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Title: After the Atom

Date of first publication: 1948

Author: John Russell Fearn (1908-1960)

Date first posted: May 25, 2017

Date last updated: May 25, 2017

Faded Page eBook #20170546

This ebook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

After the Atom

John Russell Fearn

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First published *Startling Stories*, May 1948.

Dr. Oswald Salsback believes that he holds in his grasp the vital secret of how to preserve peace for all time!

Since I have only a few hours to live, I might as well kill time by relating what actually happened. It may be believed; it may not, but as an example of irony I don't see how it could be equalled. Anyway, those beings who have condemned us may, when they read my report over, see the injustice of the sentence they have passed.

It was Dr. Oswald Salsback who started the business and I, Robert Conway, just sort of got mixed up in it. I had known Salsback as a pretty brilliant biologist way back in my college days. He had been a teacher of the subject at that period, and though my interests in biology and kindred subjects were at that time pretty negligible, he had such a persuasive way with him that even we "unbelievers" were forced to listen.

In his younger days Oswald Salsback was small, stoop-shouldered, thin-faced, and fast going bald. I often thought about him when I had left college and wondered how he was faring. Then to my surprise, fifteen years after leaving college I ran into him in London. In fact we collided at a street corner, and of course he ran true to type and called it one of those laws which govern probability, or something. Anyway we exchanged notes and it seemed that I had fared the worst.

At that period I was running a business of my own in radio, but it was fast going downhill before the giant new television combines. I was losing money rapidly, and I didn't like the threat of atomic war hovering on the horizon, either. It had simply killed commercial enterprise stone dead, for the small man anyway. Salsback, on the other hand, being a scientist, had minted away quite a pile of money, I gathered.

He didn't seem concerned about the impending war—as war, that is: he had other notions about it. I remember how I listened to him as we sat drinking coffee in a city snack bar.

He looked fifteen years older too—quite bald now, his only signs of energy being in his intensely keen blue eyes.

"Of course there's a war coming, Bob," he told me, when I had vaguely hinted at the possibility. "And since it will be atomic it may be the end of the world. On that point, however, I'm none too sure. Man has a surprising habit of surviving the mightiest of cataclysms, and I cannot see why it mightn't apply this time as well. To whatever survivors there may be I think we should hand over the secret of how to preserve peace for all time."

I raised an eyebrow at him, and I think I smiled. Evidently old age was coming on and he was filled with notions of altering the unalterable.

“Naturally you don’t believe me,” he said, quite frankly, setting down his coffee cup. “You think I’m some crackpot with implicit faith in my fellowmen; but that isn’t it at all. I’m a biologist, don’t forget, and in biology lies the answer. I am afraid that my experiments are too late to prevent this war—but I might prevent the next.”

“How?” I asked, coming to the point.

He didn’t answer me immediately. He seemed to be considering something; then his bright little blue eyes fixed on me.

“You say that your business is on its last legs, Bob, and that you are casting around for something fresh. As I recall, you were pretty interested in laboratory work when I used to be your tutor, and what you’ve forgotten I can soon re-teach you. How would you like to come with me, just the two of us, to Salsback’s Island? Then I can show you what I’m doing, and we can be fairly sure of safety if war should break out.”

“Where’s Salsback’s Island?” I demanded.

“It’s a small rock plateau in the Azores group which I bought over a year ago. I have my experimental laboratory there away from all distractions. Matter of fact I’ve been there for the past twelve months, then a few days ago I flew over here for supplies and medical equipment. Naturally the life isn’t gay,” he added, grinning, “but it’s interesting.”

“But what are you doing there?” I asked.

“Fixing it so that this war will definitely be the last. If you decide to come with me I’ll explain when we get there; if otherwise, you can’t blame me for keeping my mouth shut.”

Well, we talked some more in pretty much the same strain, but as I had known I would from the first I finally decided to throw in my lot with him. I’d have shelter, food, and something interesting to occupy me, and maybe escape the brunt of the atomic war. So when he flew back in his private ’plane to the desolate rocky island I went with him, and gained my first insight as to the experiment upon which he was engaged.

Four days later, after I had orientated myself to Atlantic storms, winter conditions, and relentless solitude, Salsback seemed to think it was time he explained things. So one morning he took me round his laboratories. They were above ground—strongly built sheds of plastic which defied all the fury of the elements—while underneath them in a natural rock cave in the heart of the island was the plane in

which he made his trips to the mainland, a craft which used atomic power in its plant. The engine was a design of Salsback's own. Salsback was way ahead of his time.

