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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE IMMORTALS ***



THE IMMORTALS

By DAVID DUNCAN

Illustrated by Dick Francis

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Staghorn dared tug at the veil that hid the future. Maybe it wasn't a crime to look ... maybe it was just that the future was ugly!

I

Dr. Clarence Peccary was an objective man. His increasing irritation was caused, he realized, by the fear that his conscience was going to intervene between him and the vast fortune that was definitely within his grasp. Millions. Billions! But he wanted to enjoy it.

He didn't want to skulk through life avoiding the eyes of everyone he met—particularly when his life might last for centuries. So he sat glowering at the rectangular screen that was located just above the control console of Roger Staghorn's great digital computer.

At the moment Peccary was ready to accuse Staghorn of having no conscience whatsoever. It was only through an act of scientific detachment that he reminded himself that Staghorn neither had a fortune to gain nor cared about gaining one. Staghorn's fulfillment was in Humanac, the name he'd given the electronic monster that presently claimed his full attention. He sat at the controls, his eyes luminous behind the magnification of his thick lenses, his lanky frame arched forward for a better view of Humanac's screen. Far from showing annoyance at what he saw, there was a positive leer on his face.

As well there might be.

On the screen was the full color picture of a small park in what appeared to be the center of a medium-sized town. It was a shabby little park. Rags and tattered papers waggled indolently in the breeze. The grass was an unkempt, indifferent pattern of greens and browns, as though the caretaker took small pains in setting his sprinklers. Beyond the square was a church, its steeple listing dangerously, its windows broken and its heavy double doors sagging on their hinges.



Staghorn's leers and Dr. Peccary's glowers were not for the scenery, however, but for the people who wandered aimlessly through the little park and along the street beyond, carefully avoiding the area beneath the leaning steeple. All of them were uniformly young, ranging from perhaps seventeen at one extreme to no more than thirty at the other. When Dr. Peccary had first seen them, he'd cried out joyfully, "You see, Staghorn, all young! All handsome!" Then he'd stopped talking as he studied those in the foreground more closely.

Their clothing, to call it that, was most peculiar. It was rags.

Here and there was a garment that bore a resemblance to a dress or jacket or pair of trousers, but for the most part the people simply had chunks of cloth wrapped about them in a most careless fashion. Several would have been arrested for indecent exposure had they appeared anywhere except on Humanac's screen. However, they seemed indifferent to this—and to all else. A singularly attractive girl, in a costume that would have made a Cretan blush, didn't even get a second glance from, a young Adonis who passed her on the walk. Nor did she bestow one on him. The park bench held more interest for her, so she sat down on it.

Peccary studied her more closely, then straightened with a start.

"I'll be damned," he said. "That's Jenny Cheever!"

Staghorn continued to leer at the girl. "So you know her?"

"I know her father. He owns the local variety store. She's only twenty today, and there she is a hundred years from now, not a day older."

"Only her image, Dr. Peccary," Staghorn murmured. "Only her image. But a very pretty one."

Peccary came to his feet, unable to control his irritation any longer. "I won't believe it!" he said. "Somehow a piece of misinformation has been fed into that machine. Its calculations are all wrong!"

Staghorn refused to be perturbed. "But you just said you recognize the girl on the bench. I'd say that Humanac has to be working with needle-point accuracy to put recognizable people into a prediction."

"Then shift the scene! For all I know this part of town was turned into an insane asylum fifty years from now." The use of the past tense when speaking of a future event was not ungrammatical in the presence of Humanac. "Do you have the volume up?"

"Certainly. Can't you hear the birds twittering?"

"But I can't hear anyone talking."

"Perhaps it's a day of silence."

Staghorn took another long look at the girl on the parkbench and then turned to the controls, using the fine adjustment on the geographical locator. The screen flickered, blinked, and the scene changed. The two men studied it.

"Recognize it?" said Staghorn.

Peccary gave an affirmative grunt. "That's the Jefferson grammar school on Elm Street. I'm surprised it's still there. But, lord, as long as they haven't built a new one, you'd think they'd at least keep the old one repaired."

"Very shabby," Staghorn agreed.

It was. Large areas of the exterior plaster had fallen away. Windows were shattered, and here and there the broken slats of Venetian blinds stuck through them. The shrubbery around the building was dead; weeds had sprung up through the cracks in the asphalt in the big play yard. There was no sign of children.

"Where is everyone?" Peccary demanded. "You must have the time control set for a Sunday or holiday."

"It's Tuesday," Staghorn said. Then both were silent because at that moment a child appeared, a boy of about eleven.

He burst from the schoolhouse door and ran across the cracked asphalt toward the playground, glancing back over his shoulder as though expecting pursuit. Reaching the play apparatus he paused and looked around desperately. The metal standards for the swings were in place but no swings hung from them. The fulcrums for the seesaws were there but they held no wooden planks to permit teetering. The only piece of equipment that looked capable of affording pleasure was the slide.

It was a small one, only about six feet high, obviously designed for toddlers and not for a boy of eleven. Nonetheless, the boy headed for it eagerly.

But he'd hardly set foot upon the bottom step of the ladder when the schoolhouse door burst open a second time. A young woman charged toward him shouting, "Paul! Get down from there at once! Paul!"

She was an attractive woman, but her voice held a note of panic. She ran so swiftly that Paul, whose ascent of the ladder was accelerated rather than retarded by her command, hadn't quite reached the top when she seized him around the legs and tried to drag him down.

"Please, Miss Terry!" he pleaded desperately. "Just this once let me get to the top! Let me slide down it just once!"

"Get to the top?" Miss Terry was aghast. "You could fall and kill yourself. Down you come this

instant!"

"Just one time!" Paul wailed. "Let me do it just once!"

Miss Terry paid no heed to his anguished cries. She tugged at his legs while Paul clung to the handrails. But he was the weaker of the two, and in a few seconds Miss Terry had torn him loose and set him on the ground. Then, seizing him firmly by the hand, she led him back toward the schoolhouse.

Paul went along, sniveling miserably. They entered the building and the play yard was once more silent and deserted.

"By God, Staghorn," Peccary thundered, "you've doctored it! You've deliberately fed false information into Humanac's memory cells!"

Staghorn turned to glare at his guest, his eyes flaming at the outrageous suggestion. "The only hypothetical element I've fed into Humanac is your Y Hormone, Dr. Peccary! You saw me do it. You watched me check the computer before we started."

"I refuse to believe that my Y Hormone will bring about the consequences that machine is predicting!"

"It's the only new factor that was added."

"How can you say that? During the next hundred years a thousand other factors can enter in."

"But the Y Hormone bears an essential relationship to the whole. Sit down and stop waving your arms. I'm going to see if we can get into the school."

Peccary sat down, seething.

