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TRANSFER POINT

BY ANTHONY BOUCHER

Illustrated by Paul Piérre

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It was a nasty plot Vyrko was involved in. The worst part was that he constructed it himself—and didn't get the end right!

There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands.

The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed the retreat and its extraordinary air-conditioning—not because his scientific genius had foreseen the coming of the poisonous element, agnoton, and the end of the human race, but because he itched.

And here Vyrko sat, methodically recording the destruction of mankind, once in a straight factual record, for the instruction of future readers ("if any," he added wryly to himself), and again as a canto in that epic poem of Man which he never expected to complete, but for which he lived.

Lavra's long golden hair fell over his shoulders. It was odd that its scent distracted him when he was at work on the factual record, yet seemed to wing the lines of the epic.

"But why bother?" she asked. Her speech might have been clearer if her tongue had not been more preoccupied with the savor of the apple than with the articulation of words. But Vyrko understood readily: the remark was as familiar an opening as P-K4 in chess.

"It's my duty," Vyrko explained patiently. "I haven't your father's scientific knowledge and perception. Your father's? I haven't the knowledge of his humblest lab assistant. But I can put words together so that they make sense and sometimes more than sense, and I have to do this."

From Lavra's plump red lips an apple pip fell into the works of the electronic typewriter. Vyrko fished it out automatically; this too was part of the gambit, with the possible variants of grape seed, orange peel....

"But why," Lavra demanded petulantly, "won't Father let us leave here? A girl might as well be in a ... a...."

"*Convent?*" Vyrko suggested. He was a good amateur paleolinguist. "There is an analogy—even despite my presence. *Convents* were supposed to shelter girls from the Perils of The World. Now the whole world is one great Peril ... outside of this retreat."

"Go on," Lavra urged. She had long ago learned, Vyrko suspected, that he was a faintly over-serious young man with no small talk, and that she could enjoy his full attention only by asking to have something explained, even if for the *n*th time.

He smiled and thought of the girls he used to talk *with*, not *at*, and of how little breath they had for talking now in the world where no one drew an unobstructed breath.

It had begun with the accidental discovery in a routine laboratory analysis of a new element in the air, an inert gas which the great paleolinguist Larkish had named *agnoton*, the Unknown Thing, after the pattern of the similar nicknames given to others: *neon*, the New Thing; *xenon*, the Strange Thing.

It had continued (the explanation ran off so automatically that his mind was free to range from the next line of the epic to the interesting question of whether the presence of ear lobes would damage the symmetry of Lavra's perfect face) it had continued with the itching and sneezing, the coughing and wheezing, with the increase of the percentage of agnoton in the atmosphere, promptly passing any other inert gas, even argon, and soon rivaling oxygen itself.

And it had culminated (no, the lines were cleaner without lobes), on that day when only the three of them were here in this retreat, with the discovery that the human race was allergic to agnoton.

Allergies had been conquered for a decade of generations. Their cure, even their palliation, had been forgotten. And mankind coughed and sneezed and itched ... and died. For while the allergies of the ancient past produced only agonies to make the patient long for death, agnoton brought on racking and incessant spasms of coughing and sneezing which no heart could long withstand.

"So if you leave this shelter, my dear," Vyrko concluded, "you too will fight for every breath and twist your body in torment until your heart decides that it is all just too much trouble. Here we are safe, because your father's eczema was the only known case of allergy in centuries—and was traced to the inert gases. Here is the only air-conditioning in the world that excludes the inert gases—and with them agnoton. And here—"

Lavra leaned forward, a smile and a red fleck of apple skin on her lips, the apples of her breasts touching Vyrko's shoulders. This too was part of the gambit.

Usually it was merely declined. Tyrsa stood between them. Tyrsa, who sang well and talked better; whose plain face and beautiful throat were alike racked by agnoton.... This time the gambit was interrupted.

Kirth-Labbery himself had come in unnoticed. His old voice was thin with weariness, sharp with impatience. "And here we are, safe in perpetuity, with our air-conditioning, our energy plant, our hydroponics! Safe in perpetual siege, besieged by an inert gas!"

Vyrko grinned. "Undignified, isn't it?"

Kirth-Labbery managed to laugh at himself. "Damn your secretarial hide, Vyrko. I love you like a son, but if I had one man who knew a meson from a metazoon to help me in the laboratory...."

"You'll find something, Father," Lavra said vaguely.

Her father regarded her with an odd seriousness. "Lavra," he said, "your beauty is the greatest thing that I have wrought—with a certain assistance, I'll grant, from the genes so obviously carried by your mother. That beauty alone still has meaning. The sight of you would bring a momentary happiness even to a man choking in his last spasms, while our great web of civilization...."

