# Return from M-15

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## 1

“For this device,” declared the haggard young man, “and all rights, I want thirty percent of the World Research Syndicate voting stock.”

The big man grinned. “Your little joke, Dr. Train. World Research Syndicate has little interest in independents—but from a person of your ability, perhaps we’ll examine it. What is it you have there? Perhaps a payment of a few thousands can be arranged.”

“Don’t laugh just yet. Look over these plans—you’ll see what I mean.”

The engineer took up the sheaf of cap with a smile and unrolled one of the sheets. His brow wrinkled, the smile became a frown. He opened other sheets and stared at them.

“Excuse me,” he said, looking up. “I think I see what you are driving at, but I can’t deliver an opinion on this sort of thing. I’m an expert in my own line and I know dielectrics as well as most, but this stuff is over my head. I shall endorse your work and refer it to the Board of Technology. And I think you’ll scare hell out of them.”

Train laughed freely. “I’ll do my best, Hans. And have you any idea of what this device will do?”

Vogel looked frightened. “I almost hope I’m wrong,” he said. “Does it—” he whispered in Train’s ear.

“Right the first time. It does and it will. And if the Syndicate doesn’t meet my demands, then I can set it up myself and go into business.”

The other man looked strangely sober. “Young Dr. Train,” he started, “I am strangely inclined to advise you like a father.”

“Go ahead, Hans,” replied Train cheerfully.

“Very well. I tell you, then, to moderate your request, or you will find yourself in the gravest of difficulties.” He looked about the room apprehensively. “This is not a threat; it is merely advice. I am almost convinced that you should scrap your machine or technique, or whatever it is, and forget about it as completely as you can.”

Train rose angrily. “Thank you. Vogel, you must be the truest and most faithful slave the Syndicate has; you and your advice can both go to the same place. I’m leaving the plans with you; they are not complete, of course. I hold all the key details. Send them in to your board and have them communicate with me. Good day.”

Ann was primping herself before a mirror. “Barney,” she warned coldly as she saw Train sneaking up behind her.

“I just wanted to straighten my tie,” he said meekly.

“A likely story!”

“It isn’t every day one calls on Jehovah,” he said. “I think Mr. T. J. Hartly would be disgruntled if I appeared with a crooked tie to receive a check for a million dollars.”

“For a check that big you should be willing to go in stark naked,” she said reflectively.

“Possibly. Where shall we have dinner? I want to flash the check in a head-waitress’ face. They’ve been sneering at me all my life and I think it’s time I got even.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” she retorted indignantly. “The moment we get that check, we head for the city clerk and get married. The money may be in your name, but I’m not going to be short-changed.”

“Come on,” he said, taking her arm and starting for the door. “It is sort of wonderful, isn’t it? I’m so damned nervous I might burst into tears.”

Suddenly sober, she looked at him. “Yes.”

“Husband and wife,” he mused. “Free from care and poverty; we can just love each other and buy all the crazy, expensive machines we want. We can get acid stains on our hands whenever we feel like it, and have explosions three times a day. It’s like a dream.”

She kissed him abruptly. “On our way.” They hopped into a taxi, and after a few moments of frenzied driving, pulled up at the entrance to the Syndicate Building.

Train paid the driver, gave him an enormous tip. On the elevator, Ann kicked him sharply in the shin.

“What was that for?” he inquired injuredly.

“For wasting our money, dear.”

“Then this,” he replied, kicking her back, “is for interfering in the distribution of our funds.”

The door opened and they hobbled out of the car.

“Mr. Train and Miss Riley?” asked a polished young man, looking curiously at them. “Please come this way.” He opened a hugely carven oak door and ushered them through. Then the door closed solidly behind them.

The room was huge and impressively bare. At the far end, beneath clouded windows, was a large desk. Impressively the man behind it rose. “I am Mr. Hartly,” he said.

“Riley and Train,” replied Barnabas Train nervously. “We are pleased to meet you.”

Hartly smiled acknowledgment and studied a sheaf of papers. “As the arrangement now stands, we have investigated your device—tagged Independent Fourteen—and are prepared to take over all rights and techniques in exchange for a stated payment. This payment will be an advance of one million dollars to be delivered in toto now, in return for the final details of Independent Fourteen which are in your possession, to be followed by a transfer of thirty percent of the voting stock of Research Syndicate.”

“Correct,” said Train. “I’m prepared to deliver if you are.”

Hartly—who was really a very small man, Ann noted with some surprise—smiled again. “As director of the Syndicate I have decided to request a slight moderation in your demands.”

“To what?” snapped Train, his eyes hardening.

“It has been thought that an ample payment would be arranged on a basis of the million advance and—say—one tenth of one percent of non-voting stock.”

Train laughed shortly. “Don’t joke with me. I know the spot you’re in. I’m holding out for a strong minority for one reason only—I want to put in my vote when I have to and keep your financiers from taking young technicians from the schools and making them your slaves as you’ve always done. And if you don’t give in—Independent Fourteen goes into operation under my direction and at my discretion. And you know what that machine can do to your trust!”

Hartly tapped his teeth with a pencil. “As well as you, certainly.” A moment of silence. “Then if we can reach no agreement you had better leave.”

“Come on, honey,” said Train, taking Ann’s arm. “We have work to do.” Turning their backs on the little financier, they walked to the huge door and pulled it open. Before them was a line of police. “Go back,” said an officer quietly.

“What the hell is this?” demanded Train as they were hustled back to Hartley’s desk, surrounded by an escort with drawn guns. The officer ignored him and addressed the man behind the desk. “We heard there was trouble in here, sir. Are these the ones?”

“Yes. The man has attempted blackmail, theft, sabotage and assault. The woman is of no importance.”

