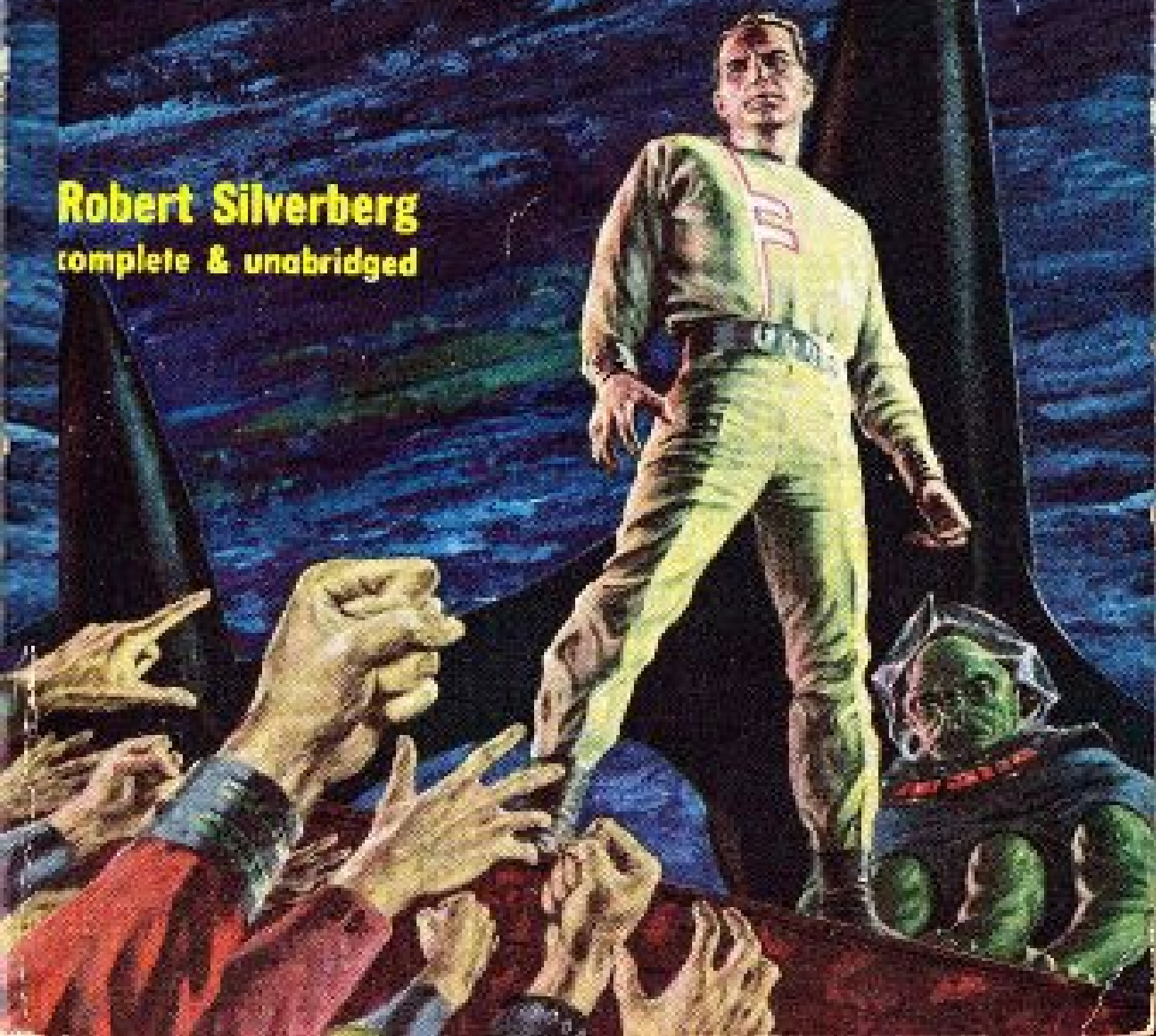


MASTER of LIFE and DEATH

Robert Silverberg
complete & unabridged



MASTER
of Life and Death

by
ROBERT SILVERBERG

For Antigone—
Who Thinks We're Property

THE MAN WHO RATIONED BABIES

By the 23rd century Earth's population had reached seven billion. Mankind was in danger of perishing for lack of elbow room—unless prompt measures were taken. Roy Walton had the power to enforce those measures. But though his job was in the service of humanity, he soon found himself the most hated man in the world.

