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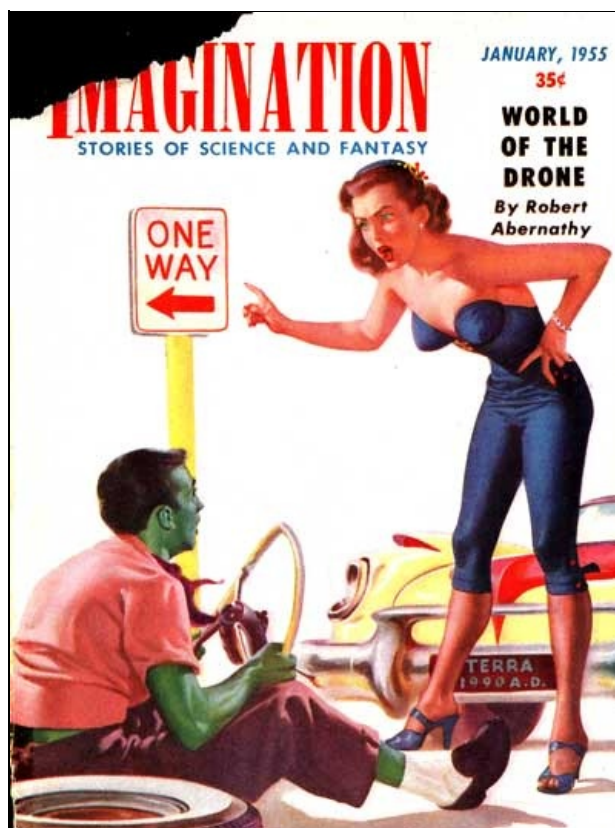
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## THE DICTATOR

*By*

## *Milton Lesser*

Ellaby's society was a perfect democracy, where all men were equal. But some still wanted more personal attention, and they got it, like—

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Just looking at Ellaby, you could tell he was going places. He was five feet nine inches tall and weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. He had an I. Q. of ninety-eight point five-seven, less than four hundredths off the mode. His hair was mousey and worn slightly long for a man, slightly short for a woman. Back in High Falls, where he was born, he was physically weaker than sixty percent of the men but stronger than sixty percent of the women.

He had been in training since his twentieth birthday to assassinate the Dictator. Ellaby was now thirty years old.

Dorcas Sinclair met Ellaby at the pneumo-station. She was too big and strapping for a woman, but otherwise not unattractive with her lusterless hair, slightly thick-featured face, small sagging bosom and heavy-calved legs.

"I'll take your bags," she told Ellaby, and led him from the station. She walked quickly, but not too quickly. You always had to find the happy medium, thought Ellaby. For Ellaby, finding the happy medium had always come easy. Ten years ago, when Ellaby had been graduated from the High Falls secondary school, the four words MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED had been printed under his picture in the yearbook. It was expected by everyone: young Ellaby had learned his three R's—rules, rights, responsibilities—satisfactorily. Ellaby had neither excelled nor failed: he was by nature a first class citizen.

Running to keep up with the too big, too long-legged Dorcas Sinclair who was carrying one of his suitcases in each hand, Ellaby was led from the pneumo-station. The splendid, unimaginative geometric precision of the Capitol stretched out before him in the dazzling summer sunlight, the view serving as a leaven for Ellaby's usually phlegmatic disposition. He could feel his spirits rise, his heart thump more rapidly, speeding the sudden flow of adrenalin through his body.



This was the city. It was here where the fruits of whatever had gone wrong in Ellaby's upbringing or whatever had gone wrong in the linear arrangement of his genes would ripen. It was here where Ellaby, modal Ellaby would pass his tests for top-secret work; unsuspected, average Ellaby, would write his name in flaming letters across the pages of history. It was here where Ellaby would kill the Dictator.

And after that—what? Chaos? A new order based not on modality but something else? Ellaby wasn't sure. No one in the organization knew for sure. The concept was staggering to Ellaby. It was the system—or nothing. Well, let the others worry about it. They did the planning. Ellaby was only the executioner.

