and rabbits won't breed telepaths. That's been tried, you know. And—well, the child of a Baldy needs very special training so he can cope with his ultimate maturity.'

'You seem to have adjusted well enough.'

'I've—learned. As most sensible Baldies have. That's why I'm not a wealthy man, or in politics. We're really buying safety for our species by foregoing certain individual advantages. Hostages to destiny—and destiny spares us. But we get paid too, in a way. In the coinage of future benefits—negative benefits, really, for we ask only to be spared and accepted—and so we have to deny ourselves a lot of present, positive benefits. An appeasement to fate.'

'Paying the piper,' Quayle nodded.

'We are the pipers. The Baldies as a group, I mean. And our children. So it balances; we're really paying ourselves. If I wanted to take unfair advantage of my telepathic power—my son wouldn't live very long. The Baldies would be wiped out. Al's got to learn that, and he's getting pretty antisocial.'

'All children are antisocial,' Quayle pointed out. 'They're utter individualists. I should think the only reason for worrying would be if the boy's deviation from the norm were connected with his telepathic sense.'

'There's something in that.' Burkhalter reached out left-handedly and probed delicately at Quayle's mind, noting that the antagonism was considerably lessened. He grinned to himself and went on talking about his own troubles. 'Just the same, the boy's father to die man. Arid an adult Baldy has got to be pretty well adjusted, or he's sunk.'

'Environment is as important as heredity. One complements the other. If a child's reared correctly, he won't have much trouble—unless heredity is involved.'

'As it may be. There's so little known about the telepathic mutation. If baldness is one secondary characteristic, maybe—something else—emerges in the diird or fourth generations. I'm wondering if telepathy is really good for the mind.'

Quayle said, 'Humph. Speaking personally, it makes me nervous——'

'Like Reilly.'

'Yes,' Quayle said, but he didn't care much for the comparison. 'Well—anyhow, if a mutation's a failure, it'll die out. It won't breed true.'

'What about hemophilia?'

'How many people have hemophilia?' Quayle asked. 'I'm trying to look at it from the angle of a psychohistorian. If there'd been telepaths in the past, things might have been different.'

'How do you know there weren't?' Burkhalter asked.

Quayle blinked. 'Oh. Well. That's true, too. In medieval times they'd have been called wizards—or saints. The Duke-Rhine experiments—but such accidents would have been abortive. Nature fools around trying to hit the ... ah ... the jackpot, and she doesn't always do it on the first try.'

'She may not have done it now.' That was habit speaking, the ingrained caution of modesty. 'Telepathy may be merely a semi-successful try at something pretty unimaginable. A sort of four-dimensional sensory concept, maybe.'

'That's too abstract for me.' Quayle was interested, and his own hesitations had almost vanished; by accepting Burkhalter as a telepath, he had tacitly wiped away his objections to telepathy per se. 'The old-time Germans always had an idea they were different; so did the ... ah ... what was that Oriental race? They had the islands off the China coast?'

'The Japanese,' said Burkhalter, who had a good memory for trifles.

'Yes. They knew, very definitely, that they were a superior race because they were directly descended from gods. They were short in stature; heredity made them self-conscious when dealing with larger races. But the Chinese aren't tall, the Southern Chinese, and they weren't handicapped in that way.'

'Environment, then?'

'Environment, which caused propaganda. The ... ah ... die Japanese took Buddhism, and altered it completely into Shinto, to suit their own needs. The samurai, warrior-knights, were the ideals, the code of honor was fascinatingly cockeyed. The principle of Shinto was to worship your superiors and subjugate your inferiors. Ever seen the Japanese jewel-trees?'

T don't remember them. What are they?'

'Miniature replicas of espaliered trees, made of jewels, widi trinkets hanging on the branches. Including a mirror—always. The first jewel-tree was made to lure the Moon-goddess out of a cave where she was sulking. It seems the lady was so intrigued by the trinkets and by her face reflected in the mirror that she came out of her hideout. All the Japanese morals were dressed up in pretty clothes; that was the bait. The old-tune Germans did much die same thing. The last German dictator, Poor Hitler they called him—I forget why, but there was some reason—he revived the old Siegfried legend. It was racial paranoia. The Germans worshipped die house-tyrant, not die mother, and diey had extremely strong family ties. That extended to the state. They symbolized Poor Hitler as their All-Father, and so eventually we got the Blowup. And, finally, mutations.'

'After the deluge, me,' Burkhalter murmured, finishing his dramzowie. Quayle was staring at nothing.

