

The Tenth Question

by George Allan England

“**D**R. NASMYTH?” inquired the voice over the wire.

“Yes.”

“This is Mr. Varian speaking, No. 29a West Eleventh Street. I should like to see you at once.”

Nasmyth frowned. The prospect of abandoning slippers, pipe, and book, to face the slush and sleet of that February night by no means pleased him.

“You’ll come, of course?” the voice persisted—the voice of an oldish man.

“Yes.”

“Very well; thank you. Good-by.”

Nasmyth growled an imprecation under his breath as he hung up the receiver. His practice had long since passed the point where a new patient was greatly to be desired.

None the less he kept his word. Fifteen minutes later he presented himself at the door of 29a West Eleventh—a three-story brick house, closely shuttered, against which the storm-drive blustered savagely.

Varian himself let the physician in. Nasmyth’s appraising eye beheld a big-chested, thick-bearded man of sixty-five or seventy, with a God-bless-you expression and mild eyes that peered from behind thick-lensed glasses. The house, dark save for the front hall and the library, impressed him as being rather unusually well furnished: a scholar’s house, thought the

doctor.

Varian led Nasmyth into the library and produced liquor. He insisted on pouring the physician a stiff drink.

Nasmyth did not object. Warmth and green Chartreuse were grateful, after having breasted such a night. When he had drunk it, Varian sat down and told him about some symptoms or other; Nasmyth never knew just what. The soporific in the Chartreuse struck him down as though he had been hit with a club.

It was morning when the doctor straggled back to consciousness. He discovered that he was lying on a padded quilt spread on a cement floor. His clothing was gone. In place of it he wore a Japanese quilted gown, with white cotton *tabi* or socks on his feet.

Astonished, he struggled up, and beheld Varian peering at him through metal bars.

The old man nodded and smiled when he saw that the doctor’s eyes were open.

“Good morning,” said he with perfect composure. I hope you slept quite well. The little potion I administered ought to have made you, at any rate. I learned its secret in Nagasaki. Wonderfully efficient; marvelously so!”

The man’s infernal nerve—for already Nasmyth realized that he had been trapped for some purpose or other—kept the doctor from speech. That, and his dazed condition, effectually muted him. He sat there on the quilt,

stupidly enough.

Varian regarded him with a cynical expression. His smile grew bitter.

"Just as dull as all the rest, I see," he remarked acridly. "And these are the men to whom society entrusts its lives and welfare!"

That stung Nasmyth to action. Mentally vague and confused as he still was, he managed to return the old man's look with compound interest. For a minute their eyes met, the doctor's in rage, Varian's eloquent of scorn.

Then Nasmyth articulated:

"What is the meaning—of this farce? What—" "No farce, but stern reality!" Varian interrupted. "If all your judgments turn out as mistaken as this, my hidden service to humanity will soon be enriched by one more heroic act, and the world will soon be rid of one more charlatan!"

II.

THIS brought Nasmyth up all standing, as the saying is. He catapulted off the quilt in spite of a dizzying headache: grabbed the bars like a gorilla, and snarled:

"Here, you! Let me out of this, or—"

"Or what?" Varian smiled calmly, "Really, I'm interested to know what you can possibly threaten."

Nasmyth could find no answer to such amazing effrontery. He stared in silence at the old man, who sat down on a chair close to the cage and regarded him with a mildly curious air of scientific speculation. Thus for a moment, captor and captive gazed upon each other in that strange place.

Strange, indeed, it was. The prison seemed a kind of basement, divided in the middle by a row of steel rods. Light entered through two windows at the far end, behind Varian; windows glazed with ground-glass, translucent, but

preventing clear vision. Near these windows stood a table with books, papers, and writing material. At the left a metal-incased door with a combination-lock, formed the only exit from the den. Above the table hung a small clock.

The cage itself was provided with nothing but the simplest of Japanese furnishings, none of which could be converted into any weapon or any tool wherewith to break jail. Beside the quilt a frail little table of lacquered cedar, with pencils and paper, and a wash-basin and pitcher of some heavily waxed, paperlike material completed the arrangements.

A single powerful incandescent hung from the ceiling near enough the cage to furnish light for it at night, yet too far to be reached through the bars. Evidently Varian had no intention of entrusting even a piece of glass in the hands of his prospective victim.

By the subdued light from the windows Nasmyth continued to stare dumbly at his captor. The physician was able to distinguish clearly the old man's expression of impersonal interest—just the same kind of impression that Nasmyth himself had more than once assumed when confronted with a new and interesting pathological condition.

The doctor needed only very brief observation to assure himself that Varian was entirely in earnest and terribly dangerous. No doubt existed in his mind, from the first minute of clear realization, that he was confronted by a case of dementia with delusions and probably homicidal mania.

