

Most of the pieces in the game were only Pawns, but when one of them became a Knight and killed the King the Players of the Game had to think hard before it was checkmate.

CHESSBOARD

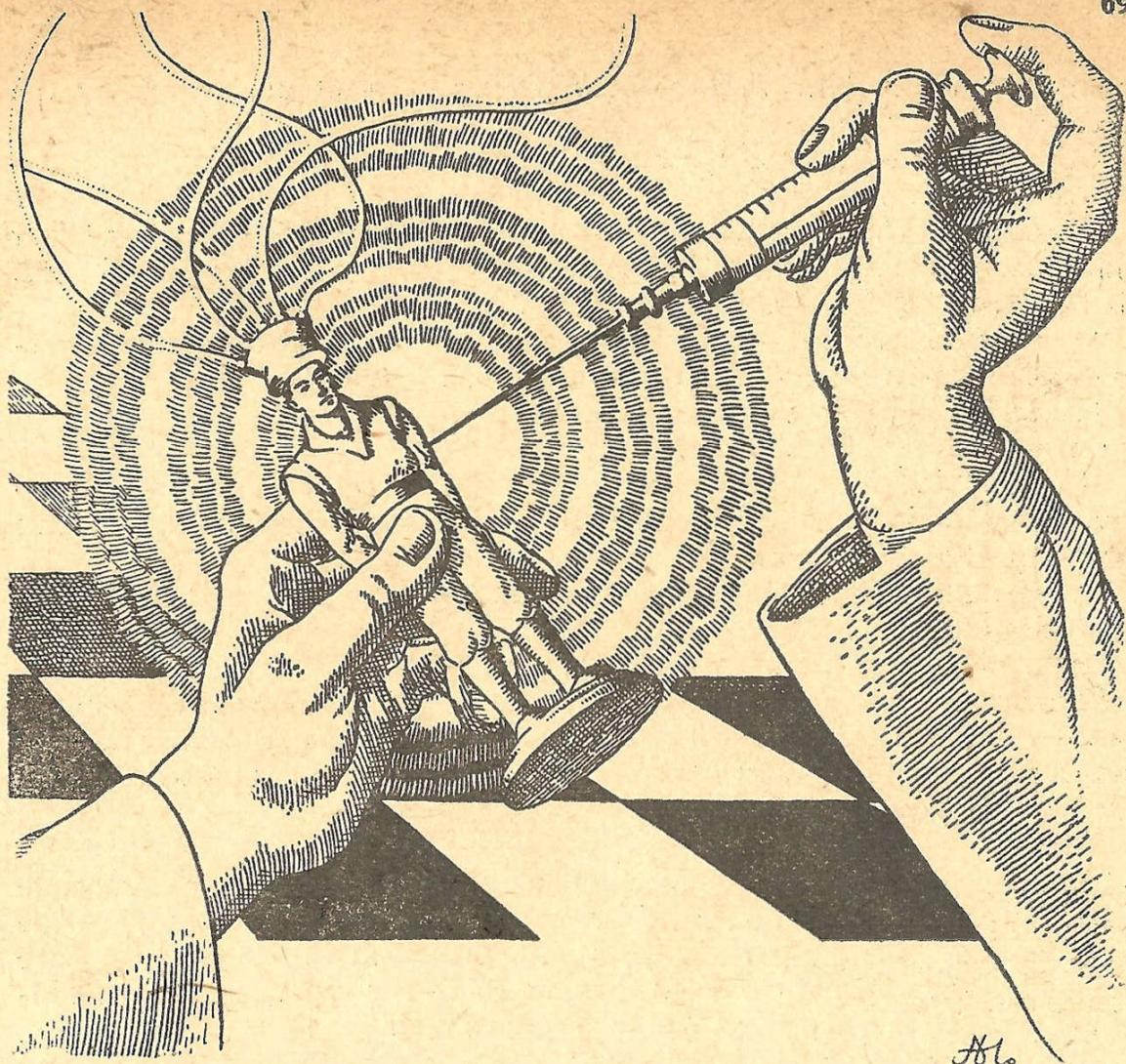
By J. F. BURKE

Illustrated by HUNTER

The sharp finger of the machine in the corner began silently to jot down its small meticulous notes on the chart. Marc Peregrine watched it for a moment and then went towards the glass wall of his office and looked down at the busy scene below.