It had been a mistake to bring his Y Hormone to Staghorn. It was simply that he'd been thinking of himself as such a benefactor to the human race that he couldn't wait to see a sample of the bright future he intended to create.

"Think of it, Staghorn!" he'd said happily, earlier in the evening. "The phrase 'art is long and time is fleeting' won't mean anything any more! Artists will have hundreds of years to paint their pictures. Think of the books that will be written, the music that will be composed, the magnificent cities that will be built! Everyone will have time enough to achieve perfection. Think of your work and mine. We'll live long enough to unravel all the mysteries of the universe!"

Staghorn had said nothing. Instead, he'd uncorked the small bottle Dr. Peccary had given him and sniffed at it.

The bottle contained a sample of the Y Hormone which Dr. Peccary had spent many years developing. Its principal ingredient was a glandular extract from insects, an organic compound that controlled the insects' aging process. If administered artificially, it could keep insects in the larval stage almost indefinitely.

Dr. Peccary's great contribution had been to synthesize this extract—which affected only insects—with protein elements that could be assimilated by mammals and humans. It had required years of experimentation, but the result was his Y Hormone—Y for Youth.

In his laboratory he now had playful kittens that were six years old and puppies that should have been fully grown dogs. The only human he'd so far experimented on was himself. But because he'd started taking the hormone only recently, he was as yet unable to say positively that it was responsible for the splendid health he was enjoying. His impatience to know the sociological consequences of the hormone had made him bring a sample of it to Staghorn.

After sniffing at the bottle, Staghorn had poured its contents into Humanac's analyzer.

The giant computer gurgled and belched a few seconds while it assessed the nature of the formula. Then Staghorn connected the analyzer with the machine's memory units.

As far as Humanac was concerned, the Y Hormone was now an accepted part of human history.

But, except for this one added factor, the rest of Humanac's vast memory was solidly based upon the complete known history of the earth and the human race. Its principles of operation were the same as those controlling other electronic "brains," which could be programmed to predict tides, weather, election results or the state of a department-store inventory at any given date in the future. Humanac differed chiefly in the tremendously greater capacity of its memory cells. Over the years it had digested thousands of books, codifying and coordinating the information as fast as it was received. Its photocells had recorded millions of visual impressions. Its auditory units had absorbed the music and languages of the centuries. And its methods of evaluation had been given a strictly human touch by feeding into its resistance chambers the cephalic wave patterns produced by the brains of Staghorn's colleagues.

An added feature, though by no means an original one, was the screen upon which Humanac produced visually the events of the time and place for which the controls were set.

This screen was simply the big end of a cathode-ray tube, similar to those used in television sets.

It was adapted from I.B.M.'s 704 electronic computer used by the Vanguard tracking center to produce visual predictions of the orbits of artificial satellites.

Staghorn was constantly having trouble explaining to people that Humanac was not a time machine that could look into the past or future. Its pictures of past events were based upon information already present in its memory cells. Its pictures of future events were predictions calculated according to the laws of probability. But because Humanac, unlike a human, never forgot any of the million and one variables impinging upon any human situation, its predictions were startlingly accurate.

Humanac had never been exposed to pictures of Dr. Peccary's home town nor to those of a girl named Jenny Cheever. It arrived at the likeness of both town and girl through a purely mathematical process.

Staghorn's ultimate purpose in building the machine was to use it in developing a true science of history. Because Humanac was only a machine, Staghorn could alter its memory at will. By removing the tiny unit upon which the Battle of Hastings was recorded and then "re-playing" English history without it, he could find out what actual effect that particular battle had.

He was surprised to discover that it had very little. According to Humanac, the Normans would have conquered England anyway a few months later.

At another time, while reviewing the events leading up to the American Revolution, Humanac had produced a picture of Benjamin Franklin kissing a beautiful young woman in the office of his printing shop. On impulse Staghorn removed this seemingly insignificant event from Humanac's memory and then turned the time dial forward to the present to see what effect, if any, the episode had had upon history.

To his amazement, with that single kiss missing, Humanac produced a picture of the American continent composed of six different nations speaking French, German, Chinese, Hindu, Arabic and Muskogean—the last being the language of an Indian nation occupying the Mississippi Valley and extending northward to Lake Winnepeg. It served as a buffer state between the Hindus and Chinese in the west and the French, Germans and Arabs to the east.

It was Humanac's ability to predict the future consequences of any hypothetical event, however, that made it an instrument capable of revolutionizing history. Once its dependability was thoroughly established, it would be possible for a Secretary of State to submit to Humanac the contents of a note intended for a foreign country, then turn the time controls ahead and get Humanac's prediction of the note's consequences.

If the consequences were good, the note would then be sent.

If they were bad, the Secretary could destroy the note and try others—until he composed one that produced the desired result.

Humanac's flaw was that it had no way of explaining the predictions produced on its screen. It merely showed what would happen when and if certain things were done. It left it up to the human operator to figure out why things happened that way.

This was what was troubling Dr. Peccary.

He could see not the remotest relationship between his Y Hormone and the fact that a mathematical probability named Miss Terry should refuse another mathematical probability named Paul permission to climb to the top of a six-foot playground slide.

Meanwhile Staghorn had been using the fine adjustment on the geographic locator and now grunted his satisfaction. "Good! We're in the building, at least."

On the screen was a dusky corridor. On either side of it were classroom doors, some closed, some ajar. Staghorn moved his hand from the fine adjustment to the even more delicate vernier control which permitted him to shift the geographic focus inches at a time. The focus drifted slowly forward to one of the half-open doors, and then he and Dr. Peccary were able to see into the classroom.

It was deserted. Desks were thick with dust. Books, yellow with age, were strewn on the floor.

Staghorn's hand sought the vernier control again. The picture led them on down the corridor to another open door.

Again it was a scene of desolation.

"This can have nothing to do with my Y Hormone!" Peccary insisted.

"Then why is your picture on the wall there?" Staghorn said with a note of malicious pleasure.

Dr. Peccary looked and started. On the classroom wall was a faded photograph of himself. Except that he was wearing a different suit in the picture, he looked just as he looked at the present moment. Staghorn got a closer focus on the photograph so that Peccary could read the legend beneath it. *Dr. Clarence Peccary, the man who gave the world the Y Hormone.*

"All right then," said Peccary, somewhat mollified by this tribute. "If they put my picture on school room walls a hundred years from now, it means I'm an honored man, a man the world admires. And therefore the Y Hormone *can't* be the cause of all this desolation!"

"I've found that Humanac's reasoning and human reasoning differ in many ways," said Staghorn. On the screen they were out in the corridor again when from somewhere ahead came a woman's voice.

"You may recite now, Paul. Please stand up."

"Ah, that sounds like Miss Terry," said Staghorn. He fingered the vernier control. The focal point slid forward along the corridor.