“He’s lying!” exploded Train. “I’m Dr. Train and this snake’s after stealing an invention he won’t meet my terms on.”

“You’d better search him,” said Hartly quietly. “I believe he has on him documents stolen from our files. They will be marked as specifications for Independent Fourteen.”

Suddenly Train stopped struggling. “You’re wrong on that point,” he said coldly. “All the missing details are in my head; you’ll never get them from me.”

“It really doesn’t matter, Doctor,” returned Hartly negligently. “My engineers can reconstruct them from what we have.”

“I doubt that very much! The chances are one in a million of your ever stumbling on certain facts that I did. I warn you—Independent Fourteen’s lost for good if you do not turn me loose.”

“That may be,” smiled Hartly. Suddenly he burst into laughter. “But surely you didn’t think we were going to operate your device. It would cripple our economy if we worked it to one percent of its capacity. That machine of yours is impossible—now. We may use it for certain purposes which we shall decide, but your program of operation was a joke.”

Train and Ann looked at each other. “I think, Barney,” she said softly, “that sooner or later we’ll kill this little man.”

“Yes. We will because we’ll have to. I’ll be back, Ann—wait for me.”

“Captain,” broke in Hartly to the officer, “here is a warrant of transportation signed by the Commissioner. It authorizes you to remove the prisoner to a suitable institution for indefinite detention. I think that had best be M-15.”

Train had been hustled into a police car and rushed to the outskirts of the city. There his guard turned him over to another group in grey uniforms. He looked for insignia but found none. A policeman said to him, before driving off, “These men don’t talk and they don’t expect prisoners to. Watch your step—good-bye.”

Train’s first question as to who his guards were was met with a hammer-like blow in the face. Silently they shoved him into an armored car, as grey and blank as their uniforms, and all he knew was that they were driving over rough roads with innumerable twists and turns. At last the car stopped and they dragged him out.

He almost cried out in surprise—they were at a rocket-port. It was small and well hidden by surrounding trees and hills, but seemed complete. On the field was a rocket the like of which he had never seen. Without windows save for a tiny pilot’s port, comparatively bare of markings, and heavily armored, it loomed there as a colossal enigma.

His guards took his arms and walked him to the ship. Silently a port opened, making a runway with the ground, and other men in grey descended. They took Train and the single sheet of paper that was his doom and dragged him into the ship.

“Where—,” he asked abruptly, and a club descended on his head.

He opened his eyes with the feel of cold water on his forehead. An inverted face smiled at him. “Feeling better?” it asked.

Train sat up. “Yes, thanks. Now suppose you tell me where we are and what in hell’s going to become of us.” He stared about him at their quarters; they were in a little room of metal plates with no door apparent.

“I think we’re on a prison ship,” said his companion. “They were apparently delaying it for your arrival. We should be taking off shortly.”

“Yes—but where are we going?”

“Didn’t you know?” asked the other with pity in his eyes. “This ship goes to M-15.”

“I never heard of it or him. What is it?”

“Not many know it by its official number,” said the other carefully and slowly, “but rumors of its existence are current almost everywhere. It is a planetoid in a tight orbit between Mercury and Vulcan—an artificial planetoid.”

He smiled grimly. “For eighty years, it has been in operation as a private prison for those who offend against World Research. Employees of the Syndicate who attempt to hold out work they have developed with the company’s equipment make up one part of the prison rolls. Attempted violence against high officers also accounts for many of the inmates.” Suddenly his eyes flashed and he drew himself up. “And I am proud,” he said, “to be one of those.”

Train moistened his lips. “Did you,” he asked hesitatingly, “try to kill—”

“No, not kill. I am a chemist, and chemistry means mathematical logic. If one can produce the effects of death without creating the state itself, the punishment is far less. I am only human, and so I dosed—a certain corporation official—with a compound which will leave him less than a mindless imbecile in a month.”

“Then I certainly belong here with you. If anything, I’m the greater criminal. You only stole the brains of one man; I tried to cripple the Syndicate entire.”

“A big job—a very big job! What did—”

His words were cut off by a shattering, mechanical roar that rattled them about in their little room like peas in a pod.

“Hold on!” shouted the man to Train above the noise, indicating the handgrips set in the floor. “We’re going up!”

They flattened themselves, clutched the metal rods. Train was sick to his stomach with the sudden explosive hops of the ship as it jerked itself from the ground, but soon its gait steadied and the sputtering rocket settled down to a monotonous roar.

He rose and balanced himself on the swaying door of their cell. “Next stop,” he said grimly, “M-15!”

## 

## 2

Lawrence—Train’s cellmate on the prison ship—stirred uneasily and nudged the other.

“What is it?”

“Listen to that exhaust. Either something’s gone wrong or we’re going to land. How many days have we been going?”

“They’ve fed us twenty-three times.”

“Probably two weeks in space. That should be about it. Do you feel the gravity?”

Train rolled over. “It’s faint, but it’s there. We must have landed already—the motion we feel is the ship shifting around on the landing field.”

As though in confirmation of his words, the door to their cell that had been closed for two long weeks snapped open to admit two of their captors. The grey-clad men gestured silently and the prisoners got to their feet. Neither dared to speak; Train remembered the blow that had been his last answer, and so did Lawrence. They walked slowly ahead of their guards to the exit-port of the ship, not daring to guess what they might see.

Train walked first through the door and gasped. He was under a mighty dome of ferro-glass construction, beyond which stars glittered coldly. They must have landed on the night side of the artificial asteroid, for he could see the blazing corona of the sun eclipsed by the sphere on which he was standing. Fantastic prominences leaped out in the shapes of animals or mighty trees, changing and melting into one another with incredible slowness. It was hard to believe that each one of them must have been huge enough to swallow a thousand Jupiters at once, without a flicker.

