

THE CHILDREN'S ROOM

By RAYMOND F. JONES

BILL STARBROOK sat down carefully in his battered soup-and-fish and picked up the latest *Journal of Physics*. There had been time to read only the first three pages of Sanderson's article on nuclear emissions before he and Rose had gone off to what she euphemistically termed "an evening's entertainment." Now, at two o'clock in the morning, he tried to shake from his head the brain fog induced by the foul air and worse liquor of the cabaret.

Finally he gave it up. It was useless to try to keep up on his science. But that was the price to be paid for being Chief Engineer of an outfit like Bradford Electronics. Commerce before research, and the customer's gin is always the best.

But his day was coming. He was nearly ready to break loose as an independent consultant.

As he moved to lay the *Journal* down he glanced at the spot on the end table at which it was aimed. There was a new book there, one he hadn't seen before. He dropped the *Journal* into the magazine rack and picked up the unfamiliar book. One of young Walt's. The kid was always bringing in strange volumes from the university and the public libraries. His 240 I.Q. mind was as inquisitive as a pup's. He would read anything he could get his hands on.

The present volume looked like something out of an ancient law or medical library to judge by the cover. Walt read as many curdling comics as the average ten-year-old in the neighborhood, but he read voraciously also of everything else from Plutarch's *Lives* to the *Journal of Physics*.

Starbrook was somewhat puzzled to find that the ponderous-looking tome in his hands was nothing but a fairy tale.

He thumbed through it curiously. There was no accounting for the swift, piercing inquiry of the boy's mind. It was perhaps no more inconsistent that he should find entertainment in a fairy story than that he should find intellectual pleasure in atomic theory. All this while his companions confined themselves to such moderations as comic books and baseball.

The words of the story caught Starbrook's eye. He found himself scanning the sentences, following their meaning. A strange, tantalizing quality escaped him at first, then became plain as he went along. It was the fact that almost every word had a double semantic content. It was like reading two stories simultaneously. He marvelled at the skill that had been required to construct such a tale.

The secondary, or theme story, as he thought of it, held him entranced. It was a curious tale about a group of men different in mental and physical attributes from their fellows. They were sad and lonely because they were isolated from each other and because the human beings with whom they associated did not understand them. Then, magically, there appeared a book that went throughout the Earth and led them to each other and through a door into a place where they lived happily ever after.

A curious tale, it was as if the shadow of a strange and mysterious meaning lay hidden there just beyond the grasp of his imagination. He revised his first opinion. It was the kind of thing that would appeal to Walt, all right.

Then, suddenly, Starbrook awoke to the fact that the time was four-thirty and he could snatch scarcely two hours' sleep before getting down to the labs.

At six o'clock, however, he roused blearily at the sound of movement within the bedroom. Rose was getting dressed.

"What's the big idea?" he said.

"Shh, darling. Go back to sleep. I'll call you in an hour. Walt's been coughing for the last hour. I'm going in to see him. If he has a cold he can't go to school this morning.

STARBROOK shook his head fiercely to try to clear it. He knew it was useless to try to sleep more now. It would only make him more doopey at work. He glanced groggily at the clock and

stumbled into Walt's room.

The boy was smothering a cough. He grinned as the spasm ended. "I'm the victim of a filterable virus, Dad. I didn't mean to wake you."

Starbrook sat down on the edge of the bed. "Better stay home today and not let the bugs get any bigger hold on you.

"I guess so, but gee – I've got a library book due today and they're awfully strict. Maybe you'd take it back for me?"

"Sure. Where does it go? What book is it?"

"It's on the table in the living room. It's from the Children's Room of the University Library."

"That odd fairy tale book? I looked at it last night. I didn't know they had any such books at the University."

"I didn't either until a month ago. They've got some swell books there. It seems like you go along and think you've just been reading a swell story and all of a sudden you find it's just been teaching you something. Like putting candy on a pill. I sure wish they'd do it that way in school."

Starbrook laughed. "Sounds like a good system. I'll have to have a look into some more of these books they have there."

"I hope you do," said Walt quietly.

"I suppose Miss Perkins is responsible for them. She's always up on the latest stuff to improve the mind of man and beast."

Bill Starbrook was well known around the Campus of Hedeman University. He frequented the excellent research library there and had arranged for Walt's special use of the books there, although he was sure that Miss Perkins, the librarian, regarded them both as unconventional interlopers who had no place on a dignified campus.

Pausing on the way to work to return the book, Starbrook found Miss Perkins along at the desk. He unlocked his briefcase and took out Walt's book.

"Good morning, Miss Perkins. I wonder if you'd see that this gets to the Children's Room for me? It's due today and Walt's sick."

Miss Perkins smiled a good morning, then frowned. "The Children's Room? We have no children's department."

She picked up the book and examined its title page and library number. She frowned even more darkly. "You must be mistaken. This doesn't even make sense. It isn't one of our books."

Starbrook grunted in irritation. "I was sure Walt said he got it here."

"It must be from the public library, though I'm sure I don't understand the markings. What is it? Something mathematical?"

Starbrook looked at her and mentally counted to ten. He was in no mood for jokes this morning. He said sweetly, "It's just some fairy tales my boy has been reading."

He left before he observed Miss Perkins' severely pursed lips.

As he turned away, the incident hung on his mind with irritating persistence. He knew he hadn't been so dopey that he hadn't heard Walt correctly. He was certain the boy had said the Children's Room at the University Library.

Then, as he was almost at the door, he glanced to the left and swore softly. There, over a doorway, was the designation: Children's Room.

What was Miss Perkins trying to pull on him? he wondered. Mathematics –!

HE WONDERED why he hadn't noticed this room before, but he had always dashed through in such a hurry. It could easily escape notice, hidden as it was in a shallow alcove.

The room wasn't very large. Seated at tables were about a dozen children ranging in ages

from about eight to fourteen. The librarian at the desk was little and wrinkled. A quality of tremendous age like an aura about her, defied description, but her blue eyes were sharp and young.

She seemed startled by his appearance. "You haven't been here before!"

Starbrook liked her at once. There was none of Miss Perkins' sourness which he had come to associate with all librarians.

He smiled, "No. My son, Walt, checked this out. He is sick today so he asked me to bring it in."

"Were you – have you read any of this book?"

Starbrook was puzzled by her alarm and amazement at his appearance. "Yes," he said. "It's quite an interesting book. I haven't kept up very well with progress in children's literature."

The little old librarian exclaimed, "This is *so* unusual. I wonder what I ought to –"

Starbrook had about reached the end of his endurance for the day. It was twenty minutes to nine – twenty minutes until he had to meet all his section chiefs for weekly conference.

"I must go now," he said. "If you will just check this book in for my boy –"

The librarian seemed to reach some decision about a matter beyond his comprehension. She lost her helpless expression and smiled gently. "Of course. And would you take this next volume in the series he is reading? Also, I wonder if you would do us the favor of taking a couple of other volumes and glancing over them critically yourself. We have some rather radically different works here and we're anxious to have adult criticism on them."

Starbrook's irritation lessened before her smile and he nodded. "I'll be glad to."

