

VOLUME XIX

Number 3

ASTOUNDING STORIES

MAY

1937

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

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The SHINING ONE

by Nat Schachner

Astounding Stories

Vbl. XIX, no. 3

May 1937

"To you I am a possible future--that never came into being----"

A star shell rose silently into the night, burst soundlessly into a dazzling white illumination. Ten square miles of uneven terrain sprang suddenly into being. One could see every detail of concrete trenches, of hundred-foot-deep proto-steel shelters of miles of intercommunication tunnels that held together the far-flung fortifications, of huge guns whose flaming mouths belched forth tons of destruction and retreated smoothly behind yard-thick caps of stellite forgings.

Leashed stratosphere bombers showed in their hidden lairs. Subterranean lakes of poison gas and liquid flame seemed to be waiting for the signal to spray their searing contents through high-pressure blowers. A million men were crouched behind barriers, wave on wave of them. Allison guns bandoleered over shoulders, the slightest finger pressure on which sent hundreds of expanding, shattering bullets in a constant stream from revolving barrels.

The pitiless M rays pierced earth and steel and densest concrete as if they were so much transparent glass, illuminated every nook and cranny of the deepest hidden secrets, etched into shadowed outlines men and guns and bomb-proof shelters. Tiny cameras, raised swiftly aloft from the dark quiescence of the enemy lines, clicked panorama views on specially activated plates, lowered as swiftly and silently as they had reared into the blue-black sky.

For a full minute the penetrating rays flooded the landscape; then, with a little puff, the star shell dissolved into the all-embracing night. As before, the midnight air hung breathless over the tortured Earth, shuddering with premonitions of that which was about to happen.

A little group of men crouched grimly in Front-line Trench X 32. A cold-light flood lamp sent its pale-white rays down into the concrete depths, its tight-band illumination cut off sharply beneath the parapet as though sliced by a knife. No scattering reflections could betray their presence to the watchful enemy in their parallel trenches not quite five hundred yards away.

Hugh Wilmot blinked from the blinding star shell, stared at the ingenious cold-light lamp, laughed shakily. There were fine wrinkles gathered in little knots under his eyes that had not been there six months before, that were belied by his still youthful cheeks and lean, hard jaw. A cigarette dangled from his lips. He leaned over to his next companion. "Got a light, Gregory?" he asked.

The man nodded wordlessly, lifted his glow catalyzer to the unlighted tip. At the point of contact flame spurted. Hugh inhaled deeply, breathed out a cloud of smoke.

"That's a new stunt," he remarked calmly, as though he were speaking of the weather. "The star shell, I mean."

Gregory Lipsin shrugged his shoulders. He was a Russian of the inner steppes, big, with blond hair and blue, frosty eyes, yet with high cheek bones and a certain askewness to his features that betrayed an ancient Tartar blood. He hitched his Allison gun a trifle higher on chafed shoulder, spat, grunted. "Bah!" he rumbled. "It means--nudding! In two weeks our good friend, the Dr. Paul Merrill, will haff solved the secret, made one just as good, or bedder." He leaned over, clapped a bearlike paw on the slight shoulder of the man crouching on the other side of Hugh.

"Hah!" Merrill gasped under the impact, regathered his breath. He was thin and graying, with lean, sensitive features. Behind his spectacles his eyes were troubled.

"I don't know, Gregory," he said doubtfully. "It's a new principle--the M ray--our intelligence service only got wind of it last week. Far more penetrating than X rays, or cosmic rays, for that matter. Of the order of sub-photons, we think. In two months perhaps----"

"Two months?" shrieked a youngster with fair hair and round, smooth cheeks which the razor had as yet barely touched. His lips twitched, and there was a feverish sparkle in his eyes. "In two months we'll all be dead. You fools! Don't you see? Don't you understand? In thirty minutes the grand attack starts. Zero hour! Flame throwers, gas, bombers, tanks, M rays, Dongan shells, Conite disruptors, every hideous weapon that the accursed race of man has made to wipe his fellowman from the face of the Earth. In thirty minutes--oh, Lord!" He was crying hysterically now.

The rest of the huddled company looked around, startled. A thickset Bavarian, black-bearded, lowering, grumbled audibly. "It's dot English poet, Arthur Holbrook, again. He shouldt be home with his nurse, making up leetle poems about violets and cows und der Liebe. He don't belong here."