Blackmail, ransom, or anything of that kind was out of the question; and as for personal revenge, what motive could it have? Nasmyth had never seen or heard of Varian till last night.

A real madman, he felt convinced, sat before him in that chair: a madman of the most sinister type, because highly educated and of extreme intelligence. Nasmyth felt that he could have outwitted a dull, brutish *crétin* in one way or another. But this elderly, professorlike

gentleman of scientific attainments—this man with the observant eyes and the well-modulated voice—evidently could not be circumvented by argument or stratagem.

Just what problem Nasmyth now faced he could not tell. But that it was fearfully urgent and freighted with extreme perils he was thoroughly convinced.

The doctor was terrified. Never in all his life had he felt so sickening, so instinctive a fear. Every medical man has to face death, legitimately, in his profession; and none dread it under these circumstances, if they are worthy the name of doctor. But to be made a rat of, and murdered in a basement cage by a lunatic, is quite different story

Varian, regarding Nasmyth's blanched face and wild eyes, said nothing for a minute. But his smile was eloquent. It meant: "Coward!"

That smile revived the doctor; it galvanized him out of his terror. In a moment he managed to pull himself together. He grew rather unusually calm.

"You seem to have the advantage," said he. "You've caught me, right enough. I don't know why. Perhaps it's a case of mistaken identity. You may take me for somebody I'm not? Or your motive may be something else. Whatever it is, I have a right to know it!"

Varian, struck by this logic, nodded assent. The physician now for the first time remarked that the old man's face was perceptibly asymmetrical, his skull plagiocephalic, and his expression indicative of some mental unbalance, though not markedly so. His beard and glasses helped to conceal this appearance. Yet Nasmyth knew the diagnosis was correct.

"Well?" he demanded. "What are you imprisoning me for, and what do you want with me?"

Varian's manner denoted culture, and his words were perfectly coherent as he answered:

"I will tell you. In the first place, there has been no mistake in your identity. You are a

practicing physician; that is enough for me. I chose your name at random, last night, from a physicians' directory. Any other one would have answered my purpose as well. My choice simply happened to fall on you, by fortune. My summoning you, as if for illness, was of course a mere deception. I am perfectly sound in mind and body. I—"

"For God's sake, then, what do you want of me?"

"You ask an explanation, and you shall have it. All the others have had one. Why not you?"

"The *others*?" demanded Nasmyth, horribly startled.

"The others," Varian repeated with satisfaction. He drew out a cigar-case and offered his prisoner a smoke. Nasmyth shuddered. The old man, smiling, calmly chose and lighted a Londres.

"What others?" gulped the doctor.

"Those who have preceded you here, of course," Varian answered slowly as he blew a feather of smoke. He crossed his legs, at ease, leaned back, and observed his victim with attention. "You must know about the mysterious disappearance of several physicians and surgeons from New York, during the past eighteen months. You must remember that they all seemed to have left suddenly for foreign parts, leaving their personal affairs and their practices unsettled, and that they all appeared to have been lost in various ways—by fire, flood, or what-not."

"What then?" Nasmyth snarled at him, still weak and dizzy as he clung to the bars.

"Every last man of them all," continued Varian, smiling, "at one time or another occupied this identical testing-cage of mine, now honored by your presence. Each one failed in the necessary trial. I was therefore compelled, much against my will—for really, doctor. I am the most humane and kind-hearted of men—to expedite their departure from a world certainly the better for their absence."

"Horrible! Impossible!" gasped Nasmyth, unable to believe his ears. The man, he felt, must be suffering from some megalomania, some obsession of power or the like.

"No, neither horrible nor impossible, Varian replied. "On the contrary, perfectly just, virtuous, and true. Some years ago, in 1908 to be exact, a surgeon did me a tremendous, irreparable wrong, not through malice, but through ignorance, stupidity, and misjudgement. After long deliberation I determined to devote my life to the testing of the intelligence of medical practitioners.

"Money was no object. I have enough, more than enough. I spent a good deal in preparing this place, where my researches should be undisturbed; and much more, subsequently, in issuing reports about the unsuccessful men's disappearance. It has been a long, hard task; but results have justified it. So far, not one physician or surgeon has passed the required test. They have all been eliminated, therefore, from a society they could only have injured by having remained in it, and—"

"This cannot be!" cried Nasmyth, horrified.

"Perfectly true, I assure you, smiled Varian, obviously with a clear conscience. "If you insist I can furnish you complete data that will prove it. There was Henderson, for instance. He came here the 11th of August, 1912, insisting on hastening the test—claimed the full ten days would drive him mad—failed, and was eliminated on the 17th, at 8:45 P. M."

Varian drew a small, red-leather note-book from his pocket, thumbed the leaves, and continued.