For it was *his* job to tell parents their children were unfit to live; *he* had to uproot people from their homes and send them to remote areas of the world. Now, threatened by mobs of outraged citizens, denounced and blackened by the press, Roy Walton had to make a decision: resign his post, or use his power to destroy his enemies, become a dictator in the hopes of saving humanity from its own folly. In other words, should he become the MASTER OF LIFE AND DEATH?

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROY WALTON

He had to adopt the motto—*the ends justify the means*.

FITZMAUGHAM

His reward for devoted service was—an assassin's bullet.

FRED WALTON

His ambition was to fill his brother's shoes—but he underestimated their size.

LEE PERCY

His specialty was sugarcoating bitter pills.

PRIOR

With the pen as his only weapon, could he save his son?

DR. LAMARRE

He died for discovering the secret of immortality.

CONTENTS

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[XVIII](#)

[XIX](#)

[XX](#)

I

The offices of the Bureau of Population Equalization, vulgarly known as Popeek, were located on the twentieth through twenty-ninth floors of the Cullen Building, a hundred-story monstrosity typical of twenty-second-century neo-Victorian at its overdecorated worst. Roy Walton, Popeek's assistant administrator, had to apologize to himself each morning as he entered the hideous place.

Since taking the job, he had managed to redecorate his own office—on the twenty-eighth floor, immediately below Director FitzMaugham's—but that had created only one minor oasis in the esthetically repugnant building. It couldn't be helped, though; Popeek was unpopular, though necessary; and, like the public hangman of some centuries earlier, the Bureau did not rate attractive quarters.

So Walton had removed some of the iridescent chrome scalloping that trimmed the walls, replaced the sash windows with opaquers, and changed the massive ceiling fixture to more subtle electroluminescents. But the mark of the last century was stamped irrevocably on both building and office.

Which was as it should be, Walton had finally realized. It was the last century's foolishness that had made Popeek necessary, after all.

His desk was piled high with reports, and more kept arriving via pneumochute every minute. The job of assistant administrator was a thankless one, he thought; as much responsibility as Director FitzMaugham, and half the pay.

He lifted a report from one eyebrow-high stack, smoothed the crinkly paper carefully, and read it.

It was a despatch from Horrocks, the Popeek agent currently on duty in Patagonia. It was dated *4 June 2232*, six days before, and after a long and rambling prologue in the usual Horrocks manner it went on to say, *Population density remains low here: 17.3 per square mile, far below*

optimum. Looks like a prime candidate for equalization.

Walton agreed. He reached for his voicewrite and said sharply, "Memo from Assistant Administrator Walton, re equalization of ..." He paused, picking a trouble-spot at random, "... central Belgium. Will the section chief in charge of this area please consider the advisability of transferring population excess to fertile areas in Patagonia? Recommendation: establishment of industries in latter region, to ease transition."

He shut his eyes, dug his thumbs into them until bright flares of light shot across his eyeballs, and refused to let himself be bothered by the multiple problems involved in dumping several hundred thousand Belgians into Patagonia. He forced himself to cling to one of Director FitzMaugham's oft-repeated maxims, *If you want to stay sane, think of these people as pawns in a chess game—not as human beings.*

Walton sighed. This was the biggest chess problem in the history of humanity, and the way it looked now, all the solutions led to checkmate in a century or less. They could keep equalizing population only so long, shifting like loggers riding logs in a rushing river, before trouble came.

There was another matter to be attended to now. He picked up the voicewrite again. "Memo from the assistant administrator, re establishment of new policy on reports from local agents: hire a staff of three clever girls to make a précis of each report, eliminating irrelevant data."