"You shut up, Karl Jorm!" snapped Hugh. He shifted position, put his arm soothingly around the shaking lad, who was only nineteen. "Take it easy, Holbrook," he said quietly. "I know it's a tough spot for you--for all of us. Six months ago we were at peace--the arbitration system that had been evolved after the Great War of 1940 seemed to be functioning perfectly. Then, like a thunderbolt, came--this!"

"*Oui!*" A small, dapper soldier with glossy, pointed mustache shrugged expressive Gallic shoulders. "It ees verree funny, no? Karl Jorm's country, she attack mine. Everybody jumps in, like strange dogs when dachshund and leetle poodle make private fight. It spread--like what you Americans call--house afire. Spain, Russia, England, Italy, China, Japan, America, South America, Egypt, Congo, Eskimos, Patagonians, every one."

A Spaniard, olive-cheeked, with burning black eyes, leaped up, laughed harshly. "You think that funny, Señor Pierre Mathieu? You are most mistaken. This"--and his wiry arm swept expressively over the crouching men, dimly illuminated in the narrow cold-light beam--"*this* is funny. For a month there was war--like always. Then what happened? What you see here. From a war of nations it became a war of--men, of human beings. Brother against brother, father against son. Look at us! We are Spanish; we are Russian; we are American; we are English; we are German; We are French----" He paused for breath.

A tall Englishman, bronzed with the Indian sun, interrupted quietly. "You, too, are mistaken, Pablo Valverde. We are no longer nationals. For every race you can point out among us, there is the same in the enemy's ranks. The line-up is different now. It is a war of principles, of ideals, not of nations, not even of human beings."

Mathieu grimaced. "Monsieur Frederic Gleason," he said courteously, "you speak like a philosopher. Once we fought for *la belle France*--now it seems I fight for--an ideal. What, Monsieur Gleason, *is* that ideal I fight for?"

Karl Jorm exploded. "Ach, listen to dot Frenchman! He knows noddings. Herr Mathieu--it iss very simple. We fight for--*freiheit!*"

"*Libertad!*" cried Valverde.

"Pah! Mere words!" rumbled Lipsin. "We fight, comrades, for the Commune, for the future World State."

Válverde spat furiously. "We do not," he cried. "I am an anarchist--an individualist! I wish for no State to regiment me, to tell me what to do. Man is godlike; is----"

"You are both wrong," Gleason interposed with some heat. "We fight for order and sanity and reasonableness and----"

"Of a brand *Anglaise*," Mathieu murmured wickedly.

It became a dog fight. The company of numerous nationalities lifted their voices, argued, gesticulated, shouted to unheeding ears. The noise rose in the frosty night, broke the strained nerves of near-by trenches, impinged on the delicate sound detectors in enemy headquarters.

A bullet-headed general, resplendent with decorations, nodded with satisfaction, spoke gutturally to his listening associates. "The pigs are fighting among themselves," he chortled. "We shall have an easy time."

A rasping, angry voice burst among the quarreling men in Front-line Trench X 32 like a Dongan shell. "Stop that racket, men! Another sound and the entire trench will be shot."

The loud discussion died suddenly; they looked at each other sheepishly. It was the voice of the brigade commander, three miles in the rear, and a hundred feet underground. It came through sono-induction coils, vibrated within the circumscribed area of the trench. Outside that area not a whisper of it could be heard.

Silence again, broken only by the muted sobbing of young Holbrook. "Fifteen minutes to zero hour," he moaned hysterically, "and they argue about principles, ideals. Fifteen minutes more and they'll be torn and bleeding lumps of flesh. Oh, Lord!"

Along the vast opposing lines there was no sound. The wind itself died down to a hush, breathless, waiting for fifteen tiny minutes to pass. The stars peered at their sister Earth in puzzled bewilderment. Along a hundred miles the trenches made zigzag gashes in plain and valley and mountain. Ten million men crouched and waited, with hearts pounding, for hell to break loose. A hundred million others, armed, accoutered, scattered along far-flung lines that ran irregularly around the Earth, waited with pallid faces and straining ears for the first concussions in their televisions that bespoke the commencement of the crucial battle.

Both sides acknowledged that. Every resource of science, every available engine of warfare, had been rushed into play. Whoever won would be in a position to mop up all remaining opposition, proclaim themselves the masters of the world. Already fifty million had died in fratricidal conflict, already hundreds of great cities, centers of former civilization and culture, had flamed in destruction; but now---

Grim-lipped, Hugh Wilmot looked at his friend and coworker, Dr. Paul Merrill. "We two are responsible for all this," he said harshly, "we two and scientists everywhere like ourselves."

