

The sound of the harp playing, the sound of the cool water falling every night and every night of their lives, after this. No spraying the roof with the garden hose now any more. Only sit on the porch or lie in your night bed and hear the falling . . . the falling . . . the falling . . .

Mr. Smith moved on up the stair; Mr. Fremley moved down.

The harp, the harp. Listen, listen!

The fifty years of drought were over.

The time of the long rains had come.

**R**ockwell didn't like the room's smell. Not so much McGuire's odor of beer, or Hartley's unwashed, tired smell—but the sharp insect tang rising from Smith's cold green-skinned body lying stiffly naked on the table. There was also a smell of oil and grease from the nameless machinery gleaming in one corner of the small room.

The man Smith was a corpse. Irritated, Rockwell rose from his chair and packed his stethoscope. "I must get back to the hospital. War rush. You understand, Hartley. Smith's been dead eight hours. If you want further information call a post-mortem—"

He stopped as Hartley raised a trembling, bony hand. Hartley gestured at the corpse—this corpse with brittle hard green shell grown solid over every inch of flesh. "Use your stethoscope again, Rockwell. Just once more. Please."

Rockwell wanted to complain, but instead he sighed, sat down, and used the stethoscope. You have to treat fellow doctors politely. You press your stethoscope into cold green flesh, pretending to listen—

The small, dimly lit room exploded around him. Exploded in one green cold pulsing. It hit Rockwell's ears like fists. It hit him. He saw his own fingers jerk over the recumbent corpse.

He heard a pulse.

Deep in the dark body the heart beat once. It sounded like an echo in fathoms of sea water.

Smith was dead, unbreathing, mummified. But at the core of that deadness—his heart lived. Lived, stirring like a small unborn baby!

Rockwell's crisp surgeon's fingers darted rapidly. He bent his

head. In the light it was dark-haired, with flecks of gray in it. He had an even, level, nice-looking face. About thirty-five. He listened again and again, with sweat coming cold on his smooth cheeks. The pulse was not to be believed.

One heartbeat every thirty-five seconds.

Smith's respiration—how could you believe that, too, one breath of air every four minutes. Lungcase movement imperceptible. Body temperature?

Sixty degrees.

Hartley laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. More like an echo that had gotten lost. "He's alive," he said tiredly. "Yes, he is. He almost fooled me many times. I injected adrenaline to speed that pulse, but it was no use. He's been this way for twelve weeks. And I couldn't stand keeping him a secret any longer. That's why I phoned you, Rockwell. He's—unnatural."

The impossibility of it overwhelmed Rockwell with an inexplicable excitement. He tried to lift Smith's eyelids. He couldn't. They were webbed with epidermis. So were the lips. So were the nostrils. There was no way for Smith to breathe—

"Yet, he's breathing." Rockwell's voice was numb. He dropped his stethoscope blankly, picked it up, and saw his fingers shaking.

Hartley grew tall, emaciated, nervous over the table. "Smith didn't like my calling you. I called anyway. Smith warned me not to. Just an hour ago."

Rockwell's eyes dilated into hot black circles. "How could he warn you? He can't move."

Hartley's face, all razor-sharp bone, hard jaw, tight squinting gray eyes, twitched nervously. "Smith—*thinks*. I know his thoughts. He's afraid you'll expose him to the world. He hates me. Why? I want to kill him, that's why. Here." Hartley fumbled blindly for a blue-steel revolver in his rumpled, stained coat. "Murphy. Take this. Take it before I use it on Smith's foul body!"

Murphy pulled back, his thick red face afraid. "Don't like guns. You take it, Rockwell."

Like a scalpel, Rockwell made his voice slash. "Put the gun away, Hartley. After three months tending one patient you've got a psychological blemish. Sleep'll help that." He licked his lips. "What sort of disease has Smith got?"

Hartley swayed. His mouth moved words out slowly. Falling

asleep on his feet, Rockwell realized. "Not diseased," Hartley managed to say. "Don't know what. But I resent him, like a kid resents the birth of a new brother or sister. He's wrong. Help me. Help me, will you?"

"Of course." Rockwell smiled. "My desert sanitarium's the place to check him over, good. Why—why Smith's the most incredible medical phenomenon in history. Bodies just don't act this way!"

He got no further. Hartley had his gun pointed right at Rockwell's stomach. "Wait. Wait. You—you're not going to *bury* Smith! I thought you'd help me. Smith's not healthy. I want him killed! He's dangerous! I know he is!"

Rockwell blinked. Hartley was obviously psychoneurotic. Didn't know what he was saying. Rockwell straightened his shoulders, feeling cool and calm inside. "Shoot Smith and I'll turn you in for murder. You're overworked mentally and physically. Put the gun away."

They stared at one another.

Rockwell walked forward quietly and took the gun, patted Hartley understandingly on the shoulder, and gave the weapon to Murphy, who looked at it as if it would bite him. "Call the hospital, Murphy. I'm taking a week off. Maybe longer. Tell them I'm doing research at the sanitarium."

