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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VICTOR ***



The Victor

By Bryce Walton

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

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Charles Marquis had a fraction of a minute in which to die. He dropped through the tubular beams of alloydem steel and hung there, five thousand feet above the tiers and walkways below. At either end of the walkway crossing between the two power-hung buildings, he saw the plainclothes security officers running in toward him.

Under the new system of the Managerials, the fight was not for life but for death! And

He grinned and started to release his grip. He would think about them on the way down. His fingers wouldn't work. He kicked and strained and tore at himself with his own weight, but his hands weren't his own any more. He might have anticipated that. Some paralysis beam freezing his hands into the metal.

*great was the ingenuity
of—The Victor.*

He sagged to limpness. His chin dropped. For an instant, then, the fire in his heart almost went out, but not quite. It survived that one terrible moment of defeat, then burned higher. And perhaps something in that desperate resistance was the factor that kept it burning where it was thought no flame could burn. He felt the rigidity of paralysis leaving his arms as he was lifted, helped along the walkway to a security car.

The car looked like any other car. The officers appeared like all the other people in the clockwork culture of the mechanized New System. Marquis sought the protection of personal darkness behind closed eyelids as the monorail car moved faster and faster through the high clean air. Well—he'd worked with the Underground against the System for a long time. He had known that eventually he would be caught. There were rumors of what happened to men then, and even the vaguest, unsubstantiated rumors were enough to indicate that death was preferable. That was the Underground's philosophy—better to die standing up as a man with some degree of personal integrity and freedom than to go on living as a conditioned slave of the state.

He'd missed—but he wasn't through yet though. In a hollow tooth was a capsule containing a very high-potency poison. A little of that would do the trick too. But he would have to wait for the right time....

The Manager was thin, his face angular, and he matched up with the harsh steel angles of the desk and the big room somewhere in the Security Building. His face had a kind of emotion—cold, detached, cynically superior.

"We don't get many of your kind," he said. "Political prisoners are becoming more scarce all the time. As your number indicates. From now on, you'll be No. 5274."

He looked at some papers, then up at Marquis. "You evidently found out a great deal. However, none of it will do you or what remains of your Underground fools any good." The Manager studied Marquis with detached curiosity. "You learned things concerning the Managerials that have so far remained secret."

It was partly a question. Marquis' lean and darkly inscrutable face smiled slightly. "You're good at understatement. Yes—I found out what we've suspected for some time. That the Managerial class has found some way to stay young. Either a remarkable longevity, or immortality. Of all the social evils that's the worst of all. To deny the people knowledge of such a secret."

The Manager nodded. "Then you did find that out? The Underground knows? Well, it will do no good."

"It will, eventually. They'll go on and someday they'll learn the secret." Marquis thought of Marden. Marden was as old as the New System of statism and inhumanity that had started off disguised as social-democracy. Three-hundred and three years old to be exact.

The Manager said, "No. 5274—you will be sent to the work colony on the Moon. You won't be back. We've tried re-conditioning rebels, but it doesn't work. A rebel has certain basic deviant characteristics and we can't overcome them sufficiently to make happy, well-adjusted workers out of you. However on the Moon—you will conform. It's a kind of social experiment there in associative reflex culture, you might say. You'll conform all right."

He was taken to a small, naked, gray-steel room. He thought about taking the capsule from his tooth now, but decided he might be observed. They would rush in an antidote and make him live. And he might not get a chance to take his life in any other way. He would try of course, but his knowledge of his future situation was vague—except that in it he would conform. There would be extreme conditioned-reflex therapeutic techniques. And it would be pretty horrible. That was all he knew.

He didn't see the pellet fall. He heard the slight sound it made and then saw the almost colorless gas hissing softly, clouding the room. He tasted nothing, smelled or felt nothing.

He passed out quickly and painlessly.

He was marched into another office, and he knew he was on the Moon. The far wall was spherical and was made up of the outer shell of the pressure dome which kept out the frigid cold nights and furnace-hot days. It was opaque and Marquis could see the harsh black and white shadows out there—the metallic edges of the far crater wall.

This Manager was somewhat fat, with a round pink face and cold blue eyes. He sat behind a chrome shelf of odd shape suspended from the ceiling with silver wires.