Merrill blinked near-sightedly. "Eh, what's that, Hugh?" he asked, startled.

Hugh repeated it. "You're a chemist," he explained bitterly. "Your chemicals, your revolutionary discoveries, have been used--for what? To create mightier explosives, to make poison gas that no mask, no suit of armor even, could keep out. I am a physicist, dealing with light and

electromagnetic effects. What happens? My practical application of light pressure is now being utilized to scythe the airplanes out of the stratosphere, to annihilate squadrons of men ten miles away. Every gun, every fiendish weapon we employ, is but the product of scientific brains. Brains that should have been employed to make the world a better and more wonderful place to live in, have devoted all their energies to annihilation.

"Mark my words, Paul. Whoever wins this coming battle will be the vanquished equally with the loser. Civilization will die in a welter of blood and agony. Those few who remain alive will revert to the brute. All that the human race has built for these long, slow centuries will be lost--forever!" He ended in a quiet passion that shook his lean, wiry frame.

Merrill blinked a moment, said thoughtfully. "It is true, yet--even now, Hugh, you are working on a secret invention. Over there!" He pointed to the tiny proto-steel hut at the farther end of the trench. It was blank, windowless, and a faint shimmer of rays played over its smooth surface. "I won't ask you what it is--war being war--but the general has hinted to me you promised him a mightier weapon than any we yet possess. That was why he gave you permission to work secretly and alone."

Hugh shot a swift glance toward the steel chamber. For almost two months he had immured himself in its confines, night and day, working desperately. That faint electric discharge playing over its surface was a vibration screen, which had repelled even the subphoton search ray of the enemy.

There was a queer look on his face as he turned back to Merrill. "We are all caught in a web of circumstance," he admitted, evading the manifest invitation to unbosom himself. "Yet it is our duty, since the guilt is ours, to put a stop to this horror. In five minutes now the signals will be given. In five minutes it will be too late. Look at them!"

The trench had stirred to a dark, secret life of its own. The men hunched forward, eyes glued to the time light on the televisior. The illuminated thread was creeping closer, inexorably closer, to the zero hour.

Five minutes! Four minutes! Only Holbrook's stifled sobbing broke the deathly silence of the trench. The shadow of approaching death lay heavy on every face. There were no illusions. In a bare few minutes earth and sky and underground would become a blazing inferno in which no man of human flesh and blood might live. Yet they merely tightened their Allison's, gripped triggers, and waited for the word of doom!

Merrill said with quiet anguish, "There is nothing we can do to stop it now, Hugh. It is out of mortal power; only God himself----"

Hugh leaned forward, spoke rapidly. His right hand reached out, gripped against the concrete wall. "You are right. Only a godlike being----"

He was interrupted. Arthur Holbrook had jerked suddenly to his feet, stared wildly around for a split second. "Two minutes to go!" he screamed. "Two minutes to hell! I can't stand it, men. Do you hear me; I can't stand it! It's got to stop!" His mind had snapped.

Before the trench knew exactly what had happened, before any one could move to stop him, the boy had vaulted up a poised ladder, was speeding like a seared rabbit over No Man's Land, across great shell holes and electrical barrages.

Hugh groaned, shouted: "Stop, you fool! You'll be killed! You'll spoil everything!"

But the lad was beyond all hearing. His voice rose in the astounded night in an agony of darkened senses. "I call on you all to drop your arms! Brothers! Comrades! Listen to me----"

Ten miles to the rear, one hundred feet deep, the general heard the mad exhortation in his detectors. The veins swelled on his bullet head; his face darkened. He stabbed a button.

A quiescent electric barrage leaped into a shining current of crackling flame. Holbrook was caught in midstride. For one awful second his body was a flaring silhouette; the next a crisp of powdered ashes floated gently to earth.

A bull-throated roar rose from Trench X 32. It came from Gregory Lipsin, the placid, heavy-handed Russian. "Dey killed dot poor leetle poet!"

In a trice he was up the ladder, Allison gun in hand, running--running--blind to all but the overpowering lust to kill, to take revenge.

"*Verfluchte teufel!*" growled Jorn, and was after him.

"*Nom du chien!*" screeched Mathieu, and darted up.

"Blast the blighters!" snarled Gleason.

In five seconds Trench X 32 was almost vacant, emptied of a raging, roaring onrush of bloodthirsty men. Within two seconds more the neighboring trenches had disgorged their hordes of screaming, racing devils. Within ten seconds the far-flung line was a hurtling mass of millions of shouting men.