"Stand up and recite, Paul," Miss Terry said more sharply.

"I think they're in the room on the left," said Peccary.

II

The focus shifted to the open door and then Peccary and Staghorn could see into the classroom. This one was in slightly better order than the others and was occupied by two people. In front sat Miss Terry, obviously the teacher, and at one of the desks sat Paul. He seemed to be the entire class. At Miss Terry's urging he was coming to his feet, his face still stained with tears. He held his book a few inches from his nose and stared over the top of it sullenly.

"Go ahead, Paul," said Miss Terry, sweetly stubborn. "I'm waiting."

Paul looked at his book and read from it in a monotone, enunciating each word carefully as though it had no relationship to the other words. "I am a human being and as long as I obey the six rules I shall live forever."

"Very good, Paul. Now read the six rules."

Paul sniffled loudly and commenced reading again. "Rule one: I must never go near fire or my clothing may catch aflame and burn me up. Rule two: I must keep away from deep water or I may fall in and drown. Rule three: I must stay away from high places or I may fall and dash my brains out." He paused to sniffle and wipe his nose on his sleeve, then sighed and continued dismally. "Rule four: I must never play with sharp things or I may cut myself and bleed to death. Rule five: I must never ride horses or I may fall off and break my neck." Paul paused, lowering his book.

"And the sixth rule?" said Miss Terry. "Go ahead and read the sixth rule."

Reluctantly Paul lifted his book. "Rule six: Starting when I'm twenty-one I must take Dr. Peccary's Y Hormone once a week to keep me young and healthy forever."

"Excellent, Paul!" said Miss Terry. "And which rule were you breaking just now on the playground?"

"I was breaking Rule Three," Paul said, then quoted sadly, "I must stay away from high places or I may fall and dash my brains out."

Dr. Peccary was on his feet stomping around in front of the computer. "Sheer idiocy," he muttered. "He doesn't have any brains to dash out! I'll admit that a computer with sufficient information about the state of the world might be able to make accurate predictions of events a few months or possibly a year into the future—but not one hundred years! In that long an interval even the most trivial error could distort every circuit in the machine." He jabbed a finger toward the screen where Paul was seated at his desk again. "And that's what that picture is—a distortion. I'm not going to let it influence me one bit in what I intend to—" He broke off because of what was happening on the screen.

From somewhere outside the school building came the wail of a deep-throated alarm. Both Miss Terry and Paul were on their feet and by their expressions, terrified.

"The Atavars!" Paul cried, his entire body shaking.

"To the basement, Paul!" Miss Terry's face was blanched as she grasped Paul's hand and headed toward the door. But halfway there, both came to a halt, breathless and staring.

A powerful bearded man strode into the classroom.

Paul and Miss Terry fell back as he advanced. He was a man of about fifty, his bushy hair shot with gray, his eyes cold and blue. He was followed by two younger men who studied Paul and Miss Terry with interest. All three wore rough work clothing.

The bearded man pointed at Paul. "There's the boy," he said quietly. "Take him."

Paul let out a shriek of terror and fled into a corner as the two men advanced. He clawed futilely as they laid hands on him. "For God's sake, shut up," one of the men said with more disgust than anger. He pinioned Paul's arms while the other man bound them together with a strip of cloth.

Miss Terry meanwhile had collapsed into her chair. One of Paul's captors glanced at her and spoke to the bearded man. "What about her?"

The bearded man stepped close to Miss Terry and put a hand on her shoulder. She recoiled as from a snake. "How old are you?" he asked. Miss Terry made some inarticulate squeaks and the man spoke more sharply. "When were you born?"

"Two thousand four," she managed to stutter.

The bearded man considered this and shook his head. "Over fifty. By that time they're hopeless. Leave her and bring the boy."

Miss Terry let out an agonized wail of protest and fainted across her desk. One of the men slung Paul over his shoulder and the bearded leader led the group from the room.

"Amazing," murmured Staghorn. "Absolutely amazing. One never knows what to expect."

"Pure gibberish," said Peccary, then betrayed his interest by saying, "Can you follow them?"

"I'm trying to." Staghorn worked at the geographic adjustment and finally got the screen focused on the corridor again. It was deserted. The bearded man and his companions had already departed. Staghorn touched the controls again, the screen flickered and once more the little park came into focus. But now it, too, was deserted. None of the ragged men and women were in sight, neither in the park nor on the street beyond. Staghorn twisted the focus in all directions without discovering anyone.

"That whistle we heard was obviously some kind of alarm," he said. "Everyone must be in hiding—from the Atavars, whoever they are. I strongly suspect that bearded fellow of being one."

"You might as well shut it off, Staghorn," Dr. Peccary said coldly. "It's too much nonsense for any sane man to swallow. And unless that machine can provide a full and satisfactory explanation as to why my Y Hormone will bring about the conditions depicted on that screen, I see no reason to keep the hormone off the market."

Staghorn turned from the controls to study his companion. "The only possible way that Humanac could give us the entire background of events leading up to what we've just seen would be to set the time control to the present and then leave the machine running until it arrived at this same period again. That would take a hundred years, and I'm not going to sit here that long. What's more, I'm not going to touch your Y Hormone even if you do put it on the market."

"There'll be plenty who will!"

"That's what Humanac says, yes."

Dr. Peccary gestured despairingly. After all, he did have a conscience. "I simply don't believe my hormone can be responsible!"

"I'll remind you that your picture was on the classroom wall and that the sixth rule read by that boy indicated that he was supposed to start using your hormone when he reached the age of twenty-one. That would be about the age to stop growing older."

"That boy is nothing but a mathematical probability!"

"That's all you and I are," Staghorn said owlily. "Mathematical probabilities. Despite Omar, nothing exactly like either of us has ever existed before or will exist again."

"But damn it, Staghorn...." Dr. Peccary sat down, his face in his hands. "It's worth millions! I've invested years of work and all the money I could scrape together. I don't see anything wrong in a scientist's profiting by his discoveries. And to keep it off the market just because that insane computer says that a hundred years from now—" He broke off, glaring at Humanac's screen which was still focused on the deserted park. "It simply doesn't make sense! The machine doesn't give any reasons for anything. If there were a way I could talk directly to some of those mathematical probabilities, question them, ask them what it's all about...." He was on his feet, striding back and forth before the computer again.

"Perhaps there is a way," Staghorn said quietly.

"Eh?"

"I said that it may be possible for you to talk with them."

"How?"

"By making your mind a temporary part of the computer."

Peccary studied the huge machine apprehensively—its ranks of memory units, its chambers of flickering tubes, the labyrinth of circuits. "How would you go about it?"