A guard prodded him savagely in the back. He began walking, trying his muscles against the strange, heady lack of gravity, mincing along at a sedate pace. They were headed for a blocky concrete building.

The doors opened silently before them, and they marched down a short corridor into an office of conventionally Terrestrial pattern.

For the first time Train heard one of the guards speak. “Last two, sir,” he said to a uniformed man behind a desk.

“You may leave, officers,” said the man gently. They saluted and disappeared from the room. The man rose and, in a curiously soft voice, said: “Please be seated.”

Train and Lawrence folded into comfortable chairs, eyed their captor uncertainly. Lawrence was the first to speak.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” he asked with flat incongruity.

“Yes,” said the man. “May I have your names?”

“Train and Lawrence,” said the chemist. The man wrote in a book sunk flush with the desk.

“Thank you. And your reasons for commitment to M-15?”

“In my case, attempted murder,” replied Lawrence. “In Train’s, blackmail and theft. At least, so we are given to understand.”

“Of course,” said the man behind the desk, writing in the information. “It is my duty as administrator of this asteroid to inform you as well as I may of your functions here and what treatment you may expect.”

He coughed and sat up straighter. “You may well wonder,” he began pretentiously, “why you have been sent to this bleak spot to expiate your sin against society.”

“Rebellion against the Syndicate, you mean,” snapped Train harshly.

“Be that as it may,” continued their informant with a shrug, “this is an officially constituted place of detention under charter and supervision by the Terrestrial League. Certain cases are sent to us for corrective measures associated formerly with World Research Incorporated. Therefore, it is only proper that they should be assigned to experimental work tending to advance the progress of humanity and raise its cultural level.

“Your work will be a sort of manufacturing process of an extremely delicate nature. However, mechanical controls and checks will make blunders and errors impossible after a short period of instruction. You two men have been technicians of a high order of skill; let us hope that you will redeem yourselves by application to your assigned task.”

He sat back with a smile. “Now, unless there are any questions—”

“There damn well are,” snapped Lawrence. “In the first place, is there any communication with the outside world?”

“None whatsoever. Evil influences might convince you that all here is not for the best, and persuade you to foolish acts of violence. We leave nothing to chance.”

Train had had enough; he was going to get this soft-spoken fiend if it were his last living act. With a snarl in his throat he leaped at the desk, only to bring up smashing his face against some invisible barrier. Amazed, he put his hands over the frozen, quite transparent surface between his tormenter and him.

“Superglass,” said the man quietly, smiling as on a child. “As I said, we leave nothing to chance.”

“This is your cell,” said the guard—one they had not seen before. He waved them into a spotless chamber, small and square, featuring two comfortable bunks and elaborate sanitary facilities.

Train sat on one of the bunks, dazed. “I can’t understand it,” he burst out suddenly and violently. “This whole business is rotten with contradictions.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lawrence absently, switching the faucet on and off.

“It’s this sort of thing. They stuck us on this asteroid to die, we know. And yet, look at this room! Perfect for comfort and health. Consider our reception: a very skillful welcome designed to soothe one’s ruffled spirit and put him in a cooperative frame of mind. Of course, it didn’t happen to work with us, because we have very special rages against the system and all it stands for.”

“It’s very simple,” said Lawrence thoughtfully. “They don’t want us on Earth and they do want us here very badly.”

“Simple?” Train snorted. “I could have been shot down like a dog in Hartly’s office two weeks ago, and yet he packed me off here at a terrible expense in salaries, fuel, and wear of the ship. I don’t think it was fear of punishment of any kind that stopped him from destroying me then and there. They need me out on this chunk of rock. And I think it has something to do with where the place is, too.”

“How so?”

“Like this. It stands to reason that if you put an asteroid in a tight orbit as near as this to the sun, you need a lot of power—expensive power—to keep her there. It would be a lot easier and cheaper to put the orbit out somewhere between Jupiter and Neptune, and would be fully as accessible, or inaccessible, all depending on how you look at it. Ships wouldn’t have to have sun-armor, which costs plenty, and they wouldn’t run the risk of getting caught in an electric twister or prominence.”

“So this place,” said Lawrence slowly, “is more than a prison.”

“Obviously. Remember the ancient motto: ‘If it pays, they’ll do it.’”

“And if it doesn’t, they won’t. What was it that smiling gentleman said about congenial occupations commensurate with our training?”

“That’s it! They manufacture something here that needs trained men and sunlight in huge quantities.”

“Then why not hire workers? Why run the risk of having convicts responsible for the production of a valuable article or substance? It must be valuable, by the way. Just think of what it cost to get us here, to say nothing of the expense of building and maintaining this setup.”

Train’s face went grim. “I can guess. It must mean that there’s a fair chance that the substance is so deadly that the men who manufacture it, even with all suitable and possible guards and shields, must be poisoned by it so that they die at their work after a time.”

“Yes,” said Lawrence, “you must be right.” There was a long silence, then a guard banged his stick on their door.

“You’re going to work,” he called in on them. The door was unlocked; the two walked out as martyrs might.

“This way,” said the guard.

He showed them into a narrow tiled room. “Begin by sealing those bottles. You’ll find torches and materials in your cabinets.” He walked out, closing the door behind him.

Train stared at the row of open flasks that stood on the shelf like so many deadly snakes. “What are they, Lawrence?” he asked hoarsely.

“I had an idea all along—” whispered the chemist. He took one of the flasks carefully by the neck and spilt some of its contents on a composition-topped table. “Looks like ordinary table salt, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. But it has a smell like nothing on earth I know.”