A scowl formed in the red fat flesh of Murphy's face. "What do I do with this gun?"

Hartley shut his teeth together, hard. "Keep it. You'll want to use it—later."

Rockwell wanted to shout it to the world that he was sole possessor of the most incredible human in history. The sun was bright in the desert sanitarium room where Smith lay, not saying a word, on his table; his handsome face frozen into a green, passionless expression.

Rockwell walked into the room quietly. He used the stethoscope on the green chest. It scraped, making the noise of metal tapping a beetle's carapace.

McGuire stood by, eyeing the body dubiously, smelling of several recently acquired beers.

Rockwell listened intently. "The ambulance ride may have jolted him. No use taking a chance—"

Rockwell cried out.

Heavily, McGuire lumbered to his side. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Rockwell stared about in desperation. He made one hand into a fist. "Smith's dying!"

"How do you know? Hartley said Smith plays possum. He's fooled you again—"

"No!" Rockwell worked furiously over the body, injecting drugs. Any drugs. Swearing at the top of his voice. After all this trouble, he *couldn't* lose Smith. No, not now.

Shaking, jarring, twisting deep down inside, going completely liquidly mad, Smith's body sounded like dim volcanic tides bursting.

Rockwell fought to remain calm. Smith was a case unto himself. Normal treatment did nothing for him. What then? What?

Rockwell stared. Sunlight gleamed on Smith's hard flesh. Hot sunlight. It flashed, glinting off the stethoscope tip. The sun. As he watched, clouds shifted across the sky outside, taking the sun away. The room darkened. Smith's body shook into silence. The volcanic tides died.

"McGuire! Pull the blinds! Before the sun comes back!"

McGuire obeyed.

Smith's heart slowed down to its sluggish, infrequent breathing.

"Sunlight's bad for Smith. It counteracts something. I don't know what or why, but it's not good—" Rockwell relaxed. "Lord, I wouldn't want to lose Smith. Not for anything. He's different, making his own standards, doing things men have never done. Know something, Murphy?"

"What?"

"Smith's not in agony. He's not dying either. He wouldn't be better off dead, no matter what Hartley says. Last night as I arranged Smith on the stretcher, readying him for his trip to this sanitarium, I realized, suddenly, that Smith *likes* me."

"Gah. First Hartley. Now you. Did Smith *tell* you that?"

"He didn't tell me. But he's not unconscious under all that hard skin. He's aware. Yes, that's it. He's aware."

"Pure and simply—he's petrifying. He'll die. It's been weeks since he was fed. Hartley said so. Hartley fed him intravenously until the skin toughened so a needle couldn't poke through it."

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Whining, the cubicle door swung slowly open. Rockwell started. Hartley, his sharp face relaxed after hours of sleep, his eyes still a bitter gray, hostile, stood tall in the door. "If you'll leave the room," he said, quietly, "I'll destroy Smith in a very few seconds. Well?"

"Don't come a step closer." Rockwell walked, feeling irritation, to Hartley's side. "Every time you visit, you'll have to be searched. Frankly, I don't trust you." There were no weapons. "Why didn't you tell me about the sunlight?"

"Eh?" Soft and slow Hartley said it. "Oh—yes. I forgot. I tried shifting Smith weeks ago. Sunlight struck him and he began *really* dying. Naturally, I stopped trying to move him. Smith seemed to know what was coming, vaguely. Perhaps he planned it; I'm not sure. While he was still able to talk and eat ravenously, before his body stiffened completely, he warned me not to move him for a twelve-week period. Said he didn't like the sun. Said it would spoil things. I thought he was joking. He wasn't. He ate like an animal, a hungry, wild animal, fell into a coma, and here he is—" Hartley swore under his breath. "I'd rather hoped you'd leave him in the sun long enough to kill him inadvertently."

McGuire shifted his two hundred fifty pounds. "Look here, now. What if we catch Smith's disease?"

Hartley looked at the body, his pupils shrinking. "Smith's not diseased. Don't you recognize degeneration when you see it? It's like cancer. You don't catch it, you inherit a tendency. I didn't begin to fear and hate Smith until a week ago when I discovered he was breathing and existing and thriving with his nostrils and mouth sealed. It can't happen. It mustn't happen."

McGuire's voice trembled. "What if you and I and Rockwell all turn green and a plague sweeps the country—what then?"

"Then," replied Rockwell, "if I'm wrong, perhaps I am. I'll die. But it doesn't worry me in the least."

He turned back to Smith and went on with his work.

A bell. A bell. Two bells, two bells. A dozen bells, a hundred bells. Ten thousand and a million clangorous, hammering metal dinning bells. All born at once in the silence, squalling, screaming, hurting echoes, bruising ears!

Ringings, chanting with loud and soft, tenor and bass, low and



high voices. Great-armed clappers knocking the shells and ripping air with the thrusting din of sound!

With all those bells ringing, Smith could not immediately know where he was. He knew that he could not see, because his eyelids were sealed tight, knew he could not speak because his lips had grown together. His ears were clamped shut, but the bells hammered nevertheless.

