

## MACK REYNOLDS

### Criminal in Utopia

Mack Reynolds is a unique writer in modern science fiction student of political economy, world traveler, the son of radical parents, and himself a onetime lecturer for the Socialist Labor Party. He is one of the few to treat such issues as Third World development problems, multinational corporations, and the connections between economic relationships and modernization. Over the years he has built an enormous body of work on socioeconomic themes.

"Criminal in Utopia" finds him at the top of his form as he portrays a society operating entirely on the principle of credit. The story is really a careful extrapolation of present trends and conditions—certainly the Western world has already reached the point where serious alterations in the supply of credit would result in severe social and economic dislocations.

On a personal level, most of us are aware of the revolutionary effect on purchasing patterns and mercantile life caused by the proliferation of credit cards, which are now accepted for such diverse goods and services as gas, food, clothing, entertainment, and college tuition. While it is true that credit (at least in small amounts) is now relatively easy to obtain, the system has a number of disconcerting side effects, not the least of which is the amount of information on the personal lives of millions accumulating in the memory banks of computers. There are legal means developing to stop this practice. On the other hand, the development of credit has led to a variety of rackets involving theft and fraud. Mack Reynolds turns his attention to the latter problem with a story that proves that even in the future, skillful individuals will find a way to beat the system.

Rex Moran dialed his wrist teevee phone for the time and looked at the clock face that appeared on the screen. A robot voice said, "When the bell rings it will be exactly two minutes until eight hours." A tiny bell rang.

Rex Moran grunted and looked about the small apartment. He had better get going.

First, though, he took his Universal Credit Card from an inner pocket of his jerkin and inserted it in the slot of his standard teevee phone which sat on his living cum bedroom's sole table. He said into the screen, "Credit balance check, please."

Within moments, a robot voice said, "Ten shares of Inalienable Basic. No shares of Variable Basic. Current cash credit, one dollar and twenty-three cents."

"One dollar and twenty-three cents," he muttered. "Holy living Zoroaster. I didn't think I'd have to start with that little on hand."

He dialed Credit and waited until a face faded in on the screen. It was a businesslike, brisk, possibly impatient face.

"Jason May, here. Assistant Credit Manager, Inalienable Basic Dividends," he said.

Rex Moran put his Uni-Credit Card on the screen and said, "I'd like an advance on my dividends."

The other was seated at a desk. "Just a moment, please," he said and touched a button. He listened to a report on a desk phone screen then looked back at Moran. "You're already two months ahead."

"I know that," Rex Moran said doggedly, "but it's an emergency. "

"It is always an emergency, Mr. Moran," the other said flatly. "What is the emergency? Your records show that you are almost invariably as far ahead as you can get on your monthly dividends. As you must know, the government charges interest on such advances. In the long run, Mr. Moran, you lose."

"I know, I know," Rex Moran said, an element of complaint in his voice. "I've had a long set of bad luck. One thing after another."

"What is the current emergency, please?"

Rex Moran wished he had thought this out in more detail before launching into his fling. He said, "I've got a sick brother, I have to go help. "

"Where is this brother, Mr. Moran?"

"In Panama City."

"One moment, please." The other went back to one of his desk screens. In only moments he looked up again with a sigh.

"Mr. Moran, the computer banks have no records of you having a brother at all, in Panama City or anywhere else. Request denied. And Mr. Moran . . ."

"Yeah?" Rex Moran said in disgust.

"It is a minor offense to lie to a credit manager in attempt to secure an advance on dividends. I shall take no action on this occasion, but the fact will be entered on your record in the computer banks."

"Oh, great," Rex Moran growled. He flicked off his screen. "I didn't expect that to work anyway," he muttered.

He thought over his plans for a few minutes, then squared his shoulders and dialed the local branch of the ultra-market, on his auto delivery box. He was a man in his early thirties, mildly burly in build and with a not really unpleasant but a broken face of one who has either seen military combat, or perhaps been a pugilist. In actuality, neither was the case.

The ultra-market in the screen, he dialed the children's toy section, boys' toys, and then military-type toys. He finally narrowed it down to guns and dialed one that came to only seventy-cents. It would have to do. He put his Uni-Credit Card in the slot, his thumbprint on the screen and ordered the toy.

Within minutes, it was in the auto-delivery box, and he put it in the side pocket of his jerkin. It was on the smallish side, but black and at any distance at all realistic enough for his purpose.

