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OUR FRIENDS FROM FROLIX 8

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Philip K. Dick was born in Chicago in 1928 and lived most of his life in California. He briefly attended the University of California, but dropped out before completing any classes. In 1952, he began writing professionally and proceeded to write numerous novels and short-story collections. He won the Hugo Award for the best novel in 1962 for *The Man in the High Castle* and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for best novel of the year in 1974 for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*. Philip K. Dick died on March 2, 1982, in Santa Ana, California, of heart failure following a stroke.

NOVELS BY PHILIP K. DICK

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Confessions of a Crap Artist
The Cosmic Puppets
Counter-Clock World
The Crack in Space
Deus Irae (with Roger Zelazny)
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Dr. Bloodmoney
Dr. Futurity
Eye in the Sky
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said
Galactic Pot-Healer
The Game-Players of Titan
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The Man Who Japed
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VALIS
Vulcan's Hammer
We Can Build You
The World Jones Made
The Zap Gun

OUR FRIENDS

FROM

FROLIX 8

PHILIP K. DICK



VINTAGE BOOKS

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PART ONE

Bobby said. 'I don't want to take the test.'

But you must, his father thought. If there is going to be any hope for our family as it extends itself into the future. Into periods lying long after my death – mine and Kleo's.

'Let me explain it this way,' he said aloud, as he moved along the crowded sliding sidewalk in the direction of the Federal Bureau of Personnel Standards. 'Different people have different abilities.' How well he knew that. 'My ability, for example, is very limited; I can't even qualify for a government G-one rating, which is the lowest rating of all.' It hurt to admit this, but he had to; he had to make the boy understand how vital this was. 'So I'm not qualified at all. I've got a little nongovernment job... nothing, really. Do you want to be like me when you grow up?'

'You're okay,' Bobby said, with the majestic assurance of his twelve years.

'I'm not,' Nick said.

'To me you are.'

He felt baffled. And, as so many times of late, on the edge of despair. 'Listen,' he said, 'the facts of how Terra is run. Two entities maneuver around each other, with first one ruling and then the other. These entities—'

'I'm not either one,' his son said. 'I'm an Old and a Regular. I don't want to take the test; I know what I am. I know what you are and I'm the same.'

Within him, Nick felt his stomach dry and shrink, and because of that he felt acute need. Looking around, he made out a drugbar on the far side of the street, beyond the traffic of squib cars and the larger, rotund public-transit vehicles. He led Bobby up a ped-ramp, and ten minutes later they had reached the far sidewalk.

'I'm going into the bar for a couple of minutes,' Nick said. 'I'm not well enough to take you to the Federal Building, at this particular junction of time and space.' He led his son past the eye of the door, into the dark interior of Donovan's Drugbar – a bar which he had never visited before but liked on first impact.

'You can't bring that boy in here,' the bartender informed him. He pointed to the sign on the wall. 'He's not eighteen. Do you want it to look like I sell nibbles to minors?'

'At my regular bar—' Nick began, but the bartender cut him brusquely off.

'This isn't your regular bar,' he declared, and stumped off to wait on a customer at the far end of the shadow-clouded room.

Nick said, 'You look in the shop windows next door.' He nudged his son, indicating the door through which they had just entered. 'I'll meet you in three or four minutes.'

'You always say that,' Bobby said, but he trudged off, out onto the midday sidewalk with its legions of squashed-together humanity... for a moment he paused, glancing back, and then he continued on, out of sight.

Seating himself on a bar stool, Nick said, 'I'd like fifty milligrams of phenmetrazine hydrochloride and thirty of stelladrine, with a sodium acetyl-salicylate chaser.'

The bartender said, 'The stelladrine will make you dream of many and far-off stars.' He placed a tiny plate before Nick, got the pills and then the sodium acetyl-salicylate solution in a plastic glass; laying everything before Nick he stood back, scratching his ear reflectively.

'I hope it does.' Nick swallowed the three meagre pills – he could not afford any more this late in the month – and downed the brackish chaser.

'Taking your son for a Federal test?'

As he got out his wallet he nodded.

'You think they're rigged?' the bartender inquired.

'I don't know,' Nick said briefly.

The bartender, resting his elbows on the polished surface of the bar, leaned toward him and said, 'I think they are.' He took Nick's money; turned to the cash register to ring it up. 'I see folks going by here fourteen, fifteen times. Unwilling to accept the fact that they – or anybody – in your case, your kid – isn't going to pass. They keep trying and it comes out the same every time, always. The New Men, they aren't going to let anybody else into the Civil Service. They want to rule –' He glanced about, lowered his voice. 'They don't intend to split up the action among themselves, anybody extra beyond themselves. Hell, in government speeches they practically admit it. They—'

'They need fresh blood,' Nick said doggedly... said it to the bartender as he had said it to himself so many times.

The bartender said, 'They have their own kids.'

'Not enough.' Nick sipped his chaser. He could already feel the phenmetrazine hydrochloride going to work on him, building up his sense of worth, his optimism; he experienced a powerful glow deep within him. 'If it got out,' he said, 'that the Civil Service tests were rigged, this government would be voted out of office within twenty-four hours and the Unusuals would be in, replacing them. Do you think the New Men want the Unusuals to rule? My god.'

'I think they're working together,' the bartender said. And walked off to wait on another customer.

How many times, Nick thought as he left the bar, I've thought that myself. Rule first by the Unusuals, then the New Men... if they have actually worked this out to a fine point, he thought, where they control the personnel testing apparatus, then they could constitute, as he had said, a self-perpetuating structure of power; but our whole political system is based on the fact of the two groups' mutual animosity... it's the basic verity of our lives – that, and the admission that due to their superiority they deserve to rule and can do so wisely.