He absently left the sentence unfinished and switched on the video screen. He had to try a dozen channels before he found one that was still casting. When every erg of a man's energy goes to drawing his next breath, he cannot tend his machine.

At last Kirth-Labbery picked up a Nyork newscast. The announcer was sneezing badly ("The older literature," Vyrko observed, "found sneezing comic...."), but still contriving to speak, and somewhere a group of technicians must have had partial control of themselves.

"Four hundred and seventy-two planes have crashed," the announcer said, "in the past forty-eight hours. Civil authorities have forbidden further plane travel indefinitely because of the danger of spasms at the controls, and it is rumored that all vehicular transport whatsoever is to come under the same ban. No Rocklipper has arrived from Lunn for over a week, and it is thirty-six hours since we have made contact with the Lunn telestation. Yurp has been silent for over two days, and Asia a week.

"'The most serious threat of this epidemic,' the head of the Academy has said in an authorized statement, 'is the complete disruption of the systems of communication upon which world civilization is based. When man becomes physically incapable of governing his machines....'"

It was then that they saw the first of the yellow bands.

It was just that: a band of bright yellow some thirty centimeters wide, about five meters long, and so thin as to seem insubstantial, a mere stripe of color. It came underneath the backdrop behind the announcer. It streaked about the casting room with questing sinuosity. No features, no appendages relieved its yellow blankness.

Then with a deft whipping motion it wrapped itself around the announcer. It held him only an instant. His hideously shriveled body plunged toward the camera as the screen went dead.

That was the start of the horror.

Vyrko, naturally, had no idea of the origin of the yellow bands. Even Kirth-Labbery could offer no more than conjectures. From another planet, another system, another galaxy, another universe....

It did not matter. Precise knowledge had now lost its importance. Kirth-Labbery was almost as indifferent to the problem as was Lavra; he speculated on it out of sheer habit. What signified was that the yellow bands were alien, and that they were rapidly and precisely completing the destruction of mankind begun by the agnoton.

"Their arrival immediately after the epidemic," Kirth-Labbery concluded, "cannot be coincidence. You will observe that they function freely in an agnoton-laden atmosphere."

"It would be interesting," Vyrko commented, "to visualize a band sneezing...."

"It's possible," the scientist corrected, "that the agnoton was a poison-gas barrage laid down to soften Earth for their coming; but is it likely that they could *know* that a gas harmless to them would be lethal to other life? It's more probable that they learned from spectroscopic analysis that the atmosphere of Earth lacked an element essential to them, which they supplied before invading."

Vyrko considered the problem while Lavra sliced a peach with delicate grace. She was unable to resist licking the juice from her fingers.

"Then if the agnoton," he ventured, "is something that they imported, is it possible that their supply might run short?"

Kirth-Labbery fiddled with the dials under the screen. It was still possible to pick up occasional glimpses from remote sectors, though by now the heart sickened in advance at the knowledge of the inevitable end of the cast.

"It is possible, Vyrko. It is the only hope. The three of us here, where the agnoton and the yellow bands are alike helpless to enter, may continue our self-sufficient existence long enough to outlast the invaders. Perhaps somewhere on Earth there are other such nuclei, but I doubt it. We

are the whole of the future ... and I am old."

Vyrko frowned. He resented the terrible weight of a burden that he did not want but could not reject. He felt himself at once, oppressed and ennobled. Lavra went on eating her peach.

The video screen sprang into light. A young man with the tense, lined face of premature age spoke hastily, urgently. "To all of you, if there are any of you.... I have heard no answer for two days now.... It is chance that I am here. But *watch*, all of you! I have found how the yellow bands came here. I am going to turn the camera on it now ... *watch*!"

The field of vision panned to something that was for a moment totally incomprehensible. "This is their ship," the old young man gasped. It was a set of bars of a metal almost exactly the color of the bands themselves, and it appeared in the first instant like a three-dimensional projection of a tesseract. Then as they looked at it, their eyes seemed to follow strange new angles. Possibilities of vision opened up beyond their capacities. For a moment they seemed to see what the human eye was not framed to grasp.

"They come," the voice panted on, "from...."

The voice and the screen went dead. Vyrko covered his eyes with his hands. Darkness was infinite relief. A minute passed before he felt that he could endure once more even the normal exercise of the optic nerve. He opened his eyes sharply at a little scream from Lavra.

He opened them to see how still Kirth-Labbery sat. The human heart, too, is framed to endure only so much; and, as the scientist had said, he was old.

It was three days after Kirth-Labbery's death before Vyrko had brought his prose-and-verse record up to date. Nothing more had appeared on the video, even after the most patient hours of knob-twirling. Now Vyrko leaned back from the keyboard and contemplated his completed record —and then sat forward with abrupt shock at the thought of that word *completed*.

