



Blake could feel something tugging at his mind again...



I Am Tomorrow

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Published 1952 in Dynamic Science Fiction, Vol. 01, No. 1

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Published in: www.atomicvintage.com.br

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His dream was to give people freedom — not to hand it to them on a platter, but give them the one weapon they needed to win it for themselves. But to do this, Thomas Blake had to get into a position of power, had to obtain the Presidency. That was his only motive for his ambition. But, as his aide, Gideon Pierce, said, "... once you have the power, and somebody bucks you — you know what will happen!" It wouldn't happen, Blake swore — but would it, after all?

CHAPTER - 01

IDIOCY wrenched at the mind of Thomas Blake; the television cameras, the fine old mansion, the people cheering, all seemed to vanish into a blankness. His mind was suddenly alien to his brain, his thoughts twisting against a weight of absolute blankness that resisted, with a fierce impulse to live. Before him, light seemed to lash down; and a grim, expressionless face swam out of nothing, while an old man's voice dinned in ears that were curiously not his.

It passed, almost at once, leaving only the sureness that this was more than fancy. Blake caught a quick view of himself in a monitor, spotting the sagging muscles of his face, and carrying them back to a smile. His eyes darted to the face of Gideon Pierce, and he saw that the slip could only have been momentary; his campaign manager was still smiling the toowarm smile of a professional politician, creasing his fat jowls into false pleasantness.

The shouting behind him caught Blake's ears then, making him realize that his short speech was ended. He stood there, studying himself in the monitor. He was still lean and trim at forty, with the finest camera face in politics. To the women, he had looked like a man who was still boyish; to the men, like a man among men. And none of that had hurt, though it wasn't the only reason he had just been conceded victory as the youngest governor of the state, on his first entry into politics.

But under his attempt to appraise himself, Blake's mind was still trembling as if huddled down into the familiar pattern of his physical brain. Mice, with icy feet, sneaked up his backbone, and centipedes with hot claws crawled down. No man can ever feel another brain — and yet Blake had just experienced that very feeling — contact with a vague, mindless, inchoate brain that no dream, or attack of nerves, could have conjured up for him.

He reached for a glass of Chablis and downed it at a sudden gulp, before the wash of congratulatory handclasps could reach him. Gideon Pierce suddenly snapped to life and was at his side, sensitive to every deviation from the normal. "Nerves, Tom?"

Blake nodded "Excitement, I guess."

"Go on up, then; I'll take care of them here."

For a second, Blake almost liked the man, hollow though he knew Gideon to be. He let Pierce clear the way for him, not even listening to the man's explanations, and slipped out, Blake's room was on the fourth floor, where he had grown up as a boy, but with a private entrance and stairs that were a later addition. He slipped up to its quiet simplicity; there, in the soft light, with the big logs burning down to coals in the fireplace, seated in his worn leather chair before his desk, he should have been safe from anything.

He should have — but the wrenching came again. There was no light this time, but the same voice was droning frantically in the distance; and again he felt the touch of a brain, filled with stark idiocy, fighting to drive him out of its alien cells. He was aware of a difference this time, though — a coarser, cruder brain, filled with endocrine rage in spite of its lack of thought. It fought, and won, and Blake was suddenly back in his room.

For a second, his senses threatened to crack under hysteria, but he caught them up. In the small bathroom, he found a four-year-old box of barbiturates and swallowed

two of them. He knew they wouldn't work for minutes, but the psychological relief of taking them meant something.

The idea of a strange attack on him hit Blake; at once, his fingers flew out to a knob on the desk, pressing it in a secret combination. A concealed drawer slipped out, and he grabbed at the papers inside — they were all there. His brother, James, had spent ten years — and fifty million dollars that had bankrupt and killed him, to get a few diagrams and instructions onto these papers.

Silas McKinley had postulated that some form of military absolutism was inevitable when the greatest weapons of the time required great means to use them — as had the phalanx, the highly-trained Roman Legion, the heavy equipment of feudal knights, or the atomic bombs, planes, and tanks of modern war. Contrariwise, when the major weapons could be owned and used by the general citizenry, then reasonably-peaceful democracy must result, as it had from the colonial muskets of the 18th Century, and would do from the use of James Blake's seemingly-impossible accomplishment.

Unless, Tom added to himself, it could be suppressed. Stealing the papers wouldn't be enough for that; he had them all completely memorized. He managed to grin at his fear, and closed the drawer, just as a knock sounded and Gideon Pierce came in.

WATCHING the man's public mask slip off and reveal a cynical, old face did more to stabilize Blake's emotions than any amount of barbiturates could have done. He motioned to another chair and poured whiskey and soda into a glass, adding ice from the small freezer in the little bar. "Rough down there?"

The older man shook his head. "No — not after we knew you won; I'm used to celebrations. But — my God, Tom — the last month — the way you were going, you didn't have a chance! Getting the nomination was miracle enough — you had no business

winning with the stuff you were handing out! It's all right to promise things — but you have to be realistic about even that! When you can't deliver..."

"I'll deliver," Blake told him. "I've always delivered on everything I ever said I'd do; and I've always tried to give them what they really wanted. Now I want something — and they give it to me. The old principle, Gideon — cast thy bread upon the water and it shall return after many days."

"Yeah — soggy!" Pierce swirled the drink in his mouth and swallowed it without tasting it. "So what do you get out of it, if you do manage to keep some of your promises?"

Insanity, maybe, Blake thought, remembering the mind-wrenching; then he thrust it down. "I get to be President — where I can really do some good; where I can give them decent, honest, democratic peace and self-respect."

"Sure." Pierce dragged out a cigar and began chewing on it, shaking his head. "Tom, I'm beginning to believe you mean it. If you do, take the advice of a man who has been around longer; get out of politics! It's no place for you. You're too naive — too filled with bright ideals that are one hundred percent right — except that they neglect human nature. You'll find even the President has opposition, boy; once you have the power and somebody bucks you, well — well, you've seen it happen. And you get bitter. I was full of noble thoughts once myself; take a look at what you see on my face now. You don't belong in this racket."

Blake held out a lighter to the other, grinning. "They told me I didn't belong in the newspaper-business, Gideon. When I inherited my foster-father's string of yellow, warmongering journals and decided to build them into the honest, fighting group they are now they told me I'd go broke. I doubled the circulation."

"Yeah — and probably convinced a few thousand voters to change their ideas — until they voted; then they cast their ballot for favors, and with the same selfish reasons

they'd had before. You're as hopeless as your brother James, burning himself out and wasting a fortune on a perpetual motion machine. But you're going to break my heart when you find out the facts. Oh, hell; Good night, Governor!"

Pierce got up and went out, grumbling before Tom could sputter the words that came to his lips. Then he shrugged; James Blake had deliberately built up a reputation as a crackpot while he went ahead turning a gadget out of the wildest of science-fiction speculations into reality. He'd developed a hand-weapon which was equal to a cannon, for offense, and simultaneously protected the user from anything up to the fatal blast of a hydrogen bomb.

And now it was up to Tom Blake to get to a position where he could have this weapon produced in quantity, and released before it could be suppressed. As President, there would be ways he could do that; with it would come an end to war, once and for all, and the genuine equality of all men. Maybe this was idealism, perhaps even naive — but the Blakes got what they wanted.

He started to undress, and then flopped down on the bed with half his clothes on. It had been a hard day, and those two attacks hadn't helped any; they must have been caused by nervous strain, he thought... and knew he was only trying to deceive himself. But the barbiturates were working, finally, bringing a cloudy euphoria that kept him from pursuing his doubts.

He was reaching up for the lightswitch when the third attack came.

CHAPTER - 02

THIS TIME, it was different; the first ones had been mere feelers; now the attack on IiLs mental stability had the sure drive of power and firmness behind it.

The euphoria vanished, as if Blake's thoughts no longer had any relation to his body — which seemed to be the case. He tried to see, and found that there was jet darkness around him. He could no longer feel his arm raised toward the switch — though he was sure he hadn't dropped it, and that the light must still be on. There was no feeling of any kind.

That was wrong, though; he could feel a pull, but it bore no relation to anything he had experienced before, except in the two previous fantasies. It was as if immaterial tongs had clasped his thoughts and were lifting them, delicately, but with all the power of the universe. There was a snapping, and then only a wild, confessed feeling of transition.

Everything seemed slower than before. Now the pressure guided him toward something — and there was a resistance which the guiding force could overcome only partially. Streamers of emotion shot out at him — and his own wild desire for a locus and a point of stability met them and clashed in something which managed to be agonizingly painful, yet without sensation!

Idiocy again!

The brain set against Blake's own mind resisted without thought, without the slightest trace of knowledge. He could sense the wild frenzy with which it collected data as it went and tried to find answers that were not there. Something that might have been a soundless scream of desperation went up from it, as the force guiding Blake managed to press it aside.