Lawrence, with the attitude of a scientist who knows and demands that everything should be in its place, opened a standard supply-cabinet and brought out, without looking, an ochre filter and a connected burner. He played the flames on the crystals and squinted through the glass carefully, turning it at sharp and precise angles. Finally he replaced the filter absently and incinerated the little heap of stuff on the table.

“One of the mysteries of the chemical world is solved,” he said. “That stuff is thalenium chloride.”

“Never heard of it.”

“You’re fortunate. It’s the filthiest narcotic that ever cursed a race. Fortunately, only the wealthiest can afford to take it. Seeing the setup required to manufacture it, that’s understandable.

“Thalenium’s supposed to be a solar element—unstable—made up in the sun’s core. They named it after the Muse of Comedy, for some reason or other. I never came across an authentic case of thalenium poisoning, but it’s supposed to cause hallucinations viler than anything imaginable to the normal mind. External manifestations are great spasms of laughter—hence, comedy and the comic muse.”

Train stared at the innocent-appearing crystals. “And we have to handle it?”

“No danger, yet, I suppose, if we are careful.”

Lawrence picked up a flask full of the narcotic with tongs. “Like this,” he said, skillfully playing a stream of flame across its tapering spout. He set it down and quickly slipped a cap over the softened glass. “Then,” he added, “you appear to spray it with this stuff.” He squirted a film of heavy liquid on the cap. It set sharply, and letters and figures came out on it.

“Authentic thalenium chloride, c.p., 500 mm,” he read. “Clever devil, World Research!”

They set to work, moving like machines, sealing the flasks in three sharp operations.

“There’s no danger yet,” observed Lawrence. “I don’t know, and can’t imagine, what the process of its actual manufacture may be, but we’ll find that out later. If the stuff is prepared direct as the chloride, it might be fairly harmless, but if free metallic thalenium is used then there must be hell to pay among the workers.”

“Then there’s no point, as yet, in going on strike?”

“Certainly not. Everything’s gravy so far. And of course, it’s going to be gravy as long as we do our work faithfully, obediently, and not too intelligently. Thus, for example, it pays to make minor mistakes like this one.” He took a sealed bottle firmly by the neck and snapped it against the edge of the table. It shattered and spilled over the floor.

“I get the idea. We case the joint for as long as we can, staying away from the dangerous operations. Then we escape?” He poured an acid over the salt on the floor; it bubbled and gave off thin wisps of vapor.

Lawrence scattered a neutralizing base over the acid. It became a white froth that he flushed down a floor-gutter. “I see,” he remarked, returning to his work, “that we’ve been thinking along somewhat similar lines.”

“I have a machine,” said Train irrelevantly. “I developed it all by myself—no, I’m forgetting my girl friend, a very competent head for details—and if I get back to Earth and have two weeks to myself, along with reasonable equipment, I guarantee that I’ll wipe World Research and all that’s rotten in it off the face of the Earth and out of the cosmos, too.”

“Sounds remarkable. What does it do?”

Train told him.

The chemist whistled. “Quite out of my field,” he said. “It takes a physicist to dope out those things that really count.”

“Independent Fourteen, they call it,” said Train with a tight-drawn smile. “And I swear by every god in the firmament that nothing—nothing—is going to keep me from getting back to Earth, setting up Independent Fourteen, and blowing World Research to hell!”

## 

## 3

Train was lying half-awake on his cot when the door slammed shut. “Hiya, Lawrence.”

The chemist bent over him. “Get up, Barney. It’s happened.”

Train sat up abruptly. “How do you know?” he snapped.

“I was just seeing the Oily Bird.” That was the name they had given the infuriating man who greeted them on their arrival. “He says we’ve made good in the packaging department and we’re going to be promoted. He still doesn’t know that we are wise as to what is going on.”

“Promoted, eh? What’s that mean?”

“He said we were going into the production end of the concern. That we’d have to handle the stuff without tongs. Be exposed to sunlight. And, at this distance, that’s surely fatal in a short time.”

“I didn’t think it would come this quickly,” said Train. “Then we’ll have to dope something out—fast.”

“Fast is the word. How about slugging a guard?”

“Too crude. Much too crude. They must have an elaborate system of passwords and countersigns; otherwise it would have been done successfully long ago. And Lord knows how many times it’s failed!”

“Right,” said the chemist. “We can’t slug a guard. But maybe we can bribe one?”

“I doubt it. We know it hasn’t succeeded. I suppose they make big money as such things go.”

“Can we put psychological screws on one? Know any little tricks like suggesting hatred against the system he’s working for?”

Train wrinkled his brow. “Yes, but they are good only after a long period of constant suggestion. We have to move at once. Lawrence, can you play sick?”

“As well as you. Why?”

“And do you remember the shape of the eyebrows on the guard we have this week?”

“Have you gone bats?” demanded the chemist, staring at Train angrily. “This is no time to be playing jokes.”

The scientist raised his hand. “This isn’t a joke, or a game, either. Those eyebrows may mean our salvation.”

Lawrence picked up a pencil and paper and sketched out what he remembered of their guard’s face. “There,” he said, thrusting it under Train’s nose.

Train studied the drawing. “I think this is accurate,” he mused. “If it is, we may be back on Earth in two weeks.”

The guard knocked on the door, and there was no answer. Suspiciously he pushed it open and entered, half-expecting to be attacked. But he found one of the prisoners in bed with a sallow skin, breathing in shallow gulps.

“Lawrence is sick, I think,” said Train.

“Yeah? Too bad. I’ll call the medico.”

“No,” gasped the patient. “Not yet.”

The guard turned to go. “I have to call him when anyone is sick. It might start an epidemic, otherwise.”

“Can you wait just a minute?” asked Train. “I know how to handle him when he gets one of his attacks. It isn’t anything contagious. Just mild conjunctivitis of the exegetical peritoneum.”

