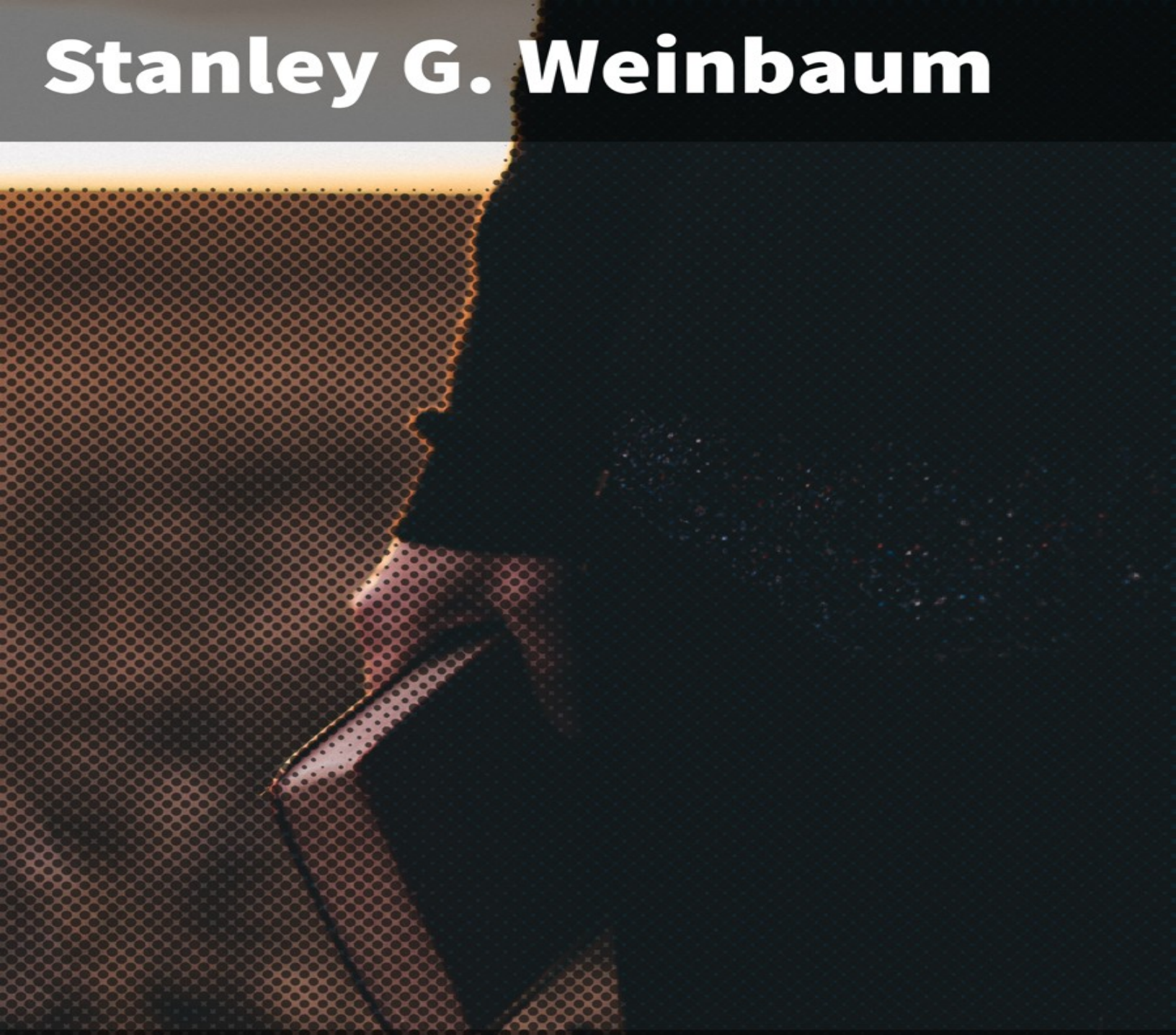
Stanley G. Weinbaum



The New Adam

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INTRODUCTION

1. DAWN ON OLYMPUS

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ANNA HALL died as stolidly as she had lived, died unimagitively in childbirth; and was perhaps spared some maternal pangs, for her strange son lived. Nor did grim middle-aged John Hall waste his emotional strength in either futile regrets or useless recriminations of the child. This business of living was a stern, pitiless affair; one took what befell and did not argue. He accepted the infant, and named it after his own father, old Edmond.