The Manager said, "No. 5274, here there is only work. At first, of course, you will rebel. Later you

will work, and finally there will be nothing else. Things here are rigidly scheduled, and you will learn the routines as the conditioning bells acquaint you with them. We are completely self-sufficient here. We are developing the perfect scientifically-controlled society. It is a kind of experiment. A closed system to test to what extremes we can carry our mastery of associative reflex to bring man security and happiness and freedom from responsibility."

Marquis didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. He knew he couldn't get away with trying to kill this particular Managerial specimen. But one man, alone, a rebel, with something left in him that still burned, could beat the system. *He had to!*

"Our work here is specialized. During the indoctrination period you will do a very simple routine job in coordination with the cybernetics machines. There, the machines and the nervous system of the workers become slowly cooperative. Machine and man learn to work very intimately together. Later, after the indoctrination—because of your specialized knowledge of food-concentrate preparation—we will transfer you to the food-mart. The period of indoctrination varies in length with the individuals. You will be screened now and taken to the indoctrination ward. We probably won't be seeing one another again. The bells take care of everything here. The bells and the machines. There is never an error—never any mistakes. Machines do not make mistakes."

He was marched out of there and through a series of rooms. He was taken in by generators, huge oscilloscopes. Spun like a living tube through curtains of vacuum tube voltmeters, electronic power panels. Twisted and squeezed through rolls of skeins of hook-up wire. Bent through shieldings of every color, size and shape. Rolled over panel plates, huge racks of glowing tubes, elaborate transceivers. Tumbled down long surfaces of gleaming bakelite. Plunged through color-indexed files of resistors and capacitances....

... here machine and man learn to work very intimately together.

As he drifted through the machine tooled nightmare, Marquis knew *what* he had been fighting all his life, what he would continue to fight with every grain of ingenuity. Mechanization—the horror of losing one's identity and becoming part of an assembly line.

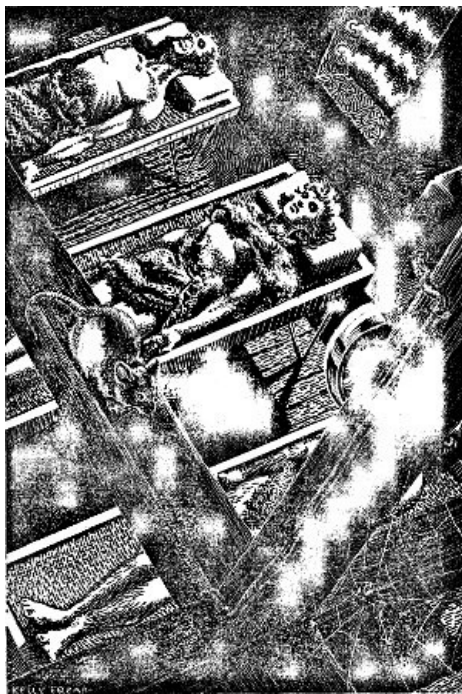
He could hear a clicking sound as tubes sharpened and faded in intensity. The clicking—rhythm, a hypnotic rhythm like the beating of his own heart—the throbbing and thrumming, the contracting and expanding, the pulsing and pounding....

... the machines and the nervous system of the workers become slowly cooperative.

Beds were spaced ten feet apart down both sides of a long gray metal hall. There were no cells, no privacy, nothing but beds and the gray metalene suits with numbers printed across the chest.

His bed, with his number printed above it, was indicated to him, and the guard disappeared. He was alone. It was absolutely silent. On his right a woman lay on a bed. No. 329. She had been here a long time. She appeared dead. Her breasts rose and fell with a peculiarly steady rhythm, and seemed to be coordinated with the silent, invisible throbbing of the metal walls. She might have been attractive once. Here it didn't make any difference. Her face was gray, like metal. Her hair was cropped short. Her uniform was the same as the man's on Marquis' left.

The man was No. 4901. He hadn't been here so long. His face was thin and gray. His hair was dark, and he was about the same size and build as Marquis. His mouth hung slightly open and his eyes were closed and there was a slight quivering at the ends of the fingers which were laced across his stomach.



When the bells rang they would arise....