The day passed with all the irritations and commotions that might be expected the day after such a night before as Starbrook had experienced. He was at least relieved to find that it had resulted in clinching the purchase of the Cromwell patents, which had been the object of last night's entertainment.

He was tired when he finally reached home again after such a day, but not too tired to put on a cheery smile for Walt as he told Rose to wait dinner a few minutes. He took the new book and went into Walt's bedroom.

Walt's eyes lighted. "Gee, Dad, I thought you'd never come! You brought me another book! Maybe I could talk you into reading to me."

"Sure. There's nothing I'd like better. The librarian even asked me to take a couple for myself. We'll read right after dinner. O.K.?"

"Sure: I'm glad you saw Miss Edythe. She's a nice old lady, isn't she? She shows me just which books to read so that I won't get mixed up on them."

"Are you supposed to read them in a certain order?"

"Yes. I picked up some out of order some day and they looked like a foreign language. I have to read the first ones to understand the harder ones. I don't know why, but that's the way it is."

After dinner, Starbrook went back and opened the new volume that Miss Edythe had sent for Walt.

"You really can read this stuff, all right?" said Walt.

"Sure, why?"

"Well, you haven't read the first books yet, and I just wondered," Walt said evasively.

Starbrook took up the reading. The story was something of a continuation of what he had read the previous night, the story of the "different" men. In long detail it told how the first man learned that he was different, and how he finally located a few others of his kind. Together, they prepared the magic book and sent it on its way around the world to gather all the rest.

THE darkness of early autumn slowly filled the room, and the words grew dim on the pages before Starbrook. But within his brain it was as if a glowing, expanding illumination were present. The story that had been secondary in the previous book was now the primary, as he termed them to himself. And the secondary story of this book was a devastating, unbelievable revelation.

“*You* are one of the ‘different’ men,” its unspoken, intangible message shouted within his brain, “and this is the magic book. Follow where it leads and you shall find the haven that has been prepared for all of us!”

He slammed the book shut abruptly as the darkness became too great to see the words any longer, but he could not still that persistent message in his brain.

The white face of Walt lying against the pillow was hardly visible. “Don’t stop”, the boy said. “Turn on the light and let’s go on.”

“Walt –” Starbrook hesitated. He didn’t quite know how to say it. “What does this mean to you? Do you find any symbolism in it besides the actual story?”

“Sure. It says that we’re a different kind of people from most others. It’s going to show us how to get to a place where there are others of our kind. We couldn’t read it if that weren’t so. That’s why I’m so glad you can read it. You’re one of us, too.”

Starbrook was glad the darkness hid his face and his eyes. “How do you know that?”

“Miss Edythe told me that others wouldn’t believe that there were ordinary words in these books. She said not to show them to anyone for that reason. I found out she was right.”

Disappointment clouded Walt’s eyes. “Mom picked up one of the books one day and she seemed almost afraid of it. I told her then it was algebra. She didn’t know the difference, but still seemed afraid. I left it for you on purpose –”

Starbrook had an average amount of imagination for an engineer, but it staggered before the implications of all this. He told himself it was only an extraordinary realism in the story of the “different” men and their magic book. It was fantastic to believe the men and the book had any counterpart in actuality.

Yet in his mind there was a supreme, undeniable knowledge that could not be denied. Before it, his doubts and name-calling were the taunts of a little boy before an impossible, white fairyland.

The book existed.

This was it.

The “different” men were real. He was one of them – he and Walt belonged to that mysterious clan.

But who were they? What did this unanswerable knowledge imply?

“I have to do a little work downstairs,” Starbrook said. “If you aren’t asleep, I’ll come up later and read some more.”

He went into the living room and opened the first of the two books that Miss Edythe had asked him to look over.

He was surprised to find that these weren’t as easy to read as the ones Walt had. The very language was somehow less comprehensible. At once he knew that *these* were not children’s books – or were they? Books for the children who had come up through the gradual orientation process of the more elementary volumes?

THERE was no pretense of a story. The book opened at once with an abstruse exposition on the principles of biology, heredity, and radiation. It was hard going, but as he continued he seemed to grow in ability to grasp the words and principles. But he tried in vain to imagine the eight-year-olds he had seen in the Children’s Room grasping the substance of this work!

Rose came in to protest his staying up, but he refused to quit. His mind was leaping across the gigantic peaks and crags of the magnificent exposition that lay before him. At midnight he

put the book down, completed, dimly realizing that he had read and absorbed a work that should have required weeks.

But what was the purpose of it all? Why were such books in a children's department of a library? He still could not credit the insistent, semantic implications of the fairy story that he and Walt were of the "different" men. As yet, there was no explanation of the difference, and the mysterious destination of all these men.

And then the answer came swiftly and like a sudden burst of flame before his eyes. He opened the second of the two volumes which he had not been able to comprehend before. Its words were plain now and addressed directly to the reader.

"You can easily comprehend, now, that you are a mutant."

He stared at the words, trying to shed their meaning from his mind, but they stayed, and he knew the truth of them.

"You have come far enough to understand what that means," the book went on. "You are aware of the extraterrestrial radiations which are continually producing mutations, and you understand some of the processes by which they are formed. It is not difficult, therefore, for you to understand that you are one of the many thousands of the 'different' men, the mutants who throng the Earth, scarcely knowing that they differ from their fellow in any matter."

Starbrook looked up. It would be easy to admit the truth of this with regard to Walt. With an I.Q. of 240 at the last test –

But Bill Starbrook – what could there be about him to indicate a mutation? He was a reasonably good engineer – but no better than a couple of million other guys. He possessed no unusual marks of mind or body.

"Thousands of mutations occur every month," he read on. "Most of them are lethal because they are of no advantage to the individual or to the race. But over a period of time there are also unknown thousands of beneficent mutations, most of which are also eventually lost.

"They are lost to the race through accident, improper mating, or no mating at all. They are lost in many instances to the individual because the differences which they impose render him more or less misfit in social aggregations. There are, of course, numerous other instances in which desirable mutations produce a more intelligent, more enduring, completely superior individual, *who is never recognized by himself or his associates as a mutant*. His characteristics may be passed on for a few generations, but unless combined in proper matings they may become recessive and lost.

"In a time far distant from your own, the human race is in competition with another major race in the galaxy who are out-evolving mankind. In order to maintain not only the superiority which the human race has gained, but its very existence, it is necessary that the natural process of evolution be speeded. Wasteful and ghastly experiments have proved the impossibility of doing this by artificial means. Only through natural processes which cannot be duplicated at will can evolution proceed in an effective manner. But nature, in her waste of precious mutations throughout the ages, is herself responsible for man's dire position in this future day.

"OUR purpose, then, is to accelerate the evolutionary rate of the human race by salvaging the beneficent mutations which have been wasted through the ages.

"You who have come this far with us have a duty now, a duty to join us, to bring your mutated characteristics before the race for the benefit of all."

Starbrook was forced to halt. It was too vast, too foreign for his mind or imagination. He was just Bill Starbrook, Chief Engineer at Bradford Electronics. It just wasn't in the cards for him to be reading some mysterious message out of the ages, pleading with him to come to some unnamed place for the good of the race.