He parted the moving mass of pedpeople, came upon his son, who stood gazing raptly in a store window. 'Let's go,' Nick said, placing his hand firmly – the drugs had made him so – on the boy's shoulder.

Not moving, Bobby said, 'There's a distance pain infliction knife they're selling. Can I have

one? It'd give me more self-confidence if I was wearing that while I take the test.' 'It's a toy' Nick said.

'Even so,' Bobby said. 'Please. It really would make me feel a lot better.'

Someday, Nick thought, you will not have to rule through pain infliction – rule your peers, serve your masters. You will be a master yourself, and then I can happily accept everything I see going on around me. 'No,' he said, and steered his boy back into the dense stream of sidewalk traffic. 'Don't dwell on concrete things,' he said harshly. 'Think of abstractions, think of processes of neurologics. That's what they'll be asking.' The boy hung back. 'Move on,' Nick grated, urging him forcibly on. And, physically sensing the boy's reluctance, felt the overwhelming presence of failure.

It had been this way for fifty years, now, since 2085 when the first New Man had been elected... eight years before the first Unusual had taken upon himself that high office. Then it had been a novelty; everyone had wondered how the lately-evolved irregular types would function in practice. They had done well – too well for any Old Man to follow. Where the Old Man could balance a bundle of bright lights, an Old Man could handle one. Some actions, based on thought processes that no Old Man could even follow, had no analogue among the earlier variety of human species at all.

'Look at the headline.' Bobby had halted before a newspaper rack.

CAPTURE OF PROVONI REPORTED NEAR

Nick read it without interest, not believing it and at the same time not really caring. As far as he was concerned, Thors Provoni no longer existed, captured or otherwise. But Bobby seemed fascinated by the news. Fascinated – and repelled.

'They won't ever capture Provoni,' Bobby said.

'You're saying it too loud,' Nick said, his lips close to his boy's ears. He felt deeply uneasy.

'What do I care if somebody hears me?' Bobby said hotly. He gestured at the streams of men and women flowing by them. 'They all agree with me anyhow.' He glared up at his father with churning wrath.

'When Provoni left,' Nick said, 'and headed out of the Sol System, he betrayed all mankind. Superior and – otherwise.' He believed this strongly. They had argued this many times, but never had they been able to integrate their conflicting views about the man who had promised to find another planet, another useful world, on which Old Men could live... *and govern themselves*. 'Provoni was a coward,' Nick said, 'and subpar mentally. I don't even think he was worth chasing. Anyhow, they've evidently found him.'

'They always say that,' Bobby said. 'Two months ago they told us that within twenty-four hours—'

'He was subpar,' Nick broke in sharply. 'And so he doesn't count.'

'We're subpar, too,' Bobby said.

'I am,' Nick answered. 'But you're not.'

They continued on in silence; neither of them felt like talking to the other.

Civil Service Officer Norbert Weiss withdrew a green slip from the processing computer behind his desk and read with care the information thereon.

APPLETON, ROBERT.

I remember him, Weiss thought to himself. Twelve years old, ambitious father... what had the boy shown on the prelim test? A marked E-factor, considerably above the average. But—

Picking up his interdepartmental v-fone, he dialled his superior's extension.

Jerome Pikeman's pocked, elongated face appeared, showing the stress of overwork. 'Yes?

'The Appleton boy will be in here shortly,' Weiss said. 'Have you made a decision? Are we going to pass him or are we not?' He held the green slip before the scanner of the fone, refreshing his superior's memory.

'The people in my department don't like his father's servile attitude,' Pikeman said. 'It's so extreme – in respect to authority – that we feel it could readily generate its negative in his son's emotional development. Flunk him.'

'Completely?' Weiss said. 'Or pro tem?'

'Flunk him forever. Totally out. We'll be doing him a favour; he probably wants to drop out.'

'The boy scored very high.'

'But not exceptional. Nothing we have to have.'

'But out of fairness to the boy—' Weiss protested.

'Out of fairness to the boy we're turning him down. It isn't an honour or a privilege to get a federal rating, it's a burden. A responsibility. Don't you find it so, Mr. Weiss?'

He had never thought about it that way. Yes, he thought; I am overtaxed by my job, and the pay is slight and, as Pike-man says, there's no honour, only a sort of duty. But they would have to kill me to make me give it up. He wondered why he felt this way.

In September of 2120 he had obtained his Civil Service status, and he had worked for the government since, under first an Unusual Council Chairman, then a New Man Chairman. Whichever group held ultimate control, he, like other Civil Service employees, stayed on performing their skilled functions. Skilled – and talented.

He, himself: he had since childhood defined himself legally as a New Man. His cerebral cortex showed visible Rogers nodes – and, in intelligence-testing, he displayed, on cue, the proper ability. At nine years of age he had out-thought a mature Old Man; at twenty he could mentally plot a random table of one hundred numbers... as well as much else. For example, he could, without the use of a computer, plot the course-position of a ship subject to three gravities; by his innate mental processes he could project its locus at any given moment. He could deduce a wide variety of correlates from a given proposition, either theoretical or actual. And at thirty-two—

In a widely distributed paper he had presented objections to the classic theory of limits, showing in his own unique way, a possible return – at least theoretically – to Zeno's conce-

of progressively halved motion, utilizing as a fulcrum Dunne's theory of circular time.

And as a result of this he held a minor post in a minor branch of the government's Federal Bureau of Personnel Standards. Because what he had done, although original, was not much. Not compared with the advances made by other New Men.