"I put you in the transmitter," Staghorn said. He stepped away from the console and slid back a panel to reveal a niche with a seat in it. Above the seat was a sort of helmet that resembled a hair drier in a beauty parlor, except that it was studded with hundreds of tiny magnets and transistors. Staghorn indicated the helmet. "This picks up and amplifies brain waves. I've used it to record the cephalic wave pattern of about a hundred men and women. The recordings are built into the computer, enabling Humanac to assign a mathematical evaluation to the influence of human emotion in making historic decisions. In your case, instead of making a recording of your brain waves, I'd feed the impulses directly into Humanac's memory units."

"And what would happen then?"

"I'm not altogether sure," said Staghorn, and it seemed to Peccary that Staghorn was finding a definite relish in his uncertainty. "I've never tried the experiment before."

"I might get electrocuted?"

"No. There's no danger of that happening. The current that activates the transmitter comes from your own brain, and as you know, such electrical impulses are extremely feeble. That isn't what worries me."

"Well then, what does?"

"In some ways Humanac behaves peculiarly like a living organism. For example, there's one prediction it can never make. Several times I've fed into it the hypothetical information that the two opposing factions of the world have declared war. Naturally everyone would like to know about the outcome of such a war." Staghorn paused, gazing lovingly at his majestic creation.

"And what happens?" Dr. Peccary said impatiently.

"Nothing. That's just it. The moment I turn Humanac into the future to get a prediction, the screen goes dead. Do you know why it goes dead?" Staghorn looked at Peccary with a pleased smile and didn't wait for Peccary to cue him. "It goes dead because, if war were declared, Humanac would be the first target for enemy bombs. When it predicts a future event, it has to take all factors into consideration. If one of those factors is its own destruction, it can predict nothing beyond that moment."

Peccary repeated this sentence in his mind while he slowly digested its meaning. What it seemed to mean was that, although Staghorn and Peccary thought of Humanac as only a complicated machine, Humanac's opinion of itself was altogether otherwise. It could foresee its own death.

"I often wonder," mused Staghorn, "about those people we see wandering around on Humanac's screen. To us they're only images made by a stream of electrons hitting the end of a cathode ray tube. Their space and time is an illusion. All the same, Humanac comprises an entire system—a system modeled as accurately as possible on our own. It's just possible that the boy we saw, Paul, was experiencing a real terror."

Dr. Peccary examined Staghorn in amazement. He had often suspected that Staghorn's genius was tinged with madness. "You're not suggesting that those ... those images are conscious?"

"Ah! What is consciousness?"

"I didn't come here to get into a metaphysical argument."

"No, but it's only fair for me to suggest the possible emotional hazards involved in hooking you up to Humanac. Because you have to admit that *you'll* be conscious during the experiment."

"Certainly. But I'll be sitting right there." Peccary pointed to the seat in the transmitter unit.

"In a sense, yes. Very well, take your seat."

Peccary eyed the helmet uneasily. "I'm not sure I want to do this."

"But you do want to make millions from the Y Hormone. And you want to enjoy it with a clear conscience. Perhaps it's as you say—there may be other factors involved. By knowing what they are you may be able to negate their influence." Staghorn's voice was a soft purr as he took Dr. Peccary's arm and urged him into the transmitter unit. Peccary sat down. The seat was small and hard.

"Just bear one thing in mind," Staghorn said. "Don't get lost. It will be best if you stay in the little park where I can see you and where you'll be in focus. Unless you're in focus it might be impossible to—ah—disengage you."

Dr. Peccary could find no meaning whatsoever in this statement, except confirmation of his suspicion that Staghorn was mad. He felt this so strongly that he started to rise from his seat and escape from the transmitter cell. But at that moment Staghorn lowered the helmet onto his head. The sensation he experienced was so novel and startling that he remained seated. For a second or two he could feel the tiny metallic contacts on the inside of the helmet pressing against his skull, but this sensation of physical pressure vanished almost at once. It was replaced by one of headlessness. His body up to his chin still seemed to be sitting in the transmitter—but his intellect had lost completely its sense of localization in the head.

He could think clearly enough, but had no notion as to the spot where his thoughts originated. Indeed, the whole concept of relative position seemed ridiculous. At the same instant he felt tall as a mountain and as low as a rug. His mind could fill the entire universe, while resting neatly in a thimble. He could also see Staghorn, for his eyes continued to function and transmit optical patterns, but precisely where he was while receiving these patterns he couldn't possibly say.

He heard Staghorn remark, "Fine. The connection is perfect. It's always better when the subject is bald. I'm going to switch you over into Humanac's circuits now."

Staghorn's hand moved across the controls and one of his long fingers flipped a switch.

This was the last Dr. Peccary saw of Roger Staghorn. Instantly he found himself standing in the center of the small park in his home town. His reaction was not one of alarm. Quite to the contrary, his immediate thought was one of surprise that he wasn't alarmed. Standing there in the little square felt entirely normal and proper.

Next he was jolted by the realization that he must be an image on Humanac's screen. He quickly looked about in all directions, half expecting to see Staghorn's huge face peering down from the sky like God. There was no sign of Staghorn, however. The world about him was as three-dimensional as any he'd ever known. He was in his home town a hundred years after he'd last seen it.

Good lord! He was a hundred and forty-two years old!

This realization was followed by a host of others. Like a man coming out of amnesia, his past began filling with memories. He was rich. He was the richest man on earth. His Y Hormone was used the world over. A mile away, on the outskirts of town, he could see a portion of his huge production plant. He lived in a majestic palace surrounded by every manner of automatic protective device. Protection? From what? And how had he dared to venture out here in the park alone? But wait ... wait. It was all an illusion. Actually he was only an image on Humanac's screen, a mathematical probability.

He must keep that fact firmly in mind, or he might lose his mental balance.

He gazed about at the town, dismayed by its appearance. Not a person in sight. Not even an automobile. Of course, the motor car might have become obsolete during the passage of a hundred years. There must be some new mode of transportation—something undreamed of a century ago!

While he was wondering what this might be, he heard a clop-clop-clopping and was astonished to see three horsemen approaching the square. As they came closer he recognized them as the bearded man and his two companions.

The boy Paul was bound firmly behind one of the saddles.

A strange panic arose in Dr. Peccary's breast, but he managed to suppress it with a reminder that this was all illusion. He was here for purposes of information; he must have the courage to get it. So he forced himself to the curb at the edge of the park. When the riders were within speaking distance, he managed to hail them with, "Hey, you!"

His nervousness made his words harsh. But then, there was no reason why he should speak politely to kidnapers. He saw that Paul was conscious. The boy had a gag over his mouth but his eyes were open.

The three riders reined in their horses and looked at Peccary with frank curiosity.

"Here's one that didn't hide," one of them remarked, in a tone that Dr. Peccary decided was disrespectful. He stepped forward boldly.

"May I ask what you intend to do with that boy?" he demanded.