There was nothing more to write.

The situation was not novel in literature. He had read many treatments, and even written a rather successful satire on the theme himself. But here was the truth itself.

He was that most imagination-stirring of all figures, The Last Man on Earth. And he found it a boring situation.

Kirth-Labbery, had he lived, would have devoted his energies in the laboratory to an effort, even conceivably a successful one, to destroy the invaders. Vyrko knew his own limitations too well to attempt that.

Vrist, his gay wild twin, who had been in Lunn on yet another of his fantastic ventures when the agnoton struck—Vrist would have dreamed up some gallant feat of physical prowess to make the invaders pay dearly for his life. Vyrko found it difficult to cast himself in so swash-buckling a role.

He had never envied Vrist till now. *Be jealous of the dead; only the living are alone.* Vyrko smiled as he recalled the line from one of his early poems. It had been only the expression of a pose when he wrote it, a mood for a song that Tyrsa would sing well....

It was in this mood that he found (the ancient word had no modern counterpart) the *pulps*.

He knew their history: how some eccentric of two thousand years ago (the name was variously rendered as Trees or Tiller) had buried them in a hermetic capsule to check against the future; how Tarabal had dug them up some fifty years ago; how Kirth-Labbery had spent almost the entire Hartl Prize for them because, as he used to assert, their incredible mixture of exact prophecy and arrant nonsense offered the perfect proof of the greatness and helplessness of human ingenuity.

But Vyrko had never read them before. They would at least be a novelty to deaden the boredom of his classically dramatic situation. He passed a more than pleasant hour with *Galaxy* and *Surprising* and the rest, needing the dictionary but rarely. He was particularly impressed by one story detailing, with the most precise minutiae, the politics of the American Religious Wars—a subject on which he himself had based a not unsuccessful novel. By one Norbert Holt, he observed. Extraordinary how exact a forecast ... and yet extraordinary too how many of the stories dealt with space- and time-travel, which the race had never yet attained and now never would....

And inevitably there was a story, a neat and witty one by an author named Knight, about the Last Man on Earth. He read it and smiled, first at the story and then at his own stupidity.

He found Lavra in the laboratory, of all unexpected places.

She was staring fixedly at one corner, where the light did not strike clearly.

"What's so fascinating?" Vyrko asked.

Lavra turned suddenly. Her hair and her flesh rippled with the perfect grace of the movement. "I was thinking...."

Vyrko's half-formed intent toward her permitted no comment on that improbable statement.

"The day before Father ... died, I was in here with him and I asked if there was any hope of our escaping ever. Only this time he answered me. He said yes, there was a way out, but he was afraid of it. It was an idea he'd worked on but never tried. And we'd be wiser not to try it, he said."

"I don't believe in arguing with your father—even post mortem."

"But I can't help wondering.... And when he said it, he looked over at that corner."

Vyrko went to that corner and drew back a curtain. There was a chair of metal rods, and a crude control panel, though it was hard to see what it was intended to control. He dropped the curtain.

For a moment he stood watching Lavra. She was a fool, but she was exceedingly lovely. And the child of Kirth-Labbery could hardly carry only a fool's genes.

Several generations could grow up in this retreat before the inevitable failure of the most permanent mechanical installations made it uninhabitable. By that time Earth would be free of agnoton and yellow bands, or they would be so firmly established that there was no hope. The third generation would go forth into the world, to perish or....

He walked over to Lavra and laid a gentle hand on her golden hair.

Vyrko never understood whether Lavra had been bored before that time. A life of undemanding inaction with plenty of food may well have sufficed her. Certainly she was not bored now.

At first she was merely passive; Vyrko had always suspected that she had meant the gambit to be declined. Then as her interest mounted and Vyrko began to compliment himself on his ability as an instructor, they became certain of their success; and from that point on she was rapt with the fascination of the changes in herself.

But even this new development did not totally rid Vyrko of his own ennui. If there were only something he could *do*, some positive, Vristian, Kirth-Labberian step that he could take! He damned himself for having been an incompetent aesthetic fool, who had taken so for granted the scientific wonders of his age that he had never learned what made them tick, or how greater wonders might be attained.

He slept too much, he ate too much, for a brief period he drank too much—until he found boredom even less attractive with a hangover.

He tried to write, but the terrible uncertainty of any future audience disheartened him.

Sometimes a week would pass without his consciously thinking of agnoton or the yellow bands. Then he would spend a day flogging himself into a state of nervous tension worthy of his uniquely dramatic situation, but he would always relapse. There just wasn't anything to do.