They had changed the map of human thought... in fifty short years. Changed it into something which the Old Men, the persons of the past, could neither understand nor recognize. Bernhad's Theory of Acausality, for example – in 2103 Bernhad, working at the Zürich Polytechnic Institute, had demonstrated that Hume, in his enormous skepticism, had been fundamentally right: custom, and nothing else, linked events understood by the Old Men as cause-and-effect. He had brought Leibnitz's monad theory up to date – with devastating results. For the first time in human history it had become possible to predict outcomes of physical sequences on the basis of a spectrum of variable predicates, each equally true, each as much 'causal' as the next. Applied sciences had because of this taken a new form, one which the Old Men could not deal with; in their minds a principle of acausality meant chaos, they could predict nothing.

And there had been more.

In 2130 Blaise Black, a certified G-sixteen New Man, had upset Wolfgang Pauli's Synchronicity principle. He had shown that the so-called 'vertical' line of connectivity operated as a predictable factor, as easily plotted – using the new methods of random selection – as the 'horizontal' sequence. Thus, the distinction between the sequences was effectively obliterated – freeing abstract physics from the burden of a double determination, making all computations, including those derived from astrophysics, fundamentally easier. Black's System, as it was called, ended at last any reliance on Old Man theory and practice.

Contributions by Unusuals had been more specific; they had to do with operations involving actual entities. So – at least as he, a New Man, saw it – his race had contributed the underlying pinions of the reshaped map of the universe, and the Unusuals had done the work in the form of application of these general structures.

The Unusuals, he knew, would not have agreed with this. But that did not bother him.

I have a G-three rating, he said to himself. And I have done a little; I have added a jot to our collective knowledge. No Old Man, however gifted, could have done so. Except perhaps Thors Provoni. But Thors Provoni had been absent for years; he did not stir the sleep of either Unusuals or New Men. Provoni raged and roamed the outskirts of the galaxy, searching, in his wrath, for something vague, something even metaphysical. An answer, to speak. A response. Thors Provoni yelled into the emptiness, dinning out his noise in hope of a response.

God help us, Weiss thought, if he ever finds it.

But he was not afraid of Provoni; neither were his peers. A few nervous Unusuals muttered among themselves as the months turned into years and still Provoni did not die and was not captured. Thors Provoni constituted an anachronism: he remained the last of the Old Men who could not accept history, who dreamed of orthodox and thoughtless action... he lived in a dismal past, most of it not even real, a dreamless and dead past which could not be recalled, even by a man as gifted, as educated, as active as Provoni. He is a pirate, Weiss said.

to himself, a quasi-romantic figure, steeped in exploits. In a sense I will miss him when he dies. After all, we emerged from the Old Men; we are related to him. Distantly.

To his superior, Pikeman, he said, 'It's a burden. You are very right.' A burden, he thought this task, this Civil Service rating. I can't fly up into the stars; I can't pursue something which does not exist into the remote windings of the universe. How will I feel, he wondered, when we destroy Thors Provoni? My work, he thought, will be just that much more tedious. And yet I like it. I would not give it up. To be a New Man is to be something.

Maybe I'm a victim of our own propaganda, he reflected.

'When Appleton comes in with his boy,' Pikeman said, 'give little Robert the entire test, then tell them the rating won't be ready for another week or so. That way the blow will be less hard to endure.' He grinned starkly and added, 'And you won't have to deliver the news; it'll be in the form of a written notice.'

'I don't mind telling them,' Weiss said. But he did. Because, probably, it would not be the truth.

The truth, he thought. *We* are the truth; we create it: it is ours. Together we have drawn a new chart. As we grow, it grows with us; we change. Where will we be next year? he asked himself. No way to know... except for the precogs among the Unusuals, and they saw many futures at one time, like – he had heard – rows of boxes.

His secretary's voice came from the intercom. 'Mr. Weiss, a Mr. Nicholas Appleton and his son are here to see you.'

'Send them in,' Weiss said, and leaned back in his large, imitation-naugahide chair, preparing to greet them. On his desk the test-form lay; he fiddled with it reflectively, seeing it, from the corner of his eye, assume various shapes. He squeezed his eyes almost shut for a moment... and made the form, in his mind, exactly what he wanted it to be.

Kleo Appleton, in their tiny apartment, glanced swiftly at her watch and trembled. So late she thought. And so little, little use. Maybe they'll never come back; maybe they'll say the wrong thing and be whisked off to one of those internment camps you hear of.

'He's a fool,' she said to the television set. And, from the speaker of the set, a chorus of clapping sounded as the unreal 'audience' applauded.

'Mrs. Kleo Appleton,' the 'announcer' said, 'of North Platte, Idaho, says her husband is a fool. What do you think about that, Ed Garley?' A fat round face appeared on the screen. The television personality Ed Garley pondered a witty reply. 'Would you say it's perfectly absurd for a grown man to imagine for an instant that—'

She shut off the set with a wave of her hand.

From the stove, in the far wall of the living room, the smell of ersatz apple pie drifted. She had spent half her week's wage coupons on it, along with three yellow ration stamps. And they're not here for it, she said to herself. But I guess that isn't so important. In comparison to everything else. This was, perhaps, the most important day in her son's life.

She needed someone to talk to. While she waited. The TV set, this time, would not do.

Leaving the apartment, she crossed the hall, knocked at Mrs. Arlen's door.

It opened. Frowsy-haired, middle-aged Mrs. Rose Arlen peered out, turtle-like. 'Oh, Mrs. Appleton.'

Kleo Appleton said, 'Do you still have Mr. Cleaner? I need him. I want to get everything right so it'll look nice when Nick and Bobby get back. You see, Bobby is taking the test today. Isn't that wonderful?'

'They're rigged,' Mrs. Arlen said.