"Hello," Marquis said. The man shivered, then opened dull eyes and looked up at Marquis. "I just got in. Name's Charles Marquis."

The man blinked. "I'm—I'm—No. 4901." He looked down at his chest, repeated the number. His fingers shook a little as he touched his lips.

Marquis said. "What's this indoctrination?"

"You—learn. The bells ring—you forget—and learn—"

"There's absolutely no chance of escaping?" Marquis whispered, more to himself than to 4901.

"Only by dying," 4901 shivered. His eyes rolled crazily, then he turned over and buried his face in his arms.

The situation had twisted all the old accepted values squarely around. Preferring death over life. But not because of any anti-life attitude, or pessimism, or defeatism. None of those negative attitudes that would have made the will-to-die abnormal under conditions in which there would have been hope and some faint chance of a bearable future. Here to keep on living was a final form of de-humanized indignity, of humiliation, of ignominy, of the worst thing of all—loss of one's-self—of one's individuality. To die as a human being was much more preferable over continuing to live as something else—something neither human or machine, but something of both, with none of the dignity of either.

The screening process hadn't detected the capsule of poison in Marquis' tooth. The capsule contained ten grains of poison, only one of which was enough to bring a painless death within sixteen hours or so. That was his ace in the hole, and he waited only for the best time to use it.

Bells rang. The prisoners jumped from their beds and went through a few minutes of calisthenics. Other bells rang and a tray of small tins of food-concentrates appeared out of a slit in the wall by each bed. More bells rang, different kinds of bells, some deep and brazen, others high and shrill. And the prisoners marched off to specialized jobs co-operating with various machines.

You slept eight hours. Calisthenics five minutes. Eating ten minutes. Relaxation to the tune of musical bells, ten minutes. Work period eight hours. Repeat. That was all of life, and after a while Marquis knew, a man would not be aware of time, nor of his name, nor that he had once been human.

Marquis felt deep lancing pain as he tried to resist the bells. Each time the bells rang and a prisoner didn't respond properly, invisible rays of needle pain punched and kept punching until he reacted properly.

And finally he did as the bells told him to do. Finally he forgot that things had ever been any other way.

Marquis sat on his bed, eating, while the bells of eating rang across the bowed heads in the gray uniforms. He stared at the girl, then at the man, 4901. There were many opportunities to take

one's own life here. That had perplexed him from the start—*why hasn't the girl, and this man, succeeded in dying?*

And all the others? They were comparatively new here, all these in this indoctrination ward. Why weren't they trying to leave in the only dignified way of escape left?

No. 4901 tried to talk, he tried hard to remember things. Sometimes memory would break through and bring him pictures of other times, of happenings on Earth, of a girl he had known, of times when he was a child. But only the mildest and softest kind of recollections....

Marquis said, "I don't think there's a prisoner here who doesn't want to escape, and death is the only way out for us. We know that."

For an instant, No. 4901 stopped eating. A spoonful of food concentrate hung suspended between his mouth and the shelf. Then the food moved again to the urging of the bells. Invisible pain needles gouged Marquis' neck, and he ate again too, automatically, talking between tasteless bites. "A man's life at least is his own," Marquis said. "They can take everything else. But a man certainly has a right and a duty to take that life if by so doing he can retain his integrity as a human being. Suicide—"

No. 4901 bent forward. He groaned, mumbled "Don't—don't—" several times, then curled forward and lay on the floor knotted up into a twitching ball.

The eating period was over. The lights went off. Bells sounded for relaxation. Then the sleep bells began ringing, filling up the absolute darkness.

Marquis lay there in the dark and he was afraid. He had the poison. He had the will. But he couldn't be unique in that respect. What was the matter with the others? All right, the devil with them. Maybe they'd been broken too soon to act. He could act. Tomorrow, during the work period, he would take a grain of the poison. Put the capsule back in the tooth. The poison would work slowly, painlessly, paralyzing the nervous system, finally the heart. Sometime during the beginning of the next sleep period he would be dead. That would leave six or seven hours of darkness and isolation for him to remain dead, so they couldn't get to him in time to bring him back.