'Funny,' he said after a while. 'This All-Father business——'

'Yes?'

'I wonder if you know how powerfully it can affect a man?'

Burkhalter didn't say anything. Quayle gave him a sharp glance.

'Yes,' the writer said quietly. 'You're a man, after all. I owe you an apology, you know.'

Burkhalter smiled. 'You can forget that.'

'I'd radier not,' Quayle said. 'I've just realized, pretty suddenly, that the telepathic sense isn't so important. I mean—it doesn't make you *different*. I've been talking to you——'

'Sometimes it takes people years before they realize what you're finding out,' Burkhalter remarked. 'Years of living and working with something they think of as a Baldy.'

'Do you know what I've been concealing in my mind?' Quayle asked.

'No. I don't.'

'You lie like a gentleman. Thanks. Well, here it is, and I'm telling you by choice, because I want to. I don't care if you got the information out of my mind already; I just want to tell you of my own free will. My father ... I imagine I hated him . . . was a tyrant, and I remember one time, when I was just a kid and we were in the mountains, he beat me and a lot of people were looking on. I've tried to forget that for a long time. Now'—Quayle shrugged—'it doesn't seem quite so important.'

'I'm not a psychologist,' Burkhalter said. 'If you want my personal reaction, I'll just say that it doesn't matter. You're not a little boy any more, and the guy I'm talking to and working with is the adult Quayle.'

'Hm-m-m. Ye-es. I suppose I knew that all along—how unimportant it was, really. It was simply having my privacy violated. ... I think I know you better now, Burkhalter. You can—walk in.'

'We'll work better,' Burkhalter said, grinning. 'Especially with Darius.'

Quayle said, 'I'll try not to keep any reservation in my mind. Frankly, I won't mind telling you—the answers. Even when they're personal.'

'Check on that. D'you want to tackle Darius now?'

'O.K.,' Quayle said, and his eyes no longer held suspicious wariness. 'Darius I identify with my father——'

It was smooth and successful. That afternoon they accomplished more than they had during the entire previous fortnight. Warm with satisfaction on more than one point, Burkhalter stopped off to tell Dr. Moon that matters were looking up, and then set out toward home, exchanging thoughts with a couple of Baldies, his co-workers, who were knocking off for the day. The Rockies were bloody with the western light, and the coolness of the wind was pleasant on Burkhalter's cheeks, as he hiked homeward. It was fine to be accepted. It proved that it could be done. And a Baldy often needed reassurance, in a world peopled by suspicious strangers. Quayle had been a hard nut to crack, but—Burkhalter smiled.

Ethel would be pleased. In a way, she'd had a harder time than he'd ever had. A woman would, naturally. Men were desperately anxious to keep their privacy unviolated by a woman, and as for non-Baldy women—well, it spoke highly for Ethel's glowing personal charm that she had finally been accepted by the clubs and feminine groups of Modoc. Only Burkhalter knew Ethel's desperate hurt at being bald, and not even her husband had ever seen her unwigged.

His thought reached out before him into the low, double-winged house on the hillside, and interlocked with hers in a warm intimacy. It was something more than a kiss. And, as always, there was the exciting sense of expectancy, mounting and mounting till the last door swung open and they touched physically. *This*, he thought, *is why I was born a Baldy; this is worth losing worlds for.*

At dinner that rapport spread out to embrace Al, an intangible, deeply-rooted something that made the food taste better and the water like wine. The word *home*, to telepaths, had a meaning that non-Baldies could not entirely comprehend, 'for it embraced a bond they could not know. There were small, intangible caresses.

Green Man going down the Great Red Slide; the Shaggy Dwarfs trying to harpoon him as he goes.

'Al,' Ethel said, 'are you still working on your Green Man?'

Then something utterly hateful and cold and deadly quivered silently in the air, like an icicle jaggedly smashing through golden, fragile glass. Burkhalter dropped his napkin and looked up, profoundly shocked. He felt Ethel's thought shrink back, and swiftly reached out to touch and reassure her with mental contact. But across the table the little boy, his cheeks still round with the fat of babyhood, sat silent and wary, realizing he had blundered, and seeking safety in complete immobility. His mind was too weak to resist probing, he knew, and he remained perfectly still, waiting, while the echoes of a thought hung poisonously in silence.

Burkhalter said, 'Come on, Al.' He stood up. Ethel started to speak.

'Wait, darling. Put up a barrier. Don't listen in.' He touched her mind gently and tenderly, and then he took Al's hand and drew the boy after him out into the yard. Al watched his father out of wide, alert eyes.