He laughed shortly. Children's Room! Someone had certainly succeeded in producing the

most fantastic, incredible fairy tales of all time. Almost had him believing for a moment that he was a mutant! He'd have to tell Miss Edythe that the books were realistic if nothing else.

He strolled out onto the porch. In the clear, cold night the stars looked near. A race had to utilize its mutants, or be outmoded in the contest for evolutionary perfection, he thought. He wondered what the ultimate product of human evolution would be. No doubt it would differ from man as man differed from the anthropoids and reptiles before him.

His eyes on the stars, he thought, were there other spawning races out there somewhere in their infancy, who would eventually challenge man and threaten to sweep him aside in the backwash of hopeless evolutionary superiority?

He brushed aside the maddening thought. There was one way to settle this once and for all. He could see the lights on in the house of Professor Martin, a block down the street on the other side. Martin was head of the ancient languages department at the University and sometimes they played gin rummy together.

Starbrook heaved into his topcoat and quietly left the house with one of the volumes under his arm.

Professor Martin was a big man with a bushy beard. He always reminded Starbrook of one of the ancient Greeks whose language he taught.

He greeted Starbrook with a welcoming roar. "Come in, Bill! I was just hoping somebody would come in for a good game of poker or gin. My wife went home for a week and I've been as lonely as a hibernating bear with insomnia."

Starbrook entered and removed his coat. "I can't stay. I just wanted to show you something and get your opinion on it. See what you make of this."

Starbrook opened the last volume that he had been reading. Its potent message leaped out to him from every character and word, but he turned his eyes carefully to Martin.

The Professor scowled. "Where'd you get this? Certainly these characters are nothing like I've ever seen, and I think I've seen them all."

Starbrook sighed. "I was hoping perhaps that you could read it and tell me what it is. It's – it's something I just picked up in a second-hand store in town. Probably some crazy lingo, something like that Esperanto of a few years ago, only worse."

Professor Martin shook his head. "Possibly. Certainly it isn't recognizable to me. Would you mind my keeping this for a while?"

"Well – perhaps later. I've already promised it to another friend right away. That's why I came over even though it's so late."

"Oh, that's quite all right! I'm glad to have some company. It's lonely here, you know –"

WHEN Starbrook finally got out under the night sky again, the full force of the knowledge hit him like a blow.

I'm a mutant, he thought. Walt is a mutant. If we weren't we couldn't read these unknown characters as if they were plain English, while Martin and others find them unintelligible. And that must mean that all of the rest of it is true, too.

And yet, there was still no meaning to it. This talk of a distant time, and a strange place of meeting for mutants out of all the ages –

That little old librarian, Miss Edythe, was evidently the key to the whole business. She knew the source of the books. She could tell him what it was about.

Then abruptly he remembered something he had not thought of during the evening. Miss Perkins' words: "We have no Children's Department!"

Starbrook was waiting at the outer entrance the following morning when the library building was opened by Miss Perkins herself. She recognized Starbrook and smiled bleakly.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Miss Perkins."

He passed on into the foyer and turned in the direction of the Children's Room. Through the open door he could see Miss Edythe already at her desk. And that was curious, since the library had just been opened. He glanced back as Miss Perkins passed on her way into the main library office. She looked at him – and at the door of the Children's Room as if nothing were there!

It gave Starbrook a sudden feeling of peculiar dread. He hurried in and found numerous children sitting about the tables in the room. He wondered how they had got in there.

“Good morning, Mr. Starbrook,” said Miss Edythe. “I was hoping we'd see you this morning. Did you get time to glance over the books I asked for an opinion on?”

“Yes, I read them completely.”

“That's fine. What do you think of what you read?”

“Miss Edythe – have you read these books? Do you know what is in them?”

“Why, surely. I've read every book in here quite carefully. It's been my life's work.”

“Then what is the explanation?”

The little old lady looked at him soberly out of her bright blue eyes, then moved from the chair on which she sat before the checking desk.

“Please come into the office,” she said.

Starbrook followed her. She closed the door of the small room and sat down, bidding him to have a chair opposite.

“Yours is quite the most difficult case that has ever come to my attention,” she began hesitantly. “In five hundred years there has been only one adult who appeared as suitable material for our colony. You will excuse me if I seem to oversimplify things because I am used to speaking with children – children, however, generally with an intelligence quotient of above 220, so that perhaps we can understand each other well enough after all.

“You recall, in the second of the books I gave you, the challenge to you as a mutant –”

“That's what I came to ask about! The whole business is so unbelievable, but I checked on the books. They couldn't be read by one of the University language professors.”

“That should contribute considerably to your conviction of the truth of what you have read, then,” said Miss Edythe.

“You mean there is actually a group of mutants somewhere who have been gathered to – to save the human race?”

“We hardly like to speak of it so melodramatically – but that is essentially our purpose. We're working to maintain the superiority of the human race in the face of an evolutionary lag from which we suffer. If we do not maintain that superiority it will certainly result in our eventual extinction. These are of course probabilities which have been worked out by our scientists who understand such things. Sufficient for the moment is the fact that we are gathering out the mutants of all the ages of man's history in order to accelerate human evolution. By the proper utilization of these mutants we intend to out-evolve, outstep our competitors in the galaxy who threaten our supremacy and our existence.

“I CANNOT be aware of your past concepts of mutants. With the children it is easy because they learn from the beginning the true character of mutations, the fact that a small variation in the gene for some characteristic may produce an individual with changes from the norm of his race, and highly advantageous both to himself and to the race. Mutations, however, are generally of such a minor character that their possessor is unaware of the variation. This is one important fact to remember in connection with our work.

“Unless, however, we can become aware of these valuable mutations and utilize them we are going to be left behind in the backwater of evolution much as the great apes were when man appeared.”

Starbrook stared dumbly, trying to comprehend.

“A group of us long ago set out to preserve the useful mutants of the race from the earliest beginnings. We have many methods of accomplishing this. This library is one of the most effective. We have devised a language, in which our books are printed, which is intelligible only to mutants. There is a certain brain characteristic which might be termed mutant-linked, which makes this possible. That is, when any kind of gene variation occurs there is also an inevitable variation of another gene at a specific locus which makes the brain receptive to a good many other stimuli, most of which you have never been aware because the stimuli have not been presented. This language is one such stimulus. Another ability your mutation gives you is that of entering the room here.”

“Why, I just walked in!” exclaimed Starbrook.

Miss Edythe smiled. “Yes, of course. But haven’t you wondered why no others also walk in, why it is that only the mutants enter?”

“Why – yes, but –”

“This inscription, ‘Children’s Room,’ above the doorway appears to non-mutants as only a portion of the decorative design of the library building. You read it because it is in the mutation language. In addition, there is a complex pattern on the floor in front of the doorway, which marks a pathway for you to follow into the room. It is a path which no one would possibly chance upon, but your mutated senses follow it instinctively. To others, there is simply no doorway, no Children’s Room at all.”