Now even the consolation of Lavra's beauty was vanishing, and she began demanding odd items of food which the hydroponic garden could not supply.

"If you loved me, you'd find a way to make cheese ..." or "... grow a new kind of peach ... a little like a grape, only different...."

It was while he was listening to a film wire of Tyrsa's (the last she ever made, in the curious tonalities of that newly rediscovered Mozart opera) and seeing her homely face, made even less lovely by the effort of those effortless-sounding notes, that he became conscious of the operative phrase.

"If you loved me...."

"Have I ever said I did?" he snapped.

He saw a new and not readily understood expression mar the beauty of Lavra's face. "No," she said in sudden surprise. "No," and her voice fell to flatness, "you haven't...."

And as her sobs—the first he had ever heard from her—traveled away toward the hydroponic room, he felt a new and not readily understood emotion. He switched off the film wire midway through the pyrotechnic rage of the eighteenth-century queen of darkness.

Vyrko found a curious refuge in the *pulps*. There was a perverse satisfaction in reading the thrilling exploits of other Last Men on Earth. He could feel through them the emotions that he should be feeling directly. And the other stories were fun, too, in varying ways. For instance, that astonishingly accurate account of the delicate maneuvering which averted what threatened to be the first and final Atomic War....

He noticed one oddity: Every absolutely correct story of the "future" bore the same by-line.

Occasionally other writers made good guesses, predicted logical trends, foresaw inevitable extrapolations. But only Norbert Holt named names and dated dates with perfect historical accuracy.

It wasn't possible. It was too precise to be plausible. It was far more spectacular than the erratic Nostradamus often discussed in the *pulps*.

But there it was. He had read the Holt stories solidly through in order a half-dozen times, without finding a single flaw, when he discovered the copy of *Surprising Stories* that had slipped behind a shelf and was therefore new to him.

He looked at once at the contents page. Yes, there was a Holt and—he felt a twinge of irrational but poignant sadness—one labeled as posthumous.

> This story, we regret to tell you, is incomplete, and not only because of Norbert Holt's tragic death last month. This is the last in chronological order of Holt's stories of a consistently plotted future; but this fragment was written before his masterpiece, The *Siege of Lunn*. Holt himself used to tell me that he could never finish it, that he could not find an ending; and he died still not knowing how *The Last Boredom* came out. But here, even though in fragment form, is the last published work of the greatest writer about the future, Norbert Holt.

The note was signed with the initials M. S. Vyrko had long sensed a more than professional intimacy between Holt and his editor, Manning Stern; this obituary introduction must have been a bitter task. But his eyes were hurrying on, almost fearfully, to the first words of *The Lost Boredom*:

> There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands. The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed....

Vyrko blinked and started again. It still read the same. He took firm hold of the magazine, as though the miracle might slip between his fingers, and dashed off with more energy than he had felt in months.

He found Lavra in the hydroponic room. "I have just found," he shouted, "the damnedest unbelievable—"

"Darling," said Lavra, "I want some meat."

"Don't be silly. We haven't any meat. Nobody's eaten meat except at ritual dinners for generations."

"Then I want a ritual dinner."

"You can go on wanting. But look at this! Just read those first lines!"

"Vyrko," she pleaded, "I *want* it."

"Don't be an idiot!"

Her lips pouted and her eyes moistened. "Vyrko dear.... What you said when you were listening to that funny music.... Don't you love me?"

"No," he barked.

Her eyes overflowed. "You don't love me? Not after...?"

All Vyrko's pent-up boredom and irritation erupted. "You're beautiful, Lavra, or you were a few months ago, but you're an idiot. I am not in the habit of loving idiots."

"But you...."

"I tried to assure the perpetuation of the race—questionable though the desirability of such a project seems at the moment. It was not an unpleasant task, but I'm damned if it gives you the right in perpetuity to pester me."

She moaned a little as he slammed out of the room. He felt oddly better. Adrenalin is a fine thing for the system. He settled into a chair and resolutely read, his eyes bugging like a cover-monster's with amazed disbelief. When he reached the verbatim account of the quarrel he had just enjoyed, he dropped the magazine.

It sounded so petty in print. Such stupid inane bickering in the face of.... He left the magazine lying there and went back to the hydroponic room.

Lavra was crying—noiselessly this time, which somehow made it worse. One hand had automatically plucked a ripe grape, but she was not eating it. He went up behind her and slipped his hand under her long hair and began stroking the nape of her neck. The soundless sobs diminished gradually. When his fingers moved tenderly behind her ears, she turned to him with parted lips. The grape fell from her hand.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself saying. "It's me that's the idiot. Which, I repeat, I am not in the habit of loving. And you're the mother of my twins and I do love you...." And he realized that the statement was quite possibly, if absurdly, true.