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The house was like all the others on the block, all the others in the Capitol, a grimly solid structure of lets-pretend brick fronting on a street which faded into distant haze, straight as a ruled line, to north and south, crossing the east-west avenues at precise right angles every five hundred feet. The grid pattern city, Ellaby remembered from his rights course in school, (every man has the right to a room and bath in any city as long as he is employed) made the best use of available space for houses. The strip city is unnecessary in time of peace—was there ever, had there ever been any other time? the radial city is preferred for rapid transportation, being

the accepted pattern in the great economic hubs and ports like Greater New York and Hampton Roads.

"You will have to live here with me" Dorcas Sinclair told Ellaby, "until you pass your tests for employment. I don't have to tell you how much depends on the outcome of those tests, Ellaby."

"But I can't fail them. I thought you knew my record."

With an unnerving unmodal violence, Dorcas Sinclair's strong fingers dug into the flabby muscle of Ellaby's upper arm. "Well, you had better not," she said, her large teeth hardly parting to let the sounds out.

Ellaby was suddenly alarmed. He had had very little truck with people of this sort. They were as unpredictable as the weather in High Falls which having a population under twenty-five thousand, had never qualified for weather control. Unlike modal man, they had never been exhaustively studied. Their likes and dislikes were not catered to, but their passions couldn't be predicted, either.

"Ease up, Dorcas," a deep voice said from the doorway leading to the kitchen.

Ellaby stared in that direction gratefully. It was indecent for a woman, for anyone, to expose her emotions that way. Ellaby was almost inclined to thank the stranger.

"Stranger, nothing!" Ellaby blurted aloud. Ellaby's face reddened and he apologized. "I didn't mean to raise my voice," he explained. "You surprised me."

"I guess you didn't expect to find me here, at that. You haven't changed much, Ellaby."

Automatically, Ellaby mumbled his thanks for the compliment. Sam Mulden, though, had changed. He'd always been a radical. He wore his hair cropped too short. He was tall and thin, his elbows and knees exposed by the tunic he wore like knots on gnarled, living wood. Mulden looked older. He hadn't bothered to dye his graying hair, or to smooth the premature wrinkles on his long-nosed, thin-lipped face. He was smiling sardonically at Ellaby now, as if he could read Ellaby's mind. "I might have known it would be you," he said. "As soon as they said the assassin was coming from High Falls, I should have guessed."

"Why?" asked Ellaby. It was a question which had nudged for ten years at his docile patience. When people go out of their way to train you, though, to spend ten years teaching you every inch of Capitol territory without once taking you there, to make you proficient with various deadly weapons although your reflexes are splendidly modal, to teach you meaningless phrases like democratic inequality (?) and individuality (?) and the right to live a self-directed (?) life, to make your own decisions (?), when people act, in short, like a very thorough government school, even if their motives seem strangely misdirected, you don't question them.

"For two reasons," Mulden said. "You can understand the first, Ellaby. If the second one bothers you, forget it. In the first place, you're so perfectly modal, the government would never suspect you. In the second place, you're so well adjusted you're bound to follow our instructions."

"Or any instructions," Dorcas Sinclair said. "That's what I'm afraid of, Mulden."

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**E**llaby still couldn't get over it. He never expected to find poor, unfortunate Sam Mulden in such a high position in the organization or anywhere. He remembered Mulden clearly from their school days together. Mulden was a character, a real character. Physically, he was barely acceptable: more than eighty percent of the men and some sixty-five percent of the women were able to knock Mulden down in the High Falls gymnasium classes. But mentally Mulden was a misfit. His I. Q. was in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty. His gangling, ineffectual physique wasn't too far below the mode, but mentally he soared intolerably above it.

Now Mulden told Dorcas Sinclair, "Don't worry about that. We've had ten years to work on him. They can't undo it in a few days. Ellaby, you are quite sure you know what you must do?"

"Oh, yes. Tomorrow morning I will take my security tests. According to the record of my previous physical and mental testing, I should make top secret classification. I will work here in the capitol. I will find the Dictator and kill him. The only thing that bothers me is I don't know who to look for. What does the Dictator look like?"

"Didn't they explain all of that to you in High Falls?" the woman asked irritably, without even making an effort to poker her face.

"Ease off," Mulden told her for the second time. "He's confused. Listen to me, Ellaby. Don't you remember? The Dictator never makes public appearances."

"Yes. Yes, now I remember. No one knows what the Dictator looks like. He keeps to himself. He issues orders which are instantly obeyed, helping to maintain universal modality in the country. It almost seems a shame I'll have to kill him."