He moved over to his library booster teevee screen and dialed a newspaper, then the paper of two weeks previous and the obituaries. He went through several papers before he found the one that seemed most likely, by the address and the information in the item, and made some notes with his stylo.

Finally, he dialed the address and waited until a face faded in on his phone screen.

The other frowned at him, in lack of recognition.

Rex Moran said, "Mr. Vassilis? My name is Roy McCord."

The other was a tired-looking obvious aristocrat, perhaps a few years the other side of sixty.

Still frowning, he said, "What can I do for you, Mr. McCord?"

"I just got back into town and heard the bad news. I'm a friend forgive me, Mr. Vassilis--was a friend of Jerry Jerome."

The other's face lightened slightly and then went sad. "Ah, I see. I am afraid he hadn't mentioned your name, but then Jerome had many friends of whom I knew little."

"Yes, sir. I'd like the opportunity to offer my condolences in person," Rex Moran began.

The older man was frowning slightly and began to respond.

But Moran hurried on. "But I also have something of Jerry's that I suppose should go to you."

Rex Moran managed to look slightly embarrassed. "Well, sir, I . . . well, I think it would be better if I just brought it over."

The other was mystified. However, he shrugged. "Very well, young man. Let me see, I shall be free at, say nine hours this morning, and should be able to give you a few minutes."

"Fine, sir. I'll be there." Rex Moran switched off the screen before the other could say anything further.

For a moment he stared down at the blank screen, then shifted muscles in his shoulders. "First step," he said. "So far, so good. Maybe I shouldn't have used this phone, but in the long run it won't make any difference."

He didn't take the vacuum tube transport from his own building, knowing that a record was kept of all trips in the computer banks, and the john-fuzz might trace back later on his Uni-Credit Card number. Instead, he walked several blocks and entered a public terminal.

He looked up at the map and selected another terminal a couple of blocks from his destination, then entered the next twenty-seater going through that point. After putting his credit card in the payment slot, he realized that with the buying of the toy gun, he probably had only a few cents left to his balance. He didn't even have enough credit to get back to his apartment if this little romp pickled. What a laugh that

would give the boys if he had to walk home.

He left the vacuum-tube transport terminal and walked to the building where Vassilis lived. This was the crucial point now. If there were others present, his plan had come a cropper. However, if he had read between the lines correctly, the senior Mr. Vassilis lived alone in his apartment in this swank neighborhood.

There was an identity screen in the front entry. Keeping his fingers crossed that his Universal Credit Card wouldn't be required for entrance, he said into the screen, "Roy McCord, on appointment to see Mr. Frank Vassilis. "

The door opened, and he entered.

There were two elevators. He entered one and said, "The apartment of Frank Vassilis."

The Vassilis apartment was on the top floor but one. Rex Moran got out of the elevator, found a door with the Vassilis name on it and activated the door screen. When it lit up, he said into it, "Roy McCord, calling on Mr. Vassilis, by appointment."

The door opened, and he stepped through.

And came to a halt. The man standing there in a dark suit was not the Mr. Vassilis he had spoken to earlier on the teevee phone. This worthy was a stiffish type, of possibly fifty. His eyes went up and down Rex Moran superciliously, taking in the less than elegant suit, taking in the rugged features.

He said, "Yes, sir. Mr. McCord? The master is awaiting you in his escape room."

The master? Holy jumping Zoroaster, Vassilis had a man servant. Whoever heard of personal servants in this day and age? The obituary had hinted that the old boy was upper class, but Moran hadn't been thinking in terms of something so rich as an establishment with a servant.

However, he followed along. It was the largest apartment he could offhand ever remember being in. They went down one hall, turned right and down another one.

There wasn't even an identity screen on the door before which they stopped. The servant knocked gently and opened the door before there was any reply. Evidently, old Vassilis was expecting him, all right.

The servant stood stiffly and said, "Mr. McCord."

The elderly man Rex Moran had talked to on the teevee phone earlier looked up from where he sat in a comfort chair, a small magnifying glass in one hand, a dozen or so stamps on a small table before him. He was evidently a philatelist.

He said, "Ah, yes, Mr. Roy McCord, Jerome's friend. Please come in." As the servant had before him, he took in Moran's clothing and general appearance, and his eyebrows went up slightly. "Now, what is it I can do for you, Mr. McCord?"

Rex Moran looked at the servant.