"He wants to know what we intend to do with the boy," said the same man.

"Yes, I heard what he said," the bearded man remarked quietly. He hadn't ceased to study Peccary with his piercing blue eyes. Now he urged his horse closer. "You must be a stranger here, son?"

"Not exactly," said Peccary. "As a matter of fact, I was born here. That was some time ago and it's true I haven't been here recently." The way the bearded man stared at him made him extremely nervous. "But I'm sure that kidnaping is against the law. If you don't release that boy I'll have to—to make a citizen's arrest!" Peccary knew that his words sounded ridiculous. From the way the three riders exchanged glances it was evident that they thought the same thing.

"He's going to make a citizen's arrest," commented the one who liked to repeat whatever Peccary said.

"Hush," said the bearded leader. And then to Peccary, "What's your name, son?"

"Clarence Peccary. If you don't do as I say I'll—" He stopped short, his heart leaping as the force of his indiscretion struck him.

The three men had been struck also.

The two younger ones were already on the ground, one on either side of him. Only the bearded man remained mounted. He leaned forward. "I thought you looked familiar. You're *Doctor* Peccary of the Y Hormone?" His voice was a menacing whisper. Peccary finally answered with a slow nod.

"He must have flipped, running around alone like this," a man beside him said. "However, let's never insult fortune!"

This was the last Dr. Peccary heard. For at that instant one of the men—he never knew which—struck him forcibly over the head with a blunt instrument.

III

At Humanac's controls Roger Staghorn leaped to his feet in alarm as he saw what was happening on the screen.

Peccary had collapsed now. The two men were draping him across the bearded man's saddle. There wasn't an instant to lose! Staghorn leaped to the transmitter cell where Peccary's material body was seated, his eyes peacefully closed. Staghorn flipped the switch to disengage Peccary's consciousness from Humanac's circuits.

Nothing happened. Peccary's body remained as before, blissfully asleep.

Good lord, of course nothing happened! How could it? Peccary had just been knocked cold; at the moment he didn't *have* any consciousness! Staghorn opened the circuit again and whirled back to the control console.

He looked at the screen. All three men were mounted again. The bearded leader gestured them on.

They set spurs to their horses and galloped away, taking the unconscious Peccary with them.

"No!" Staghorn shouted at the fleeing images. "No, Dr. Peccary! Stay in focus!" The horsemen paid no heed—nor did Staghorn expect them to, rationally. His shouts were only involuntary expressions of despair. Grasping the geographic locator, he twiddled it wildly, managing to keep the three riders in focus for several blocks as they sped down a street of the deserted town.

Then they rounded a corner and he lost them.

By the time he got a focus on the area around the corner they were gone. For several minutes he continued to search, shifting the focal point all over town, but in vain. Dr. Clarence Peccary was lost inside Humanac's labyrinthine brain!

Staghorn was stunned. There would be no difficulty in keeping Peccary's physical body alive indefinitely by intravenous feeding, but it was as good as dead while separated from its sense of identity. Worse yet were the probable consequences to Humanac of having a free soul loose in its mathematical universe. These were too dire to contemplate. The machine's reliability might be altogether ruined and Staghorn's life work destroyed. Under the circumstances there was but one course of action. He had to find Dr. Peccary and get him back into focus, so that he could be disengaged from the computer.

First Staghorn focused the geographic locator on the town square, the point from which Peccary had been abducted; from there he could begin tracking him. Next he set the time control so that it would automatically disengage the transmitter units in exactly three hours.



Whether or not he could find Dr. Peccary in that period of time Staghorn had no way of knowing; but at least he should be able to get himself back into focus at the proper moment. Then, in case he'd failed to find Peccary, he could reset the time clock and try again.

Next he opened a second transmitter unit, sat down on the little seat and pulled the helmet down on his head. As sensations of vastness and lost dimensions spread through him, he reached out and pressed down the switch that would pour his own brain impulses into Humanac's circuits.

Instantly, as with Dr. Peccary, Staghorn found himself standing in the little park.

He examined his hands and slapped his sides a few times, taking time to assimilate the fact that he felt perfectly solid. Ah, Bishop Berkeley was right all the time! The universe was subjective—a creation of consciousness!

He left off these speculations and recalled himself to his mission.

Glancing around, he saw that people were beginning to reappear. They came up from basements and out of the doors of the dilapidated houses and buildings. If there had been a panic, there was no sign of it now. The men and women moved indolently, returning toward the park and the sunlit streets. All were so much the same age and of such similar beauty that it was difficult to distinguish individual members of the same sex. But he finally recognized the girl Dr. Peccary had identified as Jenny Cheever. She had an attractive strawberry birthmark on her hip.

She strolled back into the park accompanied by a young man. The two of them took possession of the bench where Jenny had been seated earlier. They sat well apart from each other, silently contemplating the other passers-by.

Feeling that his knowledge of Jenny's name constituted a sort of introduction, Staghorn approached the couple. The man paid no attention to him but Jenny watched him curiously. Staghorn was not a man over whom women swooned, and it occurred to him that she found something odd about his dark suit and thick spectacles. He seemed to be the only man in town wearing either.

"How do you do," he said to her. "I believe you're Ben Cheever's daughter."

She continued to examine him languidly, slowly stroking a heavy strand of her auburn hair. "Am I?" she said at last. "It's been so long I've forgotten. But then I had to be someone's daughter and since my name is Cheever, you may be right. I don't remember you. We must have met ages and ages ago."

"This is the first time we've met. You were pointed out to me by a friend."

She considered this with a puzzled air, and, idly curious, said, "Do you want to marry me?"

"Good heavens, no!"

Jenny didn't seem to be insulted by his abruptness. "I just wondered why you'd speak to me," she said. "Because if you want to marry me you have to wait. I've promised to marry him first." She gestured to the man on the bench with her. The man looked at Staghorn for the first time.

"Yeah," he said.

"I see," said Staghorn. "And when is this ... merry event to take place?"

"Some day," Jenny said indifferently. "When we both feel like it. There's no use rushing things. I don't want to use up all the men too soon."

"Use them up?"

"He'll be my twenty-fifth husband."

"Yeah," said the man. "She'll be my thirty-second wife."

"Your marriages can't last very long," said Staghorn. Despite the physical attractiveness of both Jenny and her escort, Staghorn began to feel clammy in their presence. He had an impression of deep ill health, a sense of unclean, almost reptilian lassitude.

"They get shorter all the time," said Jenny, and turned away as though the conversation bored her. The man too had lost interest.

Staghorn stood ignored for a moment and then spoke bluntly.

"Who are the Atavars?"

The word produced the first genuine reaction. Jenny leaped to her feet. The man turned red.

"Don't say that word!" Jenny said.

"I'm sorry. I'm a stranger."

"No one can be that much of a stranger!"