"Then there was Maltby, October 21 to November 7. He really did go mad. I waited some time for him to recover his reason, but when I realized this was quite futile, I had to eliminate him in that unfortunate condition. His body-ash joined that of all the rest, in my electric volatilizer. I had reports sent in from Sao Pablo, in the Azores, establishing his

drowning there, just as I had Henderson reported killed by aborigines near the Essequibo Rapids, in British Guiana.

"Van Cleave's case was interesting," he continued, still consulting his notes. "On the fifth day of the test he broke his incandescent lamp—it hung inside the cage, then—and cut his radial arteries. I rescued him just in time.

"In a week he had convalesced sufficiently to resume the work: but after all," and Varian regretfully shook his head, "he failed, and I was forced to do my duty. I then removed the lamp from the cell, as you notice. I couldn't afford to take any more risks, you see."

"You inhuman monster!" cried Nasmyth, his prudence all swept away by horror and indignation. Calm judgment would have told him that it was worse than futile to accuse a madman, but in his weakened condition of nerve and body he could not keep calm.

He shook his clenched fist through the bars at the calm, smiling face of the old man. A sudden tremor almost overcame him. He had to grip the steel to keep his feet.

"Philanthropist, you mean," Varian asserted mildly, showing no slightest trace of anger or resentment. "My only idea is this: To try the intelligence of all the medical practitioners I can reach; and, if this proves too low to warrant their continuing in the profession, then mercifully and quickly to eliminate them from society. I have long been hoping to find a man of brains and wit enough some day to stand the test and emerge victorious.

"So far, however," he concluded, sighing with genuine regret. "I am very, very sorry to say not one of my subjects has stood the experiment."

Keenly he peered at Nasmyth with appraising interest.

"I wonder," he remarked musingly—"I wonder now if you are going to stand it?"

NASMYTH stared at him with horror-stricken eyes.

"What—what kind of a test?" he stammered thickly.

"Draw your quilt up here near the bars," said Varian. "Sit down on it and calm yourself, and I'll explain."

Nasmyth shook his head in objection, but the old man insisted.

"You really mustn't stand any longer," said he. "It's tiresome to us both. Make yourself comfortable by all means. And, by the way, how about a little breakfast? Rolls, coffee, cocoa? A bit of tobacco, maybe?"

"Nothing!" the captive declined. "All I want is the conditions of your infernal test!" Subconsciously he knew he should accede to anything, fall in with the madman's plans, and seem to work with him; but for the present, at least, indignation and rage inhibited deception.

He suddenly felt very weak, and, yielding to Varian's command, hauled his quilt up close to the cage and squatted there, cross-legged, his whole body shuddering in a nervous chill, his teeth chattering violently.

Varian pulled at his cigar a moment, then began:

"Of course. I don't expect you to grasp the social significance of my reform work among physicians. From your point of view I'm a mere assassin—"

"The test!" interrupted Nasmyth. "For Heaven's sake, man, the test!"

"Very well, the test, which alone can set you free. You understand that your only chance for life is through it. Succeed, and this door swings wide to you. Fail, and a vial of hydrocyanic acid gas extinguishes you, painlessly instantaneously, absolutely. That's quite understood?"

"Go on!"

"You are familiar, of course, with the old

game of Twenty Questions? Yes? Of course. Almost everybody is. A most useful diversion. Nothing can so clearly index the intellectual capacity of a man as an analysis of the processes he uses, his inferences and deductions, in approaching the answer.

"Agreed, then. Through a series of *ten* questions, on the plan of the old game. I have gauged the powers of all my subjects and shall measure yours."

"Just how do you mean?" inquired Nasmyth, striving for self-control.

"This: I have in mind a certain thing, the identical thing that all the others have tried to guess, and failed. I will give you ten questions on ten consecutive days to discover that thing. Twenty questions is a child's game. Ten will be a man's.

"I will be honest with you, doctor. If you guess my thought I will so inform you, and will certainly set you free. If you fail you will have shown your mental unfitness to practice medicine, and I shall be under the painful necessity of administering the hydrocyanic acid gas and of volatilizing your body. You will simply vanish from society.

"In due time reports will reach New York that you have been lost in Lake Victoria Nyanza, or something of that sort. There will be some sort of investigation, of course; but it will all blow over presently, and you will be forgotten. Society will be freed of another incompetent. It is all quite simple."

Nasmyth gazed at him with despairing eyes.

"So I perceive," he answered. "And when is this ghastly play to begin?"

"To-day, if you wish. The sooner the better. Evening will be the best time. Shall we make it nine-thirty?"

"Eight will be better." said the captive

"Very well; eight it is. So then. that's settled. Everything will be arranged most comfortably. You shall eat and drink of the best, smoke my finest cigars, and have plenty of

reading-matter. This push-button, here” —and he indicated one on the wall— will summon me at any time. I am sure we shall get on admirably together.”