“But what is the nature of my main mutation?” Starbrook demanded.

“That will have to be determined by proper examination. And there’s one final warning I must make. Don’t expect too much. The disappointments among us mutants are great. For example, in my own case the mutation was that of longevity. I am something over nine hundred years old –”

“Nine hun–!”

Miss Edythe nodded. “Yes. And combined with my particular mutation is a linked sterility factor. As I say, the disappointments among our group are great.”

Her ancient eyes seemed suddenly to be peering down the ages, and Starbrook thought afterward that it was that moment of looking into those strong eyes that had seen so many alien centuries that did most to convince him of the truth of the entire matter.

“What am I to do?” he said at last.

“You will join us?”

”My son, Walt, too?”

“He has much to learn yet before we can present the entire plan to him.”

“It’s difficult to answer your question,” said Starbrook. ”I just don’t know –”

“It’s hardly more than moving to a strange city,” said Miss Edythe, “except that your neighbors and associates will be from all ages and locales of time and space. In a way you will find it highly invigorating. Of course, there are ties that must be severed, friends, your wife – It is difficult that you are an adult!”

Rose!

FOR the first time he took full cognizance of the problem this created with respect to his marriage. Subconsciously, he supposed that she would share in whatever change was involved. If leaving Rose were one condition of joining the mutants he was certain that they could well do without his contribution in the future as they had evidently done in the past.

But what of the children? he thought suddenly. Did it mean that they were to leave –?

There was a new cold tightness within him as he said, ”Could I have the examination to determine what I’m good for, before I decide the matter?”

“Yes, it can be arranged immediately. Please follow me.”

They left by another door that led into a corridor which Starbrook knew was no part of the

library building of Hedeman University. As they crossed it, he got a glimpse through a broad window and gasped audibly. The scene was one of green rolling hills dotted with small clusters of white buildings, a valley of serenity and life instead of the idiotic cluster of masonry that formed the cities of his own age.

His guide allowed no time to ponder the scene. She led him through the door across the hall. Inside he found himself in the midst of a roomful of unfamiliar looking equipment. A young, professional-looking man greeted him with a smile.

“Doctor Rogers,” said Miss Edythe in introduction. “He will conduct the examination. He knows about you. Come back to my office when you are through.”

She left then, and Rogers indicated a chair. “It’s a pleasure to have a full grown individual to talk to for a change,” he said amiably. “Sometimes those pre-adolescent brats with I.Q.s of 250 to 300 are just a little too smart for their pants. I was one of them so I should know. Now, if you’ll just lie back here on this table –”

Starbrook struggled desperately to hold to the fragments of his mind that constituted Bill Starbrook, Chief Engineer of Bradford Electronics. That was all that was real. This world of fantastic Miss Edythe who was nine hundred years old, and the window that looked out upon a green valley where Hedeman should have been were only parts of a nightmare from which he would awake, the nightmare of being examined for possible useful mutations to aid the human race in its attempts to hurdle the laws of evolution.

He endured the long hours of the examination by repeating this fancy over and over again. Then, at last, Doctor Rogers announced that he was through.

Starbrook faced him across a desk. Before the doctor was a mass of records and charts, the accumulations of the tests.

“I have here your complete chromosome map,” he said slowly.

“What mutations do I have that I can contribute to the advancement of man’s evolution?”

There was a moment’s hesitation, then Rogers looked up from the charts. “I may as well give it to you straight. The answer is: none. Absolutely none.”

For a moment Starbrook sat stunned. During the past hours he had built up a vast mental structure on the premise that he was needed in assisting humanity reach the heights. He had fought through the battle of deciding what sacrifices it would be worth. Now –

“None –? I don’t understand. Miss Edythe told me – The mutation language –”

“Your case is most unusual. The total of your mutations consists only of the sensory characteristics by which you were able to read our mutation language, and find our way into the Children’s Room. I don’t recall a single instance previously where this mutation was not linked with some other. It is somewhat interesting from a purely biological viewpoint, particularly in view of the fact you are the father of Walt. Practically, however, your mutation has no value whatever.”

STARBROOK laughed then, his voice unable to disguise his disappointment and a vague shame. “So I am no use to you after all? I have nothing that is of use to my race?”

Rogers looked at him intently. “Don’t emphasize the significance of this,” he warned. “It means nothing whatever to you as an individual. You must realize that only one out of every few hundred human beings has any detectable mutation. Only one out of many thousands of mutations is of real value to the race.

“We are able to eliminate the children who are of no value to us without revealing what it’s all about. Your case has been obviously different.”

“Of course,” said Starbrook. “Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not going to be bitter about this. I had no right to expect anything out of it. I suppose I’ve always been sort of an idealist, hoping to do something to lift men up, and all that sort of thing. I guess somewhere my subconscious must have grabbed hold of this pretty hard and seen in it a chance to realize

those idealisms. But, anyway, what about my son, Walt?"

"We *must* have Walt. We absolutely must. His mutations appear to be the apex of endless unknown processes of nature, culminating in potentialities that will make him one of the most valuable members of our mutants' colony. His life will change the race for generations to come."

"He doesn't know all this yet?"

"No. Even with his high understanding it must be fed to him slowly because he is a child. But he is being educated by the books to the point where he can be given full knowledge of his potentialities and our requirements."

"But what of his relationship to us? I'm not yet convinced of the urgency of this crisis you've spoken vaguely of – not sufficiently to make me ready to allow my son to begin a new life here with perhaps infrequent contact with us."

"Once he comes here and begins his work," said Rogers incisively, "there will be *no* further contact with you."

Starbrook stared in disbelief. "You mean you expect us to give you our son as completely as if he were dead?"

"Watch your semantic extensions," Rogers said drily. "I doubt that anything could convince a member of this age of the urgency of our problem, but in your case I'd like to try, for several reasons.

"Imagine, if you will, two planets on which life had simultaneous beginnings and similar forms of development. On one of these, however, the natural rate of mutant occurrence and consequent evolution is several times that of the other, so that by the time man – so-called modern man – appears on one, the great apes are just beginning to appear on the other:

"Imagine then, the situation when the world with slower evolving life forms has advanced to the point where man appears. What of the other world and the relationship between the two in case they should make contact?

"This is roughly the situation as it existed in the 'normal' time in which this superior race was discovered. We found them as far ahead of us as we are ahead of the great apes today – and incidentally there is far greater physical differentiation between them and us than between us and the apes.

"AS MIGHT be expected, they regard us as little more than we would regard the apes – rather clever apes. Our movements through space, our mechanical achievements are no more to them than the work of clever apes. Though they appear to be a moral, peaceful race they can find no basis for compassion towards us or interest in communication or trade. There is only one possible relation between us, as there has always been only one possible relation between man and the lower forms of life on earth – that possibility is exploitation.

"Our scientists have demonstrated by means you would not be aware of that this exploitation of man by these – super-men – is inevitable. The hope of combating them and so preventing their exploitation of Earth and man is about as great as a tribe of apes would have of preventing capture by an army of hunters equipped with every scientific gadget you know, from radar to atomic bombs.