Blake felt the probing brain wrenched more wildly than he himself had been handled; again, there was a feeling of something snapping. Beside him, something tried to maintain itself, but without enough individuality to hold; it began drifting into nothing, and then was gone. But where it had been, was a suction that dragged him toward it.

He settled suddenly, feeling the alienness of a new location. It wasn't either of the two other places where he had been — this was new. There was nothing here to contest with him for his place, but something tried to erase him into the emptiness that had been the idiot-thing before him. From somewhere outside, force and pressure seemed to descend, to mold Blake's new haven into the patterns of his thoughts, and make it accept him. The effort of holding his own, where he himself was still alien, became less; but it now fitted his mind. It was cramped, and without the warmth of his own body, but he was physically alive again.

The pressure vanished, and he relaxed back on the bed suddenly.

But this wasn't Tom Blake's own bed, any more than it was his own body. This was a hard pad under him, in place of the foam-rubber cushion —and this new body seemed to be quite unmindful of the b'.nr.piness, which his own body would have found intolerable.

Blake shook himself, chasing away the final stages of the fantasy this had to be. He was probably half-asleep, which made this one last longer; if he opened his eyes. . .

They seemed to work with difficulty, but they came open finally, to show/ the contour of a body under a dingy, grey sheet — something that must have been black, before it faded. Blake moved his hand, glancing at it. His eyes focussed slowly on a heavy, muscular arm, deepbrown from sun and wind, that ended in a hand covered with hair, and lacking a finger.

Blake tried to scream. He was hysterical inside, but no sound came out; the lack of physical response struck him. like a second blow, snapping him out of it.

He wasn't in his own body, and this wasn't a dream. Somehow, something had picked up his thoughts and memories and planted them in the skull of an entirely different man. It couldn't be done, but Blake was here to prove it.

“Magic,” came the memory of his brother’s words from their adolescence, *“does not exist. It is only a distortion of what could be scientific facts, if properly understood. If poltergeists exist, then accept them, but remember they’re natural phenomena obeying natural principles we don’t fully understand. That’s science.”*

BLAKE CLUTCHED at the idea. Nobody had conjured him here, wherever here was; it was the work of intelligence, operating with natural laws — and that could never be fully horrible. He was only feeling horror because the cave-beast that feared the dark was part of his emotional and environmental heritage.

He put the cave-beast down enough to try to find where “here” was.

He found that his head was strapped down, and that webbing under the sheet restrained his new body. Inability to move more than his eyes limited his view to one end of this room. He could see monotracks over his head, with great machines that might have been anything from lamps, to over-sized routers sliding along them, under the cold glare of fluorescent tubes. The wall ahead of him was a featureless grey; the floor was out of his view. And along the wall was a single bench, covered with cots, each holding a body strapped down as Blake’s was. Their heads were clamped, hiding them from him; but he could see that each had a hairy hand outside the sheet, and that all the bodies were about the same height and build — fairly tall, and uniformly solid in build. He supposed he fitted the same description, since there was so much uniformity.

As he watched, the machines travelled down the track, stopping in clusters over a few heads at a time, while odd lights glowed, and a whirring sound came from them. From each man under a cluster of machines, there would be a mutter, then a prolonged groan... and silence, until the machines moved on.

It wasn’t an inspiring view, and it told Blake almost nothing. He seemed to have seen bits of it before in his first attack, but he couldn’t be sure.

As he watched, a door opened in the wall, and a man came through, dressed in a smock that fell to the floor and was of shiny black material. He was tall and thin but wideshouldered, with a face that was frozen into complete lack of expression. A chill shuddered through Blake; this was the same face he'd first seen. Then, somehow, even that bit of familiarity made it easier to take.

He wasn't surprised to hear a mutter in the voice of an old man. It was a complaining sound, ending in a sharp question.

The smocked man shrugged. "I know, Excellency, but we're beyond even the borderland of familiar science here. If it works, it will be a miracle. I told you that then, and I still say it. Once we catch him, we can erase him. But the problem is to catch him — on fancy guesswork as to just what mind-pattern we're looking for, way back then."

"Something worked before." The figure coming through the door now looked at the rows of men, with a sharpness oddly in contrast with the voice. He was of indeterminate age — somewhere between sixty and eighty, Blake thought. But his body was reasonably straight, and with none of the fat or gauntness most older men have. His hair was steel grey — just a shade darker than the soft grey uniform he wore — and his movements were seemingly easy and sure. His face was handsome except for the expression there. The mouth was too straight, the eyes too cynical — and over the aura of power was a hint of repressed but seething fear.

He coughed, and turned to the nearer group of figures on the cots. His voice suddenly lost its touch of tremor, and became the firm, modulated tones of a trained speaker. "Well, don't you think it's time you asked where you are, young man?" he asked.

The nearer figure struggled to sit upright. "*Wahnsinnigkeit! Um Gottes Willen, wenn ich nur frei waehre...*"

"German," the man in the black smock said. "And you don't speak it."

“Never learned it,” the older man agreed. Fie locked down the line, started toward another, and then shrugged; a sudden smile flashed over his face. “Tom Blake, you’re the man we want; are you here?”

“Here!” The word ripped out of Blake with an explosive force of its own, while all his uncertainties gathered themselves together in expectation of the explanation that would now mercifully be forthcoming.

The other man beamed. “Good, Tom! Remember the desk combination? We have to be sure.” His voice was almost young now.

“Right in, left in, left out, twice left,” Blake repeated.

“That’s it!” The old man beamed again, and was still smiling as he turned to the man in the black smock. “Okay, Sarnoff. Burn out his brain — and do a good job of it, because I’m watching! ”

CHAPTER - 03

BLAKE SCREAMED as the machines suddenly swooped over him, and one began droning again. He had no way of knowing what it would do — but the result was obvious from the shouted words. Sarnoff climbed up and inspected it, giving it a sudden test. Something in Blake’s mind slithered, and the force of the alienness grew stronger.

“Pure luck,” Sarnoff said, his voice as emotionless as his expression. “Even with what we had to work with, guessing his resonant frequency range was just good luck. I didn’t even know whether we could reach back forty years into the past. Excellency, I deserve that bonus — but chance deserves a bigger one.”

“You’ll get your bonus,” the older man agreed, and some of the age crept back into his speech. “Double it. We’ve got his mind matrix here — here where we can work on it with the burner; that’s all I care about. I want it eliminated permanently, Sarnoff! ”

The other nodded. The machine began to purr again, and Blake felt another scream come to his lips, and freeze there. Forty years into the future — to be eliminated! It wasn’t science or magic — it was simply horror. There was no purpose... no right... no...

The slithering began in his brain again. This wasn’t the same as the previous force; it was an erasing of himself. Tom Blake’s memories began to blur, beginning with the earliest ones. His foster-father suddenly stepped before his mental eye, chuckling at a successful creation of trouble at a disputed border that would be constant headlines for his papers. Then he foster-father v/was gone, and Blake had no memory of anything before the age of ten.

His brother... what had his brother said? Funny, how he’d ever gotten the chain of newspapers? Someone must have given them to Tom. Then the election was gone, and all he had heard here.

He lay staring up at the pretty lights that glistened in the machine. A dim consciousness of self was left, but it seemed to be half outside his head — as if a funny part of him were trying to pull away and go back somewhere. He had no words, nor could he understand the words that were said in front of him.

His eyes moved whenever sudden motion brought them around by catching their attention. But it was all something interesting in a purely sensory way. He saw Sarnoff test him; he lay for hours in a big room with other bodies that stirred senselessly. He felt them carry him to a truck and place him inside. The motion of the truck was scary and exciting at first, but he went to sleep soon after. His bodily functions v/o ke him, just as

the truck came to a sudden halt and other men climbed into it and began carting the drooling creatures with him away somewhere. But then he went to sleep again.

Far away, a part of himself as bereft of words as Tom was, began to cry unhappily, as if conscious that this was wrong. But it didn't waken him.

There were the beginnings of words again, when he finally did begin to come out of his sleep. Slow, bit by tedious part, his mind seemed to be reaching back to its dimmest recesses and pulling facts up for him. Sometimes whole chains of thought would pop into his mind and fade back into his permanent memory. Again, it would take what seemed like years of concentration to root out one totally unimportant thing.

Blake was delighted when he discovered who he was. He mouthed his name to himself, soundlessly. The motion brought some attention; a sharp prick that he somehow identified as a hypodermic needle was thrust into his arm.