He asked a few questions relative to Nasmyth’s wishes about material comforts, peering in through the bars, meanwhile, with a benevolent expression on his asymmetrical features.

Then presently he withdrew, leaving the captive alone with thoughts such as never till then had he believed it possible to entertain.

IV.

THE horror of the situation at first quite overmastered the unfortunate physician. He sat there, shuddering, on the quilt which had been used by so many miserable members of his profession; seemingly obsessed by the presence of the dead men who had preceded him in the cell, all doomed— as he himself was doomed— to annihilation at the hands of this madman.

His thoughts dwelt on different phases of the tragedy and of the oft-repeated crime. Where, he wondered, was the volatilizing furnace for the disposal of the bodies, and how did it operate? How long had it been since the last victim had been made way with?

How could it be that in a great and civilized community, human beings could be lured to death and could drop out of the world without this monstrous den of murder being discovered.

He knew now only too well that Varian had told the truth about those disappearances. Insane though the old man were, yet in the matter of his records of crimes he was lucid enough.

Strange, was it not? thought Nasmyth, that the murderer had never given any consideration to the inevitable results of letting a victim go in case of a successful guessing of the question. This contingency spelled certain arrest and

confinement for Varian; but probably the insane man, with characteristic fatuity, had never even given this matter a thought.

Or, in the event of success, would he still carry out his murderous desires and, breaking all promises, execute his captive?

At thought of this strong probability black despair overcame the prisoner, and for a while he gave himself up as hopelessly lost. But gradually, as calmer reason asserted itself and his physical disturbance subsided, a reaction set in and he began to entertain more hopeful thoughts.

He got up and wandered about the cell—a space of some twelve by fifteen feet—narrowly examining it for any possible chance of escape: but against cement and steel what could bare hands hope to accomplish?

There remained, Nasmyth clearly perceived, only one possibility of salvation—the chance of wresting from Varian the secret thought he harbored. Yet to do this in only ten questions—how horribly tenuous a hope!

Tired and very weak, the prisoner threw himself at length on the quilt, buried his head in both arms, and tried to think his way through the diabolical maze enmeshing him. He reflected on the disturbance his vanishment would cause and the ill effects it would surely have on two or three of his patients urgently needing his personal attention. This added to his despair.

Came, then, a comforting conviction that the old maniac was at least sincere in his testing of the intellect, and that he might fairly be depended on. Mad though he undoubtedly was he still remained of a highly intellectual type, with every indication of honesty of purpose.

Nasmyth felt sure Varian was acting on moral grounds, with a strong psychic imperative. He would play a ruseful and intelligent yet perfectly fair game. He would not change the subject of his thought during that game; and at its end, if Nasmyth should

succeed, he would undoubtedly admit it and set him free. But if he failed, the captive knew that Varian would positively kill him with as little compunction as though stamping on an insect.

Nasmyth recognized the fact that on his own wits depended not only his own life, but also the lives of many others who—in the event of his failure—must still follow him in that abominable rat-pit. He perceived that he owed a profound duty to society to beat this madman, to regain his freedom, clear up the many mysteries and tragedies he now understood, and finally to have Varian incarcerated for life.

At these reflections every fiber of his being quivered with the intensity of his determination to succeed and to be free.

“God grant” —he thought with passionate eagerness as he lay there on the Japanese quilting—“that I may live to work out justice from this horrible calamity!”

His thought passed now to the test itself, the horrible mockery of a game that was to be played with him. He determined to meet the situation like a man of intelligence, determination, and grit. In no event, even though he should see that all was lost, would he play the coward or utter vain pleas for mercy. His burning ambition was to meet Varian on his own ground and beat him.

He felt positive he would not ask to have the game hurried, would not go mad with the suspense, and would not allow himself to be driven to suicide. Carefully, thoughtfully, and with patience he would apply the totality of his mind to the problem, would take the full allotted time, and would see the hideous gamble through to the bitter end.

He pondered then on the probable direction that old Varian’s thought would take and the nature of the subject he had probably chosen. That it would be obscure and difficult he did not doubt. The man’s subtlety vouched for that, as well as the fact that all his predecessors had failed—among them men of more than usual

attainments, witness Maltby and Van Cleave.

The thought of Van Cleave, in particular, filled him with despair. Where *he* had gone down to defeat, he, the logician, chess-expert, and skilled debater, how could Nasmyth hope for success?

All the disheartening factors of the case, however, he resolutely put aside, rallied his strength, and began making active preparations for the battle royal of the intellect. Toward nine o’clock he rang for Varian, ordered some breakfast, and indulged in a cigar.

He now began to feel much more fit. Courage rose appreciably. He chatted a little with the old man, hoping to sound his thought and if possible discover in what direction his special interests lay. This, he hoped, might give him some faint clue to work on; but Varian was wary and let nothing slip which might in any way be interpreted by his adversary.