Light as gentle as daylight shone on the mothers who brought their children in from the General Service Cars outside. The calmness and efficiency of the white-coated staff made it seem that everything was moving slowly, almost indolently. But Marc nodded with satisfaction, watching the deft movements—the words exchanged with the mothers, the quick consultation of the record pad, the injection in the babies' arms and the momentary application of the supersonic skullcaps.

He heard the warning click as someone approached his door, and turned



in time to see it sliding open to admit Gibbon Dormer.

"Hello, Gib. More reports?"

"I've got one here I'd like you to look at. I have an idea someone's made a mistake."

"A mistake?"

It was so incredible that they did not take it seriously. They smiled, and spread the sheets out on the smooth surface of the black desk.

Gibbon Dormer's finger traced the line of a column of figures. "Here," he said. "This figure here. A Grade 14A—lower level intellectual, classified as non-active, suitable for local administration—but the injection doesn't tally. And the s.s. signal seems to be that for a Grade 4B, active."

Marc Peregrine looked incredulously at the evidence before his eyes. At last he said:

"Which station?"

"Local 28. New Bay City."

"We'll check up. It must be an error on the Recorder."

Dormer switched on the visi-screen beyond the desk, and raised his thick, straggling eyebrows. "First time I heard of that, and if there was one, how is it that the total on this side——"

"A compensating error," said Peregrine curtly. "Must be. No other possible explanation."

They waited for the screen to glow. As images rushed suddenly towards

them, and a face blinked into focus, Peregrine went on, addressing the screen:

"An error on your monthly return."

"An error, sir?"

They spread the chart before the screen, and Peregrine's lean forefinger indicated the erring figure. The eyes of the man on the screen widened. He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Neither do we. Fetch your Recorder operator. And the operative responsible for this injection. Five minutes—no longer."

The screen blurred to an opaque green.

Dormer said: "This is serious."

"I don't think so," said Peregrine. "It's not often the Recorders develop mechanical faults without tripping a relay and flashing the warning, but this time it must have happened."

"I hope so. This is too crucial a period for us to risk having unknown quantities floating about."

Peregrine allowed himself a cold, confident smile.

"There won't be any unknown quantities. Even if there had been a minor error—which is unthinkable—it could hardly affect our major plan. The child chosen for the revolutionary outbreak thirty years hence has passed through this building, under our own eyes."

"So has his assassin."

"Exactly. The two—er—major actors in the drama of our immediate future have been chosen, and will be ready to assume their roles when the times comes. The supporting parts will be played in the way we have arranged. The crowds will do as they are told—the visi-casts and the conditioning we have given them will take care of that."

Gibbon Dormer still looked uneasy. He was a mathematician first and foremost, and liked to have his unknown quantities resolved.

The screen shone clear again. A young man with apprehensive eyes looked out at them.

"You gave an injection two days ago," snapped Peregrine, "to a child in the class of . . . let me see . . ."

He consulted the chart, framed his questions, and fired them at the young man, who tried to stare back at him without fear.

"I made no mistake, sir," he said when the questioning had ended. "I am sure of that."

"Positive?"

"Positive. There is no likelihood of our record pads containing an error."

"And no likelihood of you yourself making a mistake?"

"Very little, sir. We have been trained not to."

"Of course. So you suggest . . .?"

"A mechanical defect in the Recorder from which your transmission was made, sir."

"Put the Recorder operator on."

Another face, another nervous voice. Orders from Gibbon Dormer: the Recorder to be overhauled, the check transmitter to be used for the next two months to make sure that no more errors crept in. "This is an important time. We can afford no mistakes. You have not been told what we are

working on, but you have been told that scrupulous exactness is essential over this period, haven't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Mind you remember it. The equilibrium of our society depends on our Control Centres. There must be no errors—not even minor errors."