"Go to sleep," a soft voice whispered. "Sleep, Jed. We need you whole, and you'll come back better if you don't try too hard. That's it, honey! "

BLAKE WAS himself when he wakened — or rather, that other body with its alien brain which somehow had become himself. He was in a basement, from the smell and the dampness; lying on a cot across the dimlylighted room from a small, crude machine that resembled one he had seen in Sarnioff's place. Another of the men who had been on one of Sarnioff's cots sat near him, watching doubtfully, with some kind of a gun in his hand. And beside him, leaning over to kiss him as he opened his eyes, was a girl with an intense, half-pretty face and eyes that could have drawn the damned from Hell straight through the pearly gates.

She held him, moaning softly against him as her lips burned on his. Blake wanted to push her aside for a moment, but the body and brain in which he now lived had a warmer endocrine balance than his own. Desire washed over him, yet with a strange

mingling of gentleness and protective instinct. She drew away at last, her eyes misty and shining. “Jed! Oh, Jed.”

From the other cot, the man chuckled. “Give him a chance, Sherry! The guy’s been through plenty — *I know!*”

She blushed, and dropped her eyes. Blake’s mind jerked at the archaic behavior. He studied her more carefully, waiting for hints from them. Obviously, they knew him as the person who had formerly inhabited this body. But beyond that, he had no dues.

Sherry was dressed in a dress that touched the floor and came high on her throat. Even the sleeves were fastened at her wrists. She blushed again, as he watched, and tried to pull the hem of the skirt — or rather, the floor-length, ballooning jodhpurs — down over a toe that was showing. “Jed!” she breathed indignantly “Not here! ”

The man chuckled again, not too nicely, and gave up trying to see the whole of the girl’s shoe. He came over to drop on the cot beside Blake, tossing the gun at him. “Here, Jed, you’ll need your statidyne. Lucky for you you’d had a light dose of mind-burning before; they really gave you the works that time. We thought there wasn’t a trace of a memory left in your head, but Mark swore the brain can’t be washed completely a second time. We put you under his restorer, on a chance — and here you are, good as new.”

“Not quite.” Blake knew he couldn’t stay silent for ever, and a little truth might help. “I’m not quite the same. I...”

“Blank spots!” Sherry moaned it. “We had them with Herman, too Rufe, can we put him back under the restorer?”

“Mark said he’d gone as far as he could,” Rufe told her. “Jed, what’s missing. The last few years? After you joined the movement, or before?”

“Not after, Jed,” Sherry begged. But Blake nodded slowly.

Rufe motioned Sherry out. “This is going to be rough,” he warned her. “No stuff for mixed company when we talk about him in a hurry. Even if you have been married three years.”

She kissed Blake quickly, while he absorbed the fact that he was now officially married, and then she slipped out after an elaborate examination through small cracks in a doorway. Rufe came closer, squatting down.

RUFE’S TALK was a quick summary of why Blake had apparently joined a rebel movement against the dictator this world seemed to have. It was old stuff to anyone who had grown up in a world where Hitler and Mussolini had been daily fare in the papers, with only a personal element added. The Bigshot — obviously a swearword now — had taken over slowly, always with the velvet glove over the steel fist. He’d apparently had some sort of invincible weapon, since he’d united the whole world under his heel.

Then he’d begun reforming it. Criminals first— and then non-conformists imd been treated to progressively more severe erasure of all memory and personality". The unfit had been sterilized. All labor had been handled through the State; all profits were ‘Equalized’, and the Iron Guard had grown up, using weapons that could not be overcome. Finally, the mind-burning and sterilization had gotten out of hand; complaints had added up until tire rebels began to sprout under every tree — as Blake found he had rebelled after being pronounced unsafe, and receiving sterilization. Twice, they had tried to revolt, and twice they had been battered down. Now the third try was due, without any better chance against the invincible Bigshot.

But they had discovered from Mark, the spy in Sarnoff’s laboratory who had built their restorer, that there was less time than they thought. A new rejuvenation-treatment had been found: in two weeks the eighty-year old dictator would be restored to something like forty. From his meaningless gabble with Blatke, in Sarnoff’s laboratory. Rufe was

sure the man was row in his dotage: however, there wouldn't be any chance against him after he was restored to his age of greatest vigor.

“Playing jokes like that.” Rufe finished, shaking his head. “Used to burn us quick, but now he’s making a big game of it, *drat* — no, by golly, darn him! You rest up a couple days, Jed. We're going to need you.”

Blake didn't try to press Rufe for more details: this was an old, familiar story in history, even though it seemed to be a burning new one to Rufe. But it puzzled Blake — here was exactly the events which he was hoping to end with his brother's weapon. He protested weakly. “I'm not that important to you, Rufe.”

“You're not! You don't think they pulled a broad-daylight rescue for me, do you? No sir! Another week, when we get that entrance blasted, you're going to be the man of the hour — the man who can outshoot all of us, that's who. We can't go without our head executioner can we? Jed, when you get Mr. Bigshot Thomas Blake in our sights I'd... Hey what's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Blake managed.

But Rufe was already leaving. “I talk too much when you need sleep. You rest up, Jed, and I'll see you later.”

CHAPTER - 04

BLAKE SAT rigidly, trying to fit it into his knowledge, and finding it an indigestible lump. For minutes, he tried to convince himself he was suffering from delusions — but that explanation required such a degree of insanity that the question of “reality” wouldn't matter at all; he rejected it.

Blake decided to see what sort of order he could make by accepting these events and objects at their face value.

There was a sort of pattern. Someone had taken the trouble to fish Tom Blake's mind up through forty years, in the hope of eliminating it. That "someone" was Sarnoff, and Sarnoff was obviously working for — for the Bigshot: then the man behind what had happened to Tom Blake had "to be Tom Blake himself, as he was in this later age — or, perhaps, someone near the throne who regarded the Blake of forty years ago a menace to the Blake of "now". Then, because of this man Mark, he — the younger Blake — had been saved, simply because the body in which the younger Blake's consciousness rested was the body of one of the rebels' chief tools.

Blake remembered a phrase he'd often heard, "A is not A"; here was an example of it, and with a vengeance!

Somehow, on all sides, he — young Tom Blake as he now was beginning to think of himself — was supposed to be a menace to his later self. Tom Blake A was presently embroiled in a war — a "future" war — where his "sole purpose was to kill off Tom Blake N — the product of forty years of Tom Blake A's living.

He wanted to reject the proposition; he rebelled against it; every reaction shouted "I am I; I am Tom Blake; I won't change!"

He put it into the back of his mind, as he had learned slowly to do with things that had no seeming answer, afraid to touch it further — consciously, at least. He picked up the gun Rufe had left him, and began examining it. A hinge on the top of the plastic case caught his eye, and a second later the case lay open.

It was the gun James Blake had invented — the gun that was supposed to end all strife, prevent war, and bring in eternal democracy!

Then Torn shook his head; this was only part of that gun. The original invention, which had taken years of work by “geniuses” under the “supergenius” leadership of James, was simply a selective stasis field. It surrounded a man with a bubble of force — or lack of force, depending on how you phrased it; that bubble was carefully adjusted on several levels, so that nothing material beyond a certain low speed, and no energy particle beyond a certain level of energy, could travel through it. The further from the limits, the greater the resistance, on an asymptotic curve. Light could pass; soft x-rays were slowed and worked down to safe limits; gamma radiation was bounced back. Or, while something travelling only a few miles an hour, up to about fifty, met almost no opposition, anything having the speed of a bullet, or that of a concussion-wave from a bomb met an impregnable wall.

But all that was missing from this gun. There was only the offensive force — a simple means of projecting a beam of that static force at a variable speed, so that whatever it hit seemed to be moving toward it. At low speeds, it could knock over or stun; at light speed, it could blast a hole through a mountain, with absolutely no reaction against the user’s hand. Theoretically, its range was infinite, limited only by the fact it travelled in a straight line. Since it wasn’t a true force, it actually required almost no energy, and could run for years off a tiny dry-cell.

On the back was stamped the serial number — a figure over forty billion — and the price — two dollars! Obviously, James’ weapon was being used generally, but not as it had been intended; apparently only the Iron Guard had the whole mechanism — if anyone had.

Damn the dictator who could pervert it to such use!

TOM BLAKE stopped, realizing he was damning himself; it made less sense than ever. All the rest of the indictment against the Bigshot had more sides; there was

justification for erasing the brains of criminals and for sterilizing the unfit — and he had heard only one side, which might actually be a criminal side. The uniting of the world under one rule was something he had long dreamed of, and was certainly justified.

But such perversion of the weapon was another matter; it was something Blake felt he could never rationalize to himself, even if he lived to be a hundred.

And the morality bothered him. Obviously, prudery had been reintroduced, and carried to an extreme. He'd been puzzling over it, without too much success. For an absolute ruler, it might have its advantages; it would both serve to occupy a good deal of time and thought on the part of the masses, and impose limits on them, which the ruler would not necessarily be compelled to admit for himself. It would make them more subservient to authority. But it wasn't the move of a man who wanted to improve the world.