When Varian was gone Nasmyth set to work with a will, logically classifying all the categories of things animate, inanimate, and abstract. He based his work as nearly as possible on the arrangement of Roget’s famous “Thesaurus,” a work with which as a writer on medical topics he had become familiar.

Using the writing materials at hand, he drew up headings and classifications, and before night had finished a fairly complete general outline of matters and things. This done, he found his confidence greatly restored, and began to face the ordeal with more than a little assurance.

At noon, and again at six o’clock, Varian made his appearance with excellent meals. A box of cigars, a pipe, and half a pound of Perique—in a cloth bag, not a metal box, since even this metal might have served for an instrument of suicide—added to Nasmyth’s comfort.

The captive noticed with a smile that dishes, knife, fork, and spoon were all of boxwood. He felt minded to tell Varian he had no intention

whatever of putting himself out of the way, but thought better of it and held his peace.

"Will you be quite ready to-night at eight?" the old man asked him at the evening meal.

"Entirely so!" Nasmyth replied. Varian passed a few commonplaces with him, apparently well pleased with as latest victim; then turned on the electric light and withdrew.

Promptly at eight he reappeared. He sat down close to the bars, with his features sinister, now that Nasmyth understood them—strongly illuminated by the incandescent above.

For a moment the two men gazed at each other in silence. The physician's heart was pounding strongly, and an extreme nervousness strove to possess him; but he mastered his emotion and assumed a sang-froid he could not feel. At least he was determined that Varian should never have the satisfaction of seeing him disturbed.

"Ready?" asked the madman, smiling. "Think well of your question! Remember, there can be no discussion. My answers shall be yes or no—nothing but yes or no! Are you ready?"

"I am," the captive replied, as he stood there by the bars.

"First question, then."

"First question: This thing that you are thinking of, does it fall into the category of material things?"

"No!" answered Varian. "I wish you a very good night!"

He arose and departed, leaving Nasmyth much depressed. Since the object of Varian's thought was not material, it must lie in realms more vague and uncertain, outside the material world. This confirmed the captive's suspicion that the old man would choose a subject of great subtlety, and assured him the task was to be fearfully severe.

Nasmyth spent the evening in profound thought, poring over the categories of the immaterial and the abstract—having rejected and destroyed all the others—until the light

went out at ten-thirty. He then wrapped himself in the folds of his Japanese attire, admirably suited to such a confinement, and lay down on his quilts to sleep as best he might.

V.

To detail each day's analyses and thoughts would unduly prolong this narrative. If it be kept within bounds, the progress of Nasmyth's investigation must now be handled somewhat in outline, as day by day it led Varian and his captive onward through the strange maze that tortured the unfortunate physician.

On the second day, in order to make positively certain of being on the right track Nasmyth used a question that perhaps he might have spared, but did not dare to proceed without:

"Is this thing an abstract concept?"

"Yes," Varian replied.

The captive now felt himself headed in the right direction, with eight questions still remaining. True, he reflected, the realms of the abstract would prove far more difficult to penetrate than would those of the concrete, where some material object was to be discovered. But with eight questions to his credit, and with a strictly scientific system of eliminations, there might still be some chance of success.

Strange as it may seem, despite the desperate character of the game, and the stakes of life or death, Nasmyth could not help feeling a kind of savage pleasure in matching his wits against those of the old man in this cynical danse macabre of the intellect. Even in those despondent hours when he felt positive nothing but extinction awaited him, he lost nothing of his powerful determination to fight on and on, to the very end.

The third day, having carefully analyzed all

the classes of abstractions, Nasmyth propounded the following query: "Does this idea you have in mind fall into the categories of the esthetic or the moral?"

"No," Varian answered. Then, smiling, he added:

"Let me compliment you on your progress. You still have seven questions left, and you have already advanced further than any of the others. with the possible exception of Van Cleve. Several died, either by their own hand or mine, before they had even reached the knowledge that I was thinking of an abstraction, outside the limits of the moral and the esthetic."

"That is to say," put in Nasmyth, hoping to win some information gratis, "within the limits of the practical?"

"Yes. But you must count that as a question," said Varian with solemnity. "Remember, there are but six left. I pray you, do not waste them!"

Nasmyth, sickened at realization of the intellectual keenness of the madman, made no further speech, but returned to his reflections. Obviously he could win nothing from Varian without paying the full price. He must not hurry matters or lose his head, but must day by day, with relentless precision and logic, prosecute this ghastly search for the practical abstraction which alone could save him from merciless annihilation.

The knowledge that now only six chances remained to him served both as a terrible depressant and a most active stimulus. Out of many thousands of things, one specific thing now had to be discovered; a task, surely, that would have baffled even a Sir Isaac Newton.