Vassilis said, "That will be all, Franklin."

Franklin turned and left, closing the door quietly behind him.

No need to mince around. Rex Moran brought the toy gun from his pocket briefly, let the other see it and returned it to his side pocket, but still holding it in his hand.

He said, "This is a romp, Mr. Vassilis."

The other goggled at him. "You . . . you mean you are a thief? That you got into my home on false pretenses?"

Moran let his face go empty. "I wouldn't put it that way. Let's just say that I'm tired of not getting my share of the cake. And since the powers that be won't give it to me, I'm taking it."

The old man stared at him. "You are a fool, young man."

"Maybe, maybe not. " Rex Moran jiggled the gun in his side pocket suggestively.

"Being a thief doesn't make sense in this day. Society has made arrangements to defend itself against the thief. There's not enough profit in petty crime to pay off."

Rex Moran grinned at him sourly. "I didn't exactly have petty crime in mind, Mr. Vassilis. Now, hand me your credit card."

"What other kind of crime is possible? Nobody but I can spend my dollar credits. I can't give them away,

gamble them away, throw them away, be cheated out of them. Only I can spend my dividends."

"We'll see about that." Rex Moran nodded. "Now, let's have your Universal Credit Card." He jiggled the gun in his pocket again.

The older man contemptuously took a beautiful leather wallet from an inner pocket and brought forth a standard Uni-Credit Card. He handed it over.

Moran said, "You have a vacuum delivery box in this room? Oh, yeah, here we are. Zoroaster, look at the size of it! Now that's the advantage of being an upper class like you, Mr. Vassilis. You should see the teeny auto-delivery box in my mini-apartment. If I want anything of any size at all, I've got to use the box down in the lobby of the crummy building I'm in. Now, with a nice big auto-delivery box like this anything you wanted would have to be really supersize before you couldn't get it delivered right here into your escape room."

Vassilis said, "You are a fool, young man. The officials will be after you in no time flat."

Moran grinned at him and sat down before the box, keeping one eye on the other. He put the card in the teevee screen's slot and said, "Credit balance, please."

A robot voice said, "Ten shares of Inalienable Basic. Two thousand and forty-six shares of Variable Basic. Current cash credit, forty-two thousand and twenty-nine dollars and eighteen cents."

Rex Moran whistled. "Two-thousand-and-forty-six-shares-of-Variable!"

Vassilis grunted contempt of him.

Moran dialed the ultra-market, then sports, then firearms, then handguns. He finally selected a .38 Recoilless and dialed it and a box of cartridges.

He thought for a moment, then dialed photography and selected a Polaroid-Pentax and some film for it. "Might as well do this up brown," he said conversationally to the

older man. "Might as well put a generous hole in that credit balance. "

"There'll be no hole-as you call it-at all," Vassilis said bitterly. "When I report this thievery, the authorities will return to my account the sum involved in any deprecations you have performed. "

Rex Moran dialed men's clothing and took his time selecting a full outfit, including shoes.

"Now, this is the crucial point," he said thoughtfully, to no one in particular. He dialed jewelry and finally selected a two-thousand-dollar diamond ring.

"I guess that's it," he said. Then, "Oh, one other thing." He dialed sports again, and camping, and eventually a length of rope.

He turned back to Frank Vassilis. "And now, old man, come on over here and stick your thumbprint on this order screen."

" Suppose I refuse?"

Rex Moran grinned at him. "Why should you? Like you said, when you report this, the authorities will return your credit dollars to you and come looking for me. You're not losing anything."

The older man, grumbling, came erect in his chair. He came over to the auto-delivery box and, with a sneer of contempt for his intruder, stuck his right thumbprint on the screen.

Moments later, the articles had arrived.

Vassilis returned to his comfort chair.

Rex Moran began fishing the articles he had ordered from the box. He loaded the gun, put it next to him, within handy reach and then dressed in his new clothes. He took up the camera and slung it over his shoulder. He looked at the ring admiringly and tucked it away in an inner pocket, and then the gun.

He muttered, "I have half a mind to order a few more of these but that big a drain on your account all at the same time might throw some relays and have the computer people check back."

"Thief," Vassilis said bitterly.

Moran grinned at him. "What's your beef? It won't be you who loses. "

He took up the rope. "First we'll tie you up a bit, old chum-pal, and then we'll call in Franklin, or whatever you called him, and do a job on him."