Sherry came in, then, as if to prove his point. She drew a cot up beside him and lay down, fully clothed. He noticed that her garments were fastened with a great many buttons, and without a zipper anywhere. His down clothes, when he looked, were as intricately fastened.

"Jed," she whispered. "Jed, I'm sorry I — I kissed you — in front of Rufe. I'm so ashamed!"

He reached out a reassuring hand, flame leaping up in his body again. There was something about her eyes and the way she avoided showing even a trace of her feet; and wrists...

She caught his hand, then jerked her own back. "Jed — not here. Someone might come in!"

Someone did, shortly after she fell asleep, while Blake was still twisting and turning in his own mind — if even his mind was still his own. He pretended sleep, when Rufe led the other up to him.

“You’re crazy, Mark,” the man whispered; “do you think Sherry wouldn’t know her own husband?” Mark was a young man with a troubled face and eyes sunk in their sockets under scraggly brows. He looked like early pictures of Lincoln, except for the incongruity of a short, stubbed nose. Now he shook his head. “I don’t know, Rufe. I didn’t quite like his response when I got out to rebuild his brain patterns. Sarnoff’s switching minds — it’s the only answer I can get to all the machinery he’s using. And I think he may have been trying to run in a ringer on us.”

“A spy?”

“What else. Probably one of those other men was from the Guard, and they switched minds. But still... well, I can’t see Sherry sleeping beside anyone unless she was sure it was Jed! And I don’t see why a ringer wouldn’t pretend to remember everything, instead of admitting his mind is partly numbed — as it should be, after what hit Jed!”

“So what do we do?” Rufe asked. “We don’t do anything. We can’t test him by having him shoot — that’s conditioned reflex, outside his mind. We take him along, making sure he doesn’t meet anyone else until we break in. Then he either shoots the Bigshot — ”

“Shh, Mark! Sherry’s here.”

“Sorry. Slipped. He either shoots, or we shoot him. With the only opening we can find, that first shot has to be good all the way across the chamber, before the automatics cut on the screen around him! Jed’s got the only reflexes that can do it.”

'THEY WENT' out, leaving Blake to his thoughts — which weren't pretty. He wasn't going to enjoy shooting himself on the amount of evidence he had; and he liked the idea of being shot at his present age even less.

They didn't sound like a criminal mob — nor even like one of the possible radical malcontent segments that might grow up in any government. They sounded, unfortunately, like honest citizens getting ready for another Lexington and Concord — the very type of citizen he had hoped to develop with his own ideas and James' gun.

But Tom Blake still couldn't picture himself as a monster. He'd spent a good many years under every sort of temptation he could imagine, and he'd grown steadily more convinced that the world belonged to the decent, normal folk in it — not to any Bigshot, including himself. He felt he should be able to trust himself more than he could trust anyone else in this cockeyed age.

The trouble was that it was cockeyed— and there was no reason for it. It should have been a utopia; why hadn't the later Blake given the defensive part of the gun out?

Or was that one under the control of someone else — the old man who had been with Sarnoff, perhaps? The old man looked capable of anything, and he'd proved completely ruthless. If the real Thomas Blake of this period was simply a front, forced somehow to do the will of another other...

But how could he be forced when no weapon would hurt him?

Blake got up in the morning with his eyes burning from lack of sleep, and no nearer the answer than before. Under Sherry's urging, he began an hour of target practice, using the slowest "speed" of the gun; Mark had been right — his shooting was pure conditioned reflex, and hadn't been hurt by the change.

He'd reached only one emotional and one logical conclusion, and he mulled them over at breakfast. Emotionally, he wanted to get back to his own age somehow to his own

body — as he had to do sometime if there was ever to be an elder Blake. Logically, he knew he couldn't go, if he had the choice, until he found out the facts about what he had become.

But there were a number of questions that had come up as he lay tossing. He didn't believe in variable time — the whole theory of the stasis gun demanded a fixed, absolute cause-and-effect time-scheme in the universe, somehow; and the gun worked. That meant the elder Blake had been through all this before, and should know every move he would make. Why had he slipped through the fingers of the Sarnoff group? Also, if he did get back to his own time — as he had to, seemingly — how could he do anything about what he could become, even if the worst was true?

That night he was assigned permanent quarters — his old ones, apparently — with Sherry. There he found that some of her morality varnished, while some of his own got in his way, at first. And it didn't make it any easier to feel that she belonged to a crowd of criminals or crackpots when his emotions began to become solidly entrenched in his head.

He was obviously falling in love with a girl who believed his highest mission in life was to shoot his older self!

CHAPTER - 05

BLAKE — OR rather Jed — was supposed to be a spatula man at the local yeast works, but he'd saved up three of his quarterly vacations to take a whole month off now. Sherry had done the same with her vacations at the fabric converter. As a result, they had time on their hands while the major part of the revolutionists were away at work; there were a number of places of entertainment, but Blake chose a newsreel theater.

He came away disgusted, and yet doubtful. All the old trappings of a dictator's propaganda bureau were there, with the usual justifications and arbitrary associations of words that had no real meaning. There was brutality enough. A revolt in Moscow against the local office of the State had been put down by Iron Guards, who moved about in complete invulnerability, using their weapons to stun the roiling crowds. There was surprisingly little bloodshed, though. But the scene where the prisoners were released mercifully back to their parents and friends was far from a happy one. All had been put through the mind-burners, and were back to the first days of infancy, mentally.

Still, there was a regular shuttle running to the Moon, and Mars was being explored. China, on the other hand, was starving; and obviously no attempt was being made to alleviate the situation. Apparently the State believed in letting local suffering go — or perhaps had insufficient resources.

He guessed that the latter was the case, particularly when a new edict of sterilization was announced for Brazil, due to unchecked birth rates. The sterilization was painless enough, and didn't impair sexuality, but such blanket use could only come from sheer necessity.

The State was loose at the seams; disease had been conquered, and while the rejuvenation process was new, secret — and obviously forbidden for general use — the progress in gerontology and geriatrics had been amazing. In making the whole world one State, the birthrate of one section had simply flooded another, leaving no natural controls. There were no wars. Progress in foods had been good, but it hadn't equalled the birth-rate; there were over ten billion inhabitants of Earth.

Perhaps the new morality had been an attempt to check the birthrate, but it had failed; public morals can be swayed — private hungers only break out more intensely. Then, apparently, had come an increasing use of sterilization against progressive feeble-

mindfulness, physical hereditary ills, alcoholism, sub-normal intelligence, subversive tendencies, and so on up the list, until less than half the population could pass the tests. When India refused to use voluntary birth-control the first large use of the sterility process had been forced on her, leaving less than five percent of her people fertile. It hadn't helped much; China had immediately begun to flow over the borders.

And, inevitably, people suffered. Housing was bad — single-room shacks were common, except in what could be called the modern slums, thrown up to house hordes in worse conditions. Food was mostly synthetic now. The people lived poorly, even though they were on a twenty-hour week, and free to buy surprising types of luxuries at small prices.

The newsreel had referred to this as “the Period of Transition,” but there was no sign of it getting anywhere.

BLAKE CAME out shaken, unable to justify the results or to condemn the ideas behind them, completely. Back in 1960, it had been a simple world, with a few minor troubles; now, he wondered. Most of the troubles here came from the relief of those simple troubles there — and it was questionable whether the dictatorship had much to do with it, beyond attempts to cure the ills so obvious then. He suspected that the brewing revolution had more connection with the bad food and inadequate housing than the more obvious high-handed State methods.

He found himself liking the people. They were what he had always dreamed of — a group devoted to liberty, willing to sacrifice themselves if necessary, with an amazing respect for each other's rights. Out of them, conceivably, a new world could come — the world he had always aimed for.

Do nothing, Blake told himself, and the plot would fail. The rebels made tests of the gun's reaction-time, measuring the period between the instant that the peep-hole in

the weapon's shield was uncovered to the moment when firing the gun would accomplish nothing. The period was too short for most of them to pull the trigger. He, in Jed's body, had been just enough better than the others to make it possible; no automatic device would work, because they had no way of knowing where the Bigshot would be in the single room where he apparently gave himself the luxury of going without his personal shield.

Do something, and he was killing himself — and perhaps ruining what was really only the “Period of Transition” they prattled about.

He got back to the little shack where he and Sherry lived just in time to see a new development. A wail went up along the street as a great van drove up, and Blake stopped to stare at the miserable creatures that were piling out. They couldn't stand on their legs; their minds had been burned completely. And among them was Rufe.

Two fingers were missing from the gun-hands of each of them, cut off and already healing under the efficient modern surgery.

Mark met Blake and yanked him inside, where Sherry was crying. “We thought they'd got you. New orders. Not even the technicians at Sarnoff's know, but I saw a copy. All men with hairy hands are to get fifteen minute burns — enough so they'll never be more than morons, and we can't rebuild their minds. And — well, you saw the rest. Sherry, shut up! They didn't get him!”