He mentioned suicide to the girl during the next work period. She moaned a little and curled up like a fetus on the floor. After an hour, she got up and began inserting punch cards into the big machine again. She avoided Marquis.

Marquis looked around, went into a corner with his back to the room, slipped the capsule out and let one of the tiny, almost invisible grains, melt on his tongue. He replaced the capsule and returned to the machine. A quiet but exciting triumph made the remainder of the work period more bearable.

Back on his bed, he drifted into sleep, into what he knew was the final sleep. He was more fortunate than the others. Within an hour he would be dead.

Somewhere, someone was screaming.

The sounds rose higher and higher. A human body, somewhere ... pain unimaginable twisting up through clouds of belching steam ... muscles quivering, nerves twitching ... and somewhere a body floating and bobbing and crying ... sheets of agony sweeping and returning in waves and the horror of unescapable pain expanding like a volcano of madness....

Somewhere was someone alive who should be dead.

And then in the dark, in absolute silence, Marquis moved a little. He realized, vaguely, that the screaming voice was his own.

He stared into the steamy darkness and slowly, carefully, wet his lips. He moved. He felt his lips moving and the whisper sounding loud in the dark.

I'm alive!

He managed to struggle up out of the bed. He could scarcely remain erect. Every muscle in his body seemed to quiver. He longed to slip down into the darkness and escape into endless sleep. But he'd tried that. And he was still alive. He didn't know how much time had passed. He was sure of the poison's effects, but he wasn't dead. They had gotten to him in time.

Sweat exploded from his body. He tried to remember more. Pain. He lay down again. He writhed and perspired on the bed as his tortured mind built grotesque fantasies out of fragments of broken memory.

The routine of the unceasing bells went on. Bells, leap up. Bells, calisthenics. Bells, eat. Bells, march. Bells, work. He tried to shut out the bells. He tried to talk to 4901. 4901 covered up his ears and wouldn't listen. The girl wouldn't listen to him.

There were other ways. And he kept the poison hidden in the capsule in his hollow tooth. He had been counting the steps covering the length of the hall, then the twenty steps to the left, then to

the right to where the narrow corridor led again to the left where he had seen the air-lock.

After the bells stopped ringing and the darkness was all around him, he got up. He counted off the steps. No guards, no alarms, nothing to stop him. They depended on the conditioners to take care of everything. This time he would do it. This time they wouldn't bring him back.

No one else could even talk with him about it, even though he knew they all wanted to escape. Some part of them still wanted to, but they couldn't. So it was up to him. He stopped against the smooth, opaque, up-curving glasite dome. It had a brittle bright shine that reflected from the Moon's surface. It was night out there, with an odd metallic reflection of Earthlight against the naked crags.

He hesitated. He could feel the intense and terrible cold, the airlessness out there fingering hungrily, reaching and whispering and waiting.

He turned the wheel. The door opened. He entered the air-lock and shut the first door when the air-pressure was right. He turned the other wheel and the outer lock door swung outward. The out-rushing air spun him outward like a balloon into the awful airless cold and naked silence.

His body sank down into the thick pumice dust that drifted up around him in a fine powdery blanket of concealment. He felt no pain. The cold airlessness dissolved around him in deepening darkening pleasantness. This time he was dead, thoroughly and finally and gloriously dead, even buried, and they couldn't find him. And even if they did finally find him, what good would it do them?

Some transcendental part of him seemed to remain to observe and triumph over his victory. This time he was dead to stay.

This time he knew at once that the twisting body in the steaming pain, the distorted face, the screams rising and rising were all Charles Marquis.

Maybe a dream though, he thought. So much pain, so much screaming pain, is not real. In some fraction of a fraction of that interim between life and death, one could dream of so much because dreams are timeless.

Yet he found himself anticipating, even through the shredded, dissociated, nameless kind of pain, a repetition of that other time.

The awful bitterness of defeat.

He opened his eyes slowly. It was dark, the same darkness. He was on the same bed. And the old familiar dark around and the familiar soundlessness that was now heavier than the most thunderous sound.

Everything around him then seemed to whirl up and go down in a crash. He rolled over to the floor and lay there, his hot face cooled by the cold metal.