"No sir."

Dormer switched off the screen. "I suppose it's all right," he said doubtfully. "The responsibility of all this——"

"We have a duty to perform," said Peregrine, quiet and assured. "We mould the shape of our society, and the time has come when something new is needed. This coming dictatorship and the war that will follow is necessary. There is too much philosophical discontent, and an inevitable spread of idle dissension among the lower levels."

"I know all that. But I'm worried. We don't know what havoc an intruder might cause."

"One man—one ordinary man—can't alter the shape of society that has been rigidly controlled from these centres for a hundred years."

Dormer shook his head, still studying the chart. "I don't see why not," he said softly. "Isn't that what we ourselves have been planning? The launching of a prefabricated dictator on a society conditioned to accept him—and then to overthrow him, after bloodshed and bitterness."

"All of which," said Peregrine, "is essential in order to introduce that element of surprise which will put an end to the jaded condition of our present epoch. It is"—again he smiled thinly and fanatically—"our duty to experiment. The balance of society depends on our experiments."

When Hammond Wyatt was twenty-nine years old, he became conscious of a strange dissatisfaction stirring inside him.

He had never been as sure of his work and his position in life as most of his friends were. He could not imagine why he should be so unsure of himself. Like everyone else, he had been taken to a Conditioning Control Centre when he was a few weeks old, and he could not understand why he should be so restless. In fact, he found himself mentally rebelling against the mere idea of Conditioning Control.

"If our lives are laid down for us in advance by a group of scientists and sociologists," he found himself arguing, "what sense is there in living at all? We are not alive: we only exist."

And his friends at school and, later, in the Area Administration Office where he spent his working hours, laughed—a trifle uneasily—and asked why he didn't go and join the Capaldi group. There, they said, was someone else who didn't like the perfectly reasonable, intelligent system under which he lived, and who talked about overthrowing it. Why not go and join him?

But Wyatt was uncertain about this, too. He distrusted Capaldi's orations and the reports of them that he saw on the visi-cast. There were times when he felt, for some reason he couldn't explain, that Capaldi's outbursts against Control were actually sponsored by Control itself. It seemed absurd. It was mad. But he could not get rid of those suspicions.

"The world is lazy," Capaldi would scream, his face in close-up, his mouth working furiously in the square of the screen. "The time has come to overthrow all those who want us to stay lazy and uncritical. We are being

governed by reactionary scientists—robbed of our freedom, our priceless heritage of free will—we must rise against this infamy . . . ”

Certain telesheets attacked Capaldi. Others supported him. People began to argue for and against the ideas that Capaldi was spreading, and there were demonstrations: there were brawls in the palatial squares of the great cities of the world, and within a week ten men had been killed.

Ten men dying by violence because of political differences ! Such a thing had not been heard of for several hundred years.

And yet everyone seemed ready for it. The prospect of war was exciting.

War ? It was strange how eager everyone was, and strange how they accepted the possibility. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that these events were going to lead to a revolution and a war. It was almost as though they had been taught to expect it: their minds had been prepared.

Which was, thought Hammond Wyatt, very suspicious.

He could not understand why his friends could not see the truth as clearly as he himself saw it. This was another one of Control's experiments—and this one was evil and mad. To plunge the world into war merely as a controlled experiment was insane. Whatever the excuse might be—a check on the growth of population, an incentive to creation and activity on the part of the rather jaded, idle scientists of the world, or merely a freakish whim on the part of the Controllers—it was wrong, utterly wrong. The whole thing was evil.

“Control's got everything under control,” said one of his acquaintances with a laugh. “Don't worry your head, son. Just when Capaldi thinks he's going to pull off a great coup, he'll find himself stopped.”

“If that's so, why is he being allowed to do this at all ?”

“There must be a psychological reason for it. Control knows what it's doing.”

“But *we* don't. And I don't like it,” said Wyatt.