"I don't want anything now," Lavra said when words were again in order. She stretched contentedly, and she was still beautiful even in the ungainly distortion which might preserve a race. "Now what were you trying to tell me?"

He explained. "And this Holt is always right," he ended. "And now he's writing about us!"

"Oh! Oh, then we'll know—"

"We'll know everything. We'll know what the yellow bands are and what becomes of them and what happens to mankind and—"

"—and we'll know," said Lavra, "whether it's a boy or a girl."

Vyrko smiled. "Twins, I told you. It runs in my family—no less than one pair to a generation. And I think that's it—Holt's already planted the fact of my having a twin named Vrist, even though he doesn't come into the action."

"Twins.... That *would* be nice. They wouldn't be lonely until we could.... But get it quick, dear. Read it to me; I can't wait!"

So he read Norbert Holt's story to her—too excited and too oddly affectionate to point out that her long-standing aversion for print persisted even when she herself was a character. He read on past the quarrel. He read a printable version of the past hour. He read about himself reading the story to her.

"Now!" she cried. "We're up to *now*. What happens next?"

Vyrko read:

> The emotional release of anger and love had set Vyrko almost at peace with himself again; but a small restlessness still nibbled at his brain.
>
> Irrelevantly he remembered Kirth-Labbery's cryptic hint of escape. Escape for the two of them, happy now; for the two of them and for their ... it had to be, according to the odds, their twins.
>
> He sauntered curiously into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.
>
> He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

"I don't like that last thing he says about me," Lavra objected. "I don't like anything he says about me. I think your Mr. Holt is a very nasty person."

"He says you're beautiful."

"And he says you love me. Or does he? It's all mixed up."

"It is all mixed up ... and I do love you."

The kiss was a short one; Lavra had to say, "And what next?"

"That's all. It ends there."

"Well.... Aren't you...?"

Vyrko felt strange. Holt had described his feelings so precisely. He was at peace and still curious, and the thought of Kirth-Labbery's escape method did nibble restlessly at his brain.

He rose and sauntered into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.

He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

Vyrko had no time for amazement when Lavra and the laboratory vanished. He saw the archaic vehicle bearing down directly upon him and tried to get out of the way as rapidly as possible. But the chair hampered him and before he could get to his feet the vehicle struck. There was a red explosion of pain and then a long blackness.

He later recalled a moment of consciousness at the hospital and a shrill female voice repeating over and over, "But he wasn't there and then all of a sudden he was and I hit him. It was like he came out of nowhere. He wasn't there and all of a sudden...." Then the blackness came back.

All the time of his unconsciousness, all through the semi-conscious nightmares while doctors probed at him and his fever soared, his unconscious mind must have been working on the problem. He knew the complete answer the instant that he saw the paper on his breakfast tray, that first day he was capable of truly seeing anything.

The paper was easy to read for a paleolinguist with special training in *pulps*—easier than the curious concept of breakfast was to assimilate. What mattered was the date. 1948—and the headlines refreshed his knowledge of the Cold War and the impending election. (There was something he should remember about that election....)

He saw it clearly. Kirth-Labbery's genius had at last evolved a time machine. That was the one escape, the escape which the scientist had not yet tested and rather distrusted. And Lavra had poked the green button because Norbert Holt had said she had poked (would poke?) the green button.

How many buttons could a wood poke poke if a wood poke would poke....

"The breakfast didn't seem to agree with him, doctor."

"Maybe it was the paper. Makes me run a temperature every morning, too!"

"Oh, doctor, you do say the funniest things!"

"Nothing funnier than this case. Total amnesia, as best we can judge by his lucid moments. And his clothes don't help us—must've been on his way to a fancy-dress party. Or maybe I should say fancy-*un*dress!"

"Oh, *doctor*!"

"Don't tell me nurses can blush. Never did when I was an intern—and you can't say they didn't get a chance! But this character here ... not a blessed bit of identification on him! Riding some kind of newfangled bike that got smashed up.... Better hold off on the solid food for a bit—stick to intravenous feeding."

He'd had this trouble before at ritual dinners, Vyrko finally recalled. Meat was apt to affect him badly—the trouble was that he had not at first recognized those odd strips of oily solid which accompanied the egg as meat.

The adjustment was gradual and successful, in this as in other matters. At the end of two weeks, he was eating meat easily (and, he confessed, with a faintly obscene non-ritual pleasure) and equally easily chatting with nurses and fellow patients about the events (which he still privately tended to regard as mummified museum pieces) of 1948.

His adjustment, in fact, was soon so successful that it could not continue. The doctor made that clear.