It was a basic step, one that should have been taken long ago. Now, with three feet of reports stacked on his desk, it was mandatory. One of the troubles with Popeek was its newness; it had been established so suddenly that most of its procedures were still in the formative stage.

He took another report from the heap. This one was the data sheet of the Zurich Euthanasia Center, and he gave it a cursory scanning. During the past week, eleven substandard children and twenty-three substandard adults had been sent on to Happysleep.

That was the grimmest form of population equalization. Walton initialed the report, earmarked it for files, and dumped it in the pneumochute.

The annunciator chimed.

"I'm busy," Walton said immediately.

"There's a Mr. Prior to see you," the annunciator's calm voice said. "He insists it's an emergency."

"Tell Mr. Prior I can't see anyone for at least three hours." Walton stared gloomily at the growing pile of paper on his desk. "Tell him he can have ten minutes with me at—oh, say, 1300."

Walton heard an angry male voice muttering something in the outer office, and then the annunciator said, "He insists he must see you immediately in reference to a Happysleep commitment."

"Commitments are irrevocable," Walton said heavily. The last thing in the world he wanted was to see a man whose child or parent had just been committed. "Tell Mr. Prior I can't see him at all."

Walton found his fingers trembling; he clamped them tight to the edge of his desk to steady himself. It was all right sitting up here in this ugly building and initialing commitment papers, but actually to *see* one of those people and try to convince him of the need—

The door burst open.

A tall, dark-haired man in an open jacket came rushing through and paused dramatically just over the threshold. Immediately behind him came three unsmiling men in the gray silk-sheen uniforms of security. They carried drawn needlers.

"Are you Administrator Walton?" the big man asked, in an astonishingly deep, rich voice. "I have to see you. I'm Lyle Prior."

The three security men caught up and swarmed all over Prior. One of them turned apologetically to Walton. "We're terribly sorry about this, sir. He just broke away and ran. We can't understand how he got in here, but he did."

"Ah—yes. So I noticed," Walton remarked drily. "See if he's planning to assassinate anybody, will you?"

"Administrator Walton!" Prior protested. "I'm a man of peace! How can you accuse me of—"

One of the security men hit him. Walton stiffened and resisted the urge to reprimand the man. He was only doing his job, after all.

"Search him," Walton said.

They gave Prior an efficient going-over. "He's clean, Mr. Walton. Should we take him to security, or downstairs to health?"

"Neither. Leave him here with me."

"Are you sure you—"

"Get out of here," Walton snapped. As the three security men slinked away, he added, "And figure out some more efficient system for protecting me. Some day an assassin is going to sneak through here and get me. Not that I give a damn about myself, you understand; it's simply that I'm indispensable. There isn't another lunatic in the world who'd take this job. Now *get out!*"

They wasted no time in leaving. Walton waited until the door closed and jammed down hard on the lockstud. His tirade, he knew, was wholly unjustified; if he had remembered to lock his door as regulations prescribed, Prior would never have broken in. But he couldn't admit that to the guards.

"Take a seat, Mr. Prior."

"I have to thank you for granting me this audience," Prior said, without a hint of sarcasm in his booming voice. "I realize you're a terribly busy man."

"I am." Another three inches of paper had deposited itself on Walton's desk since Prior had entered. "You're very lucky to have hit the psychological moment for your entrance. At any other time I'd have had you brigged for a month, but just now I'm in need of a little diversion. Besides, I very much admire your work, Mr. Prior."

"Thank you." Again that humility, startling in so big and commanding a man. "I hadn't expected to find—I mean that you—"

"That a bureaucrat should admire poetry? Is that what you're groping for?"

Prior reddened. "Yes," he admitted.

Grinning, Walton said, "I have to do *something* when I go home at night. I don't really read Popeek reports twenty-four hours a day. No more than twenty; that's my rule. I thought your last book was quite remarkable."

"The critics didn't," Prior said diffidently.

"Critics! What do they know?" Walton demanded. "They swing in cycles.