He could not see. But yes, yes, he could, and it was like inside a small dark red cavern, as if his eyes were turned inward upon his skull. And Smith tried to twist his tongue, and suddenly, trying to scream, he knew his tongue was gone, that the place where it used to be was vacant, an itching spot that wanted a tongue but couldn't have it just *now*.

No tongue. Strange. Why? Smith tried to stop the bells. They ceased, blessing him with a silence that wrapped him up in a cold blanket. Things were happening. Happening.

Smith tried to twitch a finger, but he had no control. A foot, a leg, a toe, his head, everything. Nothing moved. Torso, limbs—immovable, frozen in a concrete coffin.

A moment later came the dread discovery that he was no longer breathing. Not with his lungs, anyway.

"BECAUSE I HAVE NO LUNGS!" he screamed. Inwardly he screamed and that mental scream was drowned, webbed, clotted, and journeyed drowsily down in a red, dark tide. A red drowsy tide that sleepily swathed the scream, garroted it, took it all away, making Smith rest easier.

I am not afraid, he thought. I understand that which I do not understand. I understand that I do not fear, yet know not the reason.

No tongue, no nose, no lungs.

But they would come later. Yes, they would. Things were—happening.

Through the pores of his shelled body air slid, like rain needling each portion of him, giving life. Breathing through a billion gills, breathing oxygen and nitrogen and hydrogen and carbon dioxide, and using it all. Wondering. Was his heart still beating?

But yes, it was beating. Slow, slow, slow. A red dim susurrance, a flood, a river surging around him, slow, slower, slower. So nice. So restful.

The jigsaw pieces fitted together faster as the days drifted into

weeks. McGuire helped. A retired surgeon-medico, he'd been Rockwell's secretary for a number of years. Not much help, but good company.

Rockwell noted that McGuire joked gruffly about Smith, nervously; and a lot. Trying to be calm. But one day McGuire stopped, thought it over, and drawled, "Hey, it just came to me! Smith's alive. He should be dead. But he's alive. Good God!"

Rockwell laughed. "What in blazes do you think I'm working on? I'm bringing an X-ray machine out next week so I can find out what's going on inside Smith's shell." Rockwell jabbed with a hypo needle. It broke on the hard shell.

Rockwell tried another needle, and another, until finally he punctured, drew blood, and placed the slides under the microscope for study. Hours later he calmly shoved a serum test under McGuire's red nose, and spoke quickly.

"Lord, I can't believe it. His blood's germicidal. I dropped a streptococci colony into it and the strep was annihilated in eight seconds! You could inject every known disease into Smith and he'd destroy them all, thrive on them!"

It was only a matter of hours until other discoveries. It kept Rockwell sleepless, tossing at night, wondering, theorizing the titanic ideas over and over. For instance—

Hartley'd fed Smith so many cc's of blood-food every day of his illness until recently. NONE OF THAT FOOD HAD EVER BEEN ELIMINATED. All of it had been stored, not in bulk-fats, but in a perfectly abnormal solution, an x-liquid contained in high concentrate form in Smith's blood. An ounce of it would keep a man well fed for three days. This x-liquid circulated through the body until it was actually needed, when it was seized upon and used. More serviceable than fat. Much more!

Rockwell glowed with his discovery. Smith had enough x-liquid stored in him to last months and months more. Self-sustaining.

McGuire, when told, contemplated his paunch sadly.

"I wish I stored my food that way."

That wasn't all. Smith needed little air. What air he had he seemed to acquire by an osmotic process through his skin. And he used every molecule of it. No waste.

"And," finished Rockwell, "eventually Smith's heart might even take vacations from beating, entirely!"

"Then he'd be dead," said McGuire.

"To you and I, yes. To Smith—maybe. Just maybe. Think of it, McGuire. Collectively, in Smith, we have a self-purifying blood stream demanding no replenishment but an interior one for months, having little breakdown and no elimination of wastes whatsoever because every molecule is utilized, self-evolving, and fatal to any and all microbic life. All this, and Hartley speaks of degeneration!"

Hartley was irritated when he heard of the discoveries. But he still insisted that Smith was degenerating. Dangerous.

McGuire tossed his two cents in. "How do we know that this isn't some super microscopic disease that annihilates all other bacteria while it works on its victim. After all—malarial fever is sometimes used surgically to cure syphilis; why not a new bacillus that conquers all?"

"Good point," said Rockwell. "But we're not sick, are we?"

"It may have to incubate in our bodies."

"A typical old-fashioned doctor's response. No matter what happens to a man, he's 'sick'—if he varies from the norm. That's your idea, Hartley," declared Rockwell, "not mine. Doctors aren't satisfied unless they diagnose and label each case. Well, I think that Smith's healthy; so healthy you're afraid of him."

"You're crazy," said McGuire.

"Maybe. But I don't think Smith needs medical interference. He's working out his own salvation. You believe he's degenerating. I say he's growing."