"It's indecent," the man said. He stood up and touched Jenny's arm. "I feel my blood pounding. Let's go get married."

Jenny nodded and, with a cold glance at Staghorn, moved away with her companion. Staghorn was tempted to follow and demand an answer to his question when he saw Miss Terry approaching. Miss Terry was more likely to have the information he needed, and in any case—

since she was only in her fifties—she was less than half of Jenny Cheever's age. He hoped this would make a difference in her attitude. That she was capable of emotion he already knew. Her expression, as she approached, was disconsolate.

Staghorn bowed low before her and introduced himself. "Good afternoon, Miss Terry. I'm a stranger to you but since you're a teacher by profession, you may have heard of me. I'm Dr. Roger Staghorn." He straightened, twisted his lips into a smile and waited for Miss Terry to associate his name with those scientific achievements that had so startled the world a hundred years earlier. To his chagrin Miss Terry only gazed at him blankly and shook her head.

"No," she murmured. Then tears formed in her eyes and she tried to move on. Staghorn stopped her.

"Forgive me," he said. "I'm aware of your recent loss. Your pupil, Paul."

Her tears dropped more freely. "Sooner or later I knew they'd get him. The only child in town. And now I have nothing to do. Nothing at all!"

"They? Just who are they—the Atavars?"

Miss Terry turned pale. "Don't say it," she pleaded. "In time I'll forget."

"But where have they taken Paul? And what will they do with him?"

"He'll die, of course." She spoke these words almost indifferently, then wept copiously as she added, "But I'll live on with nothing to do!"

"Then why didn't someone stop them?" He gestured angrily at the handsome young males wandering through the park. "All these men—why don't they rescue Paul?"

This suggestion so shocked Miss Terry that she stopped weeping. "That's impossible! There'd be violence. Someone might get killed!"

"They think of *that* with a boy's life at stake?" Staghorn felt his rage rising. He was an irascible man by nature and had controlled himself so far only because he knew he was part of an illusion. The sense of illusion was fading rapidly, however. The guiding principles of morals and ethics were themselves abstractions and therefore operated just as powerfully in an abstract universe. He grasped Miss Terry by the arm.

"I'll go after him myself. Where do I find him?"

"You can't find him! If you follow they'll capture you too!"

"I'll chance that! Where have they gone?"

"I can't tell you! They might punish me!"

Staghorn shook her heartily, ignoring the fact that she was over fifty. "Tell me! It so happens that besides Paul, they've captured Dr. Clarence Peccary, and I'm responsible for his life!"

At this statement Miss Terry let out a cry of horror. "They've caught Dr. Peccary? No! No!"

"They most certainly have. So hurry up and tell me—"

"We'll all die!" wailed Miss Terry. "We'll all die!"

"In that case it can't hurt you to tell me."

"The mountains!" cried Miss Terry. "High Canyon!"

It was with great difficulty that Staghorn forced directions from her. The news of Peccary's capture had unsettled her entirely. But despite the roughness with which he was forced to use her, no one came to her rescue. Several young men and women gathered at a safe distance to watch, but they did nothing to interfere.

Staghorn finally elicited the information that High Canyon was several miles north of town and could be reached by following a dirt road. To his inquiry as to where he could rent a car, Miss Terry went blank again. There were no cars. They had been abolished before Miss Terry was born. She thought there might be one in the museum.

Staghorn glanced at his watch.

He'd already been in the transmitter thirty minutes. He had only two and a half hours to get to High Canyon, rescue Dr. Peccary and Paul and return to the square. He dared not cut it too fine. He'd have to be back with a few minutes to spare.

So, after learning the location of the museum, he took off at a run.

It was evident that at some period in the past the town had gone through a surge of prosperity, for there were several quite majestic buildings whose cornerstones bore dates of the late twentieth century. But it was also clear that during the last fifty years not only had few new enterprises been started but the old ones had been allowed to languish. The museum even lacked an attendant at the door—unless one gave this title to the bust of Dr. Peccary which stood on a pedestal just inside the entrance. The plaque beneath the bust noted that Dr. Peccary had given

the museum to the city in 1985 "to preserve for our immortal posterity a true picture of the world of mortals."

In the seven and a half decades since, however, this true picture had suffered badly.

In the absence of curtains and draperies, and in the nudeness of the mannekins whose purpose could only have been to display twentieth century costumes, Staghorn gained a hint as to where the populace got at least a part of the rags they wore. He didn't pause to examine details, however. A wall directory with a faded map of the building had given him the location of the wing of twentieth century machines. He headed there at once, passing by displays of tractors, bulldozers, jackhammers and other commonplaces before reaching the automobiles.

There was an excellent selection of standard and sports models, all a uniform gray under their coats of dust—and all of them out of gas.

After so long a time it was doubtful if any would have run anyway. He had simply hoped that one lone attendant might have kept one in working condition.

In the next room, however, he found the reward for his effort. Bicycles. He chose a racing model.

A few minutes later he was pedaling rapidly northward on the dirt road that led to High Canyon.

IV

Dr. Peccary could feel fingers probing at his sore head. A bit of damp cloth or cotton was pressed against his upper lip. The sharp odor that stabbed his nostrils made him jerk his head away and suck in his breath.

"Good. He's coming around."

Dr. Peccary opened his eyes. For a few seconds faces and objects swung around him giddily, but finally the environment achieved stability. He saw that he was in a log cabin, on a bunk. Seated in a chair beside him was a man whose manner could belong only to a doctor. Standing behind the doctor was the bearded man.

"He'll be all right," the doctor said, packing bottles and probes into his little black bag.

Dr. Peccary sat up and touched the back of his head gingerly. It was very, very sore. He'd never had an illusion quite like this before. Besides, the illusion had persisted too long. How long had he been out? Hours? Days? Good lord, had Staghorn deserted him?

The bearded man ushered the doctor out, locked the door and came back to observe Peccary. He put a booted foot on the chair and leaned an elbow on his knee.

"I hardly need tell you, Dr. Peccary," he said, "that this is the happiest day of my life."

"But not of mine," Peccary responded sourly. "I doubt if you can make it a bit worse by telling me what this is all about and what you plan to do with me."

The bearded man showed surprise. "You don't know?"

"No! I don't know!" Peccary was losing his detachment.

The bearded man considered him thoughtfully. "I shouldn't have let the doctor go so soon. Apparently you were hit harder than we thought. On the other hand it's just possible, living as you have these last seventy years locked up in your palace and isolated from the rest of the world, that you've lost touch with what is going on."

"I've lost touch with a great many things. Obviously I'm a prisoner. How long is this going to last?"

"Only until my demolition squad is ready. Then we take you to your production plant where you produce the Y Hormone. There will be a gun at your back, of course. You know the combination to get us safely past the automatic guards. Ah, I've waited all my life for this! Once we're in the plant, my men will do the rest."