Ten years ago it was form and technique, and you got the Melling Prize. Now it's message, political content that counts. That's not poetry, Mr. Prior—and there are still a few of us who recognize what poetry is. Take Yeats, for instance—"

Walton was ready to launch into a discussion of every poet from Prior back to Surrey and Wyatt; anything to keep from the job at hand, anything to keep his mind from Popeek. But Prior interrupted him.

"Mr. Walton...."

"Yes?"

"My son Philip ... he's two weeks old now...."

Walton understood. "No, Prior. Please don't ask." Walton's skin felt cold; his hands, tightly clenched, were clammy.

"He was committed to Happysleep this morning—potentially tubercular. The boy's perfectly sound, Mr. Walton. Couldn't you—"

Walton rose. "*No*," he said, half-commanding, half-pleading. "Don't ask me to do it. I can't make any exceptions, not even for you. You're an intelligent man; you understand our program."

"I voted for Popeek. I know all about Weeding the Garden and the Euthanasia Plan. But I hadn't expected—"

"You thought euthanasia was a fine thing for *other* people. So did everyone else," Walton said. "That's how the act was passed." Tenderly he said, "I can't do it. I can't spare your son. Our doctors give a baby every chance to live."

"*I* was tubercular. They cured me. What if they had practiced euthanasia a generation ago? Where would my poems be now?"

It was an unanswerable question; Walton tried to ignore it. "Tuberculosis is an extremely rare disease, Mr. Prior. We can wipe it out completely if we strike at those with TB-susceptible genetic traits."

"Meaning you'll kill any children I have?" Prior asked.

"Those who inherit your condition," Walton said gently. "Go home, Mr. Prior. Burn me in effigy. Write a poem about me. But don't ask me to do the impossible. I can't catch any falling stars for you."

Prior rose. He was immense, a hulking tragic figure staring broodingly at Walton. For the first time since the poet's abrupt entry, Walton feared violence. His fingers groped for the needle gun he kept in his upper left desk drawer.

But Prior had no violence in him. "I'll leave you," he said somberly. "I'm sorry, sir. Deeply sorry. For both of us."

Walton pressed the doorlock to let him out, then locked it again and slipped heavily into his chair. Three more reports slid out of the chute and landed on his desk. He stared at them as if they were three basilisks.

In the six weeks of Popeek's existence, three thousand babies had been ticketed for Happysleep, and three thousand sets of degenerate genes had been wiped from the race. Ten thousand subnormal males had been sterilized. Eight thousand dying oldsters had reached their graves ahead of time.

It was a tough-minded program. But why transmit palsy to unborn generations? Why let an adult idiot litter the world with subnormal progeny? Why force a man hopelessly cancerous to linger on in pain, consuming precious food?

Unpleasant? Sure. But the world had voted for it. Until Lang and his team succeeded in terraforming Venus, or until the faster-than-light outfit opened the stars to mankind, something had to be done about Earth's overpopulation. There were seven billion now and the figure was still growing.

Prior's words haunted him. *I was tubercular ... where would my poems be now?*

The big humble man was one of the great poets. Keats had been tubercular too.

What good are poets? he asked himself savagely.

The reply came swiftly: *What good is anything, then?* Keats, Shakespeare, Eliot, Yeats, Donne, Pound, Matthews ... and Prior. How much duller life would be without them, Walton thought, picturing his bookshelf—his one bookshelf, in his crowded little cubicle of a one-room home.

Sweat poured down his back as he groped toward his decision.

The step he was considering would disqualify him from his job if he admitted

it, though he wouldn't do that. Under the Equalization Law, it would be a criminal act.

But just one baby wouldn't matter. Just one.

Prior's baby.

With nervous fingers he switched on the annunciator and said, "If there are any calls for me, take the message. I'll be out of my office for the next half-hour."

II

He stepped out of the office, glancing around furtively. The outer office was busy: half a dozen girls were answering calls, opening letters, coordinating activities. Walton slipped quickly past them into the hallway.

There was a knot of fear in his stomach as he turned toward the lift tube. Six weeks of pressure, six weeks of tension since Popeek was organized and old man FitzMaugham had tapped him for the second-in-command post ... and now, a rebellion. The sparing of a single child was a small rebellion, true, but he knew he was striking as effectively at the base of Popeek this way as if he had brought about repeal of the entire Equalization Law.