'The people who say that,' Kleo said, 'are people who've failed the test, or someone related to them has. There are countless people who pass every day, most of them children like Bobby.'

'I'll bet.'

Frostily, Kleo said, 'Do you have Mr. Cleaner? I'm entitled to three hours of use a week and I haven't had him this week at all.'

With reluctance, Mrs. Arlen pattered off, was gone for a few moments, and then returned pushing pompous, lofty Mr. Cleaner, the internal maintenance man of the building. 'Good day, Mrs. Appleton,' Mr. Cleaner whined tinnily, seeing her. 'Well plug me in but it's nice to see you again. Good morning, Mrs. Appleton. Well plug me in but it's—'

She pulled him across the hall and into her own apartment.

To Mrs. Arlen, Kleo said, 'Why are you so hostile to me? What did I ever do to you?'

'I'm not hostile,' Rose Arlen said. 'I'm just trying to wake you up to the truth. If the test was on the level, our daughter Carol would have passed. She can hear thoughts, at least'

little; she's a genuine Unusual, as much as anyone in Civil Service classifications. A lot of rated Unusuals, they lose their ability because—'

'I'm sorry; I have to clean.' Kleo firmly shut the door, turned to look for an outlet in which to plug in Mr. Cleaner—

She halted. And stood unmoving.

A man, small and grubby-looking, with beaked nose and thin, agile features, wearing a seedy cloth coat and unpressed trousers, confronted her. He had entered the apartment which she had been talking to Mrs. Arlen.

'Who are you?' Kleo asked, and felt her heart labor with fear. She sensed about the man a furtive atmosphere; he seemed ready to dodge out of sight... his eyes, narrow and dark, peeped nervously here and there, as if, she thought, he's making sure he knows all the ways out of the apartment.

The man said huskily, 'I'm Darby Shire.' He stared at her fixedly, and on his face the hunted expression grew. 'I'm an old friend,' he said, 'of your husband's. When will he be home, and can I stay here until he comes?'

'They'll be home any minute now,' she said. She still did not move; she kept as far away from Darby Shire – if that was really his name – as possible. 'I have to clean the apartment before they get back,' she said. But she did not plug Mr. Cleaner in. She kept her gaze, her scrutiny of Darby Shire, unaltered. What's he so afraid of? she wondered. Are they after him in the Public Security Service? And if so, what has he done?

'I'd like a cup of coffee,' Shire said. He ducked his head, as if avoiding the pleading quality in his own voice. As if he did not approve of himself asking for anything from her, but needing it, having to have it, any way.

'May I see your identab?' Kleo said.

'Be my guest.' Shire rummaged in the bulging pockets of his coat, brought out a handful of plastic cards; he tossed them onto the chair beside Kleo Appleton. 'Take as many as you want.'

'Three identabs?' she said, incredulously. 'But you can't own more than one. It's against the law.'

Shire said, 'Where is Nick?'

'With Bobby. At the Federal Bureau of Personnel Standards.'

'Oh, you have a son.' He smiled crookedly. 'You can see how long it's been since I last had anything to do with Nick. Is the boy New? Unusual?'

'New,' Kleo said. She made her way across the living room to the v-fone. Lifting the receiver she began to dial.

'Who are you calling?' Shire asked.

'The Bureau. To see if Nick and Bobby have left already.'

Striding towards the v-fone, Shire said, 'They won't remember; they won't know what you're talking about. Don't you understand how they are?' He reached, cut off the v-fone circuit. 'Read my book.' Groping among his various pockets, he came up with a paperbag

book, bent, with wrinkled pages and stains, its cover torn; he held it out to her.

‘God, I don’t want it,’ Kleo said with revulsion.

‘Take it. Read and understand what we must do to rid ourselves of the New and Unusual tyranny that blights our lives, that makes a mockery of everything man tries to do.’ He fumbled with the greasy, torn book, searching for a particular page. ‘Can I have a cup of coffee now?’ he asked plaintively. ‘I can’t seem to find the reference I want; it’s going to take some time.’

She pondered a moment, then strode off into the kitchen cubicle, to heat water for the instant, ersatz coffee.

‘You can stay five minutes,’ Kleo said to Shire. ‘And if Nick isn’t back by then you’ll have to leave.’

‘Are you afraid of getting caught here with me?’ Shire asked.

‘I – just find myself getting tense,’ she said. Because I know what you are, she thought. And I’ve seen bent, mutilated books like that before, dreary books carried here and there in dirty pockets, pawed over in stealth and in secret. ‘You’re a member of RID,’ she said aloud.

Shire grinned crookedly. ‘RID is too passive. They want to work through the ballot box.’ He had found the reference he wanted, but now he looked too weary to show it to her; he merely stood there, holding onto his book. ‘I spent two years in a government prison,’ he said presently. ‘Give me some coffee and I’ll leave; I won’t wait for Nick. He probably can’t do anything for me anyhow.’

‘What did you think he could do? Nick doesn’t work for the government; he doesn’t have any—’

‘That’s not what I need. I’m out legally; I served my term. Could I stay here? I don’t have any money or any place to go. I thought of everyone I could remember who might help me and then I thought of Nick by a process of elimination.’ He accepted the cup of coffee, handing her the book in return. ‘Thanks,’ he said as he greedily sipped. ‘Do you know,’ he said, wiping his mouth, ‘that the entire structure of power on this planet is going to crumble away from rot? Internal rot... we’ll be able, some day, to push it over with a stick. A few key men – Old Men – here and there both inside and outside the Civil Service apparatus and—’ He made a violent, sweeping gesture. ‘It’s all in my book. Keep it and read it; read how the New Men and the Unusuals manipulate us via their control of all the media and of—’

‘You’re insane,’ Kleo said.