“That a fact?” asked the guard. “How do you handle him?”

“Easy enough,” said Train. “May I borrow your flashlight?”

“Sure!” The guard handed over a slim pencil-torch.

“Thank you.” The scientist balanced the light on the broad back of a chair. “Won’t you sit down?” he asked the guard. “This will take a few minutes.”

“Sure.” Their warder watched with interest as Train dimmed the lights of the cell and switched on the flashlight so that it cast a tiny spot of radiance on a gleaming water faucet. The guard stared at it, fascinated.

Train’s voice sank to a whispering drone. “Concentrate on the light. Block out every other thing but the light.”

The guard shifted uneasily. This was a strange way to treat a sick man, and the light was shining right in his eyes. Perhaps he had better call the medico after all. He was half decided to do so, but he felt tired and the chair was comfortable. What was it Train was saying?

“By the time I have counted to twenty, you will be asleep. One…” The guard’s eyes grew heavy. “Concentrate…block out everything but the light…everything but the light…seven…”

The spot of light floated before the guard’s face, distorting into strange shapes that shifted. He just barely heard Train drone “twelve” before he began to breathe deeply and hoarsely.

Train switched on the lights and slipped the flashlight into his pocket. “Perfect specimen, Lawrence,” he exulted. “You can always tell by the eyebrows.”

“Fascinating,” returned the erstwhile victim to conjunctivitis of the exegetical peritoneum as he climbed out of bed. “What now?”

Train rolled back the guard’s eyelids with a practiced thumb. “Ask him anything,” he said. “He’ll tell you whatever we want to know.”

Lawrence cleared his throat, bent over the sleeping man. “When are you leaving for Earth?”

“This afternoon. One hour from now.”

“Do the others know you?”

“They never saw me, but they know my name.”

“What are the passwords on the way to the ship?”

“Front gate, rabies. Second gate, tuberculosis. Field guard, leprosy. Ship port, cancer.”

“Someone must have had a grim sense of humor,” whispered Lawrence to Train.

“What are your duties on the ship?”

“I have no duties.”

The chemist snapped: “One of us must take his place.”

“Yes. Which one of us? No, we won’t have to decide. I’m going. Aside from such details as the fact that his uniform will fit me, but would look suspiciously baggy on you, I have a chance to do something about this whole rotten system when I get back. You would only be able to commit more murders, or near-murders.”

The chemist’s lips whitened. “You’re right,” he whispered. “When you have the chance, promise me that you’ll wipe out this asteroid and the filthy stuff they manufacture here. I don’t think I’ll be around by that time; exposure to the sun might get me sooner than we think.”

“I know,” said Train shortly, “and I promise.” He gripped the other’s hand and shoulder for the moment, then turned to the unconscious guard, and began a machine-gun fire of questions that were to stock his brain with every secret datum held inviolate by the militia of the man-made planetoid.

Ann Riley was frying breakfast bacon and eggs; she did not hear the door of her flat open softly and close. Behind her a voice suddenly spoke. “Cut me in on some of that.”

She turned and gasped: “Barney, you sonova gun!” she yelled and flew into his arms.

“It was really nothing,” he explained over the coffee. “They just hadn’t figured on the hypnosis angle and I took care not to drop any bricks on the voyage. The inefficiency of that system is appalling. If I were managing it, I could step up production of their rotten stuff three hundred percent and see that no prisoner even thought of escaping.”

“Yeah,” she said skeptically, “I know. But what are you going to do now that you’re back?”

“I’m safe for a month. That’s how long it takes for a ship to get there and back, and they haven’t any other means of communication. The nearness to the sun makes radio or beam messages impossible. So, first, I’m going swimming.”

“No, you aren’t,” she said coldly, a gleam in her eye. “I’ve been redrafting Independent Fourteen, and all the details are there down on paper again—except for the ones you have in your head. We’re going to build that machine and build it fast and powerful. Then we’ll throw it in the teeth of T. J. Hartly and World Research, Incorporated. And we’re going to fling it so hard there won’t be a sound tooth left in their mouths.”

“Yes, my pet. I must confess I had some such thought in my head when I decided to come back to Earth.”

“We can rig up enough of a lab,” she went on, “right here in my flat. There’s no more experimentation to do; we just need the bare essentials with a slight margin for error.”

“Splendid,” he nodded, reaching for another slice of toast. “We’ll need about a hundred yards of silver wire, some standard castings, and a few tubes. You’d better go out and get them now—shop around; we can’t afford to get the most expensive. Where have you got the plans?”

They rose from the table and Ann drew a huge scroll of paper from the closet. “Here they are. Full scale, this time.”

Train scanned them. “Hey! This distributor wasn’t on the designs I gave you.”

“Oh, I just filled it in,” she demurred.

The scientist scowled. “Hereafter,” he proclaimed, “all filling in will be done by Doctor Train. Now gwan out and buy the stuff while I work out the missing circuits.” He seated himself at a desk, brooding over the plans.

He looked up when a firm tap came on his shoulder.

“Well?” he asked without turning his head.

“Excuse me, young man, but a point of morality has just come up. Where do you expect to live while you’re building Independent Fourteen?”

“Right here,” he answered calmly. “First, I can’t afford to live anywhere else—even though I drew a guard’s salary, and that isn’t too small. But there’s the danger to consider. You wouldn’t want your collaborator to be snatched up and deported again, would you?”

“Fundamentally,” she began in a determined voice, “I’m a conventional person. And I do not like neighbors talking about me as though I were a thing loathsome and accursed in the eyes of gods and men.”

“What have neighbors to do with it?”

“Don’t you think they would consider it a bit peculiar were a man suddenly to come to my flat and begin to live with me as though it were the most natural thing in the world?”