"You'll never get away with this, you young cloddy," the old man bit out.

"Famous last words," Moran grinned back at him.

Back on the street, he realized it was going to be necessary to walk to his next destination. His credit standing simply did not allow even such a small sum as riding in the vacuum tubes. However, happily, it wasn't as far as all that. As he walked, he took the toy gun from his pocket and threw it into a waste receptacle. He had the real thing now. He found the neighborhood and had a choice of three alternatives. He took the smallest of the shops and entered.

There were even a few display cases. How anachronistic could you get? He grunted sour amusement to himself; here was the last of the kulaks, the last of the small businessmen.

A quiet man of about fifty entered from a back room and took Rex in before saying in a soft voice, "Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

Rex Moran went into his act. Hesitantly, he said, "I understand that you sometimes buy personal property."

"That is correct. Buy and sell. But what type of property, Mr. . . . ?"

"Adams," Rex Moran said. "Timothy Adams. I have a ring that used to belong to my mother. It is of no value to me, now, and I thought . . . well, I might as well realize what dollar credit value it has. "

"I see. Please sit down, Mr. Adams. Heirloom jewelry is a bit of a drug on the market, but we can take a look." He sat himself behind a desk and motioned to a straight chair.

Rex Moran sat down and brought the diamond ring from his pocket and proffered it. The other took it and set it on the table. He looked at Rex Moran thoughtfully. "This is a very modem setting, Mr. Adams. I had gained the impression that it was an older piece your mother had left you."

"Oh, no," Rex Moran said. "She bought it not too very long before she died. If I had a wife, or someone, I might give it to her, but I haven't. "

The other looked at him evenly. "Mr. Adams, I am not a fence, you know. This is a legitimate business."

"Fence?" Rex Moran said blankly.

"I buy and sell such items as art objects and jewelry, but I do not receive stolen goods. Where did you say your mother bought this?"

"On a vacation in Common Eur-Asia. In Budapest, I think, or possibly Belgrade.

"So it would be untraceable here in the United States of the Americas. "

"Why, it never occurred to me."

The shop owner took up the ring and looked at it thoughtfully. He brought a jeweler's glass from a drawer and peered through it.

He put it down finally and looked at Rex Moran. "I'll give you two hundred dollars for it."

"Two hundred dollars! My mother said she paid more than two thousand. "

"Then she paid too much. The markup on jewelry is very high, Mr. Adams, and such items as this can take a very long time to move."

Rex Moran thought about it. "Make it three hundred."

The other considered that. "Very well," he said finally. "But I am making a mistake."

"Yeah," Rex Moran said sourly. He brought his Uni-Credit Card from his pocket and stuck it into one of the slots on the other's Exchange Screen.

The shop owner put the ring in a drawer, brought forth his own Universal Credit Card and put it into the other exchange slot. He said into the screen, "Please transfer the amount of three hundred dollars from my account to this other card."

A robot voice said, "Transfer completed."

Rex Moran retrieved his Uni-Credit Card and came to his feet. "I still think I was robbed," he muttered.

The other said nothing, simply sat there and watched after him as Rex Moran left the shop.

Well, he now had three hundred dollars to his account. That was a damn sight less than he had expected to get. However, he hadn't dared buy a more expensive piece of jewelry than the two-thousand-dollar piece, on Vassilis's credit card. There would have been more of a chance of the shop owner checking on such an item. More chance of it being able to be traced. Besides, if he had drained Vassilis's account too

badly, there might have been a computer check at that point.

He strode rather rapidly to the nearest vacuum-tube transport terminal and into it, wanting to get out of the neighborhood as quickly as possible. He took a two-seater vehicle to the downtown area of the pseudo-city, if a pseudo-city can be said to have a downtown area.

When he left the vacuum tube, it was to emerge in the vicinity of several restaurants. It was just about noon, but since he hadn't been able to afford breakfast, he was feeling hunger. Well, three hundred dollars was three hundred dollars, and he might as well blow himself to a fairly good repast in an auto-cafeteria.

He selected one and sat himself down at a table and stared down at the menu listed on the tabletop. To hell with anything based on Antarctic krill, plankton protein, or soy beans; he was up to some real animal protein and Zoroaster could take the cost.

He put his credit card in the table slot, his thumbprint on the screen and dialed chicken and a mug of sea-booze. He would have liked a shot of pseudo-whiskey to begin, but his funds weren't that unlimited. His wrist teevee phone buzzed.