“Perhaps it's to shake folk out of their complacency. Or to make them value peace more than they do——”

“By starting a war, just so it'll feel good when they leave off ?” Wyatt was contemptuous. He was also uneasy—more and more uneasy.

The voice of Capaldi began to boom louder and louder. Outbreaks of violence were more frequent. Telesheets demanded action from the rarely-used Control Guard, but the Guard did not appear.

“Biding their time,” said some.

“They know Capaldi's supporters are too strong,” said others.

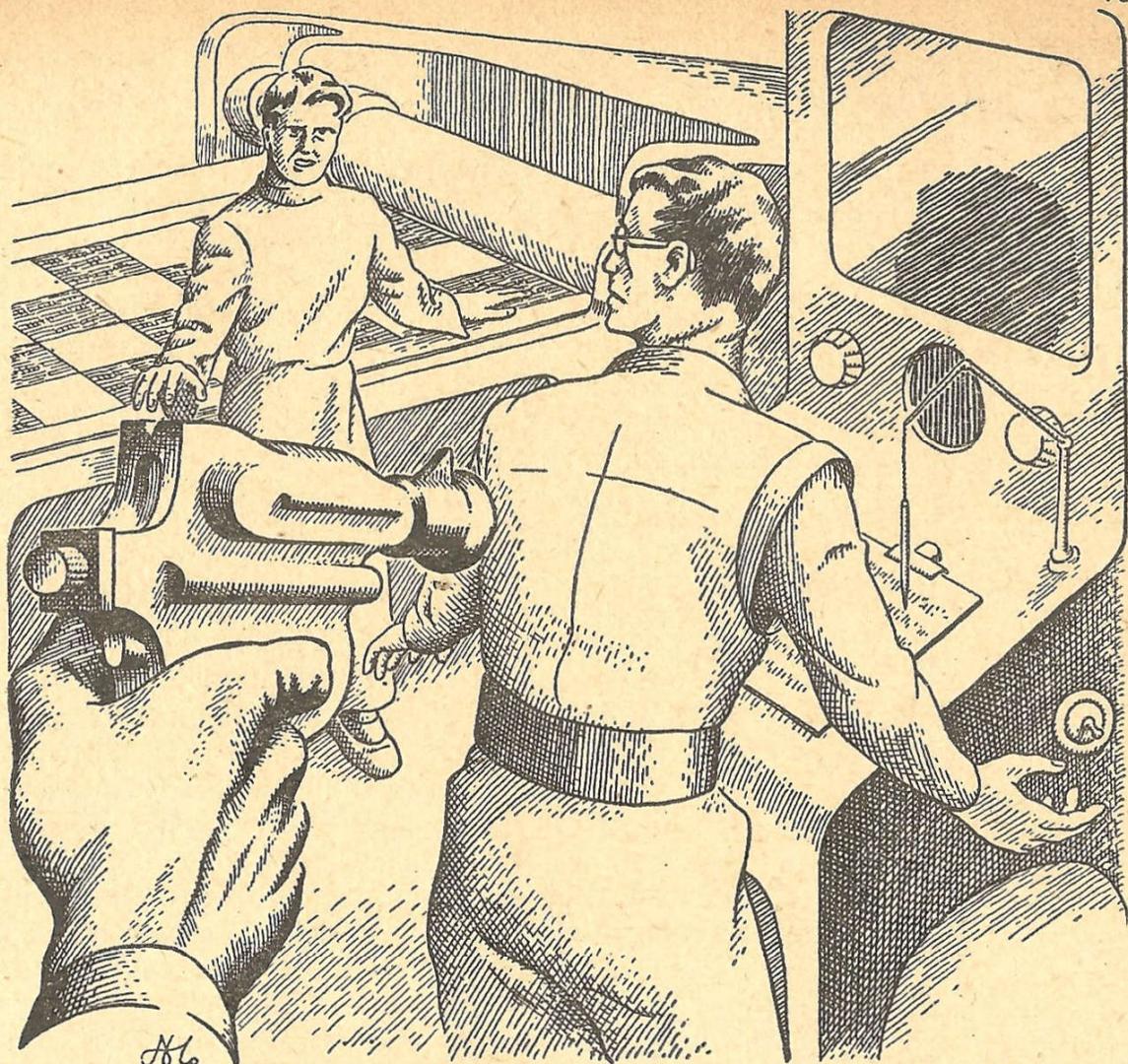
“It's all a fake,” said Hammond Wyatt, but he saw that other people had been conditioned to accept one set of beliefs, and that they could not bring themselves to pay any attention to his views.