‘Not any longer.’ Shire shook his head, his rat-like features twisting with intensity, a swift and emotional repudiation of her words. ‘When they arrested me three years ago I was clinically and legally insane – paranoia, they said – but before they would release me I had to take more psych tests, and now I’m able to prove my sanity.’ He fumbled about in his marital pockets once more. ‘I even have the official documentation with me, I carry it around.’

Kleo said, ‘They should check on you again.’ God, she thought. Is Nick never going to go home?

‘The government,’ Shire said, ‘is planning a programme of sterilization of all Old Men males. Did you know that?’

‘I don’t believe it.’ She had heard many such wild rumours, but none of them ever turned out to be true... or anyhow most of them. ‘You say that,’ she said, ‘to justify force and violence, your own illegal activities.’

‘We have a Xerox copy of the bill; it’s already been signed by seventeen Councilmen out of thirty.’

The television set clicked itself on and said, ‘A news bulletin. Advance units of the Third Army report that the *Gray Dinosaur*, the ship in which Citizen Thors Provoni left the Solar System, has been located circling Proxima with no signs of life. At present, tugs of the Third Army are engaged in grappling that apparently abandoned spaceship, and it is believed that Provoni’s body will be discovered within the next hour. Stay near your set for further bulletins.’ The television clicked itself off, its message delivered.

A strange, almost convulsive shudder swept through Darby Shire; he grimaced, clutched with his right arm... he bit savagely into empty air, then, his eyes gleaming, he turned back to face Kleo. ‘They will never get him,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘And I’ll tell you why. Thors Provoni is an Old Man, the best of us, and superior to any New Men or Unusuals. *He will return to this system with help.* As he promised. Somewhere out there help exists for us, and he will find it, even if it takes eighty years. He’s not looking for a world we can colonize; he’s looking for *them*.’ He eyed Kleo searchingly. ‘You didn’t know that, did you? Nobody does. Our rulers have control of all information, even about Provoni. But that’s what it’s all about. Provoni will make us no longer alone and no longer in the control of mutational opportunists exploiting their so-called “abilities” as a pretext for grabbing power here on Terra and holding it forever.’ He wheezed noisily, his face writhing with intensity; his eyes had glazed over with his own fanaticism.

‘I see,’ she said. Repelled, she turned away.

‘Do you believe?’ Shire demanded.

Kleo said, ‘I believe you’re a devout supporter of Provoni; yes, I believe that.’ And she believed, she thought, that you are once again clinically and legally insane, as you were a couple of years ago.

‘Hi.’ Nick, with Bobby lagging after him, entered the apartment. He perceived Darby Shire. ‘Who’s this?’ he asked.

‘Did Bobby pass?’ Kleo asked.

‘I think so,’ Nick said. ‘They’ll notify us by mail within the next week. If we had failed they would have told us right away.’

Bobby said remotely, ‘I failed.’

‘Do you remember me?’ Darby Shire asked Nick. ‘After so much time has passed?’ The two men surveyed each other. ‘I recognize you,’ Darby said in a hopeful tone of voice, as if inviting Nick to recognize him, too. ‘Fifteen years ago. In Los Angeles. The county hall records; we were both clerical assistants to Horse Faced Brunnell.’

‘Darby Shire,’ Nick said. He held out his hand; they shook.

This man, Nicholas Appleton thought, is deteriorated. What a dreadful change – but fifteen

years is a long time.

‘You look exactly the same,’ Darby Shire said. He held his tattered book towards Nick. ‘I’m recruiting. For example, I tried just now to recruit your wife.’

Seeing the book, Bobby said, ‘He’s Under Man.’ The boy’s voice held excitement. ‘Can I see it?’ he asked, reaching for the book.

‘Get out of here,’ Nick said to Darby Shire.

‘You don’t think you could–’ Shire began, but he cut him off savagely.

‘I know what you are.’ Nick grabbed Darby Shire by the shoulder of his ragged coat; he propelled him forcibly towards the door. ‘I know you’re hiding from the Public Security people. Get out.’

Kleo said, ‘He needs a place to stay. He wanted to stay here with us for a while.’

‘No,’ Nick said. ‘Never.’

‘Are you afraid?’ Darby Shire asked.

‘Yes.’ He nodded. Anyone caught circulating Under Man propaganda – and anyone associated with him in any way – was automatically deprived of his right to take future Civil Service tests. If the PSS caught Darby Shire here, Bobby’s life would be destroyed. And, in addition, they all might be fined. And sent to one of the relocation camps for an indefinite period. Subject to no real judicial review.

Darby Shire said quietly, ‘Don’t be afraid. Have hope.’ He drew himself up – how short he is, Nick thought. And ugly. ‘Remember Thors Provoni’s promise,’ Darby Shire said. ‘And remember this, too: your boy isn’t going to get a Civil Service rating anyhow. So you have nothing to lose.’

‘We have our freedom to lose,’ Nick said. But he hesitated. He did not quite push Darby Shire out of the apartment and into the public hallway. Suppose Provoni does come back, he said to himself, as he had pondered many times before. I don’t believe it; Provoni is being captured right now. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to have anything to do with you. Ruin your own life; keep it to yourself. And – go away.’ He propelled the smaller man out into the hallway now; several doors had popped open and the various inhabitants, some of whom he knew and some of whom he did not, gawked with interest at what was happening.