It must have been a rare accident of genes and determinants that produced Edmond Hall—a spindly infant, straight-legged from birth, with oddly light eyes. Yet his strangest abnormality, one that set brisk Doctor Lindquist muttering, was his hands, his tiny slim fingers, for each of these possessed an extra joint. He clenched his three-knuckled thumb against his four-knuckled fingers into a curious little fist, and stared tearlessly with yellowish gray gaze.

'She would not have a hospital,' Doctor Lindquist was muttering. 'This is what comes of home births.' One doubted that he meant only Anna's demise; his eyes were on her son.

John Hall said nothing; there was little, indeed, that he could say. Without cavil and in grim acceptance of little Edmond, he did what was to be done; he arranged for a nurse to care for the child, and returned somberly to his law

practice. John was a good lawyer, industrious, methodical, earnest, and successful.

Certainly he missed Anna. He had liked to talk to her of an evening; not that she contributed much to the conversation, but she was a quiet and attentive audience. The vocal formulating sometimes served to clarify his thoughts. There was a loneliness, too, in his solitary evenings; the baby slept or lay quiet in an upstairs room, and Magda in the kitchen made only a distant clatter. He smoked and read. For many weeks he threaded the idealistic maze of Berkeley, and turned as counter-irritant to Hume.

After a while he took to addressing the child. It was as quiet and possibly as understanding as Anna. Queer little brat! Tearless, almost voiceless, with eyes beginning to show peculiarly amber. It gurgled occasionally; he never heard it cry. So he talked to it by evenings, sending the nurse away glad enough for the moments of liberty. She was puzzled by the little whelp; abnormal hands, abnormal mind, she thought; probably imbecilic. Nevertheless, she was kind enough, in a competent, professional manner. The child began to recognize her presence; she was his refuge and source of comfort. Perhaps this thin, dark, nervous maternal substitute influenced the infant more than he was ever to realize.

John was startled when the child's eyes began to focus. He swung his watch before it; the pale eyes followed the movement with an intensity of gaze more kitten-like than human. A wide, unwinking stare. Sometimes they looked

straight into John's own eyes; the little being's gaze was so curiously intent that he was a trifle startled.

Time passed quietly, uneventfully. Now little Edmond was observing his immediate world with a half purposeful expression; now he was grasping at objects with his odd hands. They were agile little hands, unusually apt at seizing what was within their reach. The fingers closed like small tentacles about John's swinging watch, and tugged it, strangely and precociously, not toward the thin-lipped mouth, but before the eyes for examination.

And time dragged on. John gave up his office in the Loop, moving it to his home on Kenmore. He installed a desk in the living room, and a wall telephone; just as good as being downtown, he thought, and it saved the street car ride. He had the house wired for electric light; everybody was abandoning the hot gas-burners. His practice was well-established, and clients quickly learned of his new business quarters. And at this time a new company was being formed to manufacture gasoline automobiles; he bought a few shares as a speculation, believing the devices due for a wave of popularity. And the 'L' nosed northward block by block. This was Chicago of the first decade, sprawling in its mud and glitter. No seer nor sorcerer whispered that the young city had spawned an egg whose maturity was as yet inconceivable.

The child Edmond was speaking a few words now. 'Light,' he said, when the yellow carbon-filament flashed on. He toddled around the office, learned the sound of the telephone bell. His nurse dressed him in little shirted suits that went unharmoniously with his pinched and precocious

features; he looked like a waxen elf or a changeling. Yet, from a parental standpoint he was a model child; mischief seemed absent from his make-up. He was strangely content to be alone, and happily played meaningless games with himself. John still talked to him at evening. He listened owlishly solemn, and seldom questioned, and seasons came and vanished.

Nothing ever disturbed his poise. John's equally grim and never friendly brother Edward (also named for that old father of both) came once or twice to call in the early years.

'The brat's lonesome,' he stated baldly. 'You'll bring him up queer unless you get him some friends.'

The four-year-old Edmond answered for himself in a piping voice: 'I'm not lonesome.'

'Eh? Who do you play with?'

'I play with myself. I talk with myself. I don't need any friend.'