"Look at Smith's skin," complained McGuire.

"Sheep in wolf's clothing. Outside, the hard, brittle epidermis. Inside, ordered regrowth, change. Why? I'm on the verge of knowing. These changes inside Smith are so violent that they need a shell to protect their action. And as for you, Hartley, answer me truthfully, when you were young, were you afraid of insects, spiders, things like that?"

"Yes."

"There you are. A phobia. A phobia you use against Smith. That explains your distaste for Smith's change."

In the following weeks, Rockwell went back over Smith's life carefully. He visited the electronics lab where Smith had been employed and fallen ill. He probed the room where Smith had

spent the first weeks of his "illness" with Hartley in attendance. He examined the machinery there. Something about radiations . . .

While he was away from the sanitarium, Rockwell locked Smith tightly, and had McGuire guard the door in case Hartley got any unusual ideas.

The details of Smith's twenty-three years were simple. He had worked for five years in the electronics lab, experimenting. He had never been seriously sick in his life.

And as the days went by Rockwell took long walks in the dry-wash near the sanitarium, alone. It gave him time to think and solidify the incredible theory that was becoming a unit in his brain.

And one afternoon he paused by a night-blooming jasmine outside the sanitarium, reached up, smiling, and plucked a dark shining object off of a high branch. He looked at the object and tucked it in his pocket. Then he walked into the sanitarium.

He summoned McGuire in off the veranda. McGuire came. Hartley trailed behind, threatening, complaining. The three of them sat in the living quarters of the building.

Rockwell told them.

"Smith's not diseased. Germs can't live in him. He's *not* inhabited by banshees or weird monsters who've 'taken over' his body. I mention this to show I've left no stone untouched. I reject all normal diagnoses of Smith. I offer the most important, the most easily accepted possibility of—delayed hereditary mutation."

"Mutation?" McGuire's voice was funny.

Rockwell held up the shiny dark object in the light.

"I found this on a bush in the garden. It'll illustrate my theory to perfection. After studying Smith's symptoms, examining his laboratory, and considering several of these"—he twirled the dark object in his fingers—"I'm certain. It's metamorphosis. It's regeneration, change, mutation *after* birth. Here. Catch. This is Smith."

He tossed the object to Hartley. Hartley caught it.

"This is the chrysalis of a caterpillar," said Hartley.

Rockwell nodded. "Yes, it is."

"You don't mean to infer that Smith's a—*chrysalis*?"

"I'm positive of it," replied Rockwell.

Rockwell stood over Smith's body in the darkness of evening. Hartley and McGuire sat across the patient's room, quiet, listening. Rockwell touched Smith softly. "Suppose that there's more to life



than just being born, living seventy years, and dying. Suppose there's one more great step up in man's existence, and Smith has been the first of us to make that step.

"Looking at a caterpillar, we see what we consider a static object. But it changes to a butterfly. Why? There are no final theories explaining it. It's progress, mainly. The pertinent thing is that a supposedly unchangeable object weaves itself into an intermediary object, wholly unrecognizable, a chrysalis, and emerges a butterfly. Outwardly the chrysalis looks dead. This is misdirection. Smith has misdirected us, you see. Outwardly, dead. Inwardly, fluids whirlpool, reconstruct, rush about with wild purpose. From grub to mosquito, from caterpillar to butterfly, from Smith to—?"

"Smith a chrysalis?" McGuire laughed heavily.

"Yes."

"Humans don't work that way."

"Stop it, McGuire. This evolutionary step's too great for your comprehension. Examine this body and tell me anything else. Skin, eyes, breathing, blood flow. Weeks of assimilating food for his brittle hibernation. Why did he eat all that food, why did he need that x-liquid in his body except for his metamorphosis? And the cause of it all was—radiations. Hard radiations from Smith's laboratory equipment. Planned or accidental I don't know. It touched some part of his essential gene-structure, some part of the evolutionary structure of man that wasn't scheduled for working for thousands of years yet, perhaps."

"Do you think that some day all men—?"

"The maggot doesn't stay in the stagnant pond, the grub in the soil, or the caterpillar on a cabbage leaf. They change, spreading across space in waves.

"Smith's the answer to the problem 'What happens next for man, where do we go from here?' We're faced with the blank wall of the universe and the fatality of living in that universe, and man as he is today is not prepared to go against the universe. The least exertion tires man, overwork kills his heart, disease his body. Maybe Smith will be prepared to answer the philosophers' problem of life's purpose. Maybe he can give it new purpose.

"Why, we're just petty insects, all of us, fighting on a pinhead planet. Man isn't meant to remain here and be sick and small and

weak, but he hasn't discovered the secret of the greater knowledge yet.

"But—change man. Build your perfect man. Your—your superman, if you like. Eliminate petty mentality, give him complete physiological, neurological, psychological control of himself: give him clear, incisive channels of thought, give him an indefatigable blood stream, a body that can go months without outside food, that can adjust to any climate anywhere and kill any disease. Release man from the shackles of flesh and flesh misery and then he's no longer a poor, petty little man afraid to dream because he knows his frail body stands between him and the fulfillment of dreams, then he's ready to wage war, the only war worth waging—the conflict of man reborn and the whole confounded universe!"