“They will... they will...” She lay huddled for a second more. Then, as the van drove off, leaving the people to sort out their unfortunate friends, she dashed out to help. Her sobs drifted back to him, but didn't seem to hurt her usefulness in the crowd.

Blake went to the rickety cabinet where his gun lay and picked it up. Mark caught him. “That can wait. Come in here.” Lather and razor were waiting, and he began shaving the back of Blake's hands deftly. “We can't do much of this — the others will have to take their chances. But we need you.”

The anger wore off as the shaving was completed.

MARK STEPPED back to inspect Blake's hands. "You'll do — Sherry can take care of it the rest of the time. Jed, I still can't trust you completely, but you've got to come through. Once we get the Bigshot, we can move on down the line. All the shields have time-limits built in — that's why we never got anywhere trying to get any for our own use. In two weeks, the second group will have to recharge the trigger-battery relay; only the Bigshot has the key for that. Another ten days, and the third line drops; and it goes on down to the Guards. They have to get their shields set every day. Maybe a few of the higher group will manage to get guns from lowers they can recharge themselves— but their keys change automatically every period, so it won't help much, if we move fast. It all depends on your getting the Bigshot."

"You're going to have a busy time converting them or burning their minds," Blake guessed.

"Burning! Don't be a fool, Jed. We'll kill the bas — the sons! They've got it coming to them. And don't think we're just talking. The rebels, as they call us, outnumber the rest of the world five to one!"

Blake put the gun back on the table as if it had stung him. Killing off twenty percent of the population might help the crowding, but it wasn't his idea of a solution — particularly when a lot of the higher technicians, scientists, and coordinators necessarily belonged to the elite who owned the guns that were equipped with shields.

Anyhow, even without the shields, there were enough plain guns, and the whole State corps would have to fight back — those in secret sympathy with the rebel movement would be driven to it by self-preservation. It would be a welter of blood to make the worst war in history seem anemic.

"When?" he asked, finally. "The same date?"

Mark shook his head. “I got orders today. We move on the place night after tomorrow — as soon as we can force through the passage we found on the maps and set up equipment to rip away the wall where you shoot. And you’d better shoot straight!”

CHAPTER - 06

THOMAS BLAKE watched them assemble, while sounds from above-ground told him that operations were already in progress. They’d modelled their outward move on a slight improvement over the second revolt. It meant that a fair number of them would be killed in the criss-crossing of stun-blasts, but nobody seemed to consider that important.

It would at least keep all the local Iron Guard busy, and probably stir up their officers enough to disorganize the whole palace. There would be fighting on almost every street, and the bulk of their mob would be storming the palace itself from mined tunnels they were digging frantically. All was to be concentrated to reach its highest fury at precisely midnight.

“How do you know he will be there?” Blake asked.

Sherry looked at him in surprise. “He’s been boasting for years that a clear conscience induces sleep, and that he puts him to bed at midnight every night. He’ll never believe we have a chance until it’s too late.”

It sounded plausible; dictators usually showed their pride in just such stupid ways. Anyhow, Blake had to confess to himself, it was exactly the thing he’d been starting to say for the past year; he’d meant it as a joke, but such things became habits in time.

Yet he must know. Thomas Blake, the Bigshot, had necessarily been Thomas Blake in Jed’s body forty years before. He’d heard every plan, and he should remember it.

Blake fingered the two guns he carried — one for any trouble on the street, the other for the coup they were attempting. He couldn't let these people down. The honest desperation on their faces wouldn't permit all this courage and planning to go for nothing. He couldn't kill his older self and invite such a savage massacre as only the French Reign of Terror could match.

History was becoming clearer now. Blake's fine, free colonial people had been men of courage — and men of strong hatreds. They'd slaughtered the Indians just as readily as they had marched against tyranny. And even their opposition to tyranny had been founded more on hate than on any innate love of justice. Justice, in fact, had come about as a sort of afterthought — when the men they hated had fled or were killed.

He was sweating coldly in the dank basement under the old auditorium. Some decision had to be made; none was possible .

The ten in the execution-party moved out at last, trying to look like non-partisans caught in the whirls of the rising rebellion, and anxiously heading homewards.

Something struck against Blake's back, and he stumbled. His hand leaped to the gun at his waist instantly, and he fired before he was sure of his target. It was a head-shot, by sheer instinct; the blow that might have only stunned, knocked the man's head back sharply, until it seemed to dangle on his neck.

SURPRISINGLY, the weapons of the others echoed his — silent in themselves, but causing loud thuds whenever the beams hit. The surprise of seeing the whole group fire into their own crowd of rebels cut short the sickness that was rising in Blake. He turned, just as one of the black-clothed Iron Guard came up.

"Good shooting," the man said. "But take it easy. That first shot was vicious and we don't want killing. Here, bunch up. So — I think I can stretch my shield enough to give us all some protection."

Sherry looked up at him with grateful awe written large on her face. “Thank you, officer. We were going home to my aunt’s from a party — and then all — this happened...”

The Guard nodded. “It’ll get worse, from what I’m told. But right now, I guess I can escort you a ways. Where to, ma’am?”

“The subway, I guess,” she answered; “we’ll be safer there than on the street, anyway.”

The Guard nodded, and began leading them. Some of the force from the stun blasts got through, with the shield stretched out — a trick Blake hadn’t known was possible — but it helped.

Blake caught at the man’s sleeve while they waited for a yelling mob to dash by. “How do you get to be a Guard?” he asked.

The man looked around in surprise. “I thought everyone knew that, citizen. We’re picked when we’re in school — character, intelligence, all that. Then we get twenty years training in science, sociology, and everything else you can name. It’s pretty tough, but worth it— except for these riots. There the mob has all the advantage — our shields don’t protect us from stones and clubs, and we can’t use lethal speed on our guns without special orders. Lot of the mob gets trampled on, too.”

They were at the subway, then, and Blake started down. He jerked back at a sudden gasp, to see the Guard falling, his head bloody pulp from a sap in Mark’s hand. '

The leader of the group put the sap away, smiling in grim satisfaction. “Darned — sorry, Sherry — dratted hypocrite. I don’t mind the ones that go around beating us up on the sly or giving us tickets for standing on corners. But these mealy-mouthed polite ones! Fpha! They’re too good for us! Hey, Jed, what’s the matter?”

Blake held back the retching of his stomach and forced a grin to his lips. "Too much Guard," he answered, and saw an approving smile cross Sherry's lips.

He avoided looking at her then as they went down the steps. He'd heard enough to know that in general the Guards were like the one Mark had killed; they'd been conditioned into believing that to serve the State was all that mattered, but they'd also been taught manners, courtesy, and at least a normal consideration of the people under them. There was no more justice in Mark's words than in his brutal action.

The train was pulling in, and Mark waved them aboard. If the riots developed properly, it might be one of the last ones to rim along on its rubber-insulated monorail.

They found their mistake too late, just as the door was closing. It was a Guard train, carrying prisoners back to the palace. Apparently the Guards who had taken it over had lacked the key needed to break the automatic controls that stopped it at every station.

They were inside before the Guards at the door could stop them, Mark yelled once, and began swinging the sap. Blake skewed sideways as the train started, to pounce into the stomach of an older Guard. He kicked at a shin, jerked around the pain-doubled man, and darted for a strap. His other hand found the big clasp knife that most of the men carried, and he dragged it from his pocket. The plastic strap came loose, its heavy metal hand-hold forming a perfect close-quarters club.

"THIS WAS no time to argue about the right and wrong of killing Guards. His pacifist inclinations were intellectual, and his emotions had been well conditioned in two lives: Jed had been a natural brawler, and Blake had done rather well in the usual school and high-school fracas. In a brawl of this side, the issues were simplified to the basic question of whose side you came in on. The Guards were handicapped.

They were responsible for a group of prisoners, and their normal security was useless here, since all fighting was at close quarters, with weapons too slow to be bothered

by their shields. The prisoners were naturally against them — and even handcuffed, their legs were enough to upset the Guards, while some of them were able to get to the doors and prevent men from joining the police force from other cars.

Blake swung out, protecting the rest of his party on one side while they cut their own straps. Then a pattern of general mayhem began; he felt a big fist jolt against his ear and reeled, but Jed's body was rugged. He swung a backhand that dragged the handle across the Guard's teeth with a crescendo clicking. It caught one of the prisoners on the follow-through, but the man cheerfully plunged into the pleasure of breaking the Guard's ribs with his heavy shoes.

The train slowed at another station, but nobody left; the Guards were jammed in, and the citizens were too busy. Blake's wrist was sore from the pounding when he finally switched hands. At the next station, they heaved out the unconscious Guards. Mark prepared to move back into the next car, until one of the other men caught his hand and pointed. Apparently, they'd reached their destination.