That night was spent in a careful study of the written categories of the useful abstractions, and—after the extinction of the light—in profound menial analyses. Nasmyth eventually fell asleep, toward morning, and awoke only at ten, with deep despondency assailing him.

He fought this off, however, and by night

had formulated the fifth question, thus:

"Has this practical abstraction anything to do, primarily, with existence, time, change or causation?"

"No," smiled Varian, obviously elated at his captive's failure; and departed.

The next day was a bad one for Nasmyth. Confinement—despite his attempts at calisthenics—loss of appetite, intense mental labor and anxiety, all had cumulated in bringing on a severe nervous headache. He recognized the fact, moreover, that his body was losing weight and his strength declining.

His mind, however, felt supernormally keen. Its grasp and scope seemed quadrupled; yet in its intense application and dwelling on the problem he felt lay perils of madness. The strain, he knew, must soon be over in one way or the other.

Were it to last another ten days—he shuddered to think of the result.

The sixth question, tediously formulated he put in this wise:

"I shall now divide the remaining categories of the abstract, namely: relation, quality, order, and number, into two halves, of two categories each. The first is relation and quality. Does your concept fall in that group?" "No," said Varian. "Remember, now, you have but four more questions. I warn you, be extremely careful!" Nasmyth felt very ill that night. He had a last narrowed the thing down to one of the two categories of order and number, so that now he was within striking distance of the goal. But to attain the thing itself, ten or a dozen questions more would have been none too many, and he now had but four.

His physical condition was growing very bad. Nervous tremors assailed him, he perspired profusely at times and again bad chills, due to the long-continued and intense mental excitement of this ordeal.

At times he was assailed by a mad rage against Varian, whom he had come to hate with

desperate intensity; a rage that set him shivering and quaking whenever the madman appeared on necessary errands. He was assailed by mad ideas of guessing wildly and at random, quickly using up his last four chances and thus ending the horrible farce.

He now well understood how Henderson had insisted on hastening the test, how Maltby had gone mad, and how Van Cleave had tried to commit suicide.

Resolutely, however, he controlled his every untoward impulse, and with a savage kind of determination whipped himself to obedience, to labor, and to dogged patience.

Pacing the floor of his cell, head gripped in both hands, or lying on his quilt, he fought the fight with his own soul and won. Came, thus, another day and with it the seventh question, thus:

"A process of elimination reduces your idea to one of the two categories of order and number. Does it fall in either, or in both?"

"That is not a fair question," objected Varian. "It cannot logically be answered with yes or no. You interest me, however, so extremely by your extraordinary method, worthy of my own intellect, that I will strain a point and answer: It falls in both, but more particularly in the latter. Good night."

Nasmyth felt courage reviving. He now was close on to trail of the elusive abstraction. The thing had to do with order and number, but more particularly with number. That is, it must be some mathematical concept.

Carefully he analyzed. By midnight he had thought his way to this conclusion: It might be either some branch of mathematics, like arithmetic, algebra, geometry or calculus: or it might be some component part one of these sciences. Infinite possibilities opened out ahead of him, in the realm of mathematics. Despite his anguish, he could not help admiring the astuteness of Varian in entering this field, where guessing the object was a practical

impossibility.

And at the thought of this, once more despair seized the unhappy victim of the maniac's delusion.

There remained, now, but three questions, each of vital importance. Nasmyth pondered long before propounding the eighth:

"Have you in mind some mathematical science as an entity?"

"No! Remember, now, you have but two more chances!"

Nasmyth felt his brain reel, but by a powerful effort controlled himself and went on with his analyses. Next day he had prepared the following:

"Since it is no special branch of mathematics, it must be something common to them all. The only common factor is the mathematical sequence known as numbers. Is it any number, you are thinking of?"

Varian paused a moment before replying. Nasmyth felt himself irrevocably lost. Were it a number, what hope could he entertain of ever discovering it? From one to infinity, he might spend years in trying to guess a certain specific number. Thus it was with a feeling of enormous relief that he heard Varian reply:

"No."

"No number, you say?" the doctor asked

"Do you mean that as the tenth question?" And Varian's eyes gleamed.

"Certainly not! It is merely a confirmation of your ninth answer."

"Very well. I repeat, it is no number, no number at all, that I am thinking of. Yet your inference that it is something common to all branches of Mathematics is absolutely correct.

"You are now verging the absolute edge of the correct answer. In all my experience I have never met an intellect anything at all like yours. Not one of my experimental subjects has even approximated the answer. I congratulate you, doctor, on your marvelous keenness and insight.

"If you fail, as I confidently expect you yet

will, my regret at having to eliminate you will be very sincere and deep-seated. I wish you good night, and beg you to think carefully, now; for to-morrow night I shall require you to speak the one, exact, identical word which shall free you. Otherwise—you understand—much as I regret the necessity—”

Varian, suddenly lapsing into incoherence, began gesticulating and muttering into his beard, with all the characteristics of madness. He shuffled up and down the open space outside the cage a few times, stared in at Nasmyth, laughed loudly, and all at once departed.