As before, some undeterminable interim of time had passed. And he knew he was alive. His body was stiff. He ached. There was a drumming in his head, and then a ringing in his ears as he tried to get up, managed to drag himself to an unsteady stance against the wall. He felt now an icy surety of horror that carried him out to a pin-point in space.

A terrible fatigue hit him. He fell back onto the bed. He lay there trying to figure out how he could be alive.

He finally slept pushed into it by sheer and utter exhaustion. The bells called him awake. The bells started him off again. He tried to talk again to 4901. They avoided him, all of them. But they weren't really alive any more. How long could he maintain some part of himself that he knew definitely was Charles Marquis?

He began a ritual, a routine divorced from that to which all those being indoctrinated were subjected. It was a little private routine of his own. Dying, and then finding that he was not dead.

He tried it many ways. He took more grains of the poison. But he was always alive again.

"You—4901! Damn you—talk to me! You know what's been happening to me?"

The man nodded quickly over his little canisters of food-concentrate.

"This indoctrination—you, the girl—you went crazy when I talked about dying—what—?"

The man yelled hoarsely. "Don't ... don't say it! All this—what you've been going through, can't you understand? All that is part of indoctrination. You're no different than the rest of us! We've all had it! All of us. All of us! Some more maybe than others. It had to end. You'll have to give in. Oh God, I wish you didn't. I wish you could win. But you're no smarter than the rest of us. *You'll have to give in!*"

It was 4901's longest and most coherent speech. Maybe I can get somewhere with him, Marquis thought. I can find out something.

But 4901 wouldn't say any more. Marquis kept on trying. No one, he knew, would ever realize what that meant—to keep on trying to die when no one would let you, when you kept dying, and then kept waking up again, and you weren't dead. No one could ever understand the pain that went between the dying and the living. And even Marquis couldn't remember it afterward. He only knew how painful it had been. And knowing that made each attempt a little harder for Marquis.

He tried the poison again. There was the big stamping machine that had crushed him beyond any semblance of a human being, but he had awakened, alive again, whole again. There was the time he grabbed the power cable and felt himself, in one blinding flash, conquer life in a burst of flame. He slashed his wrists at the beginning of a number of sleep periods.

When he awakened, he was whole again. There wasn't even a scar.

He suffered the pain of resisting the eating bells until he was so weak he couldn't respond, and he knew that he died that time too—from pure starvation.

But I can't stay dead!

"... You'll have to give in!"

He didn't know when it was. He had no idea now how long he had been here. But a guard appeared, a cold-faced man who guided Marquis back to the office where the fat, pink-faced little Manager waited for him behind the shelf suspended by silver wires from the ceiling.

The Manager said. "You are the most remarkable prisoner we've ever had here. There probably will not be another like you here again."

Marquis' features hung slack, his mouth slightly open, his lower lip drooping. He knew how he looked. He knew how near he was to cracking completely, becoming a senseless puppet of the bells. "Why is that?" he whispered.

"You've tried repeatedly to—you know what I mean of course. You have kept on attempting this impossible thing, attempted it more times than anyone else here ever has! Frankly, we didn't think any human psyche had the stuff to try it that many times—to resist that long."

The Manager made a curious lengthened survey of Marquis' face. "Soon you'll be thoroughly indoctrinated. You are, for all practical purposes, now. You'll work automatically then, to the bells, and think very little about it at all, except in a few stereotyped ways to keep your brain and nervous system active enough to carry out simple specialized work duties. Or while the New System lasts. And I imagine that will be forever."

"Forever...."

"Yes, yes. You're immortal now," the Manager smiled. "Surely, after all this harrowing indoctrination experience, you realize *that!*"

Immortal. I might have guessed. I might laugh now, but I can't. We who pretend to live in a hell that is worse than death, and you, the Managerials who live in paradise. We two are immortal.

"That is, you're immortal as long as we desire you to be. You'll never grow any older than we want you to, never so senile as to threaten efficiency. That was what you were so interested in finding out on Earth, wasn't it? The mystery behind the Managerials? Why they never seemed to grow old. Why we have all the advantage, no senility, no weakening, the advantage of accumulative experience without the necessity of re-learning?"

"Yes," Marquis whispered.