Startled in their remote shelters, the commanders of the opposing forces stared into their visor screens, heard the mighty rush of sound. It was still a minute to zero hour; yet---

Buttons pressed simultaneously. Instantly earth and sky and underground leaped into rocking, roaring fury. Great guns thundered; bombers flung from hidden catapults high into the air; electric barrages seared and crackled; lakes of chemicals sprayed over No Man's Land and trenches alike, and ignited into huge blasts of flame; poison gas billowed forth in hellish miasma; concentrated light stabbed blinding fingers through the murk, blasted men and planes into crumbling dust; great tanks howled at sixty miles an hour over broken ground, gaunt, gray Juggernauts of destruction.

And through it all, blinded, suffocating, ripped to pieces by blasting shells, crisped beyond recognition by flame and racing current, crushed beneath tanks, reared the two vast armies to meet each other, working the triggers of Allison guns as fast as jerking fingers could manage.

Hugh Wilmot's left hand caught the scholarly, near-sighted Dr. Merrill just as he lurched forward to join the others in their mad swarming up the ladders.

"Don't you follow!" he cried sharply. "It's certain death out there. The brave idiots. If only they had waited--one more minute!"

Paul Merrill whirled on his comrade, peered at him in the blazing, crackling, roaring madness of sight and sound with unbelieving eyes. "Hugh!" he screamed in shocked voice, fighting to make himself heard above the hideous din. "Have you gone crazy? We are soldiers; we must----"

Hugh held his slight, struggling form in an iron grip. His right hand stabbed backward against the concrete wall as if to brace himself.

"Coward!" yelled the little scientist, striving in vain to break the hold. "Let me go! Let me join our comrades!"

His hand went up, crashed against his companion's face. In the blinding, blazing light, amid the chum and thundering explosions of millions of shells, against the screams of the dying, Hugh's face went red, then deathly white. But he did not relax his grip; and perforce, weeping, kicking, gouging, the embattled scientist was forced down into the bottom of the trench.

There they crouched, alone in the inferno that was to wipe civilization from the Earth! Already the supporting trenches in the rear were vomiting their myriad of khaki-clad troops.

Merrill had subsided; he was sobbing mingled tears of rage and humiliation for his friend.

Hugh Wilmot stared up and out through the periscope with tight-drawn lips and fierce, impatient jaw, watching--watching--that gigantic battleground from which few would emerge. To Merrill's bitter reproaches he paid no slightest heed.

The stratosphere rained flaming, hurtling craft and blasting destruction. Hugh did not even see; the electric barrages moved back and forth with malignant sweep and crisped thousands of screaming men in their bright-blue curtains--and his lips became only a thin gash of hardness; rays, tanks, Allison guns, bombs, gas, flame, took their frightful toll--and the strain in his eyes deepened.

Once more he sagged against the concrete--as if in weary despair.

Suddenly the wild, fierce shouts, the deadly *rat-a-tat* of the Allison guns, ceased. A moment longer and the roar of the monster cannon muted. For seconds more, stratosphere bombers locked in furious combat; then they, too, drew off and circled in aimless, erratic flight. The tanks lumbered to a whining halt; rays dipped and scorched earth harmlessly; barrages paled and sputtered, lakes of rushing flame flickered and died as force tubes ceased their constant pressure.

For ten long seconds, staring amazement held millions of men in frozen tableau; battalions breasted each other, yet did not shoot. All eyes were raised aloft, raised to a sudden midnight blackness against which a gigantic figure loomed--a figure of more than earthly proportions; a figure, nevertheless, of a man, clad in strange, shining garments of unknown stuff and hue. He walked the still air swiftly, and did not sink; he trailed behind him clouds of luminescent glory. Midway between the hosts he paused, high in the night, yet below the circling planes. He raised his hand commandingly; his godlike brow was stern upon the cowering, gaping armies underneath.

"Godlike!" muttered Hugh, and fell away from the periscope and against the trench wall. His grip on Merrill relaxed. "That's what you said, Paul!" he cried. His fingers beat a nervous tattoo on the concrete.

For ten long seconds the frozen silence lasted. Then a whispered sigh reared from the earth. Superstitious awe fled through the ranks. Soldiers fell on their knees, raised trembling hands aloft to that motionless, superhuman form.

"The Lord has come!" shrieked a man. "Forgive us our sins!"

"A being from Mars!" rose another cry.

Then the voice of Pierre Mathieu, harsh with recognition. "He has come again! My grandfather saw him--in the War of 1914. He is the Angel of Mons, come once more to aid his children in defeat. Forward, comrades, forward!"