Well, just one lapse, he promised himself. I'll spare Prior's child, and after that I'll keep within the law.

He jabbed the lift tube indicator and the tube rose in its shaft. The clinic was on the twentieth floor.

"Roy."

At the sound of the quiet voice behind him, Walton jumped in surprise. He steadied himself, forcing himself to turn slowly. The director stood there.

"Good morning, Mr. FitzMaugham."

The old man was smiling serenely, his unlined face warm and friendly, his mop of white hair bright and full. "You look preoccupied, boy. Something the matter?"

Walton shook his head quickly. "Just a little tired, sir. There's been a lot of work lately."

As he said it, he knew how foolish it sounded. If anyone in Popeek worked harder than he did, it was the elderly director. FitzMaugham had striven for equalization legislature for fifty years, and now, at the age of eighty, he put in a sixteen-hour day at the task of saving mankind from itself.

The director smiled. "You never did learn how to budget your strength, Roy."

You'll be a worn-out wreck before you're half my age. I'm glad you're adopting my habit of taking a coffee break in the morning, though. Mind if I join you?"

"I'm—not taking a break, sir. I have some work to do downstairs."

"Oh? Can't you take care of it by phone?"

"No, Mr. FitzMaugham." Walton felt as though he'd already been tried, drawn, and quartered. "It requires personal attention."

"I see." The deep, warm eyes bored into his. "You ought to slow down a little, I think."

"Yes, sir. As soon as the work eases up a little."

FitzMaugham chuckled. "In another century or two, you mean. I'm afraid you'll never learn how to relax, my boy."

The lift tube arrived. Walton stepped to one side, allowed the Director to enter, and got in himself. FitzMaugham pushed *Fourteen*; there was a coffee shop down there. Hesitantly, Walton pushed *twenty*, covering the panel with his arm so the old man would be unable to see his destination.

As the tube began to descend, FitzMaugham said, "Did Mr. Prior come to see you this morning?"

"Yes," Walton said.

"He's the poet, isn't he? The one you say is so good?"

"That's right, sir," Walton said tightly.

"He came to see me first, but I had him referred down to you. What was on his mind?"

Walton hesitated. "He—he wanted his son spared from Happysleep. Naturally, I had to turn him down."

"Naturally," FitzMaugham agreed solemnly. "Once we make even one exception, the whole framework crumbles."

"Of course, sir."

The lift tube halted and rocked on its suspension. The door slid back, revealing a neat, gleaming sign:

FLOOR 20

Euthanasia Clinic and Files

Walton had forgotten the accursed sign. He began to wish he had avoided traveling down with the director. He felt that his purpose must seem nakedly obvious now.

The old man's eyes were twinkling amusedly. "I guess you get off here," he said. "I hope you catch up with your work soon, Roy. You really should take some time off for relaxation each day."

"I'll try, sir."

Walton stepped out of the tube and returned FitzMaugham's smile as the door closed again. Bitter thoughts assailed him as soon as he was alone.

Some fine criminal you are. You've given the show away already! And damn that smooth paternal smile. FitzMaugham knows! He must know!

Walton wavered, then abruptly made his decision. He sucked in a deep breath and walked briskly toward the big room where the euthanasia files were kept.

The room was large, as rooms went nowadays—thirty by twenty, with deck upon deck of Donnerson micro-memory-tubes racked along one wall and a bank of microfilm records along the other. In six weeks of life Popeek had piled up an impressive collection of data.

While he stood there, the computer chattered, lights flashed. New facts poured into the memory banks. It probably went on day and night.

"Can I help—oh, it's you, Mr. Walton," a white-smocked technician said. Popeek employed a small army of technicians, each one faceless and without personality, but always ready to serve. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm simply running a routine checkup. Mind if I use the machine?"

"Not at all, sir. Go right ahead."

Walton grinned lightly and stepped forward. The technician practically backed out of his presence.