The unfortunate captive shuddered violently. Even though he should guess the secret, he now had begun to doubt his captor's ability to recognize his rights, or his willingness to release him. Dealing with a man *non compos mentis* opened up all kinds of horrible possibilities.

A vast sense of weariness oppressed him. Without further thought, that night, he lay down on his quilts, shut out the light by burying his face in his arms, and so—quite exhausted—fell into a kind of torpid sleep.

The final day found him feverish and wan, unable to eat or to remain a minute in one place. Like the condemned man he now realized himself to be, he paced the floor of his cell. Only by a strong effort of the will could he restrain himself from dashing his head against the walls or beating his fists on the steel cage.

Ideas of suicide obsessed him. By stripping his robe into cords and twisting them he could make a rope and manage to hang himself from the bars.

This thought took a strong hold on him. for some hours, but he fought it off, and by noon had managed to calm himself sufficiently to force his mind once more to the loathed and execrated task of analysis.

Analysis now supremely vital; since on its accuracy, on the pronouncing of the one, specific word, his life inevitably depended.

All that afternoon and evening, up till seven o'clock, he labored on the problem of discovering a common factor to all mathematics, which should yet not be a number. By seven his head was aching desperately and his nerves were raw.

A trembling weakness possessed his whole body. He could hardly remain upright, but sat or lay on his bed, his mind now fixed on the one, final idea which he had reached as the only possible solution of the ghastly problem.

This idea, voiced in a single word, rang and hummed in his fevered mind, now close to madness. Voices seemed shouting it at him. Fiends chanted it: hammers, glowing hot, pounded it upon his brain: wild visions swept it across his sight.

Again he lay down, groveling, trying to escape it; and thus he lapsed at length into a kind of merciful oblivion.

A voice, calling him, roused his wandering mind to consciousness.

“Well. Nasmyth! Are you ready?”

Sitting up, he stared in horror at the strangest apparition he had ever yet beheld.

VI.

THE figure that stood there before him would have shaken stronger nerves than his. It was clad in a long linen gown, such as surgeons use for operations. The entire head and face were covered by a singular apparatus, a respirator, with round, glazed eye-holes, through which Nasmyth could see the gleam of the madman's eyes. In his right hand Varian held a thin vial.

Nasmyth understood. He straggled to his feet, recoiling from the vision.

“Do not be alarmed,” came a voice from the respirator. “Death is nothing but sleep and rest. He who has not earned the right to life should

hold death as a blessing. Are you ready for the last, the deciding question?"

Unable for a moment to speak, the captive stared at his tormentor. Then he raised a trembling hand, pointing.

"You—you mean to murder me?" he gasped. "Murder me, and stand by, immune in that devilish apparatus."

"I am not here to argue!" answered Varian sternly. "I am here to answer your last question, and either to free you or to work inexorable justice! Are you ready?"

Realizing the worse than futility of argument, Nasmyth, by a supreme effort, steadied himself to face the inevitable. Folding his arms, he faced the madman.

"Ready, yes," he said.

"Very well!" And the old man, vial of deadly gas in hand, advanced close to the bars. "What is your tenth and last question?" Nasmyth kept a moment's silence, shuddering, then—unable to take his eyes from that venomous flask—began: "According to your own answers, you are thinking of a useful, mathematical abstraction, not a branch of mathematics and not a number."

"Correct. Can you name it?"

"I can!"

"Do so—and on your own false reasoning be the responsibility of your death if you fail!"

"Is it—is—it—" Nasmyth stammered, but could not bring himself to speak the crucial word.

"Well, is it what?" cried Varian impatiently. He raised the vial, ready to hurl it to the concrete floor in case of failure.

"Is it—*zero*?"

The word burst from his parched and quivering throat in a supreme and anguished effort.

For a second the madman stood there motionless and dumb. Then a gasping groan issued from the mask.

"Yes!" came a hoarse whisper. "I am

beaten! You—have won!"

Nasmyth's consciousness lapsed a second. Before his eyes a kind of shimmering mist seemed to flow and swim. A humming roar, as of a distant surf upon a rocky coast, filled his ears. He swayed forward, felt that contact of cold metal, and found that he was clutching the bars of his cage.

Reeking with sweat, shivering and utterly unnerved, he clung there a moment, while steadfastly upon him the malevolent gaze of the masked Varian seemed burning through his soul.

"You have won!" he heard the madman's voice again. "For the first time my intelligence has had to bow before another man's. The impossible has happened. In ten questions—it is incredible—monstrous—"

"Let me go!" panted the captive, utterly unstrung. "I have stood the test! Let me go free!"