The laboratories I found to be pretty similar to all other laboratories I had ever seen, biological ones, that is. There were the usual binocular microscopes, jars of plasma, sera, and pickled cultures and viruses. I hardly need describe such things; and in any case Salsback jumped so suddenly to the nature of his experiment I had little time to consider the commonplace.

"Peace, Bob," he told me, hands plunged in the pockets of his overalls, and his bald head on one side, "can only come in one way, through inheritance."

I nodded slowly, remembering that he had always been hot on Mendel's theory.

"I wonder," he went on, musing, "if you recall a statement made at the time of the Bikini atom bomb test many years ago? Somebody, I forget who now, suggested that the effects of atom war might be more apparent on posterity than on us ourselves. Why? Because of the atomic radiations affecting the chromosomes, the sources of reproduction, which might produce something different from the ordinary human being. In other words, gargoyles might appear."

"Which isn't a particularly pleasant speculation," I commented, rather naively.

He did not seem to hear me. "It gave me my idea," he said absently. "If atomic radiation could perchance produce a race of gargoyles—disorganized, random atomic energy, that is—could not disciplined atomic energy, in carefully computed doses, produce something different? By that I mean a type of child never known before. One without the eternal lust for power which has been characteristic of man to date."

Salsback was really warming up to it, and I listened intently because he still had that persuasive way of putting things.

"In a way," he proceeded, "I'm enlarging on the original methods of Professor Morgan, who carried out the famous experiment on the fruit-fly, *Drosophila melanogaster*. He proved that genes, which are chains of still smaller bodies inside the chromosomes, are the real units of heredity. He showed how each gene of the fruit-fly was responsible for some particular characteristic.

"Now, genes and chromosomes are as applicable to a human being as to a fruit-fly, and sudden changes in the genes, such as those caused by atomic force, cause sudden corresponding changes in evolution. But real changes, better known as mutations, are produced by actual alteration in the germ-plasm itself. Understand?"

"You mean orthogenesis?" I suggested.

"Er—in a way," he replied, not looking over convinced. "To cut it short, Bob, germ-plasm changes have happened in human beings and animals in the past. We

know that to be so by the self-evident fact that we have reached our present stage of evolution. But these changes can also be artificially produced by atomic-radiation in, as I have said, graduated amounts. This has the effect of altering both genes and germ-plasm which in turn automatically affects the chromosomes. Naturally the individual concerned changes accordingly.”

“Uh-huh, I can see that,” I granted him; “but how does that produce peace?”

He smiled contentedly. “In these past fifteen years, Bob, I’ve made it my business to study out every known human emotion and nervous reaction, and I have traced each one to a certain gene or group of genes—just as Professor Morgan traced each individual reaction in the fruit-fly. I have positively proved”—he thumped the bench beside him—“that man’s lust for power and domination springs from the action of a certain chain of genes which are inherited, inherited, mark you, from the days of the beast.”

I didn’t pass any comment because he was in one of those moods of scientific argument when anything might happen. He considered for a moment, then went on again.

“Atomic energy radiation can eliminate that group of genes as completely as evolution has eliminated the tails from our spines. That will mean that all offspring of the humans so treated will be without that chain and consequently the lust for power and other animalistic urges, which will leave behind an intelligent, progressive, non-belligose man or woman.

“And of course the business will be progressive. All the descendants will be without that chain of genes. It cannot recur, except in very rare cases where of course it will become classed as a recessive unit. That we cannot prevent, but should it appear, it must be destroyed to prevent its perpetuation.”

“By recessive unit,” I said, “you mean, I suppose, that at times an old order of genes does recur and produces atavistic tendencies?”

“Yes, but that is so remotely unlikely I don’t think we need bother ourselves about it.”

Funny thing! Looking back, I can see now that that was the one darned thing we should have bothered about.

“In theory it sounds all right,” I said finally; “but how can you prove it? You haven’t experimented on human beings yet, have you?”

“Obviously not, but I have on animals, including monkeys, whose structure approaches that of the human more closely than anything else. There is not the least

doubt that all destructive tendencies have been eliminated. I hardly have to tell you that a monkey is naturally mischievous. I've stopped that. Here, come and take a look for yourself."