He looked down at it in some surprise. He had it set on Number One Priority, and only two people in the world were eligible to break in on him on that priority, and he certainly was not expecting a call from either.

But there was a strange face in the tiny screen. Strange and severe.

The voice said, "This is Distribution Service, Subdivision Police. Rex Moran, you are under arrest for attempt to violate regulations pertaining to usage of the Universal Credit Card. Report immediately to the nearest Police Administrative Station. Failure to do so will compound the felony."

"Get lost, fuzz-john," Rex Moran snarled. He snapped the instrument off, then stared down at the blank screen in dismay. What had gone wrong? Especially, what had gone wrong so quickly? It had to be something to do with his selling that damned ring. But what? He had expected the ring to stay in that tiny shop, waiting for a customer for months, perhaps even years. And even then, when it was resold, the transaction should never have appeared on the computer records, except as an exchange of dollar credit from the purchaser's account to the shopkeeper's.

What foul luck! Vassilis must have put in an immediate alarm, and the police must have contacted every place in town where Rex Moran could possibly dispose of the purloined ring.

He had to think fast. They'd be after him now. Damn and double damn. He wouldn't even be able to return to his mini-apartment. He was on the run, and for a meaningless amount such as three hundred dollars, and even that now was of no use. He wouldn't dare use his credit card; the computers were surely watching for him.

They could also zero in on his wrist teevee phone. He reached down, in disgust, and began to rip it off. However, the screen lit up again, and a new face was there.

A voice rasped, "Now hear this, all citizens. Crimes against the government of the United States of the Americas have been committed by Rex Moran, including assault, robbery, sale of stolen property, and attempted misuse of the Universal Credit Card. All citizens are requested to cooperate in his apprehension. The criminal is dangerous and armed. Here is his face."

Rex groaned when his face appeared on the tiny screen. Happily, it was a fairly old photo, and taken before some of his present scar-red features had become what they were.

He ripped the instrument from his wrist and flung it into a corner. At this early hour there were no others present in the auto-cafeteria, thank the living Zotoaster for that.

He came to his feet and hurried for the door. In the far distance, he could hear a siren. Undoubtedly, it was for him. You didn't hear police sirens that often in the pseudo-cities of the Ultra-Welfare State. He hurried down the street and turned a corner as quickly as possible. He dared not use the vacuum tube. He dared not summon a floater, for that matter.

But that brought something to mind.

He found a fairly isolated spot and waited until a pedestrian came along. He brought his gun from his

pocket and said, "Hold it, chumpal.

The other looked at him, down at the gun, up into Rex Moran's face again and blanched. "Why, why you're the criminal just flashed on the teevee. "

"That's right, chum-pal, and you look just like the sort of chum-pal who'd cooperate with a man with a shooter trained on his tummy."

The other was wide-eyed and ashen. "Why . . . why, of course."

"Okay. Quick now, dial a floater on your wrist teevee phone."

"Of course, of course. Don't be nervous."

"I'm not nervous." Rex Moran grinned at him and jiggled the gun up and down. "Hurry it up."

The other dialed, and within moments an auto-floater cab turned the corner and pulled up next to them at the curb. The door opened.

Rex said, "Quick, put your Uni-Credit Card in the slot."

Even as the other was doing so, Moran was climbing into the back seat of the floater. He rasped, "Put your thumbprint on the screen."

While the other did that, Rex Moran was dialing his destination, not letting the other see.

He reached out suddenly and grasped the other's wrist teevee phone and ripped it off and stuck it in his pocket. He pulled the credit card from the floater's slot and handed it back to his victim.

"There," he said, "don't say I didn't do you a favor. Think of all the trouble you'd have if you didn't have a credit card."

He slammed the door shut and the floater took off.

Rex Moran said into the vehicle's screen, "Maximum speed, please. "

A robot voice said, "Yes, sir.

He couldn't afford to stay in the floater for very long. Just enough to get out of this neighborhood. As soon as that cloddy he had just stuck up back there reported to the police, they'd check through the computers for the floater's destination. There'd be a record, based on the number of the victim's Uni-Credit Card. A record of everything seemingly went into the computer banks. Why not? He growled sourly; evidently their capacity was almost infinite.

Yes, they'd check the destination of his trip. However, he was not quite so silly as to go all the way to the destination he had dialed. About halfway there, at a traffic control stop, he opened the door and left the floater to go on its own.