"Got to think about the future, you know. Can't keep you here forever. Nasty unreasonable prejudice against keeping well men in hospitals."

Vyrko allowed the expected laugh to come forth. "But since," he said, gladly accepting the explanation that was so much more credible than the truth, "I haven't any idea who I am, where I live, or what my profession is—"

"Can't remember anything? Don't know if you can take shorthand, for instance? Or play the bull fiddle?"

"Not a thing." Vyrko felt it hardly worth while to point out his one manual accomplishment, the operation of the as-yet-uninvented electronic typewriter.

"Behold," he thought, "the Man of the Future. I've read all the time travel stories. I know what should happen. I teach them everything Kirth-Labbery knew and I'm the greatest man in the world. Only the fictional time travel never happens to a poor dope who took for granted all the science around him, who pushed a button or turned a knob and never gave a damn what happened or why. Here they're just beginning to get two-dimensional black-and-white short-range television. We had (will have?) stereoscopic full-color world-wide video—which I'm about as capable of constructing here as my friend the doctor would be of installing electric light in Ancient Rome. The Mouse of the Future...."

The doctor had been thinking, too. He said, "Notice you're a great reader. Librarian's been telling me about you—went through the whole damn hospital library like a bookworm with a tapeworm!"

Vyrko laughed dutifully. "I like to read," he admitted.

"Ever try writing?" the doctor asked abruptly, almost in the tone in which he might reluctantly advise a girl that her logical future lay in Port Saïd.

This time Vyrko really laughed. "That does seem to ring a bell, you know.... It might be worth trying. But at that, what do I live on until I get started?"

"Hospital trustees here administer a rehabilitation fund. Might wangle a loan. Won't be much, of course; but I always say a single man's got only one mouth to feed—and if he feeds more, he won't be single long!"

"A little," said Vyrko with a glance at the newspaper headlines, "might go a long way."

It did. There was the loan itself, which gave him a bank account on which, in turn, he could acquire other short-term loans—at exorbitant interest. And there was the election.

He had finally reconstructed what he should know about it. There had been a brilliant Wheel-of-If story in one of the much later pulps, on *If* the Republicans had won the 1948 election. Which meant that actually they had lost; and here, in October of 1948, all newspapers, all commentators, and most important, all gamblers, were convinced that they must infallibly win.

On Wednesday, November third, Vyrko repaid his debts and settled down to his writing career, comfortably guaranteed against immediate starvation.

A half-dozen attempts at standard fiction failed wretchedly. A matter of "tone," editors remarked vaguely, on the rare occasions when they did not confine themselves to the even vaguer phrases of printed rejection forms. A little poetry sold—"if you can call that selling," Vyrko thought bitterly, comparing the financial position of the poet here and in his own world.

His failures were beginning to bring back the bitterness and boredom, and his thoughts turned more and more to that future to which he could never know the answer.

Twins. It had to be twins—of opposite sexes, of course. The only hope of the continuance of the race lay in a matter of odds and genetics.

Odds.... He began to think of the election bet, to figure other angles with which he could turn foreknowledge to profit. But his pulp-reading had filled his mind with fears of the paradoxes involved. He had calculated the election bets carefully; they could not affect the outcome of the election, they could not even, in their proportionately small size, affect the odds. But any further step....

Vyrko was, like most conceited men, fond of self-contempt, which he felt he could occasionally afford to indulge in. Possibly his strongest access of self-contempt came when he realized the simplicity of the solution to all his problems.

He could write for the science fiction pulps.

The one thing that he could handle convincingly and skilfully, with the proper "tone," was the future. Possibly start off with a story on the Religious Wars; he'd done all that research on his novel. Then....

It was not until he was about to mail the manuscript that the full pattern of the truth struck him.

Soberly, yet half-grinning, he crossed out KIRTH VYRKO on the first page and wrote NORBERT HOLT.

Manning Stern rejoiced loudly in this fresh discovery. "This boy's got it! He makes it sound so real that...." The business office was instructed to pay the highest bonus rate (unheard of for a first story) and an intensely cordial letter went to the author outlining immediate needs and offering certain story suggestions.

The editor of *Surprising* was no little surprised at the answer:

> ... I regret to say that all my stories will be based on one consistent scheme of future events and that you must allow me to stick to my own choice of material....

"And who the hell," Manning Stern demanded, "is editing this magazine?" and dictated a somewhat peremptory suggestion for a personal interview.

The features were small and sharp, and the face had a sort of dark aliveness. It was a different beauty from Lavra's, and an infinitely different beauty from the curious standards set by the 1949 films; but it was beauty and it spoke to Norbert Holt.