"So we've pavloved him for ten years, have we?" Dorcas Sinclair raged. Ellaby turned away in embarrassment. "Damn you, Mulden, he still questions it!"

"He's supposed to," Mulden explained quietly. "If he accepted what we told him, he'd go around talking about it naively. This way, he understands the necessity for secrecy."

"He doesn't understand—"

"Well, then he realizes it. Let him get some sleep, will you? Tomorrow's going to be a good day for us, a big day for him. Good night, Ellaby. If you want anything, Sinclair will get it for you."

Ellaby assured them he would want nothing except a simple meal of whatever most people in the Capitol ate on Wednesdays. It turned out to be pork chops, which Ellaby neither particularly liked nor disliked. He chewed his food with the proper lack of enthusiasm and retired early.

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The next morning, Ellaby took his I. Q. test at the Capitol personnel bureau. He was slightly above average in space perception but slightly below average in comparisons. He hoped his anxiety didn't show on his face. If anyone asked him why he had come to the Capitol he was ready to blurt out the reason and have done with it. He wondered what Sam Mulden would have thought if he knew. The Sinclair woman would have been furious.

No one asked Ellaby. You came to the Capitol because you wanted to work there. According to the mode, a man desired to change his location every 3.7 years. Ellaby had been 6.3 years tardy, but High Falls was an ideally modal community in which people tended to linger.

"I. Q., point seven under the mode," the personnel clerk told Ellaby. The slight variation—due to his anxiety—was not enough to matter, Ellaby realized with a faint sense of triumph. "Proceed to physical testing," the girl told Ellaby.

Obediently, Ellaby followed the green arrow to the gymnasium. He was given a locker, a towel, a pair of athletic shorts and a first-aid kit. He stripped off his clothing, placing the tunic, underwear and sandals in the locker, then climbed into his athletic shorts and fell into line with the other men and women carrying their towels and first-aid kits into the gymnasium.

The ten-over-mode male wrestling tester pinned Ellaby in less than two minutes, a fact which was duly noted on his employment blank. He was given fifteen minutes of rest, then squared off on the mat with a skinny, five-under-mode male. Ellaby bested him in four minutes flat, took another fifteen minute break, mopping the sweat from his body with an already sodden towel, then defeated the ten-under-mode female wrestler in two minutes and some seconds. It developed into a knock down, drag out fight with the two-over-mode female, who finally forced Ellaby's shoulders to the mat for the necessary five seconds after half an hour.

Ellaby showered, ate a hot Thursday lunch and took his employment blank to the emotion lab. His electroencephalogram revealed nine alpha cycles to the second, but too much theta.

"Are you nervous?" the technician asked Ellaby. "You're thetaing all over the place."

"I guess so. Yes, I'm nervous."

"Then let's try it again."

They did, the technician rubbing the greasy electrode salve on Ellaby's forehead before the electrodes were fastened there for the second time. The result was the same. "More than modal theta," said the technician, writing something in code on his employment blank. "See the personnel advisor, please."

For Ellaby, it came as a distinct shock. His heart pounded against his temples, in his ears. He was emotionally unstable. Had the ten years been for nothing?

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"Sit down, Ellaby," the personnel advisor said. He was a man of middle age, irritatingly careless about his appearance. He had dyed his graying hair, of course, but if you looked close you could see gray at the roots. He wore a green Thursday tunic which was poorly starched. Having had a full week to get it ready, that was naturally inexcusable.

"You have a splendid record, Ellaby," the sloppy personnel clerk said. "Mentally, within tenths of the mode. Physically, even closer. Unfortunately your emotional—"

"That never happened to me before, not in High Falls, it didn't," Ellaby interrupted.

"This is not High Falls. Every community, you must realize, has its own security testing center. And the capitol requires the tightest security of all."

"I know but I was nervous. You're going to tell me my theta was too high, aren't you?"

"That's correct. You needn't feel so bad about it. You're going to be cleared for secret work. You're damn close to modal, Ellaby. You're a good security risk. Incidentally, just why were you nervous?"