No doubt I must radiate charisma, he thought. Within the building he wore a sort of luminous halo, by virtue of being Director FitzMaugham's protégé and second-in-command. Outside, in the colder reality of the crowded metropolis,

he kept his identity and Popeek rank quietly to himself.

Frowning, he tried to remember the Prior boy's name. Ah ... Philip, wasn't it? He punched out a request for the card on Philip Prior.

A moment's pause followed, while the millions of tiny cryotronic circuits raced with information pulses, searching the Donnerson tubes for Philip Prior's record. Then, a brief squeaking sound and a yellow-brown card dropped out of the slot:

3216847AB1

PRIOR, Philip Hugh. Born 31 May 2232, New York General Hospital, New York. First son of Prior, Lyle Martin and Prior, Ava Leonard. Wgt. at birth 5lb. 3oz.

An elaborate description of the boy in great detail followed, ending with blood type, agglutinating characteristic, and gene-pattern, codified. Walton skipped impatiently through that and came to the notification typed in curt, impersonal green capital letters at the bottom of the card:

*EXAMINED AT NY EUTH CLINIC 10 JUNE 2332
EUTHANASIA RECOMMENDED*

He glanced at his watch: the time was 1026. The boy was probably still somewhere in the clinic lab, waiting for the figurative axe to descend.

Walton had set up the schedule himself: the gas chamber delivered Happysleep each day at 1100 and 1500. He had about half an hour to save Philip Prior.

He peered covertly over his shoulder; no one was in sight. He slipped the baby's card into his breast pocket.

That done, he typed out a requisition for explanation of the gene-sorting code the clinic used. Symbols began pouring forth, and Walton puzzledly correlated them with the line of gibberish on Phillip Prior's record card. Finally he found the one he wanted: *3f2, tubercular-prone*.

He scrapped the guide sheet he had and typed out a message to the machine. *Revision of card number 3216847AB1 follows. Please alter in all circuits.*

He proceeded to retype the child's card, omitting both the fatal symbol *3f2* and the notation recommending euthanasia from the new version. The

machine beeped an acknowledgement. Walton smiled. So far, so good.

Then, he requested the boy's file all over again. After the customary pause, a card numbered 3216847AB1 dropped out of the slot. He read it.

The deletions had been made. As far as the machine was concerned, Philip Prior was a normal, healthy baby.

He glanced at his watch. 1037. Still twenty-three minutes before this morning's haul of unfortunates was put away.

Now came the real test: could he pry the baby away from the doctors without attracting too much attention to himself in the process?

Five doctors were bustling back and forth as Walton entered the main section of the clinic. There must have been a hundred babies there, each in a little pen of its own, and the doctors were humming from one to the next, while anxious parents watched from screens above.

The Equalization Law provided that every child be presented at its local clinic within two weeks of birth, for an examination and a certificate. Perhaps one in ten thousand would be denied a certificate ... and life.

"Hello, Mr. Walton. What brings you down here?"

Walton smiled affably. "Just a routine investigation, Doctor. I try to keep in touch with every department we have, you know."

"Mr. FitzMaugham was down here to look around a little while ago. We're really getting a going-over today, Mr. Walton!"

"Umm. Yes." Walton didn't like that, but there was nothing he could do about it. He'd have to rely on the old man's abiding faith in his protégé to pull him out of any possible stickiness that arose.

"Seen my brother around?" he asked.

"Fred? He's working in room seven, running analyses. Want me to get him for you, Mr. Walton?"

"No—no, don't bother him, thanks. I'll find him later." Inwardly, Walton felt relieved. Fred Walton, his younger brother, was a doctor in the employ of Popeek. Little love was lost between the brothers, and Roy did not care to have Fred know he was down there.

Strolling casually through the clinic, he peered at a few plump, squalling babies, and said, "Find many sour ones today?"

"Seven so far. They're scheduled for the 1100 chamber. Three tuberc, two blind, one congenital syph."

"That only makes six," Walton said.

"Oh, and a spastic," the doctor said. "Biggest haul we've had yet. Seven in one morning."

"Have any trouble with the parents?"