"You'll forgive a certain surprise, Miss Stern," he ventured. "I've read *Surprising* for so many years and never thought...."

Manning Stern grinned. "That the editor was also surprising? I'm used to it—your reaction, I mean. I don't think I'll ever be quite used to being a woman ... or a human being, for that matter."

"Isn't it rather unusual? From what I know of the field...."

"Please God, when I find a man who can write, don't let him go all male-chauvinist on me! I'm a good editor," said she with becoming modesty (and don't you ever forget it!), "and I'm a good scientist. I even worked on the Manhattan Project—until some character discovered that my adopted daughter was a Spanish War orphan. But what we're here to talk about is this consistent-scheme gimmick of yours. It's all right, of course; it's been done before. But where I frankly think you're crazy is in planning to do it *exclusively*."

Norbert Holt opened his briefcase. "I've brought along an outline that might help convince you...."

An hour later Manning Stern glanced at her watch and announced, "End of office hours! Care to continue this slugfest over a martini or five? I warn you—the more I'm plied, the less pliant I get."

And an hour after that she stated, "We might get some place if we'd stay some place. I mean the subject seems to be getting elusive."

"The hell," Norbert Holt announced recklessly, "with editorial relations. Let's get back to the current state of the opera."

"It was paintings. I was telling you about the show at the—"

"No, I remember now. It was movies. You were trying to explain the Marx Brothers. Unsuccessfully, I may add."

"Un ... suc ... cess ... fully," said Manning Stern ruminatively. "Five martinis and the man can say unsuccessfully successfully. But I try to explain the Marx Brothers yet! Look, Holt. I've got a subversive orphan at home and she's undoubtedly starving. I've *got* to feed her. You come home and meet her and have potluck, huh?"

"Good. Fine. Always like to try a new dish."

Manning Stern looked at him curiously. "Now was that a gag or not? You're funny, Holt. You know a lot about everything and then all of a sudden you go all Man-from-Mars on the simplest thing. Or do you...? Anyway, let's go feed Raquel."

And five hours later Holt was saying, "I never thought I'd have this reason for being glad I sold a story. Manning, I haven't had so much fun talking to—I almost said 'to a woman.' I haven't had so much fun talking since—"

He had almost said *since the agnoton came*. She seemed not to notice his abrupt halt. She simply said "Bless you, Norb. Maybe you aren't a male-chauvinist. Maybe even you're.... Look, go find a subway or a cab or something. If you stay here another minute, I'm either going to kiss you or admit you're right about your stories—and I don't know which is worse editor-author relations."

Manning Stern committed the second breach of relations first. The fan mail on Norbert Holt's debut left her no doubt that *Surprising* would profit by anything he chose to write about.

She'd never seen such a phenomenally rapid rise in author popularity. Or rather you could hardly say *rise*. Holt hit the top with his first story and stayed there. He socked the fans (Guest of Honor at the Washinvention), the pros (first President of Science Fiction Writers of America), and the general reader (author of the first pulp-bred science fiction book to stay three months on the best seller list).

And never had there been an author who was more pure damned fun to work with. Not that you edited him; you checked his copy for typos and sent it to the printers. (Typos were frequent at first; he said something odd about absurd illogical keyboard arrangement.) But just being with him, talking about this, that and those.... Raquel, just turning sixteen, was quite obviously in love with him—praying that he'd have the decency to stay single till she grew up and "You know, Manningcita, I *am* Spanish; and the Mediterranean girls...."

But there *was* this occasional feeling of *oddness*. Like the potluck and the illogical keyboard and that night at SCWA....

"I've got a story problem," Norbert Holt announced there. "An idea, and I can't lick it. Maybe if I toss it out to the literary lions...."

"Story problem?" Manning said, a little more sharply than she'd intended. "I thought everything was outlined for the next ten years."

"This is different. This is a sort of paradox story, and I can't get out of it. It won't end. Something like this: Suppose a man in the remote year X reads a story that tells him how to work a time machine. So he works the time machine and goes back to the year X minus 2000—let's say, for instance, our time. So in 'now' he writes the story that he's going to read two thousand years later, telling himself how to work the time machine because he knows how to work it because he read the story which he wrote because—"

Manning was starting to say "Hold it!" when Matt Duncan interrupted with, "Good old endless-cycle gimmick. Lot of fun to kick around, but Bob Heinlein did it once and for all in *By His Bootstraps*. Damnedest tour de force I ever read; there just aren't any switcheroos left."

"Ouroboros," Joe Henderson contributed.

Norbert Holt looked a vain question at him; they knew that one word per evening was Joe's maximum contribution.