“Isn’t it?” he replied. “In the eyes of Science nothing is unclean or to be shunned.”

“Dr. Train!” she flared, “you are going to marry me whether you like it or not. At once!”

He stared at her. “I never really thought of it like that,” he began…but Ann was already speaking into the mouthpiece of the phone.

“Central Services, please.”

She returned to him. “There—that was easy, wasn’t it? He’ll be here in a moment; he lives a few houses down.”

There was a knock on the door. “Central Service is Super Service,” quoted Ann. “That’s him now.”

She rose to admit a sickly individual who greeted her in a brisk, flabby voice. “Miss Riley?”

“Yes. And that object is Doctor Train, my spouse-to-be.”

“Thank you,” said the agent, opening a book. “Please sign in duplicate.” Ann scribbled her name and passed the book to Train, who also signed.

“Two dollars for ceremony and registration,” said the anemic Cupid. Train handed over the money and limply accepted the certificate in return.

“Thank you,” said the agent. “I now pronounce you man and wife.” He walked out through the door, closing it gently behind him.

“Well,” said Ann, after a long pause.

“Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to kiss the bride?”

“Oh.” He did so until she pounded his back for air. “I must be a romanticist,” he complained, “but I always wanted an old-fashioned wedding before a city clerk.”

“Times have changed,” she philosophized. “The tempo of life is accelerated; things move at a fast and furious pace in these mad days. The old conventions remain, but one complies with them as swiftly and effortlessly as possible. It helps to retain the illusion of gentility.”

“Then,” he said, “since the illusion is saved, let’s get to work. One hundred yards of silver wire—no, make it seventy; we can always buy more.”

## 

## 4

“What’s that thing?” asked Ann, peering curiously at an odd-looking setup Train was working on.

“A little something. I plan to scare hell out of Hartly with it. A frequency inductor—I can get the wavelength of his inter-office system and bellow in his ear.”

“Very cute,” she said thoughtfully. “What’s the second tube for?”

“Steps up the tertiary vibrations. I could have used a seven-phase transformer with better effect, but a tube’s cheaper and we happened to have one left over.”

He twisted a final screw contact into place. “Finished,” he announced, “shall we call up T. J.?”

The curiosity was gone. There was only sudden anguish in her eyes as she clung to him. “Barney!” She buried her face against his shoulder. “What shall we do if anything goes wrong?”

For a brief second her fears leaped through him as he comforted her in the only way he knew. Then cold reason reached in. His voice was steady as he answered: “Nothing will. Independent Fourteen’s checked and triple-checked. We’ve tested it and it clicks every time. What are you worried about?”

“Hartly’s a smart man. He has to be to stay on top of World Research. He must have things up his sleeve that no one has ever dreamed about. Wasn’t he a scientist himself before he rose from the ranks to the executive department? It’s men like that you have to watch out for. Never trust a reformed technician.”

Train smiled happily. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s the nature of Independent Fourteen that has him licked before he can start. With this priceless gimmick we have a machine that will give us unlimited personal power and protection. I’m going to play our cards for everything they’re worth.”

“Barney, isn’t there a chance that we might compromise?” She waved aside the protests that sprang to his lips. “I know,” she said. “The Syndicate’s the greediest octopus that ever got its suckers around the life-blood of a world. It’s utterly contemptible—and yet, it’s too powerful for its own good—and maybe for ours. Couldn’t we compromise and lull their suspicions?”

“Not one bloody chance in a billion!” Train snapped harshly. “Independent Fourteen’s our only trump card, but it’s the winner in this game as soon as we see fit to play it.”

“I guess you’re right, Barney,” said Ann wearily. “Call up Mr. Hartly on that gimmick while I warm up Fourteen.” She turned to a corner of the room cleared except for a bulky piece of machinery, protrusive with tubes and coils, built around heavy castings bolted together, mounted on wheels. Ann fingered a switchboard carefully, and tubes began to glow with fiery electrical life while sparks snapped from point to point.

“Mr. Hartly, please,” said Train quietly into a grid of his instrument.

“Hartly speaking,” boomed from a loudspeaker connected with the tiny device. “Who is this?”

“Dr. Train. Do you remember?”

There was a sudden click. “You can’t hang up, Hartly. If you look, you’ll find that your phone’s blown out. I’m using irregular channels.”

A long pause, then Hartly’s voice came through again, this time tinged with wonder. “How did you get back from M-15, Train, and when did you do it?”

“You paid me to come back, Hartly. I drew the full salary of a guard while returning to Earth on his regular vacation. I’ve been here some twenty days.”

“Extraordinary,” breathed the great man. “And I suppose you’ve been setting up that silly machine of yours?”

“Not so silly,” replied Train ominously. “It works like Merlin’s wand—that neat and efficient.”

“Then it’s no use my sending men around to Miss Riley’s flat—I assume that is where you are—to arrest you as an escaped convict.”

“No use whatsoever. I can make them feel very foolish, if I so desire. Or I can simply wipe them out without any fuss at all. I’m a practical man, Hartly. Most scientists are—you were one once, yourself, I understand.”

“Bacteriologist. Occupied in saving lives. It was wonderful for awhile, but I found eventually that there was no future in it.”

“Despicable attitude, Hartly. It shows up throughout your career. It was your career, by the by, that I want to discuss with you, anyway.”

“What about my career?”

“Just two words, Hartly. It’s over.”

Hartly’s chuckle was silk-smooth. “How so, Doctor? I was under the impression that it had barely begun.”

“I’m warning you, Hartly, not to take this as a joke. I haven’t forgotten what it was you wanted to do to me on M-15, and what I was supposed to be doing in the process. I’d have more scruples about killing a scorpion than you, Hartly.”