Darby Shire eyed him, then, calmly, reached into an inner pocket of his shabby coat. He seemed taller, now, and more in command of himself... and the situation. ‘I’m glad, Citizen Appleton,’ he said as he brought forth a slim, flat, black case and snapped it open, ‘that you have taken the attitude you have. I am making spot checks in this building, random selections, so to speak.’ He showed Nick his official identab: it glowed dully, enhanced by artificial fire. ‘PSS occifer Darby Shire.’

Inside him, Nick felt coldness at work, numbing him. Making him silent. He could think of nothing to say.

‘Oh, god,’ Kleo said in dismay; she came up beside him, and so, after a pause, did Bobby. ‘But we said the right thing, didn’t we?’ she asked Darby Shire.

‘Exactly right,’ Shire said. ‘Your responses were uniformly adequate. Good day.’ He returned his flat-pak of identification back to his inner coat pocket, smiled momentarily, and

still smiling, flowed through the ring of gawking people. In a moment he had gone. Only the ring of nervous bystanders remained. And – Nick and his wife and son.

Nick shut the hall door, turned to face Kleo. ‘You can never rest up,’ he said thickly. How close it had been. In another moment... I might have told him to stay, he realized. For old time’s sake. After all, I did know him. Once.

I suppose, he thought, that’s why they picked him to make a spot loyalty check on me and my family. Good lord, he thought. It left him terrified and shaking; with unsteady steps he made his way towards the bathroom, to the medicine cabinet in which he kept his supply of pills.

‘A little fluphenazine hydrochloride,’ he murmured, reaching for the reassuring bottle.

‘That’s three of those you’ve taken today,’ Kleo said, wife-wise. ‘Too many. Stop.’

Nick said, ‘I’ll be okay.’ Filling the bathroom water glass, he rapidly, mutely took the round tablet.

And, inside him, felt dull anger. He experienced a transitory flash of rage, at the system, at the New Men and the Unusuals, at the Civil Service – and then the fluphenazine hydrochloride hit him. The anger ebbed away.

But not completely.

‘Do you think our apartment is bugged?’ he asked Kleo.

‘“Bugged”?’ She shrugged. ‘Evidently not. Or we’d have been called in a long time ago because of the awful things Bobby says.’

Nick said, ‘I don’t think I can take much more.’

‘Of what?’ Kleo said.

He did not say. But he knew, down inside himself, who and what he meant. And his son knew, too. They now stood together – but how long, he wondered, will I feel this way? I will wait and see if Bobby passed his Civil Service test, he said to himself. And then I’ll decide what to do. God forbid, he thought. What am I thinking? What’s happening to me?

‘The book’s still here,’ Bobby said; bending, he picked up the torn, creased paperback which Darby Shire had left behind. ‘Can I read it?’ he asked his father. Thumbing through it he said, ‘It looks like it’s real. The police must have gotten it off an Under Man they caught.’

‘Read it,’ Nick said savagely.

THREE

Two days later, a letter from the government made its appearance in the Appletons' mailbox. Nick opened it at once, his heart vibrating with expectation. It was the test results, as right; he scanned through the several pages – a Xerox copy of Bobby's paper was included and came at last to the determination.

'He failed,' Nick said.

'I knew I would,' Bobby said. 'That's why I never wanted to take it in the first place.'

Kleo began to snivel.

Nick said nothing, thought nothing; he was empty and numbed. A hand, colder than that of death itself, gripped his heart, killing off all emotion.

Picking up his line-one fone, Willis Gram, Council Chairman of the Extraordinary Committee For Public Safety, bantering said, 'How's the capture of Provoni coming, Director? Any new news?' He chuckled. God knew where Thors Provoni was. Probably dead long ago on some airless planetoid far away.

Police Director Lloyd Barnes said stonily, 'Are you speaking of media releases, sir?'

He laughed. 'Tell me what the TV and the papers are blabbing about now.' He could, of course, turn his own TV set on, without having even to get out of bed. But he enjoyed raking his stuffed-shirt Police Director over the coals re the Thors Provoni situation. The color of Barnes' face usually proved interesting in a morbid sort of way. And, being an Unusual of the highest order, Gram could enjoy firsthand the chaos in the man's mind when it came to anything dealing with the topic of the runaway traitor.

After all, it had been Director Barnes who had released Thors Provoni from a Federal prison ten years ago. As rehabilitated.

'Provoni is going to narrowly slip through our fingers again,' Barnes said gloomily.

'Why don't you say he's dead?' It would have enormous psychological consequences on the population – and along the lines he would have liked to see.

'If he shows up here again, the basis of our situation would be jeopardized. By mere showing up—'

'Where's my breakfast?' Gram asked. 'Tell them to bring it in.'

'Yes sir,' Barnes said, nettled. 'And what do you want? Eggs and toast? Fried ham?'

'Is there really ham available?' Gram asked. 'Make it ham, with three chicken eggs. But make sure nothing's ersatz.'

Not enjoying his servant-role, Barnes muttered, 'Yes sir,' and got off the line.

Willis Gram lay back against the pillows; one of his personal men immediately manifested himself and expertly propped the pillows up exactly as they should have been. Now where the damn paper? Gram asked himself, and held out his hand to receive it; another of his personal staff-members noted his gesture and adroitly produced the current three editions of the *Times*.

For a time, he leafed through the first sections of the great old newspaper – not government-controlled. 'Eric Cordon,' he said at last, making a motion with his right hand to show that he wished to dictate. At once a scribe appeared, portable transcriber in hand. 'Tell all council members,' Gram said. 'We cannot claim Provoni's death – for reasons which Director Barnes has pointed out – but we can deliver Eric Cordon. I mean we can execute him. And what a great relief that will be.' Almost, he thought, like getting Thors Provoni himself. Throughout the Under Men network, Eric Cordon was the most admired organizer and speaker. And there were, of course, his many books.