His uncle laughed. 'Queer, John, like I told you.'

Queer or not, the imp developed. At six he was a silent slender child with curious amber eyes and nondescript brown hair, and a habit of spending many hours alone at the window. He betrayed none of the father-worship common to sons, but he liked the slowly aging John, and they got along well together in a distant way. His curious hands had long ago ceased to bother his father; they were at least as useful as normal members, and at times unusually apt and delicate. The child built things—tall houses of cards that John's steadiness could not duplicate, intricate bits of machinery from a mechanical building toy, and sometimes neat little sailing planes of paper, matches, and glue.

At this age Edmond's quiet way of living was rather ruthlessly upset. John chose to enter him in school.

2. MORNING ON OLYMPUS

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THERE was a public school at the time not more than a block and a half from the house on Kenmore. John placed young Edmond there, disregarding the Kindergarten and starting him in the first grade. The nurse, more or less of an ornament the last two years, dropped out of the boy's sphere. His father took him the short distance to school for a week or so, and thereafter he trudged it himself, as he had often watched others from his window.

For the first time in his short life his world impinged on that of others. He was thrust willy-nilly out of his privacy into the semi-public ordeal of grade school. His first day was something of a trial; he was stared at, and stared back, and stood for the most part quietly waiting for instructions. A few young sophisticates who had come up from Kindergarten grouped together, calling each other by name, and definitely dividing themselves from the others. However, there were many newcomers like Edmond who stood at a loss; some of them cried, and some waited aimlessly for the assignment of seats.

And that stage passed. The strange child refused association with others; he came and left alone, and spent his recesses wandering by himself about the school-yard. He did not seem unusually bright. The goad of competition simply slipped off his hide; he flatly and definitely refused to compete. Questions put by the teacher were answered with unvarying correctness, but he never volunteered. On the other hand, his memory was faultless, and his grasp of

explanations rather remarkable. And so the strange child moved in a world as frictionless as he could contrive and the grades slipped by with the lengthy seasons of childhood. He seemed to learn with acceptable facility. He was never late, seldom early, and still pursued as solitary a course as conditions permitted.

In fourth grade he encountered a physical training instructress who had taken a summer course in the psychology of morbid children. She singled Edmond out; here, she thought, is both a good specimen and an opportunity to help. Introverted, repressed, feeling of inferiority—these were the tags she applied to him.

She arranged games during the gymnasium hour, and attempted to arouse Edmond to compete. She paired him with one or another of the children in races, jumping contests, competitions of various sorts. She appointed him to drop the handkerchief when that game was in progress, and in various ways tried to direct him in paths she thought proper from her three-months study of the subject.

Edmond realized the situation with some disfavor. He promptly and coolly obtained an excuse from physical training, displaying his curious hands as a reason. In some ways he paid for his privilege; the excuse drew the attention of his classmates to his manual deformity. They commented on it in the blunt manner of ten-year-olds, and were continually asking to see the questionable fingers. Edmond obligingly wriggled them for their amusement; he saw in this the easiest attainment of the privacy he desired. And after a while interest did fade; he was permitted again to come and go alone.

He was not, of course, spared entirely in the fierce savagery of childhood. Often enough he was the butt of gibes, the recipient of challenges to fight, or the bearer of a derisive, though usually short-lived, sobriquet. He faced all of these ordeals with a stony indifference. He came and went as he had always done—alone. If he held any resentment, he never showed it, with but possibly one exception.

He was in the sixth grade, and just twelve years old. In every grade, as he had noticed, there had been one leader, one boy who assumed mastery, and whom the others obeyed with a sort of loose discipline. For two years this leader had been Paul—Paul Varney, son of an English professor at nearby Northwestern University, a fine blond youngster, clean-featured, large for his age, intelligent, and imaginative. Very grown up was Paul; he dated with little Evanne Marten in the fifth grade in Platonic imitation of his elders. It was his custom and his privilege to walk home each afternoon with Vanny, who had the blackest hair in school. And it was Paul who coined the sobriquet 'Snake-fingers', which pursued Edmond most of a week. At the beginning the name gave Edmond a day of torment—not that he minded the epithet, but he hated with a fierce intensity the attention it centered on him. He stalked icily out of the door that afternoon. The nick-name followed him, taken up by others in the cruel hunting-pack of children. A group trailed him, headed by Paul.