The Manager leaned back. He lit a paraette and let the soothing nerve-tonic seep into his lungs. He explained.

"Every one of you political prisoners we bring here want, above everything else, to die. It was a challenge to our experimental social order here. We have no objection to your killing yourself. We have learned that even the will to die can be conditioned out of the most determined rebel. As it has been conditioned out of you. You try to die enough times, and you do die, but the pain of resurrection is so great that finally it is impossible not only to kill yourself, but even to think of attempting it."

Marquis couldn't say anything. The memory called up by the mention of self-destruction rasped along his spine like chalk on a blackboard. He could feel the total-recall of sensation, the threatening bursts of pain. "No...." he whispered over and over. "No—please—no—"

The Manager said. "We won't mention it anymore. You'll never be able to try any overt act of self-destruction again."

The bright light from the ceiling lanced like splinters into the tender flesh of Marquis' eyeballs,

danced about the base of his brain in reddened choleric circles. His face had drawn back so that his cheekbones stood out and his nose was beak-like. His irises became a bright painful blue in the reddened ovals of his eyes.

The Manager yawned as he finished explaining. "Each prisoner entering here has an identification punch-plate made of his unique electro-magnetic vibratory field. That's the secret of our immortality and yours. Like all matter, human difference is in the electro-magnetic, vibratory rates. We have these punch-plates on file for every prisoner. We have one of you. Any dead human body we merely put in a tank which dissolves it into separate cells, a mass of stasis with potentiality to be reformed into any type of human being of which we have an identification punch-plate, you see? This tank of dissociated cells is surrounded by an electro-magnetic field induced from a machine by one of the identification punch-plates. That particular human being lives again, the body, its mind, its life pattern identical to that from which the original punch-plate was made. Each time you have died, we reduced your body, regardless of its condition, to dissociated cells in the tank. The identification punch-plate was put in the machine. Your unique electro-magnetic field reformed the cells into you. It could only be you, as you are now. From those cells we can resurrect any one of whom we have an identification plate.

"That is all, No. 5274. Now that you're indoctrinated, you will work from now on in the food-mart, because of your experience."

For an undeterminable length of time, he followed the routines of the bells. In the big food-mart, among the hydroponic beds, and the canning machines; among the food-grinders and little belts that dropped cans of food-concentrate into racks and sent them off into the walls.

He managed to talk more and more coherently with No. 4901. He stopped referring to suicide, but if anyone had the idea that Marquis had given up the idea of dying, they were wrong. Marquis was stubborn. Somewhere in him the flame still burned. He wouldn't let it go out. The bells couldn't put it out. The throbbing machines couldn't put it out. And now he had at last figured out a way to beat the game.

During an eating period, Marquis said to 4901. "You want to die. Wait a minute—I'm talking about something we can both talk and think about. A murder agreement. You understand? We haven't been conditioned against killing each other. It's only an overt act of selfdes—all right, we don't think about that. But we can plan a way to kill each other."

4901 looked up. He stopped eating momentarily. He was interested. "What's the use though?" Pain shadowed his face. "We only go through it—come back again—"

"I have a plan. The way I have it worked out, they'll never bring either one of us back."

That wasn't exactly true. *One* of them would have to come back. Marquis hoped that 4901 wouldn't catch on to the fact that he would have to be resurrected, but that Marquis never would. He hoped that 4901's mind was too foggy and dull to see through the complex plan. And that was the way it worked.

Marquis explained. 4901 listened and smiled. It was the first time Marquis had ever seen a prisoner smile.

He left what remained of the capsule of poison where 4901 could get it. During one of the next four eating periods, 4901 was to slip the poison into Marquis' food can. Marquis wouldn't know what meal, or what can. He had to eat. The bells had conditioned him that much. And not to eat would be an overt act of self-destruction.

He wasn't conditioned not to accept death administered by another.

And then, after an eating period, 4901 whispered to him. "You're poisoned. It was in one of the cans you just ate."

"Great!" almost shouted Marquis. "All right. Now I'll die by the end of the next work period. That gives us this sleep period and all the next work period. During that time I'll dispose of you as I've said."

4901 went to his bed and the bells rang and the dark came and both of them slept.