A great voice rolled down and over the far-flung millions. It was sweet with an infinite sweetness, yet strong enough to drown all other sounds; it was rich and vibrating, yet curiously unhuman. It was in English, understood by all the warring armies, yet an English that was slurred and foreign, and like unto no dialect form that was spoken on Earth.

"Hear me, men of the end of the twentieth century! I come to call on you to cease this senseless slaughter; I come to tell you that here, on this very battlefield, on this very day and hour, you had doomed the Earth and all its civilizations, all its evolution and aspirings, to complete and total destruction. After this last great battle of the world, few remained alive; and those few fled to the wastelands for safety and hiding, while you surged back and forth over the smiling Earth, leaving but desolation and thickets and lifeless deserts behind. Hear me before what has occurred shall come to pass! Hear me before it is too late!"

Dr. Paul Merrill rose tremblingly to his feet. His pale eyes glimmered at the mighty, air-borne being; his scholarly features blazed with excitement. No need for Hugh to hold him now.

"Hugh Wilmot!" he cried. "Did you hear that? Did you notice? He spoke of us as men of the past, as men whose appointed courses had already run!"

But Hugh was staring also, muttering over and over, "The godlike being!" while his lean fingers drummed desperately on the wall.

A stricken mortal, more daring than the rest, cried out harshly: "What are you, angel or devil or creature from another world?"

The great figure shifted and shimmered, and his misty eyes seemed to rest calmly on the rash questioner. "I am none of those you mention. I am a man!"

As one, the incredulous whisper went up, pregnant with the latent anger of those who feel they have been tricked. "A man?"

"Yes, even so," the shining creature admitted. "Yet no man of your early day and time. I come from an incredible century in the far future; in your chronology it would be measured in millions on millions of years ahead."

"I thought as much," breathed Merrill, scientific ardor fighting human awe. "His speech is clipped and changed, as though æons have intervened to smooth and distort."

Hugh Wilmot said nothing.

"In fact," the great voice went on, "I am the last of all mankind!"

A vast susurrous rose like incense from the frozen armies. Catholics crossed themselves devoutly; Protestants muttered hasty prayers; Jews called on their ancient prophets; Mohammedans invoked Allah; the Chinese whispered to their hovering ancestors.

Somehow the Shining One seemed infinitely weary. "The last man!" he repeated. "Do you puny

mortals of a forgotten time realize what that means, what you have done to me?"

They could hear Karl Jorm's guttural response, greatly daring. He, Mathieu and Lipsin were all that were alive of those who had emerged from Trench X 32 only minutes before. "Lord! Do you blame us?"

"Because here and now you primitive creatures, with primitive weapons in your hands, had decided the future. Let me sketch for you briefly what resulted from your insane quarrel, and you shall understand!"

The night seemed a bottomless void in which only a luminous, floating figure existed, in which only a solitary voice breathed incredible things. The huge armies were motionless shadows, clinging to a blood-soaked Earth with bonds that would not loose; high above, a thousand planes still circled idly, dark and noiseless, while amazed pilots picked up the voice in sonodetectors. Deep underground, in proto-steel chambers, among gun and flame crews, in far-back headquarters, men did not stir, but listened breathlessly.

"This is March 8, 1987," said the Shining One. "In my time it is Flor 6.2.3--æons ahead. But the switch that determined my time, that set immutable causes at work, started here. You call yourselves men of the Left and Right; you believe that it matters who wins this holocaust of carnage. I shall tell you--neither won! Both of you were defeated! By the rise of Sun, barely a handful of tens of millions had remained alive. All over the world, locked in the same madness, other armies met in mutual destruction. Within a month only those wise enough or cowardly enough to flee to the wastelands had survived.

"Civilization, such as you possessed, was extinct. Knowledge, culture, were but dimming memories in the brains of those who crouched in caves, baked by the sun, frozen by the ice, feeding sparsely on grubs and roots and raw fish that they could catch with stiffened fingers.

"For uncounted centuries they lived thus, slowly degenerating into the brute, intent only on the bare satisfactions of hunger, shelter, and sex, forgetting all their ancestors had known, staring with lackluster eyes at the thorn-covered ruins of what had once been cities, fumbling with careless fingers at the rotting pages of the books that lay buried under the débris.

"The Earth became a barrens. The countless tons of searing gas and flaming chemicals you are now losing and will continue to lose for the next few months over grassy plains and tree-covered hills, over the surging, life-impregnated oceans, through the wind-blown atmosphere, had seen to that. Life, such as it was, became supportable only in a few remote sectors of the world.