The closing doors caught Blake across the shoulders, sending him sprawling to his hands and knees. He saw that most of the party, including Sherry and Mark, were out, and then was up, dashing after them. Guards were pouring down the entrance, with a mob behind them. Mark yelled.

The group darted into the men's washroom. Sherry hesitated, but she swallowed her inculcated prudery and followed them. The door shut with a sound that indicated a lock had already been added to it. Mark knocked on a white panel, and it swung open.

"Clear sailing," he told them, breathing harshly through what remained of his teeth. One eye was swelling closed, and his lip was smashed, but he obviously didn't feel it. "Good work, Jed; I guess I was wrong about you, at that. Well, we're under the palace!"

CHAPTER - 07

WITH THE two who had been waiting in the tunneled passage from the washroom, there were nine of them now. Nine men to end the tightest rule any man had held on the planet — and uncounted millions outside serving as a screen for their operations.

For a few minutes, all Blake's doubts had been settled, but they came back now.

"Two minutes, maybe," Mark announced, "Lew, you come with Jed and me. The rest stay back."

"I'm coming," Sherry stated. Her glance at Mark was defiant, and then surprised as the man merely shrugged.

Two minutes to make up his mind. Blake couldn't even get his ledgers out for a book-balancing in that length of time. He'd posted too many entries in the day-book, and the whole business needed a complete new audit. But now it boiled down to the simple question of whether he could kill himself — even if he decided he should do so.

He thought he could. He'd always been sure he could commit suicide for a cause he believed in, if necessary — and this was the same thing, with a forty-year lapse between pulling the trigger and dropping dead.

The passageway was crude, and they stumbled upwards slowly. They were obviously inside a wall, where tamped earth had been used to fill the space left by the masonry. It was thick with age and dirt odors, and Mark's flash barely lighted their way. They crawled up now on their hands and knees. Then a bulky piece of machinery appeared ahead, facing a blank stone wall.

Lew went to it. "All tapped. If we aimed it right, this should pull out the plug left, and there'll be a hole big enough to shoot through. Better get used to the light, Jed."

Blake focussed his eyes where the flash was, while Mark brought it around until it rested on the plug that the machine was gripping. Lew touched a button, and the machine whined faintly.

For the moment, he had decided. On one side was courage, and devotion; on the other side, retreat and aloofness behind thick stone walls. When in Rome... well, it was as good a rule as any now. And maybe he was only doing it to convince himself he had the courage to fire at himself.

The plug popped out and sidewise, leaving a six-inch opening. Blake got a quick view of a tremendous room, at least a hundred feet long, with a bed at the far side. On the bed, stark naked and asleep lay the older man who had been in Sarnoff's laboratory — Thomas Blake the Bigshot. Tom Blake N. He should have guessed!

The gun was already up, and swinging into position. His thoughts seemed to have swivelled off into a dimension where time was infinitely variable. It wouldn't be hard now. The man had already proven his duplicity, had tried to wipe out his own younger self. Why shouldn't that younger self eliminate him?

"He's naked!" Sherry's horrified whisper sounded beside Blake's ear, just as the trigger came back.

It was a clean miss, he had jerked at the last split second.

HELL EXPLODED inside. Gongs sounded, and Guards came pouring out of every cranny, while the old man sat up, staring quietly at the hole in the wall. His old eyes found it before the Guards did, and he pointed.

Mark let out a yell, and pushed the other three ahead of him. They went sprawling down the tunnel, just as a tremendous thwack reached their ears, what was left of Mark fell past them. Sherry was ahead, and Lew behind. Blake started to look back, but he had

no need, another sound broke out, and half of Lew's head went past his ear, spattering gore.

Then they hit a curve in the tunnel. The big booming of the highspeed stasis guns went on, but they were simply cutting holes through the palace now, unable to locate their targets.

They hit the washroom, charging through those who had waited behind. The lock was stuck, and one of the men was working on it. There was no need to report the results to anyone — Sherry's face gave that away.

She was sobbing and cursing herself in the same breath. Then she met Blake's eyes hopelessly, with the expression of Judas the day after. He started toward her, but she cut him off quickly. "We'll have to split up — they saw us together, up there. I'll be at the cellar — where they brought you back — tomorrow!"

The door finally came loose, and she darted out. He could sense the feelings in her, but there was nothing he could do. He let her go, giving her time to get away, before he sped up the steps after her. The station was almost deserted, except for a dead Guard and several badly wounded citizens.

Behind him, the sound of the stasis guns came again, indicating that guards had broken down through the tunnel and were after him. He sped up the stairs, expecting to find the street, instead, he came out into a monstrous hall, crowded at the entrance by a mass of guards defending a big gate which had dropped. Blake raced up the hall, swinging off at the first stairway. He cut down another hall, and darted into a room at random. There was a fat dowager inside, stripped to ankle-length pantaloons and camisole, but she gave no trouble; she simply fainted.

On a dressing table, he spotted a gur. and picked it up. There were stasis screen controls on it, but a series of buttons along the side indicated some sort of combination

lock — which explained why the citizens didn't bother to fool with them; they probably were set to explode on tampering.

He dropped it and went through the back of the suite. There windows opened on a closed court. It was a drop of no more than ten feet, and he took it. One set of windows was dark. He kicked through one of them, and banged his head against something hanging from the ceiling. By the dim light of the red and green lights on a control panel, he suddenly recognized it as the laboratory of Sarnoff.

HE KNEW the way out, now — and one which was probably less besieged than others, simply because men avoided something that was a chancre in their minds. But he halted suddenly, moving toward the control panel.

Blake was right — there was a scattering of tools in a drawer under it, and barely enough light to work by. He yanked out the two guns and opened them; they were familiar enough — mere simplifications of the complete models his brother had made.

Blake ripped the tiny coil out of one hastily, and fitted it into open space in the other. There was room enough. He found small screwdrivers and began working on the adjustments to the coils, hoping that the numbering around the slots was the same. Alpha 10 changed to Alpha 2 to give a protective sphere instead of an offensive beam; beta 5 would regulate the speed which would be denied penetration; delta 7 should be about right for energy penetration. He checked that, setting it up to 9, until the green bulbs seemed to come down to the red, and back to 7. Apparently, there had been no basic change in the little coils, and offensive and protective coils were still the same, except for setting. He found contacts within the gun for the second coil, indicating that both models were made from the same basic parts. He had to leave the defensive coil on, since he could find no way of installing a switch.

If his settings were right, he was now safe from bombs and bullets, though a club or a knife would kill him as easily as before. But the main problem was the offensive beams from other guns, and there a rough setting would cancel it out.

He shoved the gun that was now complete into its holster and headed toward the entrance.

From the side, a quite voice reached him. "Nice work, Thomas Blake!"

The lights snapped on to show Sarnoff standing expressionlessly beside the main door.

CHAPTER - 08

SARNOFF nodded toward the gun that had snapped out in Blake's hand. "It probably works now, just as you expect. But it wasn't that which gave you away. You might as well put it away, anyhow; naturally, I'm shielded."

Blake had already realized that, from the gun on the other's hip. He dropped his own back, trying to estimate his chances to reach the other before the man could get out the door. It seemed impossible.

Sarnoff nodded again. "You're right; you couldn't make it. I've been ready for you since you tripped the alarms getting in here. I could have shot you while you were working on the gun, you see. But naturally, I didn't."

"Naturally."

"Certainly; why else do you think I faked the last half of the mind burning? I'm all in favor of your living. I'd hate to try to figure out any system of logic that would permit you to be killed without ruining most of the life I've led these last years. Anyhow, I always back the whiner."

Blake let it sink in, and began breathing again. “You mean you’re on the side of the rebels?”

“Hardly.” A trace of a smile flickered over the other’s face and vanished again. “I’m on the side of whichever one wins, though that’s rather obvious, if you’ll use your head. I fish you out of the past for your distinguished senior self — and I make sure that you go into the head of a man the rebel spy Mark wanted saved; he can’t prove I’m on his side, but he suspects so — particularly after I showed him the rough diagram of the restorer a year ago and never noticed the parts he stole.”

“Mark’s dead,” Blake told him.

“I know — he was a fanatic, so of course he’s dead. But he wasn’t the leader of the group anyhow! I have my connections, still. I’ll come out on top — as a realist always will, unless he’s a deliberate villain which I’m not.”

“All right,” Blake conceded wearily. He had no time to talk of idealism and realism now, when his first job was to escape long enough to locate Sherry. “So what happens next?” Sarnoff shrugged. “So you go out the door, I suppose, and into the arms of the Guards who are there — or down this little private stair to the subway station, where you’ll never be noticed by now. And I report to your rebel leaders — whom you don’t know — that you are the original Blake, complete with all plans for the James Blake statidyne gun.”