"There is only one hope for the future of our race: That is to bring ourselves to an equal or superior level with respect to this rival race. And it must be done within the space of a very few human generations, according to our predictions. The mutant colony was founded about one generation ago as soon as the full picture of conditions became apparent. Our work indicates that we can feel confident of success, because mutations have been abundant in the development of man. Nature seems to have been generous but wasteful of them.

"We have already produced a generation of the next form of man, and the individuals of that generation are applying all the powers of their minds to the problem. As you can see, our

facilities are pyramiding rapidly, since we have created the next form of man and *they* are busy on the problem of going a step beyond.

“But, back to Walt. We need him. He carries three extremely valuable, recessive mutations which have never been discovered before. We feel that he will enable us to make the second step beyond man as you know him. You wouldn’t dare interfere with that critical advancement, if you could understand the full depth of the problem. Unfortunately, first-hand knowledge cannot be given you.”

Starbrook had been listening with a gradually increasing tension that left his muscles aching as he abruptly shook his head and forced his attention away from Rogers’ face.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just can’t grasp it all so suddenly. If only I could see for myself –”

“You can’t,” said Rogers with finality. “Ordinarily, of course, we do not complicate our operations with these problems. It is only the accident of your own peculiar mutation that you have become aware of us at all. We *could* act without your consent at all –”

Starbrook felt a sudden frantic chill sweep through him. He had seen enough to know that these mutants could do as Rogers said. They could steal Walt away and banish him forever in this strange land beyond the doors of the Children’s Room.

“It is against our principles to cause pain to anyone,” Rogers continued. “You are a scientist. I want you to follow the teachings provided your son. Study along with him. Learn the facts of our science and finally details of the crisis that faces humanity. If you are not convinced by then, perhaps the Council which controls these matters will bow to your possession, though, frankly, I doubt it. Walt is too important to us.”

“But how can you take *any* of these children without causing pain? How many parents are willing to see them taken away forever? You can’t just take them away and leave a vacuum where they have been!”

“No, we don’t do that.” Rogers hesitated a moment, then he stepped to a door and called to someone. He sat down again. “We do not simply yank an individual out of his environment and leave a vacuum. That would cause too much disruption of your society, considering the numbers we have taken. It would lead to too much pain.”

At that moment a figure moved into the room from the doorway through which Roger has called.

“Walt!” Starbrook rose in amazement. “I didn’t know you were here!”

But the boy did not answer, or even look at Starbrook with any recognition.

“He is not finished,” Rogers explained.

“WHAT do you mean?” Starbrook saw now the empty expression on the boy’s face, repulsive in its vacuousness. Terror seized him and he staggered back into the chair from which he had risen.

When we take someone, we provide a substitute to insert in their environment,” said Rogers. “We create a homolog such as this and make the substitution without the knowledge of anyone except the one who joins us.”

Starbrook’s horror mounted. “You expect to take Walt and leave us this – this monster!”

Sudden, terrible pain crossed the boy’s face and Rogers rose with a snarl of rage. He led the boy out of the room and returned.

“Starbrook!” You’re supposed to be a scientist. Act like one!”

“I’m Walt’s father first. You could hardly expect me to give up my son and accept that – thing of yours as an substitute!”

“I suppose I was stupid to think that you could view this matter with any degree of objectivity. We should have simply made the substitution without your knowledge as we have done in all other cases.”

“Do you think you could have done that without our knowing your homolog wasn’t our son?”

“Of course. It has been done in thousands of other cases. This homolog *is* your son in every respect – or will be when he is completed. Every emotional pattern, memory, instinct, and physical form and composition that goes into your son’s makeup is being duplicated. With the exception, of course, of the creative mutations which set Walt apart from other men, and which cannot be duplicated in the homolog. The homolog will fill Walt’s place in life in every respect. He will grow and develop and respond to his environment in a manner parallel to that of Walt. He can live a normal, useful life. He can marry, though not reproduce. He has an intelligence comparable to Walt’s and will be professionally superior. If you love him or hurt him, if you make him happy or sad, you are doing it to Walt. He *is* Walt. His emotions and feelings are simply transplants, so to speak, of those of your son. That is why you hurt him so terribly just now when you despised him as a monstrosity. What would Walt’s reaction be if you called him that? It will take considerable effort to eradicate that painful experience from the homolog mind.”

Abruptly, Rogers rose. “You may have time to think it over. Our final course of action will be decided by the Council. I am only a technical advisor in these matters, but I can tell you that you will be doing yourself, your son, and the human race a great service if you try to comprehend the things you have seen and heard; conversely, a great disservice.”

ROGERS hesitated. “Perhaps the easiest solution would be for you to come here. It might be arranged since you have the one essential mutation. You could be useful as a technician. A homolog could, of course, be provided to take up the life you leave.”

Starbrook, from where he sat, could see the distant view of the strange valley through a window across the room. It bespoke serenity and peacefulness such as he had not known, and there was evidence of science here such as he had not dreamed of. But he had no purpose here. The invitation was a mere concession to the accident of nature that had granted him his single, useless mutation.

As for leaving Rose –

“Thanks,” he said, “but, no.”

Rogers nodded and escorted him back to Miss Edythe’s office. She was disappointed when Starbrook told her what had happened.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she said, “but the world of mutants is a disappointing place, as I told you before. I suppose we won’t be seeing you again, but we’ll look forward to the visits of your son. Would you care to take along a couple of new volumes for him?”

The world seemed to have taken on a curiously unreal equality to Starbrook as he left the building and got into his car. He drove mechanically through the streets and along the highway that led to the outskirts of the city where the Bradford Electronics plant was located.

There, he secluded himself in his office with orders to his secretary to keep everyone else out for a while. He leaned back in his chair. Through the window he could see the hazy, disordered landscape of the city, just as through that other window a few moments ago he had seen the peaceful scene out of that unknown era of the future.

He had no illusions about the reality of that strange vision. The experience carried its own conviction. He knew that he had seen the miracle of a scene from the future, and had spoken to men whose lives lay far ahead of his in the time continuum.

His mind speculated at the fringes of his experience, ever trying to dodge the core of it. But at last he forced himself to face it.

Walt.

He tried to submerge the subjective factors in his mind and consider the things he’d heard as a scientist should consider them. He didn’t doubt the truth of Rogers’ statements – and when he once admitted that to himself he was left helpless.

Walt would go.

He would carry forward the mutations which he bore so that the race might profit.

It was as simply as that, and there was no alternative.

But that conclusion released the flood of subjective opposition that his mind had held in check. Were a man's feelings for his son to be wholly ignored? They weren't, he reflected bitterly. They were supposed to be expended upon some grisly automaton shaped in the image of his son. Surely Rogers would destroy the thing after he'd seen Starbrook's reaction to it.

And Rose.

Up to now he'd left the reactions out of his thoughts. She was no scientist. She had never pretended to understand the objective, selfless attitudes of science. Surely she would not be able to do so in this. It would be impossible to convince her that Walt's destiny lay with the mutants of a future age.

And what of Walt himself?

Soon he would be faced with full understanding of the thing that he was and his possibilities. Would he choose to go with the mutants?