Austin Carter picked it up. "Ouroboros, the worm, that circles the universe with its tail in its mouth. The Asgard Serpent, too. And I think there's something in Mayan literature. All symbols of infinity—no beginning, no ending. Always out by the same door where you went in. See that magnificent novel of Eddison's, *The Worm Ouroboros*; the perfect cyclic novel, ending with its recommencement, stopping not because there's a stopping place, but because it's uneconomical to print the whole text over infinitely."

"The Quaker Oats box," said Duncan. "With a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a...."

It was standard professional shop-talk. It was a fine evening with the boys. But there was a look of infinitely remote sadness in Norbert Holt's eyes.

That was the evening that Manning violated her first rule of editor-author relationships.

They were having martinis in the same bar in which Norbert had, so many years ago, successfully said *unsuccessfully*.

"They've been good years," he remarked, apparently to the olive.

There was something wrong with this evening. No bounce. No yumph. "That's a funny tense," Manning confided to her own olive. "Aren't they still good years?"

"I've owed you a serious talk for a long time."

"You don't have to pay the debt. We don't go in much for being serious, do we? Not so dead-earnest-catch-in-the-throat serious."

"Don't we?"

"I've got an awful feeling," Manning admitted, "that you're building up to a proposal, either to me or that olive. And if it's me, I've got an awful feeling I'm going to accept—and Raquel will *never* forgive me."

"You're safe," Norbert said dryly. "That's the serious talk. I want to marry you, darling, and I'm not going to."

"I suppose this is the time you twirl your black mustache and tell me you have a wife and family elsewhere?"

"I hope to God I have!"

"No, it wasn't very funny, was it?" Manning felt very little, aside from wishing she were dead.

"I can't tell you the truth," he went on. "You wouldn't believe it. I've loved two women before; one

had talent and a brain, the other had beauty and no brain. I think I loved her. The damnedest curse of Ouroboros is that I'll never quite know. If I could take that tail out of that mouth...."

"Go on," she encouraged a little wildly. "Talk plot-gimmicks. It's easier on me."

"And she is carrying ... will carry ... my child—my children, it must be. My twins...."

"Look, Holt. We came in here editor and author—remember back when? Let's go out that way. Don't go on talking. I'm a big girl, but I can't take ... everything. It's been fun knowing you and all future manuscripts will be gratefully received."

"I knew I couldn't say it. I shouldn't have tried. But there won't be any future manuscripts. I've written every Holt I've ever read."

"Does that make sense?" Manning aimed the remark at the olive, but it was gone. So was the martini.

"Here's the last." He took it out of his breast-pocket, neatly folded. "The one we talked about at SCWA—the one I couldn't end. Maybe you'll understand. I wanted somehow to make it clear before...."

The tone of his voice projected a sense of doom, and Manning forgot everything else. "Is something going to happen to you? Are you going to—Oh, my dear, *no*! All right, so you, have a wife on every space station in the asteroid belt; but if anything happens to you...."

"I don't know," said Norbert Holt. "I can't remember the exact date of that issue...." He rose abruptly. "I shouldn't have tried a goodbye. See you again, darling—the next time round Ouroboros."

She was still staring at the empty martini glass when she heard the shrill of brakes and the excited up-springing of a crowd outside.

She read the posthumous fragment late that night, after her eyes had dried sufficiently to make the operation practicable. And through her sorrow her mind fought to help her, making her think, making her be an editor.

She understood a little and disbelieved what she understood. And underneath she prodded herself, "But it isn't a *story*. It's too short, too inconclusive. It'll just disappoint the Holt fans—and that's everybody. Much better if I do a straight obit, take up a full page on it...."

She fought hard to keep on thinking, not feeling. She had never before experienced so strongly the I-have-been-here-before sensation. She had been faced with this dilemma once before, once on some other time-spiral, as the boys in SCWA would say. And her decision had been....

"It's sentimentality," she protested. "It isn't *editing*. This decision's right. I know it. And if I go and get another of these attacks and start to change my mind...."

She laid the posthumous Holt fragment on the coals. It caught fire quickly.

The next morning Raquel greeted her with, "Manningcita, who's Norbert Holt?"

Manning had slept so restfully that she was even tolerant of foolish questions at breakfast. "Who?" she asked.

"Norbert Holt. Somehow the name popped into my mind. Is he perhaps one of your writers?"

"Never heard of him."

Raquel frowned. "I was almost sure.... Can you really remember them all? I'm going to check those bound volumes of *Surprising*."

"Any luck with your ... what was it...? Holt?" Manning asked the girl a little later.

"No, Manningcita. I was quite unsuccessful."

... *unsuccessful*.... Now why in Heaven's name, mused Manning Stern, should I be thinking of martinis at breakfast time?

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