"Because I wanted top secret clearance. Because I wanted to work close to the Dictator. You see —" Abruptly, Ellaby stopped talking, clasping a hand over his mouth in sudden confusion. He

wasn't supposed to talk about this. Lying, of course, was as far from Ellaby's nature as it was from anyone else's, assuming he were reasonably close to the mode. But Ellaby hadn't been asked for all that information directly. "What kind of job will I get?" he asked, trying desperately to change the subject.

It was too late. The personnel clerk asked, "Just why did you want to work close to the Dictator?"

Ellaby felt a single drop of sweat fall from his armpit under the loose tunic and roll, itching, down the side of his body. He wanted with all his soul to be back in High Falls. Anyplace but here.

"Why, Ellaby?"

"I can't answer that question. A man isn't forced to answer a question unless he wants to."

"Certainly not," said the personnel advisor, staring blandly at Ellaby. "This is a democratic country."

"Then—"

"But you've never known a man to refuse answering a question asked of him officially, have you?"

"I'm not sure I understand, sir."

"You don't have to be so obsequious, Ellaby. I'm less modal than you are, but I make the best of my divergencies. What I meant was this: did you ever hear of a criminal *not* confessing to his crime?"

"Well, no."

"I'll ask you the question again, Ellaby. Why did you want to work near the Dictator?"

The man leaned close, peered at Ellaby. The room was small, almost a cubicle, the bare walls seeming to close in on all four sides. Ellaby stifled a wild impulse to scream and run out of there, run any place as long as he could leave the room and the personnel advisor behind him. "I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question," he said finally.

"Tell me, Ellaby, did you ever hear your own voice?"

What a strange question. "Why, certainly. All the time, when I speak."

"No, I mean your voice reproduced artificially. Your radio voice?"

"No, I never heard it."

"Well, you're about to."

While the personnel advisor busied himself setting up the radio equipment, Ellaby had a few seconds in which to think. He could still make a clean breast of the whole thing. They had chosen him—Mulden, the Sinclair woman and the others in High Falls—for his modality. Very well, he could use that modality to get out from under. He didn't understand. He didn't know what they were leading him to, slowly, over a period of ten years. *He* didn't want to assassinate the Dictator. What in the world would he want to do that for? He would gladly name all the names he knew if the personnel advisor would only let him forget the whole mad experience and return to High Falls. He could attend Adjustment Academy if they thought he needed it. Anything. Anything....

"Please slip these earphones over your head, over your ears. There. Is the microphone close enough to your lips? I think so."

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**A** metal band running over the top of Ellaby's cranium held the earphones in place. Another metal band curved around the side of his cheek and chin, leading to a small microphone before his lips.

"Place your hands on the arms of your chair, please."

Ellaby did as he was told. *Click! Click!* A pair of manacles sprang up from the chair arms trapping Ellaby's wrists. Ellaby looked at the personnel tester in unpokered alarm. "What did you do that for?" he asked timidly.

"So you won't remove the earphones. Now, are we ready?" The personnel advisor pressed a button on his desk. Ellaby thought he heard a faint hum of power in the microphone. "I will ask you once more, Ellaby. Why did you want to work near the Dictator?"

Ellaby shrugged. He was going to say, "I'm sorry, but I don't have to answer that question." He said, and heard through the earphones: "I'm sorry (I'm) but I (sorry don't have (but) to ans (I) wer that (don't) question) (have to answer that question)."

"Again, please. I didn't hear you," the personnel tester said.

It was his own voice Ellaby had heard through the earphones. Playback, with a fraction of a second lapse. Oddly, it un-nerved him. The reproduced voice had no right lagging. He shouted,

"I'm sorry (I'm) but I (sorry) don't have (but) to ans (I) wer that (don't question!) (have to) Shut up! (answer) SHUT UP! (that) PLEASE.... (question). PLEASE! (please)."

"Once more, if you don't mind."

Ellaby's head was whirling. He blinked sweat from his eyes. "I—please! (I—please!)"

"The law requires that you make some answer, even if answer is a refusal."

Criminals confessed, Ellaby thought wildly. Is this why criminals confessed? Did the sound of their own voices drive them mad? It seemed such a simple device, and yet ... and yet ... but he could fool it. He couldn't rush the words out in a quick torrent and: "I don't have to (I don't answer that ques) (have to) tion (answer that question.)" Ellaby—and Ellaby's echo. "Well, I (well) don't (I don't)!" Ellaby blinked more sweat from his eyes. "Mumble (mumble). Sob. (Sob)."