He watched the face of Capaldi whenever it appeared on the screen—which was often, now—and the expression in the would-be dictator's eyes convinced him that he was right.

There was an uprising in Eurasia. Several Control Centres were taken over by Capaldi's armies. No harm was done, as far as could be told.

The revolt spread. The telesheets that had opposed Capaldi now changed their tune. The world began hastily to adjust itself to the possibility of a new sort of government—a possibility that soon became reality.

“A free world for free men !” cried Capaldi, as his troopers spread across



the continents, taking over this administration and that Control Centre, supplanting this Governor and that Professor.

And still, to Hammond Wyatt, it was like watching pawns moved on a chessboard. Pieces were pushed here and there, moved by fingers from above . . . and Capaldi was only one of the pieces: for all his arrogance and for all the homage that men paid him, he was only a piece on a chessboard, controlled by someone sitting above.

All the business of closing down the Control Centres was a fake. Wyatt was sure of that. He was sure of it, just as he was sure that Capaldi was behaving as he did simply because the Controllers had decreed, about thirty years ago, that a certain child should receive injections and brain impulses that would turn him into a dictator when the time came. It had all been planned.

So Hammond Wyatt, who had always felt himself to be a misfit in this tidy, over-organised world, took the responsibility of that world into his own hands, and went to find Capaldi, and murdered him.

"Killed?" said Marc Peregrine, his face white with incredulous fury. "Assassinated? But it's not time yet. The plans were made for the year after next. This is impossible."

Gibbon Dormer, older and wearier, shrugged. His eyes were thoughtful. "All the same," he said. "it's happened. An assassination, just as we planned——"

"But too early. It doesn't fit in with any of our plans. It can't happen this way—it just can't happen. The whole thing would be out of control."

"That's the way it is."

Peregrine snapped on the visi-screen. Then, as though realising it could tell him nothing, he switched off again and swung back to Dormer.

He said: "We've got to get the man who did it. Or was he killed—mobbed, or anything?"

"He got away. The Guards are out after him. So are Capaldi's men."

"Capaldi's men must be called off. They're liable to kill him, and we don't want that: we want to ask him questions, and find out what happened." He paused, doubtfully, then went on: "Was it our man who killed him? I mean, was it the one who should have killed him?"

Dormer shook his head. "No. It was someone else."

"It's incredible. You've got to make sure we get that man here. Tell Capaldi's henchmen——"

"It won't be any good telling them anything. The idea was implanted in their heads that they would follow Capaldi and fight for him. They worshipped him. Now they're out for blood. We conditioned them that way as part of our plan. The only thing that can withstand them is a larger, more powerful force of men imbued with a similar fanaticism. And those men," Dormer pointed out drily, "aren't ready yet. The urge for a readjustment will not come to fulfilment for more than a year. That's the way we planned it. We didn't figure on accidents of this sort."

They stood and looked down into the great hall, into which mothers still brought their children, although Capaldi and his propagandists had so fervently assured the world that Control Centres no longer functioned. Peregrine said bitterly:

"Oughtn't we to close down for twenty-four hours and check our statistics? Nothing will be the same now. We'll have to re-cast the whole schedule."

His eyes narrowed suddenly—keen eyes in an old, arrogant face. "There's one thing I've been wondering——"

"And I know what that is," said Dormer. "You've remembered that error years back, when we thought a Recorder was at fault."

"Yes. That operative . . . Suppose he lied, and suppose he *did* make a mistake?"