"You're going to blow it up?"

"Absolutely!"

"And what do you gain by that? The formula for the Y Hormone still exists!"

The bearded man laughed. "Yes, I can see you've been out of touch with the world. It's been thirty years since the country produced anyone capable of working with that formula. That's when the last university closed down—thirty years ago."

"That's shocking," said Dr. Peccary. "But my experiments showed conclusively that the Y Hormone has no deleterious effect upon intelligence. I took every precaution!"

"Nothing wrong with anyone's intelligence," said the bearded man, "except that no one's under pressure to use it. When the future stretches on indefinitely, it gets easier and easier to put things off until tomorrow—even education—until finally it's put off forever. There's only one man living who understands that formula."

"And who is that?"

The bearded man looked down at him hatefully. "Yourself, Dr. Peccary! That's why we're so delighted to capture you—because now you'll never use it again!"

Peccary stared at him aghast. "I understand now! You mean to steal it. You mean to force it out of me and start producing the Y Hormone yourself!"

This accusation resulted in a violent reaction from the bearded man. He grasped Peccary by the lapels of his jacket and hauled him to his feet. Peccary could feel the man's powerful hands trembling with rage.

"You fool! You utter imbecile! Don't you even yet know who we are?"

Peccary was so throttled by the man's clutch that he could only waggle his head in the negative. The bearded man's face came close to his.

"We're mortals!" He flung Peccary back on the bunk contemptuously. "We accept our allotted span of years and call it quits. But during that time we live! We have to. It's all the time we have!" He glared at Peccary a moment before resuming in a milder tone. "After we destroy your production plant, Dr. Peccary, we're going to kill you. You might as well know. It's the only way to make certain that the formula for the Y Hormone will never be used again." Then he smiled. "But take consolation. With the plant destroyed you'd gradually get old and die anyway. For the brief period before we execute you, you might even regain an appreciation for life." He bent suddenly, gripped Peccary's wrist and hauled him to his feet again. "In fact, you might have forgotten what life is. I'll refresh your memory. Come along!"

He dragged Peccary to the door, opened it and led him outside.



Peccary looked around. He found himself on the level floor of a canyon whose vertical walls rose high on either side. He recognized the place at once. Often when he was a boy he'd come here to camp overnight. It had been a delightful wilderness with a year-round stream.

The canyon had changed. Some forty cabins like the one he'd been in were built in the shade of the southern cliff, and the canyon floor was covered with green crops and pasture. He heard singing, laughter. People were at work in the fields, children were building rock castles at the base of the cliff. On a cabin porch two elderly men sat playing checkers.

"The last of the mortals," said the bearded man. "If there are any other colonies we don't know of them. But when you're gone, Dr. Peccary, they'll be the first of a new race! You asked earlier what we intended to do with the boy we kidnaped. There he is." And he pointed toward the canyon wall.

Peccary looked and saw Paul climbing upward along crevices and ledges. The bearded man cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted. "Paul! How is it?"

The boy straightened on a rocky pinnacle and looked back. His face was ecstatic. "I'm climbing!" he crowed. "I've never been so high! I'm climbing all the way to the top!" He waved and clambered on.

"Once in a great while a child is born to one of the immortals," the bearded man said. "If we find him in time we can save him."

Peccary watched the boy move upward along the cliff. "Then why was he so terrified when you captured him?"

"Because he'd had it pounded into him that if the Atavars got him he'd die. He will, too, eventually. Like any other mortal. But in the meanwhile—" He broke off and turned on Peccary savagely. "You see, there's one thing you didn't consider at all! The Y Hormone stops aging and keeps people healthy, but it can't protect them from accidents. The immortals can still die if they get hit by a train or fall overboard in the middle of the ocean. A mortal can accept the possibility of accidental death because he knows he's going to die anyway sooner or later, but can't you see the psychological shock to the immortals when one of them dies? A man who had the potential of living forever, suddenly wiped out! It's like the end of the world. And so they started eliminating hazards. Automobiles went first. Then planes and trains. They weren't needed anyway, because people stopped traveling. To travel is to court accident. But one precaution breeds another, and before long people were avoiding all dangerous occupations. With immortality at stake, even the smallest risk was too much. Planing mills, machine shops, mines, smelters—bah! Name me an occupation that doesn't occasionally entail some hazard. Even motherhood!"

"But I anticipated the need for birth control! I had the plans all set up."

"There was birth control all right, but not the way you planned it. Ten years after your hormone went on the market the world had an extra five billion people. For a few years they produced a surge of energy until the older immortals started eliminating the hazards. After that, starvation set in. Three-fourths of the population died. Your hormone can't keep people from starving, either, and it was a shock from which those who survived never recovered. Every new mouth to feed was a threat. Childbirth practically stopped. But that left the remaining immortals in a very soft position. For years now they've been existing on the leftovers from civilization, finding shelter in the old houses, ransacking the attics and closets of the dead for scraps of clothing, daring to plant a few crops in areas where they'll grow with little care. And after that—boredom."

He thrust an accusing finger at Peccary. "And you dared to use the slogan, 'Time to achieve perfection!' I tell you, Dr. Peccary, the source of man's courage and energy is the knowledge of death! Man was meant to be mortal. We strive because we know the time is short. We climb mountains, make love, descend to the depths of the sea and reach for the stars because the certainty of death urges us on. It's the only certainty the world had—and you would destroy it!"

Peccary quailed before the bearded man's ferocity. He was relieved when his captor's attention was diverted by a party of horsemen who rode up in neat order and stopped before their leader. Several horses were loaded with explosives.

"We're ready, Sir," their spokesman said.

"Good," said the bearded man. "I see no reason to delay an instant."

An extra horse had been provided for Dr. Peccary. He was on the point of being forcibly hoisted into the saddle when he was given a reprieve by a diversion of another kind.

Approaching on the path through the center of the canyon, pedaling his bicycle frantically, came—Staghorn!

He rode up to the group and leapt from his seat, his face blue from exertion. He'd been climbing all the way from town. He stood gasping for breath while he dragged his big gold watch from his pocket and consulted the time. He managed a groan. "Only thirty minutes left. Miles to go! But it's down hill all the way; we can make it!" He shoved his bicycle forward. "On the handlebars, Dr. Peccary, quick!"

Peccary would have liked nothing better. But his movement toward Staghorn was stopped instantly by the men who were trying to put him on his horse. "They're going to kill me!" he cried. "They're going to blow up my factory and kill me!"

"No, no!" said Staghorn. "That can't be. The consequences would be disastrous." He turned to the bearded leader. "Look, Sir, I have no time to explain, and I'm sure you wouldn't believe me even if I did. All of you are illusions! This entire situation is nothing but a mathematical probability. And so I insist that you release my friend, Dr. Peccary, at once!"