Blake turned toward the little private . door, and was almost surprised to find that there was a stairway there. Probably most of the so-called “public” sections of the palace had such exits.

Sarnoff’s voice halted him. “Not a louse, Blake,” he said quietly. “Just an opportunist, like every successful animal up the long road of evolution. And paradoxical

as you may think it, I privately wish you the best of luck. I've thoroughly liked your senior self, and I would probably like you. Take care of yourself."

The laboratory was suddenly dark. Blake stumbled down the stairs, to find that the riots were nearly over, and the subways were running smoothly again. Guards were patrolling the platform, but the monorail was already in. For the third time, Blake barely made it before the door could close.

HE GRINNED bitterly at Sarnoff's words that were still ringing in his ears. It wasn't hard to tell who'd lose, at least; Blake had fortythree cents to his name, and knew nothing about the city. The State wanted him as an attempted assassin. Now, with Sarnoff's spreading the good word, the rebels would be looking for him as a traitor to them, and the very man they most wanted to eliminate from all history. It wouldn't do to argue immutable time with them, either.

He was safe from bombs, bullets, and guns — but there was always the knife. And when she found the facts, even Sherry might be happy to use it.

He should never have been stampeded into mob action — his reason for killing the Bigshot because of the first meeting was no more valid than the Bigshot's reason for trying to destroy him in self-defense. And now that he cooled down, he could never take the secret of the guns to the rebels. There had been blood enough shed, without putting them in a position to exterminate all the other side.

He never knew exactly how he managed to get through the night. Time after time, he saw Guards or rebels patrolling, and he suspected most of them were looking for him. Probably the complete dejection and the slowness of his walk saved him, they must have been looking for a man who was skulking up dark alleys, or running from them.

He found the house where he had first come to in the cellar be sheer hunt and try search, though he knew the general location. It was locked, of course, and he realized suddenly that he did not know the secret for opening it.

But he was tired of running, and a cellar door in the shack across the street was open. He crossed to it, and went inside, leaving the door open a crack.

Daylight crept through the opening, and reached the full brightness of noon. There was no sign of Sherry. Above him, he could hear a family stirring over their noon lunch, discussing the riots. Apparently they had been involved only indirectly, but there was enough misery in their guesses as to how many of their friends would be picked up and mindburned.

At four in the afternoon, Guards came and broke in the house where the place of meeting was. They scoured it thoroughly, then posted it.

Blake knew that Sherry hadn't told on him — she should have, if she'd heard the truth about him, but he was sure somehow that she would never turn him over to the Guards. He also knew then that she'd never keep the rendezvous.

He buckled his gun on more firmly, knocked the dust off his knees where he had been kneeling, and stood up. The cellar door creaked as he went through it, but the Guards did not look up from their duty. Blake crossed the street and went up to them.

"If you're looking for a lady, she won't be here," he said, and only the deadness of his voice registered in his own ears.

The younger Guard growed impatiently. "Scram. We know what we're doing! "

"Dan!" The senior Guard glowered at the other. "That's enough of that. Citizen, the State apologizes; but I'm afraid your information is already in the papers, so we do know about it."

Blake nodded, and shuffled off down the clingy street. He found a newsstand and put down a coin for one of the papers he had managed forty years in the past. It was thinner, due to the paper scarcity, but the lack was mostly in the advertising. He had no trouble finding the story.

Sherry was dead!

She'd been found by the Guards early in the morning, with a printed label claiming she had betrayed the cause by ruining the shot. It was clearly murder.

HE MIGHT have guessed. The hatred that had flowered so long had to take root somewhere, and she had been as good a scapegoat as any other, Blake supposed. He dropped the paper into a can without bothering to read further. He'd seen that she was being kept at the palace morgue for the claiming of her body.

They'd dragged him into this crazy future to keep him from killing himself, by a tortuous logic of their own. Then they'd tossed him to the other side, to force him to kill himself. Now, the only good thing he'd found was killed, and nothing else had been accomplished. No paradox had been solved: but if the Bigshot remembered when he had been dragged here, he could have saved Sherry, at least.

Blake saw another of the Guards on the corner, and approached him quietly. "Where can I find the subway to the palace?"

"To your left three blocks," the Guard answered absently. Then he looked up, reached for his gun, and moved forward. "Your identification papers, citizen!"

"No matter," Blake told him. "I'm the assassin!"

CHAPTER - 09

BLAKE SWUNG on his heel and headed toward the subway. He didn't bother to look back at the faint sound of the gun being drawn. Either Iris shield worked, and he

would have no way of knowing whether the man fired, or he'd find out soon enough. Nothing happened.

Then the Guard was running up to him, white of face, with the gun shaking in his hands. The man stuttered as he grabbed for Blake's arm. "You're under arrest!"

"All right," Blake agreed. "I'm it; now you go hide."

He walked on steadily, while the Guard pawed at his arm and then desisted. Physical, he was more than a match for most of the Guards, and their superior weapons had lost all superiority. Blake could have watched the whole civilization shatter and have cared as little as he did for the shock on the other's face.

He found the subway entrance while the Guard was tardily blowing his whistle. He was beginning to think the trains ran every fifteen seconds, since one was again waiting. He climbed on, with the puffing Guard at his heels. "You'll get used to it, whatever your name is," he told the other.

"Colton," the black-clad man told him unhappily. "And why couldn't you have picked someone else? I broke a toe and got a brick over my head last night. Today — you!"

"Tough. I guess you'll just have to string along until we find some of your buddies to subdue me, Colton."

Colton nodded glumly, and they sat in silence while the quiet train moved along. Blake was emotionally numbed, and the problems that had bothered him were operating only on a semiconscious level.

No man, he supposed, could really accept predestination. The idea was something that could be agreed to on an intellectual level, but inside a man had to feel that he decided things for himself. Actually, there were no paradoxes; everything was decided, and things didn't happen because of either his actions or those of his older self — they happened

only, because that was the way they happened. The Bigshot was no more responsible than he was.

It wasn't hard, when you considered things carefully, to see why he'd tried to eliminate his younger self and put himself out of danger. Intellectually, he might realize nothing he did could alter the fabric of the events that must happen, but emotionally he couldn't stand by — and his logic was as much shaped by emotions as by facts.

And even explaining why he did things was a refusal to accept predestination, Blake knew. Looking for the reason behind his own or any other man's actions meant an attempt to see why something happened or didn't happen — and there was no real "why" in a universe on a fixed timetrack.

He got up at the palace stop and went out with Colton at his heels. The Guard again reached for his whistle, but stopped when he saw Blake head for the door leading to the stairs that went up to Sarnoff's laboratory. The door was locked, of course, but a blast from the gun opened it.

SARNOFF was opening the upper door as Blake came to it, and he motioned the two men inside. "I heard you break the other," he explained. "I've been expecting you. Guard, there's nothing you can do — your prisoner's as untouchable as I am."

Colton shrugged, but stayed.

"Where's Sherry's body?" Blake asked woodenly.

Sarnoff moved toward the end of the room, where a couch had been brought in. He lifted the sheet silently. "She's in good hands, Tom," he said softly. "She was my daughter, though you wouldn't know that. And she hated me, long before she ran away to join your group. I used to wonder, once in a while, what happened to her. Now — I know."

Blake looked down at the still figure. Sherry still bore the look he had last seen, though her eyes were closed. Her clothing was in place, he noticed, with even her toes concealed. He was glad of that.

“She must have hated me,” he said, at last.

Sarnoff shook his head. “No — she never knew; she was dead before I passed the word about you along.”

His expressionless face studied her body, and then he drew the sheet up.

Blake sighed softly, and turned toward the entrance to the main palace, with Colton still at his heels. Sarnoff shook his head slightly, and moved toward another door, waiting for them until Blake shrugged and climbed into the little elevator. Then Sarnoff pressed the top button, and they moved upwards.

There was neither austerity nor over-lavishness to the private part of the palace. Blake took it for granted; he’d been brought up to have good taste, and becoming a dictator hadn’t changed that.

There were a few men in the outer office, but they left at Sarnoff’s motion, retreating into a second room beyond. Here and there along the walls were niches where Guards might be stationed, but Blake could see no sign of them — they were at least well hidden.

Sarnoff picked up a phone from a desk and pressed a button, “Tell his Excellency I have the assassin,” he said. Then, after a moment, he turned back to Blake. “We’ll have to wait. He’s taking a bath — or calling his top Guards. He’s grown nervous, these last few days.”

Blake dropped to the seat behind the desk. He picked up a volume there, saw that it was a leather-bound biography of himself, and started to put it down. Then he opened it and began scanning it.