Breathless, voice hoarse, heart pounding, Rockwell tensed over Smith, placed his hands admiringly, firmly on the cold length of the chrysalis and shut his eyes. The power and drive and belief in Smith surged through him. He was right. He was right. He knew he was right. He opened his eyes and looked at McGuire and Hartley who were mere shadows in the dim shielded light of the room.

After a silence of several seconds, Hartley snuffed out his cigarette. "I don't believe that theory."

McGuire said, "How do you know Smith's not just a mess of jelly inside? Did you X-ray him?"

"I couldn't risk it, it might interfere with his change, like the sunlight did."

"So he's going to be a superman? What will he look like?"

"We'll wait and see."

"Do you think he can hear us talking about him now?"

"Whether or not he can, there's one thing certain—we're sharing a secret we weren't intended to know. Smith didn't plan on myself and McGuire entering the case. He had to make the most of it. But a superman doesn't like people to know about him. Humans have a nasty way of being envious, jealous, and hateful. Smith knew he wouldn't be safe if found out. Maybe that explains your hatred, too, Hartley."

They all remained silent, listening. Nothing sounded. Rockwell's blood whispered in his temples, that was all. There was Smith, no longer Smith, a container labeled SMITH, its contents unknown.

"If what you say *is* true," said Hartley, "then indeed we should destroy him. Think of the power over the world he would have. And if it affects his brain as I think it will affect it—he'll try to kill us when he escapes because we are the only ones who know about him. He'll hate us for prying."

Rockwell said it easily. "I'm not afraid."

Hartley remained silent. His breathing was harsh and loud in the room.

Rockwell came around the table, gesturing.

"I think we'd better say good-night now, don't you?"

The thin rain swallowed Hartley's car. Rockwell closed the door, instructed McGuire to sleep downstairs tonight on a cot fronting Smith's room, and then he walked upstairs to bed.

Undressing, he had time to conjure over all the unbelievable events of the passing weeks. A superman. Why not? Efficiency, strength—

He slipped into bed.

When. When does Smith emerge from his chrysalis? When?

The rain drizzled quietly on the roof of the sanitarium.

McGuire lay in the middle of the sound of rain and the earthquaking of thunder, slumbering on the cot, breathing heavy breaths. Somewhere, a door creaked, but McGuire breathed on. Wind gusted down the hall. McGuire grunted and rolled over. A door closed softly and the wind ceased.

Footsteps tread softly on the deep carpeting. Slow footsteps, aware and alert and ready. Footsteps. McGuire blinked his eyes and opened them.

In the dim light a figure stood over him.

Upstairs, a single light in the hall thrust down a yellow shaft near McGuire's cot.

An odor of crushed insect filled the air. A hand moved. A voice started to speak.

McGuire screamed.

Because the hand that moved into the light was green.

Green.

"Smith!"

McGuire flung himself ponderously down the hall, yelling.

"He's walking! He can't walk, but he's walking!"

The door rammed open under McGuire's bulk. Wind and rain shrieked in around him and he was gone into the storm, babbling.

In the hall, the figure was motionless. Upstairs a door opened swiftly and Rockwell ran down the steps. The green hand moved back out of the light behind the figure's back.

"Who is it?" Rockwell paused halfway.

The figure stepped into the light.

Rockwell's eyes narrowed.

"Hartley! What are you doing back here?"

"Something happened," said Hartley. "You'd better get McGuire. He ran out in the rain babbling like a fool."

Rockwell kept his thoughts to himself. He searched Hartley swiftly with one glance and then ran down the hall and out into the cold wind.

"McGuire! McGuire, come back you idiot!"

The rain fell on Rockwell's body as he ran. He found McGuire about a hundred yards from the sanitarium, blubbing.

"Smith—Smith's walking . . ."

"Nonsense. Hartley came back, that's all."

"I saw a green hand. It moved."

"You dreamed."

"No. No." McGuire's face was flabby pale, with water on it. "I saw a green hand, believe me. Why did Hartley come back? He—"

At the mention of Hartley's name, full comprehension came smashing to Rockwell. Fear leaped through his mind, a mad blur of warning, a jagged edge of silent screaming for help.

"Hartley!"

Shoving McGuire abruptly aside, Rockwell twisted and leaped back toward the sanitarium, shouting. Into the hall, down the hall—

Smith's door was broken open.

Gun in hand, Hartley was in the center of the room. He turned at the noise of Rockwell's running. They both moved simultaneously. Hartley fired his gun and Rockwell pulled the light switch.

Darkness. Flame blew across the room, profiling Smith's rigid body like a flash photo. Rockwell jumped at the flame. Even as he jumped, shocked deep, realizing why Hartley had returned. In



that instant before the lights blinked out Rockwell had a glimpse of Hartley's fingers.