"The generations came and went. Shambling, wool-covered, knowing naught of fire, blinking in their dark caves, killing each other with brawny, strangling hands on those few occasions when strange tribe trespassed on tribe; the tide of evolution retrogressed.

"In one colony only, on the edges of what you term Antarctica, was there even a hint of emergence from the slough. In tens of thousands of centuries fire was born; in tens of thousands more, writing was recreated; in a hundred thousand, civilization emerged. For a million æons it progressed. A marvelous culture flowered; thought soared and lifted to supernal heights; man emerged to whom you are but discarded experiments. Yet there was that which was irremediably gone.

"For it was of a different type than yours. Man had lost the initiative, the brutal energy of his

youth. He was content to sit in solitude, to contemplate as in a glass the wisdom of himself and of his universe. Action was abhorrent to his fine-blown sensibilities; it was something nonessential.

"Why, he argued, shift from his rooted colony in Antarctica? Why bother to explore the confines of the Earth? Why rear new structures, build space-devouring vessels, visit the remote stars? In the external universe everything was the same, wherever one went--the same protons, electrons, photons. Only in the depths of one's mind was there novelty, was there change. Man's lifetime, increased though it was to many centuries, was hardly sufficient to probe those fascinating depths to the full.

"As a result, each sat solitary and alone, heedless of his fellow colonists, wholly contemptuous of those strange, animallike creatures who rooted and grubbed in the farther confines of the Earth. Sex became a matter of indifference; less and less children were born to sit and contemplate by themselves.

"The Sun cooled slowly; the Earth, long arid, became a frozen ball. The little apelike bands died out one by one. The colony in Antarctica, each man solitary and aloof from his fellows, glanced outward with the physical eye, resumed again their introspective absorption. Heat and cold and food were matters of supreme indifference. Long before, they had learned to impregnate themselves with radiant forces that stoked them ceaselessly. Sex became a lost memory.

"By the millionth century they began to die, one by one. They had been almost, but not quite, immortal. At the turn of the ten millionth century some spark of ancient fire aroused my parents. I was born--the last child of the human race. With ten thousand centuries more they died, aloof, oblivious to my being, as if regretful of that single Earthly act.

"And now I am alone, the solitary survivor of the human race, alone on the shores of a shoreless, frozen sea, alone in a wilderness of ice and snow and fast-congealing atmosphere. I look up into the heavens and see a dim, overlaid ball that was the Sun. On its tenuous surface already life has begun, a life not of our kind. On the distant stars there is life, but not of us.

"I could go there--in all those æons the means have been discovered--but to what purpose? I would be forever alien; no kindred human would seek renewal with me. In a few centuries or millenniums, it does not much matter, I shall die, and the race of Earth, once teeming, will have vanished with me. *This* you have done."

He ceased, and the hush deepened.

Merrill sprang to his feet, eyes blazing. Hugh, intent against the wall, jerked forward, too late. The scientist was already over the parapet, his voice excited in the utter silence.

"It is a terrible picture you have painted, man of the incredible future; but the die has been cast. The future has already come into being. We must proceed inexorably to our doom."

With a sigh, Hugh relaxed against the cold concrete. He dared not follow Merrill into No Man's Land.

The great figure swirled with color. "You are wrong, my friend," he said. "It is true that the future has already occurred, that the die you have cast in this battle has led to inexorable conclusions. But I have come back through time--through means known only to myself--because you stand at the cross-roads. There is no *one* future; there are innumerable futures.

The time-space entity has many paths: each one leads to the future, and each is different. And each is equally real with the others. But the election remains with you--which to adopt. Once the crucial, adoptive moment is past, your feet must inevitably tread the path before you; the other paths are there, the futures they contain as real a sector of time space, but to you they will be lost. Here and now is the crucial moment I have indicated. Continue in your madness and the path leads to--me! Cease this slaughter, embrace each other as fellow-men, fellow beings on the upward, common road of evolution, and another vista inevitably opens."

Mathieu, ever the practical, even in the face of the incredible, yelled out. "Where does that lead, monsieur?"

The last man dropped his extended hand. "I do not know," he confessed. "It is enough that the other must not grow into existence."

A low buzz murmured among ten million men--a buzz compounded of fear, of dim-groping thoughts, of accustomed ways and fumbling speculations. "He is right!" "He is wrong!" "We cannot change fate!" "It is a chance!" "Our general will be angry!" "Brother!" "But he is my enemy!"