He ducked down a side street and took off at right angles to the avenue along which the floater was progressing.

Rex Moran now had a double problem. He grimaced wryly. An immediate double problem, that was.

For one thing, he was still hungry. For another, he had to get off the streets. Citizens weren't likely to pay overmuch attention to the Distribution Service police calls over the teevee phone screens, but there was always the exception. Given time, someone would spot and report him, in spite of the poor photograph which just had been broadcast.

He could hear the stolen wrist teevee phone buzz in his pocket and brought it forth, flicking the tiny stud which prevented it from transmitting his face.

It was the same official as before, and he was making the same broadcast, but now reporting Rex Moran as last seen in that part of town where he had dialed the floater. Evidently his victim had reported.

That also meant they would know that Moran had the stolen wrist

teevee phone and would shortly be zeroing in on it. He threw the instrument into the gutter and ground a heel down on it.

He had to get off the streets.

And suddenly he knew where to go.

In this vicinity there was a posh restaurant of which he had heard but had never been able to afford, nor had he really ever expected to be able to afford it. Well, things were different now.

He entered the building and took the elevator to the penthouse restaurant known as the Gourmet Room.

The day was more advanced now, and upperclass office workers were beginning to stream in for the midday meal.

He avoided looking impressed at the ostentatious swank of this rendezvous of the ultra wealthy and thanked his stars that he had thought of acquiring his present clothing. A headwaiter approached diffidently. In all his life, Rex Moran had never eaten in a restaurant which boasted live waiters. Now he tried to look unimpressed.

"A single, sir?" the maitre d'hôtel said.

"Please," Rex Moran told him, keeping his voice softly modulated and as though such surroundings were an everyday affair for him. "If possible, a table set back somewhere. I have a bit of figuring to do."

"Certainly, sir. This way."

He was seated in an out-of-the-way alcove which suited his needs perfectly.

The maitre d' snapped his fingers, and a waiter scurried up.

There was no menu. It was that kind of a restaurant.

The maitre d' said unctuously, "Sir, today the Gratin de langoustines Georgette is superb."

Rex Moran hadn't the vaguest idea what langoustines Georgette might be, but he made a face as though considering.

"What else might you recommend?" he said.

"The chef has surpassed himself with the poulet docteur."

"That sounds good."

The waiter made a note.

"And a half bottle of Sylvaner of the Haut-Rhin, perhaps?"

"Fine."

Salad and dessert were settled upon, and then the maitre d' and the waiter were gone.

Rex Morgan sighed inwardly and looked around. The only other diner within his immediate vicinity had his back to Moran.

He unslung the Polaroid-Pentax from his shoulder and brought from his pocket the cassette of film. He inserted it in the camera. Then he took from his inner pocket the Universal Credit Card he had appropriated from Frank Vassilis and examined it with care, spending particular time on the thumbprint. Finally, he propped the card against the small vase in the table center, which held a single black rose, and focused the camera on it. He clicked the shutter then drew the photo from the camera back and stared at it. It didn't quite do. He tried again, getting the camera closer to the subject. He took half a dozen shots before he came up with as near a duplicate of the Universal Credit Card's thumbprint as he could hope for.

He put the credit card away, the camera back in its case and brought forth his penknife. He was busily trimming the photo to be the exact size of a thumbprint when the waiter turned up with his first course. Poulet docteur turned out to be the best chicken dish he had ever tasted. And the wine was excellent. In the middle of his salad course, and before dessert, he came suddenly to his feet and hurried toward the reception desk cum cashier's booth. It was there that the payment screen for the ultraswank restaurant was to be found.

And it was there that the maitre d'hôtel stood, his eyebrows politely raised now.

Rex Moran said to him hurriedly, "I have just thought of something I must attend to. Please hold my dessert for me. And, please, keep an eye on my camera over there, will you?"

The maitre d' looked over at Moran's table. The camera sat upon it. He said, "Why, of course, sir."

Rex Moran left, still projecting an air of a suddenly remembered matter that must urgently be taken care of.

Down on the street he grimaced. One camera sacrificed to the game. However, he had no need of it now.

He was still in one of the best sections of town. He made his way toward a nearby hotel, holding a handkerchief over his face, as though trying to extract something from his left eye. There were quite a few



pedestrians at this time of the day.