At the sidewalk he encountered little black-haired Vanny of the fifth; she took in the situation instantly, and seized his arm.

'Walk with me, Edmond.'

There was a cessation of sound from behind him; this situation was up to Paul. And Paul strode up to Edmond; he was a head taller than his slight opponent.

'Vanny's walking with me!' he said.

'I'll walk with whom I please, Paul Varney!' Vanny cut in.

'This guy won't be able to walk in a minute!' He advanced toward Edmond.

'All right,' said the latter coldly, with a curious intense light in his amber eyes. He doubled the troublesome fingers into curious fists.

'Sure, you're bigger'n Edmond. Bully!' Vanny taunted Paul. He stopped; whether Vanny's gibe or Edmond's defiance had halted him was not evident.

'Can't fight with girls around,' was his comment, as he swung on his heel. The pack, leaderless, watched the quarry depart.

'Why do they call you Evanne?' asked Edmond as they walked on.

'One grandma's name was Eva and the other's name was Anne,' sang Vanny. She had answered the same question numerous times. Her mind reverted to the scene of a moment before. 'Why don't you get mad at Paul once in a while? He rides you too much.'

'Perhaps,' said Edmond. 'Sometimes.' He fell silent, and they walked on until they reached Vanny's home.

'Goodbye, Edmond.' She took the books he had carried for her and skipped into the house. Edmond trudged on alone.

In the morning the quarrel had been forgotten; at least, Paul did not refer to it, and Edmond saw no reason to revive it. Paul walked home with Vanny as usual that afternoon, and every afternoon following. Edmond was satisfied, he sought no further meeting with the girl, but he felt a slight thrill of pleasure to have her smile and greet him thereafter when they met in the hall or on the playground. He always smiled a thin, youthfully sardonic smile in answer. It was the friendliest grimace he could manage with what features he had available.

The years in the grades dragged on—futile, stupid years, the boy thought. For, though no one had realized it, Edmond never studied. True, he handed in the usual themes and exercises when these were required, and he purchased the usual text books, but these were never perused. The explanations of the teacher, the little drill he had in class, were all he required; his almost infallible memory served him sufficiently to render needless any further study.

In these awakening years he was beginning to appreciate something else—that there was a difference between the beings about him and himself. Not the minor physical differences that he had always known, but a mental and emotional gap that he was unable to bridge. This realization was slow in dawning. He began by recognizing a slightly superior feeling, a mild contempt, for his class-mates; they were stupid, slow, plodding; they worked over problems that yielded instantly to his perceptions. Even Paul, who was incessantly being called on for answers when others failed, and who always made the highest marks, seemed merely a less complete dullard than the rest.

But the vital difference was of another sort, a variation not of degree but of nature. This condusion came to him as the culmination of many semesters of reprimands by his various teachers; and the accumulated repetitions of an adage that seemed meaningless to him. He was in seventh grade when the realization dawned, and it came about in this fashion.

The geography period was in session, and the teacher was expounding at some length the growing importance of South America to the United States. Edmond, who was seated near a window, was staring disinterestedly out at the street. He noticed a commotion at the corner—two automobiles had mutually dented fenders—and turned his head, focusing his eyes on the scene. His motion drew the teacher's petulant glance.

'Edmund Hall!' was her impatient exclamation. 'Please forget the window and pay attention!' This followed with the most surprising statement he had heard during his seven school years. 'No one can think of two things at once!'

Edmond knew she was wrong. He had been following her. For he himself could with perfect clarity pursue two separate and distinct trains of thought at the same time.

3. INTROSPECTION

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HIGH SCHOOL. A larger world wherein it was far easier to walk alone. Classes under various teachers and with various associates, and freedom from the prying glare of prolonged intimacy. Edmond was half content.

He was now a slender quiet lad of fourteen, of about average height. His features were beginning to betray a youthful ascetic saturninity and his rare smiles seemed almost sneers, foreshadowing a sort of demoniac beauty to come. Boys disliked him, and girls ignored him; he made no advances to either and quietly repulsed casual attempts at companionship.