“No doubt about that,” came the answer. “So would many misguided persons. But the interesting thing about it is that they have always ended up among insuperable difficulties. You may make me a concrete proposition, Doctor.”

“I may and I will! The proposition is this: your unqualified resignation from the directorship and organization of World Research Syndicate, and an assignment to me of unlimited reorganization powers for the period of one year.”

Hartly’s voice was mocking in tone. “Yes? World Research is a rather large enterprise. Do you think one year would be enough?”

“Ample. Your answer?”

A long pause, then: “My answer is unqualified refusal.”

“Based on what? Make no mistake: I shan’t hesitate to blot you out any longer than you would hesitate to do the same to me—unless you capitulate. And the difference, T. J., is that I can do it and you cannot.”

“Admitted,” came back Hartly’s voice cheerfully. “But surely, Doctor, you didn’t think that I have not been preparing—in fact, been prepared—for just such an occasion as this ever since I came into power?”

“Explain,” snapped the scientist. “And talk fast and straight.”

Hartly’s voice was now unperturbed. “When a question of conflict arises, it’s either a matter of personal gain or benefit to the world. I’ve been faced by determined men before, Train. Those who were after personal advancement could be compromised with and later eliminated by quick thinking and quicker action.

“However, altruists presented a different problem. Most of them could not be bribed. Some of them were powerful enough, by reason of their ability or backing, or both, to issue a flat defiance to me. Those I threatened with the thing they loved most—humanity.”

“Come to the point, Hartly. I’m not too patient a man in some ways.”

“I was a bacteriologist once,” went on Hartly. “And, in the course of my research, I developed a nasty variety of bread-mold. It attacks anything organic and spreads like wildfire. I know of nothing to check it, nor does anyone else. It thrives at any temperature and flourishes off corrosive agents.”

“So?”

“So, Doctor Train, make one false move, as they say in melodrama, and I release an active culture of that mold; you will then see your flesh crumble away. I realize that alone wouldn’t stop you, but the thought of what will then happen to the teeming millions of Earth will.”

Another silence, then: “I decided long ago, Train, that no one would wipe me out. True, someone might come along with bigger and better power, even as you have done, but, as you can see, if there’s any blotting out to be done, I shall do it myself.

“It will mean the end of World Research and of me. It will also mean the end of all animal life on this planet. If you want a Pyrrhic victory, Train, you may have it.”

“It’s horrible!” cried Ann, her eyes wide with the shock of it. “Can he do it, Barney?”

“Miss Riley,” came through the voice. “Perhaps you remember the occasion of our first meeting. Do you think me the type of man to try a bluff?”

Train turned to the transmitter of his tiny outfit. “I know you’re not bluffing, Hartly. I know also that you’ll try every means of persuasion you know first, because you don’t particularly want to be wiped out, even by you own hands, yet. But it won’t work; you’ll try this last resort of yours because the ethics of business, which doesn’t blink at the murder of an individual, wouldn’t blink at the murder of a planet.

“We’re going to make a call on you very soon, Hartly. My wife, myself, and Independent Fourteen.”

## 

## 5

Train paused for a moment in thought. “Ann,” he said, “do you think Hogan would want to help us?”

“That’s a fine favor to ask of any neighbor. Let’s see.”

They knocked on the door of an adjoining apartment, and the staccato rattle of a typewriter suddenly cut short. The door swung open, and a little man presented himself. “Afternoon, Trains,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Hogan,” began Ann winsomely, “we think you ought to take the afternoon off. Your work’s telling on you.”

“Not so I’ve noticed it. What do you want me to do? More shopping for copper tubing? I’m a busy man, Mrs. Train.”

“We know that, Hogan,” broke in Barney. “But can you spare us a few hours? We need help badly. You’ll have to push some heavy machinery and maybe do a bit of scrapping…”

“A fight! Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Wait; I’ll get me gun.” He vanished, and they heard the typewriter rattle off a few more steaming paragraphs.

The little man appeared again, hefting a ponderous automatic. “Who do we have to pop off?” he asked amiably.

Ann shivered. “Bloodthirsty, isn’t he?”

“They bred us that way in South America. Is it a riot, or what?”

“No, none of them. We’re going to blow up World Research.”

“Splendid! I’d often thought of how elegant it would be to do that, if only some way could be figured out. Where’s the machinery ye spoke of? I presume that is what you toss the bombs with.”

“In our apartment. Only it isn’t bombs; it makes the most powerful explosive look like a slingshot in comparison.” They walked back to Train’s flat and Ann pointed out Independent Fourteen.

“That’s the junk,” she said simply.

“It’s a powerful-looking bit of machinery. But what does it do?”

Ann told him briefly.

“No!” he cried. “If it were as big as the Research Building it couldn’t do that!”

“Calling us liars, mister?”

“Not a bit of it. All right. It does what you say it will—I hope. What’s the campaign?”

“We march on the Syndicate Building, pushing Independent Fourteen before us. It’s got wheels, you notice. The thing is nicely adjusted—it’ll function on any violent shock as well as the hand controls; they know that, so they won’t make any attempt to blow it up. In fact they know all about it, but I don’t think they quite realize just how good it is. Otherwise they’d talk differently.

“I’d better show you how to handle it. All you have to know about is this switchboard. The button here indicates radiation. The power will spread in all directions except in that of the operator and directly behind him. This other button is direction. That aims the influence of the machine in a fairly tight beam. Its action is invisible, but it’s controlled by this pointer. And the results are soon apparent.”

“And what could be the meaning of these cryptic signs?” asked Hogan, indicating a long vertical list of symbols running parallel to the slot of an indicator needle.

“They are the chemical names of the elements.”

“I seem to remember,” remarked Hogan, knitting his brows.