"What do you think?" the doctor asked. "But some of them seemed to understand. One of the tuberculars nearly raised the roof, though."

Walton shuddered. "You remember his name?" he asked, with feigned calm.

Silence for a moment. "No. Darned if I can think of it. I can look it up for you if you like."

"Don't bother," Walton said hurriedly.

He moved on, down the winding corridor that led to the execution chamber. Falbrough, the executioner, was studying a list of names at his desk when Walton appeared.

Falbrough didn't look like the sort of man who would enjoy his work. He was short and plump, with a high-domed bald head and glittering contact lenses in his weak blue eyes. "Morning, Mr. Walton."

"Good morning, Doctor Falbrough. You'll be operating soon, won't you?"

"Eleven hundred, as usual."

"Good. There's a new regulation in effect from now on," Walton said. "To keep public opinion on our side."

"Sir?"

"Henceforth, until further notice, you're to check each baby that comes to you against the main file, just to make sure there's been no mistake. Got that?"

"*Mistake?* But how—"

"Never mind that, Falbrough. There was quite a tragic slip-up at one of the European centers yesterday. We may all hang for it if news gets out." *How*

glibly I reel this stuff off, Walton thought in amazement.

Falbrough looked grave. "I see, sir. Of course. We'll double-check everything from now on."

"Good. Begin with the 1100 batch."

Walton couldn't bear to remain down in the clinic any longer. He left via a side exit, and signaled for a lift tube.

Minutes later he was back in his office, behind the security of a towering stack of work. His pulse was racing; his throat was dry. He remembered what FitzMaugham had said: *Once we make even one exception, the whole framework crumbles.*

Well, the framework had begun crumbling, then. And there was little doubt in Walton's mind that FitzMaugham knew or would soon know what he had done. He would have to cover his traces, somehow.

The annunciator chimed and said, "Dr. Falbrough of Happysleep calling you, sir."

"Put him on."

The screen lit and Falbrough's face appeared; its normal blandness had given way to wild-eyed tenseness.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"It's a good thing you issued that order when you did, sir! You'll never guess what just happened—"

"No guessing games, Falbrough. Speak up."

"I—well, sir, I ran checks on the seven babies they sent me this morning. And guess—I mean—well, one of them shouldn't have been sent to me!"

"No!"

"It's the truth, sir. A cute little baby indeed. I've got his card right here. The boy's name is Philip Prior, and his gene-pattern is fine."

"Any recommendation for euthanasia on the card?" Walton asked.

"No, sir."

Walton chewed at a ragged cuticle for a moment, counterfeiting great

anxiety. "Falbrough, we're going to have to keep this very quiet. Someone slipped up in the examining room, and if word gets out that there's been as much as one mistake, we'll have a mob swarming over us in half an hour."

"Yes, sir." Falbrough looked terribly grave. "What should I do, sir?"

"Don't say a word about this to *anyone*, not even the men in the examining room. Fill out a certificate for the boy, find his parents, apologize and return him to them. And make sure you keep checking for any future cases of this sort."

"Certainly, sir. Is that all?"

"It is," Walton said crisply, and broke the contact. He took a deep breath and stared bleakly at the far wall.

The Prior boy was safe. And in the eyes of the law—the Equalization Law—Roy Walton was now a criminal. He was every bit as much a criminal as the man who tried to hide his dying father from the investigators, or the anxious parents who attempted to bribe an examining doctor.

He felt curiously dirty. And, now that he had betrayed FitzMaugham and the Cause, now that it was done, he had little idea why he had done it, why he had jeopardized the Popeek program, his position—his life, even—for the sake of one potentially tubercular baby.

Well, the thing was done.

No. Not quite. Later, when things had quieted down, he would have to finish the job by transferring all the men in the clinic to distant places and by obliterating the computer's memories of this morning's activities.

The annunciator chimed again. "Your brother is on the wire, sir."

Walton trembled imperceptibly as he said, "Put him on." Somehow, Fred never called unless he could say or do something unpleasant. And Walton was very much afraid that his brother meant no good by this call. No good at all.