There was little doubt that he would. The genius of the boy's mind was tempered with an emotional stability that would let him see the problem whole, that would let him evaluate it without fear and personal prejudice – as Starbrook knew that he should be doing, himself.

THEY *could*, of course, forbid his further study of the books of the Children's Room. They could enforce their will upon him by sheer physical means.

And for the rest of his life he would hate them with an untranscended bitterness. In any profession he undertook he would be taunted by the incubus of longing for lost worlds and vanished dreams. And with it would ride hate – hate and revulsion for the thing that his parents had done.

Starbrook sighed wearily and put away that bitter vision. He forced himself to recognize that he was completely helpless. The decision lay not with him, but with Walt.

He'd have to tell Rose, somehow, he thought. That was the hardest part of all. Harder still, because she could not comprehend the mutant language or see that world of the future. All of it would have to be understood only as he could tell it.

For a while he tried futilely to dispose of some of the work on his desk. It was no use. He cleared it off and gave necessary instructions to his secretary, telling her he'd be back in the morning.

When he reached home, Rose met him in the front hall, her face reflecting her startled surprise.

"Bill! What are you doing home at this time? Nothing's wrong –?"

"Of course not, darling." He lifted her with his hands on her waist. "Just got lonesome for home cooking for lunch. What's on?"

"Bill, you silly. There's nothing on – nothing that would satisfy your gourmandizing. Some fruit salad, sandwiches – for me and Walt,

"Swell. Lead me to it."

It isn't going over, he thought. This isn't the right approach. But how can I say it? What am I going to tell her –

After lunch, he led her into the living room and drew her down beside him on the sofa.

"Bill, what's wrong? Something is on your mind."

He smiled uncertainly. "Yes. There is something special I want to tell you, something I've got to make you understand – about Walt."

"Walt! What has happened –?"

"Something good. It's happened, or *is* happening, and he's going to need all our help and understanding. Darling, do you know what a mutant is?"

Rose furrowed her brow. "I remember something about them in college biology. Six-legged

calves, fruit flies with extra wings –”

“Yes, but that’s the wrong kind. Every improvement in living creatures from the dawn of life has come about through mutations, changes in characteristics of offspring from those of their parents. Rose, Walt is a mutant.”

Uncertain disbelief, shock, and revulsion moved in waves across her face. Then slowly, Bill Starbrook began his story. He explained about the books, the Children’s Room, and his own experiences there. He told of the mutant colony and their struggle to step up the evolutionary rate of the human race to keep it from being swept aside and exploited by more rapidly advancing races. Then he told of the need of Walt’s potentialities in that struggle.

WHEN he was finished, Rose was sitting still as ice, her face expressionless. When he touched her hand, it was cold.

“You can’t expect me to believe such a story,” she said at last. “It isn’t true. It couldn’t possibly be true. Things like that don’t happen.”

“They *have* happened,” Starbrook pointed out, “perhaps thousands of times in our own generation. It is only by accident that I found out about this instead of Walt being swept away without our knowledge.”

”This must be some kind of a crazy joke, Bill. You can’t have believed a word you’ve said. Why are you telling me this?”

“There are the books –”

“Those books. Yes. Ever since Walt first brought them home I’ve felt their evil influence. Why, no one can even read them. The characters are like cabalistic scribbling of ancient spells and mysticisms. I *can* believe almost that they are responsible for such fantasies as you have described – in your minds.”

“Rose.” And suddenly Starbrook knew it was no use, but he went on. ”Walt and I can read those books. To us, the characters make sense – because we have the mutations that enable us to read them.”

“Please, promise me you won’t let Walt bring any more of them to the house. Whatever it is that has seized his imagination – and yours – will gradually be forgotten if he doesn’t have them around.”

Starbrook kept silent. As he looked into Rose’s eyes he knew she would never believe this thing. Not until it was too late, anyway –

I’ll see what I can do with Walt,” he said wearily. ”We can’t suddenly force him to avoid the books. He would read them in the library at any cost. But I promise I’ll watch him and keep him from being hurt by them.”

He got into the car again and drove away. His disappointment hung like a pall over everything, but he had not expected more, he told himself. He could not expect Rose to act differently. Her utterly conventional mind with its lack of scientific training was a narrow highway over which such ponderous vehicles of revelation could never pass.

Suddenly, he realized he had no destination. He didn’t want to go back to the office. He glanced down at his briefcase in which lay the books Miss Edythe had given him for Walt. He’d forgotten to take them to him. He turned downtown and went into the reading room of the public library. There, he began studying the new volumes.

With what was almost a pathetic eagerness now, he wanted to devour every concept of the mutant’s colony which he could obtain. He wanted to know that world in which Walt was going to live in all the detail he could.

With somewhat of a shock he realized he was now thinking in terms of Walt’s going as a foregone conclusion. Now he wanted to preserve for himself every common facet of experience that would link them after Walt had passed irrevocably through time and space to a far future.

He found the present volumes suddenly different from those that Walt had previously been given. The pretense of fiction and fairy tales was gone. The information being given now was straight stuff. So abstruse was it, that Starbrook wondered how Walt could possibly absorb it, but he felt certain that the mutants had made no mistake. They knew what they were doing.

There began to appear new bits of information that he knew was not a part of Earth's science in this age. As he read on, he moved farther and farther into the difficult unknown of the mutants' science.

Slowly, his scientific objectivity began to predominate the mixture of feelings within him. Here was material that would be of inestimable value to his own age. It would be tragic to let it get away without making some attempt to preserve it. He wondered if the mutants would have any objection to that. Evidently not, since Rogers knew he had free access to everything that Walt obtained from the library, and had even advised him to go along with Walt.

HE DECIDED to go back to the plant after all. It was late and near quitting time when he arrived, but the photo lab was still open. He took one of the books and gave it to Joe Coppers, the photo technician.

"How soon can you shoot the whole thing? Photostats of each page, say three copies."

The technician frowned as he glanced at the unintelligible pages. "What the devil –?" Then he glanced at Starbrook's face.

"We can get it out tomorrow," he said quickly, "if it's that much of a rush job," he said. "We've just finished up the instruction book work on that BC-124A set –"

"Good. I'll be around tomorrow for it – and have some more for you."

When he returned home neither he nor Rose made any mention of the incident of the afternoon. Together they went up to Walt's room to see how he was. His cold was better and he was lying impatiently reading one of the mutants' books.

Rose's face showed only a flicker of emotion as she saw the book, then she returned the smile that Walt gave them.

"Gee, Dad, I thought you were never going to get home. Mom says you were here for lunch and never came up to see a guy flat on his back. What kind of business is that?"

Starbrook ruffled his hair. "Very urgent business or I'd have come up. How're your viruses – or what the devil do you call more than one of the bugs –"

"They find me pretty poisonous. I'll be up tomorrow."

"Not quite," laughed Rose.

"How about us working on our chess game while Mom gets supper, Dad? We ought to have time for a couple of moves. O.K. Mom?"

"Sure. You go right ahead. I'll bring yours on a tray."