In the hotel, he approached the lone clerk at the reception desk. Now, he had to take his chances. If the man recognized him from the police broadcast-Rex Moran was on a spot.

He said, "I would like a small suite. Nothing ambitious. Living room, bedroom, bath. I doubt if I'll be entertaining."

"Why, yes, sir, of course." The other looked beyond Moran. "Ah, your luggage, sir?"

"I have no luggage," Rex Moran said, offhandedly. "I just came in from the coast. Plan to do some shopping here for my wardrobe. Always buy my things here in the East. California styles are ludicrous. "

"Yes, sir, of course." The clerk motioned in the direction of the teevee screen slot on the desk. "Would you wish to register?"

"I'd rather see the suite, before deciding," Rex Moran said. "I'll register up there, if it's satisfactory."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be, sir. Let me suggest Suite Double A."

"Double A,- Rex Moran said and made his way to the bank of elevators.

Inside the first elevator, he said, "Suite Double A."

"Yes, sir," a robot voice said.

Suite Double A was several stories up. Rex Moran emerged from the elevator, looked up at the direction signs on the wall and made his way to the suite in question.

It was quite the most elaborate quarters in which Rex Moran had ever been. Not that that was the issue, he would have taken the accommodations whatever they had resembled.

He approached the room's teevee phone screen and said into it, "This suite seems adequate, I'll take it."

A robot voice said, "Very good, sir. If you'll just put your UniCredit Card in the slot."

Rex Moran took a deep breath. He brought the card of Frank Vassilis from his pocket, inserted it in the slot. Then he brought forth the photo he had taken of the Vassilis right thumbprint and laid it in the screen.

He picked it up again, immediately.

A robot voice said, "Thank you, sir. "

Rex Moran took another deep breath and let it hiss out again between his teeth.

-Zo-ro-as-ter. I think it worked."

He dialed the time. It was midafternoon.

He grinned exuberantly. He had it licked. Unless there was something he didn't know about, he absolutely had it licked.

He dialed Service and said to the screen, "I'd like to lay in a stock of potables. Let me see. Let's say a bottle of Scotch, one of cognac, one of Metaxa, one of Benedictine, one of Cherry Heering, one of Chartreuse-yellow, of course, not the green-one of Pernod, absinthe if available but otherwise the ordinary will do."

A robot voice said, "Sir, in the New Carlton all these can be dialed on the auto-bar."

"I know, I know, but I like to mix my own."

"Very good, sir. They will be delivered through the auto-bar, sir.

"Mind," Rex Moran said, "the best quality."

"Always, sir. "

Still grinning widely, he went over to the suite's auto-bar and took up the bottle of Glengrant Scotch and held it up to the light approvingly. In his whole life he had been Jushed up exactly once on Scotch. The stuff was worth its weight in rubies since Central Production had discontinued the use of cereals for beverages.

He dialed for soda and sipped away at it approvingly, even as he strode up and down the room, considering his immediate future.

He wondered briefly how you went about getting a mopsy up to your quarters in a hostelry as posh as the New Carlton. But he had better draw the line there, anyway. It was no use pushing your luck. Some wheel might come off. She might have seen the police teevee alarm on him.

What the hell else was there in the way of unrealized lifelong ambitions?

Caviar. He had never eaten his fill of caviar. In fact, the amount of caviar he had eaten in his whole life could have come out of a two ounce jar of the precious stuff.

Fine. He dialed Service again and had a pound jar of caviar sent up, along with sweet butter, toast, chopped eggs, and chopped onion. While he was at it, he ordered a large amount of smoked sturgeon and smoked salmon.

While he waited for this order, he built himself another Scotch and soda. Glengrant. He'd have to remember that name, on the off chance that he'd ever have another opportunity such as this.

He spent the rest of the day indulging himself in every food and drink ambition he could ever remember having had. And in getting well smashed and surfeited with rich edibles to the point that, when dinner time arrived, he had no appetite, to his disgust. He wanted to order a real gargantuan meal.

His last vague memory was of staggering into the bedroom and dialing the bed to ultimate softness before throwing himself into it.

In the morning, he should have awakened with some sort of hangover, but the gods were still with him; either that or there was another good mark to chalk up for Glengrant whiskey. He awoke grinning up at the ceiling. He had slept like a log.

He dialed the time at the bedside teevee phone and didn't bother to look into the screen at the clock. A robot voice said, "When the bell rings it will be exactly nine minutes to eight hours."