Dormer nodded. "That's what I came in to tell you. He did lie. He did make a mistake. A wrong injection, and the wrong pattern of impulses through the s.s. cap: and then he tried to falsify his figures, I suppose, so that the Recorder totals would balance."

"You've checked on this?"

"Twenty minutes ago," said Dormer, "after the news of the assassination, and after a description of the assassin and a tele-cast reconstruction of his features had been flashed over the world, that operative committed suicide. It made me think. It made me think a lot. And I made enquiries, and got out the old returns, and that's what it amounts to."

Peregrine lifted one arm as though to strike somebody. His face worked. For a moment he could find no words. At last he burst out:

"All our work overthrown by one blunder! The world completely at the mercy of chance once more, instead of under perfect control: and one

unstable, unpredictable lunatic who's murdered Capaldi and got away . . . ”

“We'll find him,” said Dormer.

“You've got to find him. Before he can do any more mischief, he must be brought here.”

“Every resource we have will be concentrated on the search,” said Dormer. “We'll find him.”

But it was impossible to concentrate every resource on the search for Hammond Wyatt. There were too many other problems to be faced.

In South America there was an uprising. It was confused and, in the end, unsuccessful since the revolutionaries were uncertain of their own motives, and still hampered by their early conditioning. But it was a bad sign. And the fury of Capaldi's followers, wreaking vengeance on innocent people in their search for their chief's assassin, did not make things easier. Inevitably, there was a split in the ranks, and leaders of opposing factions sprang up.

A Control Centre in Eurasia was destroyed—quite genuinely, this time, during a spasm of mob madness.

Peregrine, seeing the world which he had largely created shattering to pieces like this, turned all his hatred against the missing Hammond Wyatt. The operative who was responsible for Wyatt's condition was dead, so it was no good hating him: Wyatt was the one who must be found; Wyatt was the one on whom Peregrine lusted to pour out his fury.

“You've got to find him and bring him here. We can still restore order out of chaos. We can still help the world to regain its balance by a really intensive programme. But nothing we do will be safe as long as that madman is free. There is no room in our world for sports and mutants. I tell you he's got to be found and brought here.”

But in the end nobody found Hammond Wyatt, and nobody brought him to Main Control.

He came of his own accord.

The door clicked warningly, and when Peregrine and Dormer turned, the young man with the beard and the contemptuous eyes was standing there.

Peregrine said: “How did you get in?”

“I found my way all right,” said Wyatt coolly.

“But the Guards——”

“It's quite easy for someone who hasn't been conditioned the right way to get past Guards who've been conditioned—well, shall we say rather too well?”

Dormer stared. He said: “Your name's Wyatt. You're the murderer we've been looking for.”

“Murderer? That's an ugly word.”

The man's calmness infuriated Peregrine. Here was the one—the single irresponsible individual—who had created such havoc in his plans. Peregrine stepped towards the desk, his hand reaching for a switch.

And he was somehow looking into the menace of a blaster, which had almost certainly been taken from one of his own Guards.

“Don't look so surprised,” said Hammond Wyatt. “Didn't it occur to you that I could only be here for one reason? I've come to kill you.”

Marc Peregrine felt no fear. His anger was too great for that. He would have attacked the man but for Dormer's restraining hand on his shoulder.

Dormer, trying to make his voice sound reasonable, was saying: "You don't know what you're saying. You don't know what harm you've done, and what harm you'd do now if you were so mad——"

"I know what I've done," came the calm response, "and I know what I'm going to do."

The room was silent. The door was closed, the visi-screen blank. The three men looked at one another. Peregrine and Dormer were tense; Hammond Wyatt was quite at his ease—he was like a man who had come to the end of a long journey and was glad to be here.

"Let's talk about this," said Dormer.

"It won't do you any good," said Wyatt.

"We've got to make you see——"

"I've seen all I want to see of the results of your meddling with human destiny," Wyatt snapped, tilting the blaster slightly so that it winked malevolently at Peregrine's contorted face.