Burkhalter sat on a bench and put Al beside him. He talked audibly at first, for clarity's sake, and for another reason. It was distinctly unpleasant to trick the boy's feeble guards down, but it was necessary.

'That's a very queer way to think of your mother,' he said. 'It's a queer way to think of me.' Obscenity is more obscene, profanity more profane, to a telepathic mind, but this had been neither one. It had been—cold and malignant.

And this is flesh of my flesh, Burkhalter thought, looking at the boy and remembering the eight years of his growth. *Is the mutation to turn into something devilish?*

Al was silent.

Burkhalter reached into the young mind. Al tried to twist free and escape, but his father's strong hands gripped him. Instinct, not reasoning, on the boy's part, for minds can touch over long distances.

He did not like to do this, for increased sensibility had gone with sensitivity, and violations are always violations. But ruthlessness was required. Burkhalter searched. Sometimes he threw key words violently at Al, and surges of memory pulsed up in response.

In the end, sick and nauseated, Burkhalter let Al go and sat alone on the bench, watching the red light die on the snowy peaks. The whiteness was red-stained. But it was not too late. The man was a fool, had been a fool from the beginning, or he would have known the impossibility of attempting such a thing as this.

The conditioning had only begun. AI could be reconditioned. Burkhalter's eyes hardened. And would be. *And would be.* But not yet, not until the immediate furious anger had given place to sympathy and understanding.

Not yet.

He went into the house, spoke briefly to Ethel, and televised the dozen Baldies who worked with him in the Publishing Center. Not all of them had families, but none was missing when, half an hour later, they met in the back room of the Pagan Tavern downtown. Sam Shane had caught a fragment of Burkhalter's knowledge, and all of them read his emotions. Welded into a sympathetic unit by their telepathic sense, they waited till Burkhalter was ready.

Then he told them. It didn't take long, via thought. He told them about the Japanese jewel-tree with its glittering gadgets, a shining lure. He told them of racial paranoia and propaganda. And that the most effective propaganda was sugar-coated, disguised so that the motive was hidden.

A Green Man, hairless, heroic—symbolic of a Baldy.

And wild, exciting adventures, the lure to catch the young fish whose plastic minds were impressionable enough to be led along the roads of dangerous madness. Adult Baldies could listen, but they did not; young telepaths had a higher threshold of mental receptivity, and adults do not read the books of their children except to reassure themselves that there is nothing harmful in the pages. And no adult would bother to listen to the Green Man mindcast. Most of them had accepted it as the original daydream of their own children.

'I did,' Shane put in. 'My girls——'

'Trace it back,' Burkhalter said. 'I did.'

The dozen minds reached out on the higher frequency, the children's wavelength, and something jerked away from them, startled and apprehensive.

'He's the one,' Shane nodded.

They did not need to speak. They went out of the Pagan Tavern in a compact, ominous group, and crossed the street to the general store. The door was locked. Two of the men burst it open with their shoulders.

They went through the dark store and into a back room where a man was standing beside an overturned chair. His bald skull gleamed in an overhead light. His mouth worked impotently.

His thought pleaded with them—was driven back by an implacable deadly wall.

Burkhalter took out his dagger. Other slivers of steel glittered for a little while——

And were quenched.

Yenning's scream had long since stopped, but his dying thought of agony lingered within Burkhalter's mind as he walked homeward. The wigless Baldy had not been insane, no. But he had been paranoid.

What he had tried to conceal, at the last, was quite shocking. A tremendous, tyrannical egotism, and a furious hatred of non-telepaths. A feeling of self-justification that was, perhaps, insane. *And—we are the Future! The Baldies! God made us to rule lesser men!*

Burkhalter sucked in his breath, shivering. The mutation had not been entirely successful. One group had adjusted, the Baldies who wore wigs and had become fitted to their environment. One group had been insane, and could be discounted; they were in asylums.

But the middle group were merely paranoid. They were not insane, and they were not sane. They wore no wigs.

Like Yenning.

And Yenning had sought disciples. His attempt had been foredoomed to failure, but he had been one man.

One Baldy—paranoid.

There were others, many others.

Ahead, nestled into the dark hillside, was the pale blotch that marked Burkhalter's home. He sent his thought ahead, and it touched Ethel's and paused very briefly to reassure her.

Then it thrust on, and went into the sleeping mind of a little boy who, confused and miserable, had finally cried himself to sleep.

There were only dreams in that mind now, a little discolored, a little stained, but they could be cleansed. And would be.