They were a brittle mottled green.

Fists then. And Hartley collapsing as the lights came on, and McGuire, dripping wet at the door, shook out the words, "Is—is Smith killed?"

Smith wasn't harmed. The shot had passed over him.

"This fool, this fool," cried Rockwell, standing over Hartley's numbed shape. "Greatest case in history and he tries to destroy it!"

Hartley came around, slowly. "I should've known. Smith warned you."

"Nonsense, he—" Rockwell stopped, amazed. Yes. That sudden premonition crashing into his mind. Yes. Then he glared at Hartley. "Upstairs with you. You're being locked in for the night. McGuire, you, too. So you can watch him."

McGuire croaked. "Hartley's hand. Look at it. It's green. It was Hartley in the hall—not Smith!"

Hartley stared at his fingers. "Pretty, isn't it?" he said, bitterly. "I was in range of those radiations for a long time at the start of Smith's illness. I'm going to be a—creature—like Smith. It's been this way for several days. I kept it hidden. I tried not to say anything. Tonight, I couldn't stand it any longer, and I came back to destroy Smith for what he's done to me . . ."

A dry noise racked, dryly, splitting the air. The three of them froze.

Three tiny flakes of Smith's chrysalis flicked up and then spiraled down to the floor.

Instantly, Rockwell was to the table, and gaping.

"It's starting to crack. From the collar-bone V to the navel, a microscopic fissure! He'll be out of his chrysalis soon!"

McGuire's jowls trembled. "And then what?"

Hartley's words were bitter sharp. "We'll have a superman. Question: what does a superman look like? Answer: nobody knows."

Another crust of flakes crackled open.

McGuire shivered. "Will you try to talk to him?"

"Certainly."

"Since when do—butterflies—speak?"

"Oh, Good God, McGuire!"

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With the two others securely imprisoned upstairs, Rockwell locked himself into Smith's room and bedded down on a cot, prepared to wait through the long wet night, watching, listening, thinking.

Watching the tiny flakes flicking off the crumbling skin of chrysalis as the Unknown within struggled quietly outward.

Just a few more hours to wait. The rain slid over the house, pattering. What *would* Smith look like? A change in the earcups perhaps for greater hearing; extra eyes, maybe; a change in the skull structure, the facial setup, the bones of the body, the placement of organs, the texture of skin, a million and one changes.

Rockwell grew tired and yet was afraid to sleep. Eyelids heavy, heavy. What if he was wrong? What if his theory was entirely disjointed? What if Smith was only so much moving jelly inside? What if Smith was mad, insane—so different that he'd be a world menace? No. No. Rockwell shook his head groggily. Smith was perfect. Perfect. There'd be no room for evil thought in Smith. Perfect.

The sanitarium was death quiet. The only noise was the faint crackle of chrysalis flakes skimming to the hard floor . . .

Rockwell slept. Sinking into the darkness that blotted out the room as dreams moved in upon him. Dreams in which Smith arose, walked in stiff, parched gesticulations and Hartley, screaming, wielded an ax, shining, again and again into the green armor of the creature and hacked it into liquid horror. Dreams in which McGuire ran babbling through a rain of blood. Dreams in which—

Hot sunlight. Hot sunlight all over the room. It was morning. Rockwell rubbed his eyes, vaguely troubled by the fact that someone had raised the blinds. Someone had—he leaped! Sunlight! There was no way for the blinds to be up. They'd been down for weeks! He cried out.

The door was open. The sanitarium was silent. Hardly daring to turn his head, Rockwell glanced at the table. Smith should have been lying there.

He wasn't.

There was nothing but sunlight on the table. That—and a few remnants of shattered chrysalis. Remnants.

Brittle shards, a discarded profile cleft in two pieces, a shell



segment that had been a thigh, a trace of arm, a splint of chest—these were the fractured remains of Smith!

Smith was gone. Rockwell staggered to the table, crushed. Scrabbling like a child among the rattling papyrus of skin. Then he swung about, as if drunk, and swayed out of the room and pounded up the stairs, shouting:

“Hartley! What did you do with him? Hartley! Did you think you could kill him, dispose of his body, and leave a few bits of shell behind to throw me off trail?”

The door to the room where McGuire and Hartley had slept was locked. Fumbling, Rockwell unlocked it. Both McGuire and Hartley were there.

“You’re here,” said Rockwell, dazed. “You weren’t downstairs, then. Or did you unlock the door, come down, break in, kill Smith and—no, no.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Smith’s gone! McGuire, did Hartley move out of this room?”

“Not all night.”

“Then—there’s only one explanation—Smith emerged from his chrysalis and escaped during the night! I’ll never see him, I’ll never get to see him, damn it! What a fool I was to sleep!”

“That settles it!” declared Hartley. “The man’s dangerous or he would have stayed and let us see him! God only knows what he is.”

“We’ve got to search, then. He can’t be far off. We’ve got to search then! Quick now, Hartley. McGuire!”