The buzz grew to a hum, like the hive of countless contending bees. They stood on the verge of a shoreless eternity, and they dared not take the plunge.

In remote headquarters, astounded staffs awoke to realization. Their war, the war they had planned so carefully and coldly, was being taken away from them--and by an idiot who spoke of the future, of paths, of utter nonsense. This must not be!

Simultaneously, sono-coils spewed rasping commands, vivid threats, to earth and sky alike. But still the mighty swarm of bewildered men moved indecisively, troubled beyond all obeying. The general cursed his cowering staff, ran himself to a gun emplacement. He centered the monster cannon on its far-off prey, pressed the release. A huge projectile, true in aim, whistled through the night, roared a direct hit on the motionless Shining One.

The bullet crashed to earth miles away in a spouting geyser of mud and mangled bodies, but the man who hovered above was unhurt, whole.

"I am beyond your puny weapons," he said calmly.

The general, with a scream of insane rage, rushed to another set of controls. He jerked and pressed and danced with fury. The huge stratosphere bombers, obedient to robot levers, hurtled toward earth in a crescendo of whistling sound, their pilots clinging helplessly to safety straps.

"They'll blast that triple-starred fool out of existence," roared the general.

The planes, shining metal monsters, converged on the still motionless figure, zoomed past him, sprayed with dread Dongan pellets, dropped tons of aerial explosives on his devoted head, swung away triumphantly. When the smoke had cleared, and the thunderous concussions had ceased, the awed, cowering armies saw the man of the future emerge, calm, still shining, unharmed.

"It is obviously necessary that I show my power before these silly displays of your leaders cease," he declared passionately. He extended his hand.

A cry of fear blasted from the watching millions. A long streamer of blue light had emanated from the pointing finger, impinged upon the nearest diving plane. Metal flared in unendurable brightness, cataracted in a molten gush to the war-torn earth beneath. The finger moved. A great bomber jerked convulsively, went crashing and flaming to destruction. Its mates, aghast, catapulted into the night, fleeing from that dreadful figure to the farthest ends of the stratosphere!

That was the end!

Ten million throats gave vent to a single cry; ten million men threw down their arms and clung to one another in trembling awe. Man was indistinguishable from man; enemy from friend. In one headquarters a bullet-headed general ranted and screamed and called on his staff to follow him. A futile sword waved dangerously in his hand. His officers shot him down, coldly and precisely, and clambered on swift mono-cars to join the swelling fraternization. In opposing headquarters, another general, wiser or more discreet, ripped the epaulets from his shoulders, and mingled indistinguishably with the mob of shouting men.

High above the clamor, high above the sudden frenzy of overwrought emotions, pierced Dr. Paul Merrill's keen apostrophe.

"Wait, O man of the future! Have you not signed your own death warrant? If our human feet are even now on a new path, then your future never came into being, never existed; and you yourself----"

The great Shining One floated high above the multitudes. A weary smile seemed to wreath his godlike features, but his voice was as passionless, as unhuman as ever. "You have but lifted the veil of truth a little bit, my friend," he said. "You have elected your path. It is not the one from which I stem. Hence to your limited consciousness, to the consciousness of the future human race, I do not exist, I shall never exist.

"But in the wide universe of space time there are many mansions and many parallel paths. To you I am but a possible future that never came into being; in the vast ebb and flow of being that possibility, an infinitude of other possibilities possessed eternal reality. Farewell."

Hugh Wilmot gripped the supporting wall with rigid, tightening fingers. His eyes flamed with curious lights; he seemed exalted above himself, yet strangely weary.

The man of the future shimmered, hazed, melted into the blackness of the night, vanished. He had commenced his tremendous journey back to the illimitable future, back to the frozen, shoreless sea, back to solitude and approaching dissolution, cut off by his own martyrdom from those who should have been his ancestors, an alien without past or present or future.

On Earth, by radio, visor screen and fleet airplane, the joyful news was spread. Man looked on man and saw with excess of gladness that he was brother. The tale of the incredible visitant hastened on lightning wings, was tossed from mouth to mouth and grew in the telling. But ten million men had seen, and ten million men could swear to its essential truth.

The world recoiled from the abyss into which it had almost plunged. A new World State arose; the old politicians were contemptuously discarded; men of vision, men of science, poets and philosophers took over the reins. The legend of the man of the future, lonely by his frozen sea, took root and flourished. He became, down the ages, an inspiring myth, a noble sermon, by

means of which the generations were kept, perforce, to a path of reason.