When Rose was gone, Walt looked at the briefcase that Starbrook still held. "Did you bring some more books for me?"

Starbrook nodded. He drew out the first of the two that Miss Edythe had given him. "We've got to do something about keeping these under cover from now on. They worry your mother. She's afraid of their influence. She can't understand what you or I can comprehend in them. I tried to tell her a little about them this afternoon. That's what I came home for. It's hopeless. She wants you to get rid of them. You'll have to do that or else study them under cover."

For a moment Walt's young face seemed whiter against the pillow and at last he shook his head. "I can't do either. I can't stop until I know where this is leading. And one of the things I need most is Mom's understanding of it. Don't you understand?"

"Yes – I do, but I don't know what you can do about it."

"Why couldn't I teach her to read these books? It seems to me that this language or whatever it is should be so simple to understand. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know. I had never thought of that. Why don't you see?"

Surely it would be worth a try, Starbrook thought. He had never supposed that it would be possible for anyone not possessing the particular mutation to be able to read the language. But it was worth hoping for. Walt *needed* all the understanding he could get. It was beginning to tell on the boy's face, the uncertainty and the glimpsing of new worlds that were terrifying in their impact upon his mind. His yearning and his gift of understanding went out towards his son, but there was so little that was tangible that he could do. He wondered what would happen when the full impact of knowledge of what he was expected to do came to him. But Starbrook had no thought that Walt would turn down the opportunity. In spite of the terrifying aspects of it, Walt would leap at the chance to join the mutants. There was no doubt of that. If only Rose could come to some understanding before it happened –

“Try it tomorrow,” said Starbrook suddenly. “Try to get your mother interested in learning the language of the books.”

DURING the forenoon of the following day, Starbrook was forced to return his attention to his work at the plant. Development on a police transceiver was in a boggle, and he spent the whole morning in the lab working with the engineers on it. By early afternoon he broke away long enough to go down to the photo lab.

“Got my stuff ready?” he asked Joe Coppers. “Here's another one for you.”

“I hope you and your Chinese friends know what this is all about,” grinned the technician. He handed Starbrook the thick piles of photostats.

Starbrook looked at them. “This isn't the stuff I gave you!”

Joe Copper looked startled. “Sure it is. Here's your original. Same stuff. What's the matter?”

Starbrook continued to stare at the photostats – and at the original copy. Then he knew what the trouble was. The photostats were absolutely unintelligible to him. Only the original books provided the proper stimuli for his senses. There was something beside the mere form of the symbols – something in the very materials of the book itself.

Slowly, he picked up the books and nodded towards the pile of photostats. “Toss that junk away, Joe. I was wrong. There won't be any more. This stuff won't photograph.”

The technician gaped as Starbrook walked out. After the door closed, he swore volubly.

In his office once more, Starbrook faced the problem that the only way to record the material he wanted to preserve would be for him to read it aloud. He ordered up one of the long time magnetic recorders which would run a full day without attention. It would take endless hours of his time. Perhaps he could get Walt to do some of it after the boy was a little farther along.

He began the long task with the volumes at hand and worked until long after everyone else had gone. He called Rose and told her he'd be late. It was after eleven that night when he finally decided to quit and go home.

He expected the lights to be out in the house. Walt would be asleep, and Rose always went to bed early when she was alone. But when he drove in the driveway the front of the house was ablaze with light.

As he entered the front door, Rose looked up. With somewhat of a start, Starbrook noticed she had one of the mutants' books on her lap.

She saw his glance go towards it at once.

“I'm afraid, Bill,” she said in a thin, fear ridden voice. “I've never been so afraid in my life.”

“Rose –!”

“Walt wanted to try to teach me to read these books. Just to humor him I let him and I found out that I *can* learn it. Already I can pick out words and sentences, even whole paragraphs here and there. Oh, Bill, I don't want to read it!”

“But you must – now that you know you can,” he said quietly. “You know that, don’t you?”

She nodded, her face tight with terror. “That story you told me yesterday. It can’t be true –!”

“Please Rose.” He sat down beside her and tightened his arm around her shoulders. “We’ve got to realize that we’ve had a very wonderful privilege in knowing Walt – in bringing him into the world, because he’s going to do something wonderful for all of mankind.”

“I just can’t think of it that way, I just can’t. He’s my baby.”

“Yeah, said Starbrook thickly. “He’s mine, too –”

HE WONDERED how long it would be now. Walt’s cold was soon better and he returned to school. He brought home new books regularly from the Children’s Room, at the rate which the mutants allowed.

Starbrook labored fiercely to keep up with Walt’s speed in understanding the new science revealed in tantalizing snatches and mere introductory expositions. He had to depend now on Walt’s interpretations to a great extent and the work of transcribing the information to the recorders went slowly, even with Walt’s assistance in the reading and segregation of material.

In growing tension, Starbrook began to greet each day somehow as if it were the last he would ever know. He tried to suck the essence of living from each passing moment, for he knew that almost any time now the mutants would reveal their purposes to Walt and claim him for their own. And in that moment something of Starbrook would be eternally dead.

His admiration for Rose increased as she continued doggedly her study of the mutant language. It has seemed easy for her at first, but now it became apparent that she would never get past the first volumes in which the situation of the mutants scattered throughout the Earth was presented in fantasy and allegory.

But Starbrook was not prepared for the change which was becoming more apparent in Rose day by day. The terror was slowly giving way to a strange serenity, almost a resignation that was in itself somehow frightening to Starbrook. It seemed as if she had found some secret of her own in those pages, which neither he nor Walt had discovered.

He wanted to ask her about it, but he knew that when this new feeling came to a focus she’d tell him.

She did. It was just two weeks after Walt had started back to school. They were sitting in the early twilight on the front steps watching Walt riding away on his bicycle to join the baseball game in the park two blocks away.

“It will be lonesome,” said Rose suddenly, “but there’ll be happiness in memory.”

“Rose!”

“It seems like I’ve found out just this moment what those stories in your mutants’ books have been saying all this time. I’ve read them over and over, and I can’t go beyond the stories, but I understand *them* now.”

“What do you understand?” said Starbrook.

“I understand that Walt *is* different. I think I’ve always known it, really. Not just his high intelligence, but other things, too. I understand now that he is one of the lonely men whom the book has been sent into the world to gather. I know that unless he goes with his own kind he’ll be forever lonely and his life will be wasted. I wouldn’t want that, no matter what the pain of sending him away might be.”

“The – story – convinced you of that?”

STARBROOK pondered the semantic power of the mutant language. What secrets lay behind its powers to shape the human will to the wishes of the writers might never be known, but he knew there was a vast science evident here that was hardly dreamed of in his age. Semantics that could reduce all Rose’s fears to a calm serenity and persuade her that her only child should be sacrificed to the unknown future of the race. There was no understanding such

powers yet –

He said, “It will be easier on Walt when he knows, now that you are willing for him to pursue his own destiny.”

“We’ve had him for ten happy years. It’s been a lot. When will they tell him?”

“I don’t know. Whenever they think he’s ready. It might be any day now.”