McGuire sat heavily down. “I won’t budge. Let him find himself. I’ve had enough.”

Rockwell didn’t wait to hear more. He went downstairs with Hartley close after him. McGuire puffed down a few moments later.

Rockwell moved wildly down the hall, halted at the wide windows that overlooked the desert and the mountains with morning shining over them. He squinted out, and wondered if there was any chance at all of finding Smith. The first superbeing. The first perhaps in a new long line. Rockwell sweated. Smith wouldn’t leave without revealing himself to at least Rockwell. He couldn’t leave. Or could he?

The kitchen door swung open, slowly.

A foot stepped through the door, followed by another. A hand lifted against the wall. Cigarette smoke moved from pursed lips.

“Somebody looking for me?”

Stunned, Rockwell turned. He saw the expression on Hartley’s face, heard McGuire choke with surprise. The three of them spoke one word together, as if given their cue:

“Smith.”

Smith exhaled cigarette smoke. His face was red-pink as he had been sunburnt, his eyes were glittering blue. He was barefoot and his nude body was attired in one of Rockwell’s old robes.

“Would you mind telling me where I am? What have I been doing for the last three or four months? Is this a—hospital or isn’t it?”

Dismay slammed Rockwell’s mind, hard. He swallowed.

“Hello. I. That is—Don’t you remember—anything?”

Smith displayed his fingertips. “I recall turning green, if that’s what you mean. Beyond that—nothing.” He raked his pink hand through his nut-brown hair with the vigor of a creature newborn and glad to breathe again.

Rockwell slumped back against the wall. He raised his hands, with shock, to his eyes, and shook his head. Not believing what he saw he said, “What time did you come out of the chrysalis?”

“What time did I come out of—what?”

Rockwell took him down the hall to the next room and pointed to the table.

“I don’t see what you mean,” said Smith, frankly sincere. “I found myself standing in this room half an hour ago, stark naked.”

“That’s all?” said McGuire, hopefully. He seemed relieved.

Rockwell explained the origin of the chrysalis on the table.

Smith frowned. “That’s ridiculous. Who *are* you?”

Rockwell introduced the others.

Smith scowled at Hartley. “When I first was sick you came, didn’t you. I remember. At the radiations plant. But this is silly. What disease was it?”

Hartley’s cheek muscles were taut wire. “No disease. Don’t *you* know anything about it?”

“I find myself with strange people in a strange sanitarium. I find myself naked in a room with a man sleeping on a cot. I walk around the sanitarium, hungry. I go to the kitchen, find food, eat,

hear excited voices, and then am accused of emerging from a chrysalis. What am I supposed to think? Thanks, by the way, for this robe, for food, and the cigarette I borrowed. I didn't want to wake you at first, Mr. Rockwell. I didn't know who you were and you looked dead tired."

"Oh, that's all right." Rockwell wouldn't let himself believe it. Everything was crumbling. With every word Smith spoke, his hopes were pulled apart like the crumpled chrysalis. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Strong. Remarkable, when you consider how long I was under."

"Very remarkable," said Hartley.

"You can imagine how I felt when I saw the calendar. All those months—crack—gone. I wondered what I'd been doing all that time."

"So have we."

McGuire laughed. "Oh, leave him alone, Hartley. Just because you hated him—"

"Hated?" Smith's brows went up. "Me? Why?"

"Here. This is why!" Hartley thrust his fingers out. "Your damned radiations. Night after night sitting by you in your laboratory. What can I do about it?"

"Hartley," warned Rockwell. "Sit down. Be quiet."

"I won't sit down and I won't be quiet! Are you both fooled by this imitation of a man, this pink fellow who's carrying on the greatest hoax in history? If you had any sense you'd destroy Smith before he escapes!"

Rockwell apologized for Hartley's outburst.

Smith shook his head. "No, let him talk. What's this about?"

"You know already!" shouted Hartley, angrily. "You've lain there for months, listening, planning. You can't fool me. You've got Rockwell bluffed, disappointed. He expected you to be a superman. Maybe you are. But whatever you are, you're not Smith any more. Not any more. It's just another of your misdirections. We weren't supposed to know all about you, and the world shouldn't know about you. You could kill us, easily, but you'd prefer to stay and convince us that you're normal. That's the best way. You could have escaped a few minutes ago, but that would

have left the seeds of suspicion behind. Instead, you waited, to convince us that you're normal."

"He *is* normal," complained McGuire.

"No he's not. His mind's different. He's clever."

"Give him word association tests then," said McGuire.

"He's too clever for that, too."

"It's very simple, then. We take blood tests, listen to his heart, and inject serums into him."

Smith looked dubious. "I feel like an experiment, but if you really want to. This is silly."

That shocked Hartley. He looked at Rockwell. "Get the hypos," he said.