"And what about your own meddling? If it hadn't been for you, Capaldi would have died when he was supposed to die, with far less bloodshed than there's been now, and the world would have profited from this brief interlude of dictatorship. Because of your insane intervention, there's no telling how it will end now."

"At least men will control their own destinies."

Peregrine sneered. "How many men have ever controlled their own destinies? The world has been a happier, more peaceful place since Control ruled the minds and actions of men than it was in the days of anarchy and so-called freedom."

"You have no right to govern men's minds," said Wyatt.

Peregrine studied him for a moment, then a sly smile crept into his eyes. He said:

"But what about yourself? You don't imagine that you're a free agent, do you?"

"I've never been fooled by Control propaganda. I knew from the start that Capaldi was a fake. I've seen every move of your game. And now I've tipped the board over, and the game will never be played your way again."

"No?" said Peregrine softly. "But you yourself are only the result of conditioning. A stupid operative made a mistake, and gave you a wrong injection. The brain impulses were wrong, too, and so there was confusion in your mind. But if we had known at the start what had happened, we should have been able to forecast your entire behaviour pattern. You can denounce conditioning all you like, my young friend, but you yourself are not free: you're only a technical error. A technical error," he repeated mockingly.

Hammond Wyatt took a step forward, then halted.

"Once you are out of the way," said Peregrine, "we can establish order once more. It will take time—a long time, thanks to your foolishness—but we have the means at our disposal. Two generations, or perhaps three, and Control will once more govern the destinies of men. And men will be glad."

"Aren't you overlooking something?" said Wyatt. "I'm not the one who's going to be put out of the way. I've come here to kill you. And I don't intend to waste any more time."

He lifted the blaster purposefully.

Peregrine said: "You madman . . ."

And then the door gave its warning click, and began to slide open.

Wyatt moved so that his back was to the wall. His finger was already moving as he glanced at the newcomer.

For a fraction of a second he faltered, his face puzzled as recognition flooded it. "Rossheim," he said involuntarily.

Before the thin destructive beam could leap towards Peregrine and Dormer, the newcomer had fired—and Hammond Wyatt was momentarily the glowing, dazzling shape of a man, and then nothing.

Life seemed to return to the silent room. It was possible to depress a switch, to summon Records clerks and to send out swift, urgent messages on the visi-screen. The two Controllers, pale but confident, spread out the chart on the desk, and the man whose name was Rossheim watched them without comprehension.

"You're right," said Peregrine, chuckling. "That's what must have happened."

"This figure here"—Dormer's finger traced the line of the column—"accounts for it. It wasn't a compensating error at all. That fool of an operative tried to cover up his mistake by giving someone else a false injection—one whose strength he worked out himself, the lunatic—and hoping we'd overlook it."

"As we did."

"If you're not looking for it, you wouldn't stand a chance of finding it. Very cunning. And this man here . . ."

They both turned gratefully to Rossheim, who had saved their lives. His gaze was remote and strained: he did not seem to know what he had done, nor why he had done it.

Dormer said gently: "You've known Hammond Wyatt for a long time?"

"Yes. We were at school together, and later I saw him often, though he never really noticed I was there."

"But you felt drawn to him?"

"Drawn to him? Yes, that was it. I just knew—there was something inside me that told me—that I had to follow him, and watch him, and that someday I should be needed to do something."

Dormer nodded, flashing a glance at Peregrine. "You see? The equation works out. Our unknown quantity has been cancelled out."

Peregrine crossed to the window and looked down.

"Now," he said softly, "we can carry on where we left off. A man made a mistake, and upset the balance. But he tried to create a counterbalance, and although a lot of harm has been done, I believe the equilibrium can be restored."

"Two generations," said Dormer, echoing his chief's earlier words; "perhaps three."

"This time there must be no mistakes. We can't afford to run these risks. For the good of mankind," said Peregrine icily, "chance and free-will must be completely eliminated. There can be no happiness otherwise."

With a curt nod he dismissed Rossheim, and called Dormer to his side. Together they pored over a series of charts, and then began to plan the future, which was now safe in their capable hands.

THE END