There'd been war, after all. He'd had to wait two terms as Governor to become President, and then it was only a few weeks before the hydrogen bombs fell — too little time to prepare. He'd saved most of the cities with his large shields, but the terrible days had made an absolute dictatorship necessary; and through that, it hadn't been too hard to conquer the whole world, given both large supplies of bombs and a base immune to the bombs of others. Blake skimmed on, surprised to see how often Sarnoff's name cropped up. The man was obviously far more than a mere scientist.

And there was another name that meant nothing. Ainslee seemed to be almost as important as the dictator, though the people never had mentioned him.

Blake put the book back, just as the phone buzzed and a group of Guards in spotless white uniforms came out. Sarnoff motioned them aside, and they fell into step behind as Blake headed toward the door, Colton started forward, and then shrugged helplessly. He turned back slowly, probably to return to his beat.

This was it, Blake told himself. This was the point toward which the whole silly business had been driving. It seemed almost anticlimactic.

THE BIGSHOT sat at a small desk, surrounded by his Guards. He was probably shielded, but he seemed to have less faith in the shield than it deserved. His voice as nervous as he rearranged the papers before him, and some of the power seemed to have drained from his face. But he gathered himself together.

"You are charged with an attempt to assassinate your rightful ruler," he began.

Blake cut him off. "I'm here by my own will — as much as either one of us can have a will. And I'm shielded; I combined two of your citizen guns into the weapon James invented — the weapon on the papers in the secret drawer of my desk." The older man sat stiffly for a long minute. Then he put down the papers he held. "So all my efforts go

for nothing? Your brain wasn't exterminated. But there are still enough men here to overcome you physically, even if you are shielded."

"It won't work," Blake told him. "It's all happened before, from your viewpoint; and I suggest that you dismiss the Guards."

The Bigshot nodded. "Guards dismissed," he said slowly. They stared at him, but slowly withdrew, leaving only the two men who were both Thomas Blake and Sarnoff behind.

Theoretically, there was no way to end what was now a perfect stalemate — except that the Bigshot could always call back his Guards to batter Blake down with their fists; there was no way in which he could win.

But he had revolved all that before, and knew the answer. He knew that in this case, his decision to accept the facts would inevitably create those facts — so far as even the decision was his free will. Predestination seemed to be working, and that would make the decision something he had no control over, too.

"You lost," Blake told the Bigshot. "Every step shows that. If you hadn't lost — if your younger self, when you stood in my position, here — hadn't remembered that you lost, you wouldn't have gone to the trouble of getting my mind drawn here to attempt to exterminate me. I should have seen it sooner, but that doesn't matter; you have to lose."

"If I hadn't taken on Ainslee..." the Bigshot began, but his face was drawn now.

"There aren't any 'ifs'." Blake told him remorselessly. "You lost. You're fighting with no hope at all. You can try anything you want to, but the end is already written; you lost."

He had no idea of what would happen, and yet he knew it was inevitable. Then, slowly, the answer came. He should have seen it from the beginning. No man can accept predestination within himself — yet the Bigshot knew now that there was no answer save

predestination. He had to solve a completely impossible problem, and no mind could stand that.

“You lost.” Blake repeated it, emotionlessly; “you lost.”

And slowly, the Bigshot crumpled. He dropped his hands on his knees, and then brought his head down against them, sobbing softly.

Sarnoff stepped in quickly. “Stop it, Tom. Stop it. You don’t have to solve anything now. It’s all over; you don’t have to solve anything.” The Bigshot looked up then, with tears streaming from his eyes, staring forlornly at the two men. “I’m lost.” he said miserably. “I don’t like this place. I don’t like you. I want my mama!”

Blake turned to the window, while Sarnoff led the Bigshot out of the room. There, forty years from now, was the end of his own plans — the reward for all his hopes and struggles.

CHAPTER - 10

SARNOFF found Blake finally, down in the laboratory, lying on the cot where his mind had first come into the future.

“The council of the head Guards and the rebel leaders want you, Tom,” he said quietly. “They’ve already published the plans for turning two of the citizen guns into a single complete one, in case your curiosity is still working.”

Blake nodded. He’d asked for that — the only thing he could do for this tangled future; his decision was the only one he could make. Human nature couldn’t be changed, and compulsory improvement was something which might or might not be good. But no society could be healthy where one group enjoyed a terrible power that the other group could not have.

There were guns enough for all to make the conversion — and that way, the fanatics would find the rest of the world shielded by the time they got their own shields made and were ready to go out killing or converting others. It was a problem that had always plagued him somewhat, since a total weapon in the hands of a crackpot could wreck incalculable damage if there were others without such a shield.

His only function, after all, had been to make sure that his original plan went through — that all men had such guns. It had been his basic motivation for going into politics, but it had only succeeded when he'd driven himself completely out of such politics.

"I suppose you'll be the next dictator," he told Sarnoff bitterly.

"Pro-tem president," the man answered. "But only pro-tem; I prefer to have Ainslee take over, if anyone has to. There's no real advantage to absolute power, and I'm still an opportunist. I'm in solid — but behind the scenes, where I'd rather be. I suspect we're in for a period of democracy, anyhow."

They'd have to be, if Silas McKinley had been right — and for a long, long spell of it — at least until something greater than the stasis gun and shield could come along.

"Then send my mind back," Blake decided. "They can get along without me."

Sarnoff began moving the machines along their tracks. And the sight of the action suddenly focused Blake's thoughts on what the return would be like — and the paradoxes his own inability to accept predestination involved.

He couldn't be such a fool as the Bigshot had been; with all he remembered, he couldn't.

"This body will be left a complete idiot, of course," Sarnoff said. "But your mind should snap back to your own body — and if I'm right, it will be only a few minutes in your time after you left. There's no real time-barrier for the mind — and no reason to

expect the time spent here to be equalled by elapsed time in a trance back there. Maybe you can help by focussing your thoughts on when you want to return; I don't know."

Blake had wondered about that. He tried to think of his body just after his mind had left it, while Sarnoff adjusted the mind-burner. Then, without preamble or wasted farewells, the scientist depressed the switch.

For a moment, it was horrible, as it had been before. Then the full power seemed to snap his thoughts out into a roaring nothingness. Something pulled at him. Unlike the force trip into the future, the move back was almost instantaneous.

THOMAS BLAKE found his arm half-way to the light switch. He dropped it, and looked at the clock; but the faint sounds of the party still going on downstairs convinced him. He was back in his own world — and almost no time had elapsed there.

Sarnoff, Sherry, assassination...

He could feel it slipping from him. There was no machine here to intensify his thoughts, and to force them onto his brain cells and channel them into his permanent memory, as had been done by Sarnoff when his mind first touched the brain of Jed.

And the brain cells could not absorb what had happened during long days, now in these first few seconds of awakening. But now, whatever his mind-matrix was, it was slipping back into relation with those cells. It was like a dream that seems to be completely intense and to span hours, but which slips out of the mind, almost as soon as that mind awakens.

Blake jumped for the wire-recorder, and began spouting the bits he still remembered into it, before they could go. But he found curiously little to dictate; he'd been in the future where he'd tried to kill himself. There'd been a girl named Sherry. And he'd had hairy hands — aside from that, he had no idea of what he'd looked like. He'd never seen a reflection of his face.

He dredged up other bits, but most of it was gone, except for the general realization that it had not been a dream. But what he had dictated was still more than he could have remembered — it was already more than he sensed he had known as his older self.

Then he glanced down to see that the recorder was still turning — but without effect. He'd forgotten to replace the spool of wire!

Gideon Pierce came into the office of Governor Blake, shaking his head. "You were right, Tom. They had a deal cooked up, just as you thought; I must be getting old."

Blake grinned at him, but he secretly agreed. Pierce should have spotted the opposition move. In time, you could get used to such business, and learn to expect the moves before they came. He'd have to watch Pierce from now on; the man had been iova! enough, but still.

Well, Blake thought, I'm not naive any more. Idealism is a good thing, the only important thing. But a man has to be a realist too. Like that business of the gun James had invented. It had to be given to the people, of course — but they had to be protected from the crackpots who might seize on it first. It was a problem and one that could only be faced realistically.

"Forget it, Gideon," he said; "we all slip sometimes. Go back down there and keep them whipped into line. We've got to put that across, if I'm to get the nomination for President this time."

He watched Pierce leave, and consulted his calendar. There was only an appointment with the mathematician — a brilliant man, even if a bit too starry-eyed. Still, if his theory of cause and effect could be proved, it should make a difference. It began to look as if all the predestination he'd been worrying about was as much nonsense as the argument about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

But that appointment could be postponed. He flipped through his book, until he came to another name. Then he reached for his intercom.

“Call up Professor Houton, Miss Brightley, and ask him if he can change that appointment to next week at the same time.” he instructed. “Then get ahold of Ainslee — you have his number — and tell him it’s urgent I see him this afternoon. As soon as he can make it.”

Ainslee should be a good man to replace Pierce. A little cold-blooded, perhaps but he got things done...