The work itself weighted very lightly upon him; he had not lost his miraculous facility nor infallible memory. His two study periods sufficed to complete any form-work his courses required, and he disregarded the rest. He had, therefore, ample leisure for a rigid regime of introspection he was following. For more than a year the youth had been examining his own mind.

The realization of his difference had become a certainty; evidence abounded in his reading, in his associates, in the very manner of the school's teaching. He had two minds, equal and independent, capable each in itself of pursuing a train of thought. He could read with half his being and dream idly with his other self; or on occasion, he could fuse his twin mentalities, focus both on the same point as a single unit, and reason with a lucidity and insight that might have amazed his instructors. He could read with astonishing

facility, garnering the contents of half a page of print in an instant's glance, or he could deal with the simple quadratics of high school algebra without the need of chalk or pencil. Yet he never flaunted these abilities; he pursued his accustomed path, never volunteering, never correcting, watching the blond Paul perform pridefully, and holding silently a secret contempt.

In his second year, little Vanny arrived, with her glowing black braids of hair; Paul walked with her in the halls in a manner mature as befits a sophomore in high school, and she still smiled at Edmond when they met. He noted a shade of distraction in her face, and recalled that her father had died during the summer.

In the house on Kenmore, the senescent John smoked on in his library. His little block of motor shares had multiplied itself into a respectable nest-egg; he had given up his practice for a quiet existence in the shade. He refused to own an automobile, berated the rumbling of the distant 'L', and read the conservative *Daily News*. A war in Europe was two years old, and a white-haired philanthrope had sailed to get the soldiers out of the trenches by Christmas. A president was re-elected after a race so close that victory hung in the balance for several days.

Edmond and his father got along well enough. Old John was satisfied with his son's quiet reserve and asocial bent; it seemed to him a sign of industry and serious mind. And Edmond was content to have his leisure undisturbed; the two spent their evenings reading, and seldom spoke. Berkeley and Hume were back on the shelves, and John was plodding through the great *Critique* and Edmond, finding

novels of little interest, was perusing page by page the volumes of the *Britannica*. He absorbed information with a sponge-like memory that retained everything, but as yet the influx was unclassified and random, for the practical and theoretical had no differences in his small experience. Thus the older man absorbed a flood of philosophy with no retaining walls of knowledge, and the younger accumulated loose bricks of knowledge that enclosed no philosophy.

The years rolled on tail-to-trunk like an elephants' parade. Edmond entered Northwestern University, and here found a privacy almost as profound as that of his early youth. A war had been fought and finished without disturbing the curious household other than the mild vicissitudes of meatless days, Hooverizing, and Liberty Bonds. The stormy aftermath was over the world, and the decade of Youth was in its inception.

Edmond chose a medical course, and settled into a routine of home-to- class. The campus was just beyond the city limits, and he made the trip by street-car since old John still held steadfastly to his refusal of motor cars. His first year's sojourn in the College of Medicine was but a repetition of high school. Paul was there, majoring in English; occasionally they passed on the campus with casual nods, and Edmond had his father Professor Varney in an English lecture course. He was not greatly interested in any of his freshman studies; they were simply requirements to be put by since his pre-medic course permitted little latitude for choice. However, he mastered French with considerable facility.

In his second year, he derived some enjoyment from an elective course in Physics under Professor Albert Stein. The brilliant little Jewish savant was already famous; his measurements of electrons were beginning to open up vistas looking to the unknown. Behind his near-sighted eyes and slightly accented speech, Edmond perceived a mind alert and intuitive, an intellect that thought in lesser degree almost as he did himself.

And that year Vanny appeared again, and that was also the year that old John died. Edmond was twenty, a slender young man with strange amber eyes. His grim Uncle Edward became his guardian for the year remaining until his majority, and managed the not-too-extensive estate with a grumbling astuteness. Edmond lived on at the house on Kenmore, and Magda, grown plump and ruddy, ran the house as she had done for twenty years.

So Edmond drifted on, a slim saturnine figure, toying with knowledge in those incredible minds he possessed. He read voluminously in every field save fiction. Learning came to him with a consummate ease. He moved through the University like a lonely, flaming-eyed spirit, coming and going in solitude and scarcely ever addressed outside the classroom. Only Evanne Marten, grown very lovely with her glistening black mop of hair, tossed him an occasional word of greeting.