In Trench X 32, Hugh Wilmot stared an oblivious moment at the hazy afterglow where only a little while before the Shining One had floated on nothingness. Then the breath expelled sharply from his laboring chest. In No Man's Land, ten million men shouted and danced and thumped each other's backs; in Trench X 32, Hugh Wilmot moved cautiously and swiftly down the concrete walk toward the little proto-steel hut in which he had labored mightily for two whole months on that new and mightier weapon which he had promised his general. His lips curled at the thought.

The general was now a discreet anonymity among the rejoicing millions; he had no present thought for Wilmot's broken promise. Hugh stooped down, pressed a hidden control. The shimmer of protective rays ceased; the heavy metal side slid soundlessly open. He entered.

Within there was a complex of machinery, of compact tubes and strange devices. Lovingly, with infinite regret, Hugh surveyed them for the last time. He bent, fondled the shining tubes as if they were flesh-and-blood children of his brain. So absorbed was he in his own emotions that he did not hear the tiptoeing secrecy of the man who entered almost on his heels.

"I thought as much," the voice crashed startlingly in his ears.

Hugh whirled, clutching for his Allison gun. He had been discovered, but the man who had found him out must not live to spread the tale. He would kill, yes, murder in cold blood, to protect his secret.

His fingers dropped nervelessly from the trigger "You?" he breathed dully.

Dr. Paul Merrill, fellow scientist and closest friend, stood before him, staring at him with fathomless eyes, staring with quick appraisal at the maze of machinery.

"Don't worry," Merrill said gently. "I understand! I shall never betray you, Hugh. The secret must die buried in our breasts--that countless generations of human beings may live. It is hard. I would rather shout it from the housetops. My friend, Hugh Wilmot, is the greatest scientist who ever lived, the greatest benefactor that mankind has ever known. But it cannot be. Man cannot live by bread alone; he must have faith; he must bear witness to miracles."

Hugh avoided his friend's eye like a guilty boy caught in the jam closet. "When did you find out?" he muttered.

"I became suspicious when you seemingly turned coward--that was not like you. Then the Shining One, the man of the future, too pat on your little speech about the end of civilization, about our duty to put a stop to the slaughter. Some of his phrases were remarkably like your own. But how, in Heaven's name, did you accomplish such a miracle?"

Hugh took a deep breath. "The idea came two months ago," he answered. "I fooled the general into giving me *carte blanche*. The Shining One was but a concentration of magnetic light rays built up in the representation of a man. You will find in the back of that projector the three-dimensional simulacrum over which I sweated many a day, exercising my artistic talents. That was why, of course, bombs couldn't hurt, Dongan shells couldn't destroy, the Shining One. He was pure light!"

"But his voice, his speech, his ready answers to all questions?"

Hugh grinned. "A very simple trick. I made disks of my own voice to the number of five hundred carefully chosen words. Then I ran them over again, a bit off key, at slightly different speeds, to give them that queer, slurred, alien-sounding accent of the future. Sound waves are deceptive; in the stress of the moment no one could trace the voice to my hut, rather than to the figure itself."

"But you were with me all the time," Merrill protested. "Out there in the trench. How could you possibly control the word disks so as to return apt answers?"

"You are most unobservant for a scientist," Hugh retorted severely. "You saw, yet you didn't see, my fingers drum on the wall until they were numb and bruised. I had a keyboard panel built in the side, and covered it with a thin coat of disguising paint."

"And the ray from the fingers?"

"That," Hugh Wilmot said softly, "was my new weapon: lightning!"

Dr. Merrill stared in wordless admiration. It was almost reverence.

Embarrassed, Hugh spoke briskly. "Now, if you'll get out of here fast, I have work to do."

The scientist nodded understanding, went out noiselessly. Ten seconds later Hugh joined him at the very farthest end of the trench. In No Man's Land the fraternization, the rejoicing, was reaching epic proportions. The night was a delirium of sound.

So it was that no one heard the dull boom which emanated from Trench X 32, or worried much about the shapeless, unrecognizable mass of twisted metal and shattered glass which marked the erstwhile hut where Hugh Wilmot had labored fruitlessly for two months on a proposed engine of destruction. An enemy bomb might easily have been responsible for that.

But two men watched with regretful eyes the passage of this noblest monument in all science. Wordlessly, they shook hands and clambered out of the trench, out of the darkness, into the pæan of happiness that had once been No Man's Land.

[The end of *The Shining One* by Nat(haniel) Schachner]