The bearded man was so amazed by this request that he forgot to take offense. He gaped at Staghorn. "Who are you? I can't imagine an immortal risking himself on a bicycle!"

"At this moment I'm desperately mortal, and so is Dr. Peccary!"

"Nonsense. Dr. Peccary is a hundred and forty-two years old!"

"I've told you this situation has no existence in reality!"

The bearded man stomped the ground. "I've been living on this planet fifty-five years. I know reality when I see it! And what's more, I'm beginning to think you *are* one of the immortals. Even an immortal might show some courage when he knows he's going to be deprived of the Y Hormone."

"If you must know, I'm Dr. Roger Staghorn! I can see that there's industry and education in this canyon and so it's possible you've heard of me. I have quite a record of scientific achievements back in the twentieth century."

At this announcement the bearded man goggled at him, then threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "You couldn't have picked a worse masquerade. Dr. Roger Staghorn died in 1994!"

"I can't help that I'm Staghorn!"

The bearded man stopped laughing and thrust his face forward threateningly. "You're a fraud! Because it so happens that *I'm* Staghorn!"

"You? Staghorn?"

"I'm Henry Staghorn, great-grandson of the real Dr. Roger Staghorn!"

"Impossible. I have no intention of ever getting married!"

"Dr. Roger Staghorn married when he founded the Atavars, ninety years ago! He saw the need of leaving mortal offspring and sacrificed himself to that end. And he's buried in the cliff over there. Furthermore, he became Dr. Peccary's most bitter enemy. If he were alive today, he'd be tying the knot for Peccary's neck instead of trying to rescue him." The bearded man drew a revolver from inside his jacket. "I think I'll execute you here and now!"

Peccary all but fainted. If Staghorn were killed all hope was gone. But Staghorn threw up a commanding hand.

"Stop, Henry! What you say may be perfectly true from your peculiar viewpoint. But I'm still Roger Staghorn! Are you going to shoot your own great-grandfather?"

Staghorn's tone, rather than his words, made the bearded man pause. He turned to a companion.

And in that instant Staghorn moved. After all, he was slightly younger and more agile than his great-grandson. He leapt onto his bicycle, shouting at Peccary, "Turn around!"

Peccary whirled and sprang in the air as Staghorn aimed the bicycle between his legs. He landed neatly on the handlebars, and with simultaneous kicks sent the men on either side sprawling. Then he and Staghorn were off down the canyon.

Behind them they could hear the thundering hoofs as the horsemen started in pursuit.

"Go, Staghorn, go!" Peccary shouted.

The race would have been lost at once except for the downhill grade. But because of it, Peccary's added weight was a help instead of a hindrance. Shots rang out; bullets bounced from the rocks on either side.

They made it out of the canyon's mouth and the grade increased on the long straightaway toward town. Staghorn's feet spun as they darted downward, maintaining their lead in front of the pursuing horsemen. The town loomed ahead of them, closer and closer until at last they sped into a street where the buildings gave them protection from bullets.

The bicycle slowed. They were on level ground again. Staghorn skidded around a corner and stopped so suddenly that Dr. Peccary was propelled forward and landed on his feet at the mouth of an alley. Abandoning the bicycle, both men charged into it.

"The square!" Staghorn gasped. "I'm focused on the square!" He hauled out his watch as he ran. Only seven minutes remained.

The deep-throated alarm whistle was sounding over the town. Its inhabitants must have sighted the approach of the Atavars for they were scurrying into buildings and basements, leaving the way clear for Peccary and Staghorn. They emerged from the alley and turned left for a block, then doubled back as they were sighted by the searching horsemen.

The hue and cry was on again, but Peccary's familiarity with his home town served them well until they came within sight of the square. Then they stopped in dismay and ducked into a doorway.

Across the street in the center of the little park, as though divining that it must be their destination, was Staghorn's great-grandson and three of his men. Their position enabled them to watch all four approaches to the square at the same time.

Staghorn tugged out his watch again. Two minutes. They had to be in focus! A second late and they'd be locked forever. He watched the second hand creep around the dial.

"We have to chance it," he said. "When I start running, run with me!"

The second hand crept on. A minute left. Staghorn judged the distance from their hiding place to

the grassy plot where the bearded man was standing. About seventy-five yards. Could he do seventy-five yards in ten seconds? Could Peccary? Thirty seconds left ... twenty-five ... twenty. He'd never gone through such a painful count-down ... fifteen seconds.

"Ready, Dr. Peccary. It's now or never."

Thirteen ... twelve ... eleven ... "Go!"

Staghorn burst from his hiding place with Peccary at his heels. They dashed for the square. They were over the curb and into the street before the men in the park saw their approach and let out cries of triumph.

"Dip and weave, Dr. Peccary! Dip and weave!"

They dipped and wove, while bullets ripped at their clothing. They were running right into the fire, making better targets at every stride. Staghorn ran with his watch in his hand, and never had time and distance diminished so slowly.

Seven seconds, six, five, and they were still alive and across the street. Four seconds, three, two. They were over the park and onto the grass. A bullet crashed into Staghorn's leg and he fell, diving forward.

"Got him!" cried his great-grandson. "Now get Peccary!"

Three shots rang out as one. But at some point in the bullets' flight toward Peccary and Staghorn, the square and everything in it vanished.

Staghorn found himself sitting in Humanac's transmitter unit.

The time clock had functioned. He was disengaged.

He lifted the helmet from his head and stumbled from the cell, drawing a trouser leg up to examine his leg. It seemed that he could detect a scar. Then he turned and helped Dr. Peccary from the other transmitter. Both men stepped toward the console to look at Humanac's screen.

It was still focused on the little park. The bearded man and his companions were now exchanging glances of consternation. After a moment the bearded man wet his lips. "Maybe he was right," he said in awed tones. "No one but my great-grandfather could ever do a trick like that. And maybe what he said is true. It's all illusion. We're nothing but mathematical probabilities!"

At this point Staghorn hauled down the master switch. The screen went dead as Humanac's power was shut off.

Some twenty minutes later he had finished draining Dr. Peccary's sample of the Y Hormone from Humanac's analyzer and had thoroughly cleansed the computer of any last traces of it. He handed the little bottle of the hormone back to Dr. Peccary.

"There," he said. "As far as Humanac is concerned, it's as though it never was. Do as you wish."

Dr. Peccary looked at the bottle sadly. It was worth millions. Billions.

Then slowly he moved to a laboratory sink and poured the contents of the bottle down the drain.

"I can't help wondering," mused Staghorn, "of whose computer we're a part right now—slight factors in the chain of causation that started God knows when and will end...."

"When someone pulls the switch," said Dr. Peccary.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE IMMORTALS ***

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