He took me on a tour to other parts of the laboratory and I saw things in that next half hour which convinced me he had really got something. The monkeys I saw were quiet but brightly alert. There were also wild animals of various sorts which in the normal way would have been tearing out each others' throats, all of them grouped together in one cage, yet they were quite content, and not stupidly so either. They were quite normal but without any inclination to be vicious.

"These animals are of course the offspring of the animals I treated," Salsback explained, when the tour was over. "They are as the children of treated humans will be. I have only about a month's work to put in on my final calculations as to atomic radiation dosage and then I'm ready to demonstrate the idea to the Medical Association."

"You think they'll listen to you?" I asked him doubtfully.

He had no illusions. "They'll doubt me, Bob; I'm prepared for that, but I have experimental backing and proof which I don't think they'll be able to gainsay. If they won't listen to me I'll act on my own."

I stared at him in surprise and he added fiercely, "I mean it! I'll kidnap men and women if I have to. I'll do anything! Even the descendants of a single man and woman comprise a tremendous number in a few generations, and with increasing time the old power-lusting type of human would die out. I've just got to succeed, Bob. Call me a man with a mission, if you like, but I'm convinced I have the way to stamp out war, crime, murder, and the like, forever."

This was too sweeping an assertion for me to pass comment upon there and then, but in spite of it I was convinced that he was right. He had got the idea and, scientifically, there was nothing to prevent it developing and producing a perfect race, but when I thought of the prejudices, the criticisms, and the heartaches that were before him, I felt appalled. He was no longer a young man, and he might break down under the onslaught.

This decided me to help him all I could, so that if anything should happen to him I could carry his message and complete the work. He seemed to realize that I meant to do this for he held nothing back from me. Between us we went to work day after day in the laboratory, searching for exactly the right amount of atomic radiation which would have the desired effect on human genes.

It was a laborious job which involved pure mathematics since we had no human beings on which to experiment, and obviously we could not experiment on ourselves.

The only real thing we did have was the atomic power plant, specially designed by Salsback, and as ingenious in its method of parting with radiation in graduated doses as was the biological idea itself. But we had to be meticulously careful. As in the case of yeast-cells and X-rays, too much radiation might kill, where just enough would stimulate.

We were on the job as usual one night, with an Atlantic storm blowing hard round our eyrie, when something happened. We might have had some inkling of it had we troubled to listen to the radio during the past week; but we had not done so, otherwise we would have realized that the dreaded atomic war had arrived.

As to its effect once it struck the cities and populations, I have nothing to record. In our lonely position we had no chance to find out the facts, but we certainly knew there was a war in progress when, right in the middle of important computations, there was a sudden unimaginably violent explosion.

It was so unexpected that neither Salsback nor I had any chance to be prepared. We suddenly stopped dead in our tracks, so to speak, and cast each other a fleeting glance as thunderous din burst on our ears. Then the lights went out and there was a sense of unbearable pressures and whelming darkness.

I did not lose consciousness, but for all practical purposes I was completely excommunicated from life. It seemed that I had fallen into a state of timeless drifting, and for that reason I cannot say how long the condition lasted. Also I was out of touch with Salsback.

Then by degrees this immense darkness and sense of crushing confinement began to lift. I glimpsed the grayness of daylight and felt warm, wet wind from the sea. Like steam from glass the opacity disappeared, and I was lying on my back on rocks, staring across the narrow reaches of the island to a sombre ocean. Beside me, Salsback was staring too.

Except for scratches and bruises he looked no different—well, just a bit different. That keen, brilliant look had gone from his blue eyes, and they were utterly puzzled.

“What the devil happened?” I asked blankly.

He did not answer, and gradually it came to me how different things seemed. For one thing our plastic laboratory had utterly disappeared without trace. For another there was an intense solitude over everything, as though the world were empty. The only thing that made a noise was the ocean. Even the wind was somehow muted.

“I just don’t understand this,” Salsback whispered at last. Then he got to his feet and gazed over the bleak, empty scene. Going away from me over the uneven rocks

he began an exploration. After a moment or two I got up and followed him.

The things we found were puzzling. There were remains of instruments from the laboratory lying buried in the rock crevices, but the odd thing was that they were crumbling away with rust. All the laboratory fittings and equipment had been made of incorrodible metal, or to be more exact resistant to rust for hundreds of years, yet here was ferrous oxide doing its worst, and it hardly seemed probable that air and spume were the root causes.