"Relax, Ellaby. You seem upset. Will you read this, please?" the personnel advisor held a card in front of Ellaby's face.

The words swam, blurred together, fused, were readable and then were not. Ellaby read aloud: "A code (a) of eth (code) ics for (eth) mankind (ethics for mankind)." It was, he realized, the preamble to the constitution. "In the (in) nineteenth (the) centur (nine) y the (nine) common (teenth)"—faster, faster!—"(century the common) c-common man was defended (common man) by enlightened liberalism (man was). In the t-twentieth century (in the t-twen) common man was championed by (tieth century) enlightened liberalism (the common man was). In the twenty-first century (championed by enlightened) the common man assumed his proper place (liberalism) at the top of society but (in the twenty-first cen) will protect the rights of the (tury the common man) enlightened liberals or any other minority, (assumed his proper) encouraging them to become (place at the top of) as common as possible (society but will protect the rights of the enlightened liberals or any other minority, encouraging them to become as common as possible).

"Oh God (Oh)," shouted Ellaby. "Shut (God) it (shut) off (it) make (off) it (make) stop (it) God (stop—God)!"

"Will you agree to answer my question?"

"Anything (anything)! ANYTHING (anything)." Now the playback was a faint whisper. Ellaby found himself hysterically fascinated by it, trying to guess the time-lapse, which varied, trying to guess the volume, which varied. Ellaby's head slumped forward on his chest. The unfamiliar wetness at the corners of his mouth was drool. Ellaby didn't quite know it, of course, but he had given himself a very mild and very temporary nervous breakdown.

Two hours later he was asked one question. He answered: "I want to be near the Dictator so I can kill him."

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Later, Dorcas Sinclair asked: "What else happened at testing, Ellaby?"

"Take your time," Mulden cautioned. "He looks nervous."

"I know it. I want to find out why."

"After my EEG," said Ellaby softly, "they told me I had too much theta."

"Damn you!" Dorcas Sinclair swore. "Then you weren't cleared for top secret?"

"No, I wasn't. Not at first. Then a strange thing happened. They said I was cleared only for secret and asked me why I wanted to be cleared for top secret."

"You fool!" the woman cried.

"I told them it was because I wanted to work near the Dictator. I didn't mean to tell them, but—"

The woman shook her head in despair. "Don't bother finishing," she said. "You can clear out of here, Ellaby. You're through. Ten years. Ten years wasted."

"If you wish," Ellaby said mildly. "But you're missing the most interesting part. They asked me why I wanted to be near the Dictator."

Dorcas Sinclair sucked in her breath sharply. Even Mulden seemed anxious. "You didn't tell them?" the woman asked in a frantic whisper.

"I'm afraid I did."

"We'll have to flee the city," the woman told Mulden, ignoring Ellaby now. "If he told them that, he probably named names. I have friends in Hampton Roads—"

"Let him finish," Mulden said. Mulden was looking strangely at Ellaby.

"They didn't ask me to name anyone in the conspiracy," Ellaby said. "Unless they could poker very well, they seemed perfectly calm. They said they would make an exception in my case. They would clear me for top secret work. I start tomorrow."

"What's your job?" Mulden asked eagerly.

"Well, this is the strangest part. I'm to be the Dictator's confidential assistant."

"Of course!" Mulden cried. "It makes sense. Don't you see, Sinclair? We're not the only ones. There are others, inside the government, who think it's time for a *coup*. With their help, Ellaby won't fail us."

Dorcas Sinclair wasn't convinced. "Doesn't it seem peculiar to you that, purely by co-incidence, Ellaby happened to meet these people?"

But Mulden shrugged. "You know the old saw about the gift horse," he said. "Ellaby will go ahead with the plan. Tomorrow, if all goes well, we'll have a full-scale revolution on our hands. Don't you understand, Sinclair? The Dictator—a figurehead. There are plenty of people around like us, who don't want to do things just because everyone else does them, who don't want to be stamped by the mold of conformity, who don't want ... but I don't have to go on. The Dictator is a figurehead, a symbol of power. Destroy him and the whole conforming system comes tumbling down in chaos. You'll see tomorrow."