Ha! Nine minutes to go.

He dialed breakfast, a monstrous breakfast, and had it delivered to the auto-table next to the bed. Fresh mango juice, papaya, eggs in black butter, caviar again, toast, fried tomatoes, coffee; double orders of all.

Groaning satisfaction, he ate.

By the time breakfast was over, it was past eight o'clock.

All right, he grinned jubilantly, time to get busy.

He went to the teevee phone screen and dialed the local branch of the ultra-market and men's furnishings. He took his time selecting a new change of clothing. That accomplished he dialed the order, put Vassilis' card in the slot and laid the photo of the thumbprint on the screen and took it off again immediately.

The clothing arrived in minutes, and he dressed after showering and shaving in the bathroom.

He returned to the teevee phone screen and dialed the ultra-market once again. He began ordering items, in fine discrimination, and had the time of his life unwrapping and examining them as they arrived. His loot piled up.

At about ten o'clock, he decided really to do it up brown and dialed a floater sales outlet. He ordered a sports model private floater and instructed them to send it over to the hotel's parking area on automatic.

At ten minutes after ten, the identity screen on the door lit up. There were two men there, one in uniform.

The one in plain clothes said disgustedly, "All right, come along-"

The one in uniform looked at all the purchases strewn around the room, wrapping paper and string everywhere. "Zoroaster," he snorted.

They took him down the elevator, through the lobby, out to the street where a police floater awaited. The uniformed one drove manually. Rex Moran sat in the back with the other.

The plainclothesman said sourly, "You must have had the time of your life."

Rex Moran laughed.

"Big joke," the other said. "We almost nabbed you there in the auto-cafeteria. We should have zeroed in on you, instead of trying to arrest you by teevee phone."

"I wondered why you didn't," Rex Moran said. "Police inefficiency. "

They took him to the local offices of the Bureau of Distribution Services, to an elevator and then to the third floor where he was ushered into the presence of Marvin Ruhling himself.

Ruhling looked at him and said, "Very funny, ordering even a sports floater. "

Rex laughed and took a chair. The uniformed policeman left but the plainclothesman also sat down. His

face was as disgusted as that of the Supervisor.

Marvin Ruhling said, "Holy jumping Zoroaster, what kind of heat do you think Vassilis is going to stir up?"

Rex Moran said reasonably, "Never let him know what really happened. He wasn't doing any harm. He had a little excitement."

"A little excitement, you damn cloddy. Suppose he had dropped dead of a heart attack or something? Not to mention that pedestrian you forced at gunpoint to get a floater for you."

Rex said, "Well, you asked for it. You wanted authenticity. You got it."

"Authenticity," the plainclothesman grunted disgustedly. "Which reminds me, we better get that teevee police broadcast killed, or the next time Rex goes out on the street somebody'll shoot him."

Ruhling said to Rex Moran, "Well, your conclusions?"

"That we've got to do something to the cards. Something to guarantee the thumbprint is legitimate.

Otherwise, a real bad-o could locate some upperclass cloddy without any immediate friends or relatives, take him out somewhere and finish him off and hide the body, then take the Uni-Credit Card and head off into some other part of the country and, using the same system I did, duplicate photographically the thumbprint. And for the rest of his life he could milk the dividends that would accrue on the upperclass cloddy's credit account from his Variable Basic."

Marvin Ruhling looked at him sourly. "What could we do to the credit cards?"

"Search me. That's up to the engineers. Maybe something in the card, or on the screen, to detect body heat. I don't know. But I proved the cards vulnerable the way they are."

"What else?"

Rex Moran thought about it. He shook his head. "I just mentioned it to Fred, here, on the way over. That system of making a citizen arrest himself and turn himself over to the nearest police station doesn't wash. Oh, I admit it saves manpower, ordinarily, but when you get a cloddy vicious enough to be carrying a shooter, then you should zero in on his wrist teevee phone, assuming he's silly enough to be carrying one, without warning."

"Rex is obviously right on that one," the plainclothesman said.

Marvin Rubling sighed deeply. "All right," he said. "You won your bet. You were able to beat the rap, exist in comfort for a full twenty-four hours, without any dollar credits."

He glared at his underling. "But I'd sure as the holy living Zoroaster like to see you do it six months from now, when I've cleared up some of those loopholes you used."

Rex Moran grinned at him. "It's a bet," he said.