“Got everything straight? Radiant, director, pointer, and elements?”

“Yes. We can go in my car, I suppose.”

They eased the ponderous machine safely down the flight of stairs, then into Hogan’s car. Suddenly there boomed from Train’s frequency inductor the voice of Hartly. “Train!” it said.

“Listening,” the scientist snapped back.

“This is your last warning. I have a man across the street from you. He says that you’ve loaded Independent Fourteen into a car. You seem to think I intend to back down on my promise to release the fungus.”

“Not at all.” replied Barney cheerfully, “not at all. On the contrary, I am convinced that you’ll not hesitate to pour the stuff out of your window as soon as we come in sight. In fact, I’m counting on it, Hartly. Don’t disappoint me, please.”

“Then remember, Train, nothing…nothing…can stop the fungus. As you say, one false move nearer my building, and I release the culture.”

“The false move is made, Hartly,” said Train, with steel in his voice. “In case your man hasn’t told you, the car has started. We are on our way.”

He snapped off the transmitter.

“What was that all about?” asked Hogan, his eyes on the road.

“Just Hartly. He thinks he has a final stymie to work on me. Plans to release a kind of mold that eats away all organic matter. Fire cannot destroy or injure it, nor can chemicals. Once he releases it, it’ll spread through the world, attacking all live wood, grass, and animal life.”

“Yeah? What are you going to do about it?”

“Can’t you guess? Hartly still doesn’t realize that any power of his is just a joke so long as Independent Fourteen is in my hands. Pull up!”

The car skidded to a halt before the building that housed World Research. “Take it out tenderly, husband mine,” said Ann. “It means a lot to me.”

There was a rattling from the pocket wherein Train had thrust his frequency inductor. He took it out, held it to his ear.

Hartly’s voice was dry by now. “The bluff’s never been pushed this far by any man, Train. This is your last chance. I’m looking down at you, and I have the fungus in my hand. Train, I’m ready to drop this bottle.”

“Are you, now?” The scientist’s voice bespoke amusement. “And what am I supposed to do about it?”

“Abandon your machine and walk into the building. I’ll see that you are taken care of rightly. You’ll not regret it if you choose to compromise; you will if you do not.”

Train laughed. “For once, Hartly, I’m holding every ace in the deck. Drop your little toy and see how useless it is to you.”

There was a long, tense pause. Hogan and Ann watched, but could see nothing. Train swiftly manipulated the little instruments on the control board. There was a little tinkle in the street near them.

“There, Barney, there!” Ann screamed, pointing a trembling finger at a scarcely visible splotch of green. Train swung the pointer of the machine on it even as it exploded upward into a bomb of poisonous vegetation that rustled foully as it spread serpentine arms outward and up.

Train slammed down the button that flung the machine into action, swept the pointer right and left as the tubes sputtered angrily.

“Glory!” muttered Hogan. The fungus had suddenly been arrested and now stood etched in silvery metal.

“Free metallic magnesium,” said Train. “It works on a large scale and with one hundred percent efficiency.”

“Elements transmuted at will,” breathed Ann. “And nothing went wrong!”

“And the machine will do—that—to anything?” demanded Hogan. “It has the Midas touch.”

“That it has,” agreed the scientist, swinging the needle and shifting the slide. “And, unless I’m mistaken, those men mean us harm.”

He swung the pointer against a squad of uniformed militia that were running from the huge doors of the building. The button went down, and the police went transparent, then gaseous. They vanished in puffs of vapor that sought the nearest solid.

“Fluorine,” said Train quietly. “Those poor devils are just so much salt on the street and portico.”

“Let’s go in,” said Ann. They walked into the lobby, treading carefully around the white crusts on the pavement.

“Easy, Hogan,” warned Train as they pushed Independent Fourteen into an elevator under the eyes of the horrified attendant. “Take us to the Hartly floor,” he snapped at the latter, “and no harm will come to you. Otherwise…” He drew a sinister finger across his throat.

The doors of the elevator rolled open and they carefully pushed the machine before them. “Come out, Hartly,” called Ann at the bronze doors to the inner office.

“Come in and get me,” sounded from the frequency inductor in her hand. Resolutely they swung open the doors and marched in. Hartly was alone behind the desk. Quietly he lifted his hands, displayed two heavy pistols.

“I haven’t been too busy managing my affairs to learn how to use these,” he remarked. “Stand away from that machine.”

Train tensed himself to leap, flinging Fourteen into operation, but Ann touched his arm and he relaxed, stepped aside with her and Hogan.

Hartly strode over and glanced at the machine. He set the slide absently. “How does it work?” he asked.

“Red end of the pointer directs the beam. Slide determines the element required. Button on the left starts the operation.”

“The red end?” asked Hartly smiling. “You would say that. I’ll try the black end first.” He aimed the black end at the little group of three, thus bringing the red end squarely on himself.

“This button—” he began, pressing a thumb on it. But his words were cut short. A wild glare suffused his face as he brought up one of the pistols, but it fell from his hand, exploding as it hit the floor. He tried to speak, but a choking gasp was all his yellowing tongue could utter.

“He didn’t trust ye,” said Hogan sadly. “He thought ye meant him evil when ye told him the simple truth about the machine’s operation. And that’s why Mr. Hartly is now a statue of the purest yellow gold. The beast must weigh a ton at least.”

“Hartly’s never trusted anyone,” said Train. “I knew that he’d never take my word, so took a chance for all of us. Now he makes a very interesting statue.”

“It’s horrible,” said Ann. “We’ll have them take it away.”

“No,” replied Train. “It must stay here. There’s a new life beginning now—at last the youth will be free to work at what they want and the era of Syndicate regimentation is over.

“Let that statue remain there—as a picture of the old order and as a warning to the new.”