Rockwell got the hypos, thinking. Now, maybe after all, Smith was a superman. His blood. That superblood. Its ability to kill germs. His heartbeat. His breathing. Maybe Smith was a superman and didn't know it. Yes. Yes, maybe—

Rockwell drew blood from Smith and slid it under a microscope. His shoulders sagged. It was normal blood. When you dropped germs into it the germs took a normal length of time to die. The blood was no longer super germicidal. The x-liquid, too, was gone. Rockwell sighed miserably. Smith's temperature was normal. So was his pulse. His sensory and nervous system responded according to rule.

"Well, that takes care of that," said Rockwell, softly.

Hartley sank into a chair, eyes widened, holding his head between bony fingers. He exhaled. "I'm sorry. I guess my—mind—it just imagined things. The months were so long. Night after night. I got obsessed, and afraid. I've made a fool out of myself. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He stared at his green fingers. "But what about myself?"

Smith said, "I recovered. You'll recover, too, I guess. I can sympathize with you. But it wasn't bad . . . I don't really recall anything."

Hartley relaxed. "But—yes I guess you're right. I don't like the idea of my body getting hard, but it can't be helped. I'll be all right."

Rockwell was sick. The tremendous letdown was too much for him. The intense drive, the eagerness, the hunger and curiosity, the fire, had all sunk within him. So *this* was the man from the



chrysalis? The same man who had gone in. All this waiting and wondering for nothing.

He gulped a breath of air, tried to steady his innermost, racing thoughts. Turmoil. This pink-cheeked, fresh-voiced man who sat before him smoking calmly, was more than a man who had suffered some partial skin petrification, and whose glands had gone wild from radiation, but, nevertheless, just a man now and nothing more. Rockwell's mind, his overimaginative, fantastic mind had seized upon each facet of the illness and built it into a perfect organism of wishful thinking. Rockwell was deeply shocked, deeply stirred and disappointed.

The question of Smith's living without food, his pure blood, low temperature, and the other evidences of superiority were now fragments of a strange illness. An illness and nothing more. Something that was over, done and gone, and left nothing behind but brittle scraps on a sunlit tabletop. There'd be a chance to watch Hartley now, if his illness progressed, and report the new sickness to the medical world.

But Rockwell didn't care about illness. He cared about perfection. And that perfection had been split and ripped and torn and it was gone. His dream was gone. His supercreature was gone. He didn't care if the whole world went hard, green, brittle-mad now.

Smith was shaking hands all around. "I'd better get back to Los Angeles. Important work for me to do at the plant. I have my old job waiting for me. Sorry I can't stay on. You understand."

"You should stay on and rest a few days, at least," said Rockwell. He hated to see the last wisp of his dream vanish.

"No thanks. I'll drop by your office in a week or so for another checkup, though, Doctor, if you like? I'll drop in every few weeks for the next year or so so you can check me, yes?"

"Yes. Yes, Smith. Do that, will you please? I'd like to talk your illness over with you. You're lucky to be alive."

McGuire said, happily. "I'll drive you to L.A."

"Don't bother. I'll walk to Tujung and get a cab. I want to walk. It's been so long, I want to see what it feels like."

Rockwell lent him an old pair of shoes and an old suit of clothes.

"Thanks, Doctor. I'll pay you what I owe you as soon as possible."

"You don't owe me a penny. It was interesting."

"Well, good-bye, Doctor. Mr. McGuire. Hartley."

"Good-bye, Smith."

"Good-bye."

Smith walked down the path to the dry wash, which was already baked dry by the late afternoon sun. He walked easily and happily and whistled. I wish I could whistle now, thought Rockwell tiredly.

Smith turned once, waved to them, and then he strode up the hillside and went on over it toward the distant city.

Rockwell watched him go as a small child watches his favorite sand castle eroded and annihilated by the waves of the sea. "I can't believe it," he said, over and over again. "I can't believe it. The whole thing's ending so soon, so abruptly for me. I'm dull and empty inside."

"Everything looks *rosy* to me!" chuckled McGuire happily.

Hartley stood in the sun. His green hands hung softly at his side and his white face was really relaxed for the first time in months, Rockwell realized. Hartley said, softly,

"I'll come out all right. I'll come out all right. Oh, thank God for that. Thank God for that. I won't be a monster. I won't be anything but myself." He turned to Rockwell. "Just remember, remember, don't let them bury me by mistake. Don't let them bury me by mistake, thinking I'm dead. Remember that."

Smith took the path across the dry wash and up the hill. It was late afternoon already and the sun had started to vanish behind blue hills. A few stars were visible. The odor of water, dust, and distant orange blossoms hung in the warm air.

Wind stirred. Smith took deep breaths of air. He walked.

Out of sight, away from the sanitarium, he paused and stood very still. He looked up at the sky.

Tossing away the cigarette he'd been smoking, he mashed it precisely under one heel. Then he straightened his well-shaped body, tossed his brown hair back, closed his eyes, swallowed, and relaxed his fingers at his sides.

With nothing of effort, just a little murmur of sound, Smith lifted his body gently from the ground into the warm air.

He soared up quickly, quietly—and very soon he was lost among the stars as Smith headed for outer space . . .