Cordon was a true Old Man intellectual, a theoretical physicist who could inspire a gre

group-response among other disenchanted Old Men who longed for the ancient days. What would, if he could, put the clock back fifty years. Cordon, however, despite his unique forensic ability, was a thinker, not a doer – as was Provoni: Thors Provoni the man of action who had roared off to ‘get help’, as Cordon, his onetime friend, had reported in endless speeches, books and grubby tracts. Cordon was popular, but – unlike Provoni – Cordon was not a public menace. With his execution, he would leave a void which he had really never properly filled. He was, despite his public appeal, strictly small-fry.

But much of the Old Men population did not understand that. Hero worship surrounded Eric Cordon. Provoni was an abstract hope; Cordon existed. And he worked and wrote and spoke here on Earth.

Picking up the line-two fone he said, ‘Get me Cordon on the big screen, Miss Knight.’ He hung up, settled back in his bed and once again snooped into the articles in the newspaper.

‘Further dictation, Council Chairman?’ the scribe inquired, after an interval of time.

‘Oh yes.’ Gram pushed the newspaper aside. ‘Where was I?’

“‘I mean we can execute him. And what a—’”

‘To continue,’ Gram said, clearing his throat. ‘I want all department heads – are you getting this? – to grasp and understand the reasons behind my desire to finish off whats-hisname.’

‘Eric Cordon,’ the scribe said.

‘Yes.’ Gram nodded. ‘Why we must destroy Eric Cordon is as follows. Cordon is the link between the Old Men of Earth and Thors Provoni. As long as Cordon is alive, people feel the presence of Provoni. Without Cordon they have no contact, real or otherwise, with that rat-space bastard out there somewhere. In a sense, Cordon is the voice for Provoni while Provoni is gone. I admit that this might backfire; the Old Men might riot for a time... but on the other hand this might bring the Under Men out of hiding where we could get at them. In a sense I’m about to deliberately spark a premature show of force by the Under Men; there will be wild waves as soon as Cordon’s death is announced, but ultimately—’

He broke off. On the big screen, which comprised the far wall of his great bedroom, a face had begun to ignite. A thin, esthetic face with hollows about the jaw: a weak jaw, Gram reflected as he saw the jaw move with speech. Rimless glasses, meager hair in the form of carefully combed strands across an otherwise bald head.

‘Sound,’ Gram instructed, as Cordon’s lips continued to move inaudibly.

‘... pleasure,’ Cordon boomed, as the sound came on too loudly. ‘I know how busy you are, sir. But if you wish to speak to me—’ Cordon gestured elegantly. ‘I am ready.’

To one of his bedside aides, Gram said, ‘Where the hell is he now?’

‘In Brightforth Prison.’

‘You getting enough to eat?’ Gram asked the image on the big screen.

‘Very much so, yes.’ Cordon smiled, showing teeth so even as to seem – and probably were – false.

‘And you’re free to write?’

Cordon said, ‘I have the materials.’

‘Tell me, Cordon,’ Gram said energetically, ‘why do you write and say those damn things? You know they’re not true.’

‘Truth is in the eye of the beholder.’ Cordon chuckled in his thin, humorless way.

‘You know that trial a few months ago,’ Gram asked, ‘where you were sentenced to sixteen years in prison for treason? Well, goddam it, the judges have gone back and eradicated the specifications of your punishment. They’ve now decided on the death penalty.’

No expression appeared on Cordon’s bleak face.

‘Can he hear me?’ Gram asked an aide.

‘Oh yes, sir. He hears you, all right.’

Gram said, ‘We’re going to execute you, Cordon. You know, I can read your mind; I know how afraid you are.’ It was true; inside Cordon quaked. Even though their contact remained purely electronic, with Cordon himself actually two thousand miles away. Psionic capacities like this always baffled the Old Men – and, frequently, the New Men as well.

Cordon said nothing. But it was obvious that he grasped the fact that Gram had begun to feel him out telepathically.

‘Down underneath,’ Gram said, ‘you’re thinking, “Maybe I should bolt. Provoni is dead—”’

‘I don’t think Provoni is dead,’ Cordon broke in, showing outrage: his first genuine facial expression.

‘Subconsciously,’ Gram said. ‘You’re not even aware of it.’

‘Even if Thors were dead—’

‘Oh, come off it,’ Gram said. ‘You know and I know that if Provoni were dead you’d drop your agitation and propaganda enterprises and creep off out of public sight for the rest of your damn ineffectual life.’

A buzzer in the communications apparatus to Gram’s right all at once squeaked into life. ‘Pardon me,’ Gram said, and pressed a switch.

‘Your wife’s attorney is here, Council Chairman. You left word that he was to be let in no matter what you were doing. Shall I send him on in, or—’

‘Send him in,’ Gram said. To Cordon he said, ‘We’ll notify you – Director Barnes, most probably – an hour before your scheduled death. Goodbye, I’m busy now.’ He made a motion and the wall-size screen dribbled into opaqueness.

The central bedroom door opened and a slim, tall, well-dressed gentleman with a short beard strode briskly into the room, briefcase in hand. Horace Denfeld, who always dressed this way.

‘Do you know what I read in Eric Cordon’s mind just now?’ Gram said. ‘Subconsciously, he wishes he’d never joined the Under Men, and here he is, the leader of it – to the extent that they have a leader. I’m going to obliterate their existence, starting with Cordon. Do you approve of my ordering Cordon’s execution?’

Seating himself, Denfeld unzipped his briefcase. ‘According to Irma’s instructions, and my professional advice, we have changed several clauses – minor ones – in the separation maintenance agreement. Here.’ He handed a folio, a document, to Gram. ‘Take your time.’