Number 4901 resisted the conditioners enough to follow Marquis past his regular work room into the food-mart. As planned, 4901 marched on and stood in the steaming shadows behind the hydroponic beds.

Marquis worked for a while at the canning machines, at the big grinding vats. Then he went over to 4901 and said. "Turn around now."

4901 smiled. He turned around. "Good luck," he said. "Good luck—to you!"

Marquis hit 4901 across the back of the neck with an alloy bar and killed him instantly. He changed clothes with the dead man. He put his own clothes in a refuse incinerator. Quickly, he

dragged the body over and tossed it into one of the food-grinding vats. His head bobbed up above the gray swirling liquid once, then the body disappeared entirely, was ground finely and mixed with the other foodstuff.

Within eight hours the cells of 4901 would be distributed minutely throughout the contents of thousands of cans of food-concentrate. Within that time much of it would have been consumed by the inmates and Managers.

At the end of that work period, Marquis returned to his cell. He went past his own bed and stopped in front of 4901's bed.

The sleep bells sounded and the dark came again. This would be the final dark, Marquis knew. This time he had beat the game. The delayed-action poison would kill him. He had on 4901's clothes with his identification number. He was on 4901's bed.

He would die—as 4901. The guards would finally check on the missing man in the food-mart. But they would never find him. They would find 4901 dead, a suicide. And they would put the body labeled 4901 in the tank, dissolve it into dissociated cells and they would subject those cells to the electro-magnetic field of 4901.

And they would resurrect—4901.

Not only have I managed to die, Marquis thought, but I've managed the ultimate suicide. There won't even be a body, no sign anywhere that I have ever been at all. Even my cells will have been resurrected as someone else. As a number 4901.

"And that's the way it was," No. 4901 would tell new prisoners coming in. Sometimes they listened to him and seemed interested, but the interest always died during indoctrination. But No. 4901's interest in the story never died.

He knew that now he could never let himself die as a human being either, that he could never let himself become completely controlled by the bells. He'd been nearly dead as an individual, but No. 5274 had saved him from that dead-alive anonymity. He could keep alive, and maintain hope now by remembering what 5274 had done. He clung to that memory. As long as he retained that memory of hope—of triumph—at least some part of him would keep burning, as something had kept on burning within the heart of 5274.

So every night before the sleep bells sounded, he would go over the whole thing in minute detail, remembering 5274's every word and gesture, the details of his appearance. He told the plan over to himself every night, and told everyone about it who came in to the indoctrination ward.

Swimming up through the pain of resurrection, he had been a little mad at 5274 at first, and then he had realized that at least the plan had enabled one man to beat the game.

"He will always be alive to me. Maybe, in a way, he's part of me. Nobody knows. But his memory will live. He succeeded in a kind of ultimate dying—no trace of him anywhere. But the memory of him and what he did will be alive when the New System and the Managers are dead. That spirit will assure the Underground of victory—someday. And meanwhile, I'll keep 5274 alive.

"He even knew the psychology of these Managers and their System. That they can't afford to make an error. He knew they'd still have that identification punch-plate of him. That they would have one more plate than they had prisoners. But he anticipated what they would do there too. To admit there was one more identification plate than there were prisoners would be to admit a gross error. Of course they could dissolve one of the other prisoners and use 5274's plate and resurrect 5274. But they'd gain nothing. There would still be an extra plate. You see?

"So they destroyed the plate. He knew they would. And they also had to go back through the records, to Earth, through the security files there, through the birth records, everything. And they destroyed every trace, every shred of evidence that No. 5274 ever existed."

So he kept the memory alive and that kept 4901 alive while the other prisoners become automatons, hearing, feeling, sensing nothing except the bells. Remembering nothing, anticipating nothing.

But 4901 could remember something magnificent, and so he could anticipate, and that was hope, and faith. He found that no one really believed him but he kept on telling it anyway, the story of the Plan.

"Maybe this number didn't exist," someone would say. "If there's no record anywhere—"

4901 would smile. "In my head, there's where the record is. *I know. I remember.*"

And so it was that 4901 was the only one who still remembered and who could still smile when sometime after that—no one in the prison colony knew how long—the Underground was victorious, and the Managerial System crumbled.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE VICTOR ***

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