He was not yet really lonely. He watched the panorama of city and college, and was fairly content with his own company. There still grew in him the sense of superiority, of contempt for these single-minded beings about him. To see only one side of anything! To be unable to toss thoughts

back and forth within one's self, never to know the strange conceptions that are beyond expression in language! No wonder they herded together for company!

Then he was twenty-one, and assumed the management of his resources. His income was sufficient for comfort; he made few changes in old John's investments. However, he purchased a long grey roadster of rather expensive make; there was something about mechanical excellence that pleased his curious character. He drove the machine with almost miraculous dexterity, slipping through traffic like wind through grain. His slim, tentacular fingers seemed especially designed for the management of machinery, and the thrill of driving was as intense as if he used his own muscles. Sometimes he drove to the open country, selecting unpatrolled dirt roads, and here drove at breath-taking speed, pitting his skill against the vagaries of the terrain.

His courses neared completion. Toward the end, the queer Edmond was somewhat less content; a sense of futility oppressed him, and he perceived no outlet anywhere for his energies. The curious being was lonely.

'I am enclosed in a viscid mist,' he reflected. 'Knowledge is a barren thing, since I see no closer to its end than the dullest of these about me.' And his other mind replied, 'This conclusion is unwarranted since hitherto I have made no attempt to attain happiness, but have let my fortunes drift without plan to the beckonings of chance.'

Thereafter he formed a plan. His degree was granted and he departed, making no effort to serve as an interne, since he did not wish to practice. An experiment awaited him that he relished; if happiness could be reduced to formula, he

meant so to reduce it, solving at least for himself the elusive mystery.

Yet an unusual sense of sadness pursued him; he endured the graduation exercises in a somber silence. After the return to his home, he put away his car, and wandered aimlessly westward, past the decrepit school of his early youth, past the house that had been Vanney's home, past the high school now empty for the summer's recess. The half-deserted summer streets seemed sterile and melancholy; he was lonely.

Before him spread the glass fronts of a business street. A group of half a dozen persons clustered before the window of one—a pet shop. A glance revealed the attraction—the gambols and grimaces of a small monkey. Edmond paused for a moment; an impulse stirred him. He entered the shop, emerging in a moment bearing a paper-wrapped cage. The group filtered away as the attraction vanished.

'Here is my companion,' thought Edmond, 'and my defense against loneliness. At least he will be as understanding as any among these who watched him.'

He bore the chattering little animal to the house on Kenmore.

'Your name,' he said, 'shall be Homo, after the being who apes you less successfully than you him.' He smiled as the creature chattered in reply. 'My friend,' he continued, 'your sympathy and intelligence shall aid me in my appointed task.'

The monkey Homo chattered and grimaced, and rattled the bars of his flimsy cage; Edmund slipped the catch, and the little being pushed open the door, bounding with tree-

born agility to Edmond's knee. There he sat in patent enjoyment of his liberty, while his strange master watched him with an expression almost of amusement, finding in his antics a momentary release from his own somber nature. The youth toyed with his unusual emotion of pleasure, reflecting, 'This creature, unthinking and happy, may direct my quest, who am thinking and therefore unhappy; let me see whether I can complete the circle, and in the pursuit of knowledge find happiness.' Thus Edmond entered upon his search.

BOOK I. THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

1. TRAFFIC WITH NATURE

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DURING this epoch of his life, Edmond was not unhappy, at least until the period was approaching its end. He threw himself into a round of labors and speculations; he spent many hours in the unraveling of mysteries by processes purely rational. For a span of several months he found no need for the mechanics of experiment since the tabulations of others' results were available for his use. He absorbed the facts and rejected the speculations of science. This rejection was due in part to his distrust of the theories of these half-minded creatures about him; he was inclined to doubt the truth of any hypothesis promulgated by such beings.

He set about his own researches, therefore, working with an enthusiasm that almost deluded himself. He realized, indeed, that his purpose in these researches was artificial and sterile; he had no consuming love of knowledge, and no deep inherent desire to serve humanity; what drove him like a seven- tongued scourge was the specter of boredom standing just behind him. To a being of Edmond's nature this was sufficient incentive.

His income was ample for his immediate needs. He subsided therefore into a quiet regime of speculation, building for himself an esoteric picture of the universe to assist his purposes. In this field as well he found little meat