Council Chairman.'

'What will happen when Cordon is gone?' Gram asked as he unfolded the legal size sheet of paper and began reading here and there; in particular he scanned the passages marked red.

Denfeld said offhandedly, 'I couldn't even manage to guess, sir.'

"'Minor clauses'," Gram mocked with bitterness as he read. 'Jeez Christ, she's upped the child support from two hundred pops a month to four.' He shuffled among the pages, feeling the edges of his ears glow with wrath – and with stunned dismay. 'And the alimony up from three thousand to five. And—' He reached the last sheet; it was strewn with red lines and sums penciled in. 'Half my travel expenses – she gets that. And *all* of what I make for paid speeches.' His neck had become grimy and soggy with warm, stinging sweat.

'But she's allowing you to keep all your earnings from written material which you—'

'There isn't any written material. Who do you think I am, Eric Cordon?' He tossed the papers brusquely onto the bed; for a time he sat steaming... partly from what he had just now read and partly because of the attorney, Horace Denfeld, who was a New Man; low as he was in the general New Man standings, Denfeld considered all Unusuals – including the Council Chairman – merely a pseudo evolvment. Gram could pick it up from Denfeld's mind that low, constant level of superiority and contempt.

Gram said, 'I'll have to think it over.' I'll show it to my own attorneys, he said to himself. The best government attorneys there are: those in the tax branch.

'I want you to consider one thing, sir,' Denfeld said. 'In a way, it may seem to you that it's unfair of Mrs. Gram to ask so—' He searched for the word. 'So large a share in your property.'

'The house,' Gram agreed. 'And the four apartment buildings in Scranton, Pa. All that, and now this.'

'But,' Denfeld pointed out smoothly, his tongue flitting about his lips like a paper streamer dancing in the wind, 'it is essential that your separating from your wife must at all costs be kept secret – *for yourself*. For the fact that a Council Chairman of the Extraordinary Committee For Public Safety cannot let a breath of... well, shall we say *la calugna*—'

'What's that?'

'Scandal. There can't be a scandal for any high-ranking Unusual or New Man anyhow, as you well know. But this, plus your position—'

'I'll resign,' Gram grated, 'before I sign that. Five thousand pops alimony a month. She's insane.' He raised his head and scrutinized Denfeld. 'What happens to a woman when she's getting a separate maintenance or a divorce? She – they – want everything, nailed down or otherwise. The house, the apartments, the car, all the pops in the world—' God, he thought, and rubbed his forehead wearily. To one of his servants he said, 'Get me my coffee.'

'Yes sir.' The aide fiddled with the coffee maker, handed him his black, strong espresso cup.

To the aide, and to everyone in the room, Gram said, appealing to them, 'What can I do? She's got me.' He placed the folio of documents in the drawer of his bedside desk. 'There'

nothing more to discuss,' he said to Denfeld. 'My attorneys will let you know my decision.' He glowered at Denfeld, whom he did not like at all. 'Now I have other business.' He nodded to an aide, who put his firm hand on the attorney's shoulder and guided him toward one of the doors leading out of the bedroom.

After the door had shut behind Denfeld, Gram lay back, meditating and drinking his coffee. If only she'd break a law, he said to himself. Even a traffic law – anything to get her behind in her relationship to the police. If we caught her jaywalking we could make it stick; she could resist arrest, use foul and obscene language in public, be a public menace by virtue of the fact that she had deliberately flouted the law... and, he thought, if only Barnes' people could catch her on a felony rap; for example buying and/or drinking alcohol. Then (his own attorneys had explained this) we could hit her with an unfit mother suit, take the children and put the blame on her in a true divorce action – which, under those circumstances, we could make public.

But, as it stood, Irma had too many things on him. A contested divorce would make him look bad indeed, what with what Irma could scrape together out of the gutter.

Picking up his line-one fone he said, 'Barnes, I want you to get hold of that cop dame, the Alice Noyes, and send her in here. Maybe you should come along, too.'

Police officer Noyes headed the team which had been trying, for almost three months, to get something on Irma. Twenty-four hours a day, his wife was monitored by police video and audio gadgetry... without her knowledge, of course. In fact, one video camera scanned the happenings in Irma's bathroom, which unfortunately had not turned up anything to speak of. Everything Irma said, did, everyone she saw, every place she went – all on reels of tape at the PSS Central in Denver. And it added up to nothing.

She's got her own police, he realized gloomily. ExPSS flatheads who roamed about with her when she went shopping or to a party or to Dr. Radcliff, her dentist. I've got to get rid of her, he said to himself. I should never have married an Old Man wife. But it had happened long ago, when he did not hold the high position which had become his later on. Every Unusual and every New Man sneered at him in private, and he did not like it; he read thoughts, lots of them, emanating from many, many people, and buried there somewhere lay the contempt.

It was exceptionally great among the New Men.

While he lay waiting for Director Barnes and officer Noyes, he examined the *Times* once again, opening it at random to one of its three hundred pages.

And found himself confronted by an article on the Great Ear project... an article which called the byline of Amos Ild, a very well-placed New Man: someone Gram could not touch.

Well, the Great Ear experiment is just rolling merrily along, he thought sardonically as he read.

Thought to be beyond the scope of probability, work on the first purely electronic telepathic listening device advances at a reassuring rate, officials of McMally Corporation, the designer and builder of Great Ear, as it has come to be called, said today in a press conference attended by many skeptical observers. 'When Great Ear goes into operation,' Munro Capp opined, 'it will be capable of telepathically monitoring the thought-waves of tens of thousands of persons, and with the ability – not found among Unusuals – to unscramble these enormous flood-tides of...'

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