Starbrook had told himself that he was prepared, but when the moment came he knew that he could never have been equipped to accept the fact unemotionally.

It was the very next day when he came home from the plant that he found Rose and Walt together in the living room. Something went dead within him at the sight of their white faces. They had both been crying.

“They told me today,” said Walt without waiting for him to speak. “They told me what you already knew all the time.”

Starbrook fought down the tight swelling in his throat. “Yes, I knew, I’ve been waiting for you to become ready.”

“But you’re not going?” Walt looked in agonized despair from his father to his mother and back again. Somehow I’d always thought because you could read them, too – that you were like me –”

Starbrook shook his head and smiled wanly. “No I’m just a sort of freak that they’ve never run into before. I’m no good to them, so I won’t be going. Besides, your mother will need me.

“I’ll miss you –!” Tears sprang again into his reddened eyes.

“You wan’t be lonely,” said Starbrook with a calm that surprised himself.”That’s why you’re going away. If you stayed here you would be the loneliest of men because you have a thousand talents and abilities that would only be smothered and subdued. You’d be misunderstood, despised for your superior attributes and your whole life would be bitter. It will be far better where you are going. They will understand you and will be your own kind.”

“Yes, I know all that,” said Walt thinly,” – but I’ll still be lonely for you –”

It would pass, Starbrook thought. It had to pass. In the end it would be the best. He knew that what he had said was true.

“You don’t have to go –” he said.

“Oh, but I do! It’s just kind of hard right now –”

That’s what Starbrook wanted to be sure of. He smiled approvingly. “Do you know when?”

“Right away. Tonight!”

“Tonight!” All Starbrook’s defenses seemed to collapse before that single word.

“In less than a couple of hours from now. Some emergency has come up. I don’t know what, exactly. They’ve got to move the Children’s Room to some other age right away – something about picking up an important mutant who is about to be destroyed in some future time. They’re holding the movement now just for me.”

“Then there’s time for dinner together,” said Starbrook. “Lets have it a time to remember.”

“It’s all ready,” said Rose, drying her eyes. ”We were waiting for you.”

IT WAS a time to remember – and a time for remembering. They went back and picked out the gems from the thousand moments of happiness they had known together and touched them again, fondling them, hugging them close in their memories.

And swiftly the moments passed until there were no more left.

Walt glanced at the clock. “I’ve got to be going.”

They got into the car and Starbrook drove slowly away from the curb. With each new moment it seemed as if the impact of realization came all over again – the realization that Walt would not be riding back this way with them. These houses and this street, those friends who were waving to Walt from across the way, none of them would ever know his presence again. And suddenly, Starbrook wondered how his absence would be explained –

Sounds all about them seemed to be suppressed as if it were a dream and the car was floating soundlessly through space. Almost as if without Starbrook's conscious direction it approached the college campus and came to a halt before the library where lights were visible in the main reading room.

"Maybe you won't want to come in," said Walt hesitantly.

"Of course we will," said Rose in a steady voice.

Starbrook remembered that she had never seen an entry into the Children's Room. He wondered how it would appear to her.

With Walt between them they walked slowly towards the building.

"Gee, Dad," said Walt suddenly. "I forgot to put my bike up. It looks like rain. Will you put it away for me?"

"Yeah. Yeah – sure –"

The futility of that impulsive request washed over him in a suffocating wave of desolation. Silently, they mounted the steps and entered the foyer.

"It's here." Starbrook touched his wife's hand.

"Where? I don't see anything. But, of course –"

He pointed to the inscription over the door.

She shook her head. "I can't quite make it out. That blank wall, Bill! How can there be a door there that I can't see –"

Some of the old fear was returning to her eyes.

"It's there. Walt's going towards it, now. Perhaps he'll disappear to your eyes."

The boy turned for one final, backward glance. He smiled warmly and confidently and held up a hand. Then he walked on into the room.

Rose gave a little cry as he vanished from her sight. "Bill – can you see him? Where did he go?"

"He's right there, darling. He's talking to Miss Edythe and Dr. Rogers. There are a lot of the other boys in there, too. There's a Chinese boy and some that are European. This library must have doors into all the world."

"What's Walt doing now?"

"Just waiting. Dr. Rogers has his arm around his shoulders. He looks happy, darling. He *is* happy. This is the way it should be."

Suddenly, while he spoke, the doorway into the Children's Room seemed to grow milky. It wavered and blurred as if his vision were failing. Impulsively, he took a step forward and waved. He glimpsed Walt's face, smiling and joyous, and his hand waving in farewell."

"He's gone."

Rose crumpled against him. Her face buried in his shoulder and she stood there sobbing uncontrollably for a moment. Then at last she raised her head and looked at Starbrook. Her eyes were shining in spite of the longing in them.

"I'm sorry, Bill. I just couldn't help that one."

"Shall we go back, now?"

They started down the steps as the light drizzle began to fall.

"It's raining," said Rose. "And Walt's bike is still out. You mustn't forget to bring it in for him."

YES, Starbrook thought. I mustn't forget that. It's the last thing I can ever do for him.

He glanced towards the curb, at their car which they had left empty. With a start, he realized it wasn't empty now. There was a figure in the back seat, a face watching them through the window.

Rose saw it, too, and cried out in momentary fright.

A chill of terror swept through Starbrook.

The homolog.

He had forgotten it. He had supposed that Rogers had destroyed it because he'd said they wouldn't want it.

He closed his eyes a moment and prayed silently that this nightmare monster might vanish, this parody of Walt –

It was looking at them with Walt's face, Walt's eyes, and Walt's smile was upon his lips.

And it called to them.

Walt's voice.

"I hurried and got my books. I thought you wanted to get back home right away. Let's hurry now, because I left my bike out in the rain."

The hard knot within Starbrook seemed to soften. This was not the staring, empty face he had seen in Rogers' laboratory that day. He remembered how Rogers had warned him that it hadn't been completed. When it was, he's said it would be every feeling, every emotion, every memory that had been Walt. It would react in every way exactly as Walt would have reacted.

And Rose had not seen the homolog before its completion. Something of that first shock was leaving her face as she recognized what it was. She moved forward slowly.

"It's Walt," she said in a half whisper. "It's everything of Walt that could have been ours anyway. And I thought it would be some crude mechanical thing from what you said. Oh, darling, they've taken their mutant and given our son back to us!"

Semantic control – wish fulfillment – whatever it was, Starbrook thought, the Rose who hadn't read the mutants' books would not have accepted the homolog so readily.

And yet – perhaps it was some influence they'd exercised over him, too – why not? Wasn't the homolog everything that Walt had been? The exact pattern of his instincts, reactions, emotions, memories. What else was there that constituted a human being?

Even the question of identity seemed to diminish as he thought of that last vision of Walt standing content and happy amid the other mutants about to begin their long journey.

The homolog got out of the car. He ran towards them as they moved slowly towards it.

"What's the matter" Mother – Dad, you look so strange. Is anything wrong?"

Starbrook smiled. "Not a thing in the world – son. Your mother and I were just thinking how lucky we are – in a lot of ways. Come on, we'd better beat it home and get that bike in out of the rain."