Varian nodded, muttered to himself and approached the door of the cage. Mute and weak, Nasmyth watched him turning the combination.

The prisoner's eyes fastened themselves on that operation with a terrible intensity. Nothing mattered now but that. While the mood should last, would Varian really let him escape? Would he hold firm to that diabolical flask of death; would he open the door, let the captive pass from the cage and through the basement door?

Beyond that, Nasmyth had no thought. Once he could gain the exit he felt that he could fight his way to liberty in spite of all that Varian might do. His weakness mattered nothing, now. New, latent strength welled up in him.

His costume made no difference. Given the chance, he would rush into the public street in that strange garb, shouting for help, for the police, for the arrest of Varian, the maniac and murderer!

All at once he heard a sharp, decisive click. Varian stepped back from the door, which now

was swinging wide. Unable to believe his eyes, still fearing some treachery, some ruse, the wretched captive tremblingly advanced, his every sense keenly alert lest in the very moment of liberation his insane captor strike him down.

Now he was at the door, now through it, while Varian stood back, vial in hand, still peering at him through those round death's-head goggles in the respirator. Nerving himself to a supreme self-control, forcing himself to walk instead of yielding to the mad impulse to run in stark panic toward the half open basement door, Nasmyth passed in front of the madman.

In silence Varian watched him go. Nasmyth made a yard toward the door, two yards, three. Already half the distance was traversed. Already he sensed liberty, and hope, and life—

Came a shrill cry, a rush behind him, a snarling scream of rage.

"If you go free, I am lost!" screamed Varian. *"You will tell the police—you must not no—you shall not!"*

Whirling, his flesh a-crawl with horror, Nasmyth saw the maniac's arm toss up, as with a beastlike howl of rage he hurled the vial of liquid gas, the deadliest poison known to science.

A quivering faintness flashed upon him at that sight. Instinctively he flung up both arms. His loose Japanese sleeves, outspread like a bat's wings, intercepted the spinning tube of death.

He heard its impact against the padded softness of his right sleeve. Something fell upon his right foot, upon the white cotton tabi, or sock, that shod it. Then, with a tiny clattering, the frail glass capsule of annihilation skittered across the rough concrete and came to rest.

Howling, Varian precipitated himself toward it. One stride more, and his boot would have crushed it to powder.

But ere that stride fell, Nasmyth was upon him. Leaping, he smote the madman on the masked jaw with all the power of his being.

Varian fell sprawling, with wild blasphemies. Upon him, as he scrambled toward the flask, Nasmyth hurled himself.

A horrible struggle began. Weakened by confinement and the desperate nerve-strain of the past days, Nasmyth still for a moment was able to hold his adversary.

Over and over they rolled on the floor, grunting, striking, gouging, tearing. At every moment danger was acute that they might fall upon the vial and crush it. All Varian's surprising energy was now concentrated on just that ambition—to smash the vial; all Nasmyth's, to hold him back from it.

Off ripped the long kimono, in grotesque shreds and tatters. Off tore the respirator, stripped away by the physician's clutching desperation.

"You—die with me—if I die!" he panted, straining for a vital grip on the madman. He felt the old man's wiry hands grappling his throat. Furiously he flung his head from side to side, avoiding that clutch. Tearing like a wild beast, he for a second held him off. Then, once, twice, full in the face he struck the maniac.

Varian's grip loosened a second. With a heart-bursting effort, Nasmyth wrenched himself free.

Rip!

Long shreds and tatters of silk remained in the old man's clutch as the physician struggled up, away. Again he struck; and now, free for an instant he staggered to the vial, caught it up and ran for the door.

With incredible agility and strength the old man flung after him, howling like all the fiends of the pit. Just at the door Varian caught him.

Whirling, Nasmyth let drive a blind right-hander to the eyes. The crash of that blow, going home, was music to his soul.

In a haze of wild confusion he sensed that Varian was staggering backwards. Fate hung on fractions of a second. Up he slung his left, holding the vial, and with all his last remaining

strength hurled it smashing against the wall below the clock.

Even as the old man, rallying, clutched at him once more, he burst through the door and slammed it after him. With a clang of metal a catch fell into place.

Muffled, a hideous scream echoed within—a scream choked off short in the middle—a scream that ended in a silence terribly eloquent.

Nasmyth stood there, pale as milk, bloodless to the lips, with staring eyes, his quivering body racked in spasmodic tremors. He turned, then,

toward some stairs dimly seen ahead of him.

Three or four steps he made toward those stairs, along a kind of passageway. All at once he burst into a jangling laugh that rose, rose, rose in horrible, mad mirth.

The laugh died suddenly.

“Free! Free!” gasped the doctor in a choking whisper.

He pressed both hands to his burning head, took one more step, and—all his vital forces drained to the utter-most dregs—plunged forward and fell, face downward, in a swoon.