It was all beyond Ellaby, who was still weary from the playback ordeals. He took the small, palm-sized blaster from Mulden and slipped it into his tunic. Tomorrow he would assassinate the Dictator and suffer the consequences. He almost had in mind to rebel. The people at testing had been very nice—except for those earphones. But the Sinclair woman and Mulden might be able to do as bad—or worse. He'd go through with it.

Under the circumstances, he slept surprisingly well.

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Mulden's passionate parting words still ringing in his ears, Ellaby entered the capitol building. "Someday you and your kind will understand, Ellaby," Mulden had said. "Someday you'll know what banal really means, and vulgar. Someday—I promise you, someday—the true social perspective will be re-established. It should not be the role in life of the common man, the mass, the mob, to make the uncommon man as common as possible, but quite the other way around. The other way, Ellaby! Common folk should be given the opportunity to become as uncommon as possible. Otherwise, Ellaby, we've reached a dead end.

"Kill him and I promise you this: the whole warped system will come tumbling. A man shouldn't be forced to conform, Ellaby. Mankind's greatness stems from lack of conformity. For his own purposes, the Dictator bows to the will of the mob. But he's surrounded himself, with mediocrity. Without him, what can they do? Without him they'll go down in weeks, Ellaby. In days!"

The guard, a tall blonde woman who looked like a twenty-over-mode to Ellaby, led him down a long, well-lit corridor. No one had searched him. It would have taken the guard a moment to reach within his tunic, find the blaster and drag him off to the Academy. Other people, nameless people on nameless errands, walked by in the corridor without paying Ellaby any attention.

Was Mulden right? Were there people here, within the building, waiting to help Ellaby?

Ellaby licked his dry lips and kept walking, finding it difficult to keep his legs from trembling. It was as if a nimbus of terror dogged his footsteps, ready to envelope him momentarily. The guard seemed completely unconcerned. She was humming the melody of the latest song-hit, a wonderfully liltingly banal tune which had been on everyone's lips back in High Falls.

The blonde guard paused before a door in the long corridor. "Here we are," she said.

Ellaby opened his mouth to speak, but gulped in air instead. He felt a weak fluttering in his chest. He had never been so afraid in all his life.

The guard, who was a head taller than Ellaby, glanced down at him. "You don't have to be so nervous," she said in a perfectly normal voice. "Everything's going to be all right."

"You see, it's a new job and all—"

"Oh, here! Let's see that blaster."

Ellaby's heart plunged. He wanted to bolt, to run. She knew. She knew....

He stood there, too weak to move, while the guard reached inside his tunic, found the blaster taped to his chest, wrenched it loose. She took it out, held it up, flipping open the chamber and examined the inside. "All right," she said. "I only wanted to make sure it was loaded."

And she took out a key and opened the door. "He's inside," she said, and strolled on down the hall.

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Ellaby clutched the doorframe for support. He was breathing raggedly now, as if he'd run all the great length of the corridor, sprinting with monsters behind him. He rubbed the shoulder of his tunic against his damp brow and entered the room.

A man Ellaby's own size was sitting there, viewing a 3D. When he heard Ellaby at the door he got up. He looked very unhappy as Ellaby pointed the blaster at him. He said, "So soon?"

"They said you would try wiles, trickery, deceit," Ellaby recited. "You won't fool me."

"You think I'm the Dictator? You're going to kill me? That's very funny. I know, you see. I know."

"Stand back!" Ellaby screamed.

"I assure you, I am not the Dictator any more than you will be—"

The Dictator's face dissolved in a red, jelly-like smear as Ellaby pulled this trigger of his blaster.

He spent the next ten minutes being very ill.

Afterwards, they were very efficient. They carted the body away and told Ellaby all he had to do was ring for food or drink or anything he wanted. Occasionally, he would sign some papers. Occasionally—masked—he might be asked to review a parade.

And all at once, sitting alone in the room with its pleasant view, it came to Ellaby. He passed no judgment, but he understood—and he was afraid.

The masses ruled, thought Ellaby, hardly knowing what the phrase meant. The system was self-perpetuating, and revolution couldn't change it. The common man—men like Ellaby—had come into his own, for once and for all time.

The man Ellaby had slain was no Dictator. He had tried to tell Ellaby that before he perished. Now Ellaby had taken his place. Ellaby was no Dictator, either.

But he would do until the next one came along.

## THE END

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