Of the laboratory itself there wasn't the least sign, or of the house part which had been attached. The only thing remaining was the airplane which we found buried underground and more or less normal; but even here rust was eating into certain parts. Fortunately the atomic motor was normal enough, with its life of many hundreds of years.

We spent perhaps six hours prowling and pondering, using up some of the provisions which were in the plane's sealed refrigerator, then we sat down together in the driving cabin and thought things out, or tried to.

"It looks," I said, musing, "as though instead of being away for a matter of perhaps a few hours we have been away for years, even centuries . . . Everything points to it."

"I believe that we have," Salsback answered, brooding. "But it's only a guess," he added, as I looked at him in wonder, "and I'm not going to base my opinion on the few evidences we've found on this island. The thing to do is to take a look at what has happened in the outer world. There we'll find all the proof we need. In any case we must try and find some provisions. Those we have in the refig' won't last very long. So we'll have a sleep, patch the plane up, and then be on our way."

The patching up business took us a couple of days, however. Then, everything tested to our satisfaction, we hauled the plane up the narrow rocky slide from below and took off. The atomic power motor functioned perfectly and we sped across the gray, heaving waters with steady, silent rhythm.

But gradually we realized once again how different everything was. Normally it is about 1,300 miles from the Azores to London, yet, though there was no doubt as to our course, the instruments functioning perfectly, we covered 2,000 miles without seeing a trace of Ireland or the British Isles. Even Europe had disappeared, or rather there were little islands here and there where Europe had been which suggested, grim thought, that they might be the tops of mountains which had once reared from the vast European plain.

For most of the trip we were both of us too astonished by the view of everlasting waters to pass any comments, but as time went on, we flew in varying directions in the vain hope of finding familiar land.

“This decides it, Bob,” Salsback at last said slowly. “We did stay away for centuries in what appeared to be minutes. I’m afraid we have proved one theory of an atomic explosion which isn’t very palatable, namely that atomic force, under certain conditions, can for a time twist objects near it into hyper-space.

“In other words, the object is hurled out of the normal space-time continuum like a ball on the end of an elastic; then when the elastic retracts, when the warp straightens out, the object returns to the normal position, as we did. While we were in non-space-time, brief though it seemed to our senses, heavens knows how long a period passed in the normal world.”

I suppose I should have been stunned by this pronouncement but for some reason I wasn’t. In fact I had half arrived at this conclusion already. What really worried me was the endless water. To have traveled through time, through a spatial warp, was bad enough, but to find nothing but water upon return was even worse, and I said so.

“I can think of only one explanation,” Salsback said, after studying the empty void of heaven in which no birds flew. “The atomic war must have been so diabolically thorough that oxygen and hydrogen combined during the radiation onslaught and formed water, burying all the continents and turning the earth into something pretty close to a hydrosphere. Come to think of it,” he finished, sighing, “it’s the only logical outcome.”

“Then we’re the last men on an empty watery world?” I asked, aghast.

“That’s the way it looks, Bob. There may have been others who were thrown into and out of a warp as we were, but how we are to find them I don’t know, and few would have the luck to be on an island as we were. Most would presumably drown by returning to sunken continents. It seems to me that perhaps the continents were smashed by atomic force and the waters rolled in over them. Small islands were not inundated because the water level remained substantially the same.”

For a space we flew on without making any further comment; then after perhaps twenty minutes we crossed a small island in the all-inclusive ocean. There was something on it resembling buildings, and though I couldn’t judge accurately at our height it seemed to me as though monstrous penguins populated it, or if not penguins then creatures of a definitely aquatic nature.

“We’re not alone in the world, then,” Salsback said rather dryly, looking down; “though those are quite the strangest ocean denizens I ever saw.”

“But intelligent,” I pointed out. “They turned their heads to watch us as we flew over.”

My mind had begun to revolve around all sorts of theories. Martians perhaps? Or anyway creatures from another planet who had arrived in the lapse of time after the atomic convulsion had engulfed the world?

“Best thing we can do is get back to our own island and try and figure out what we’re going to do,” Salsback said at length. “We have a few provisions left in the plane and our job is to decide what we do when they’re gone. For all the chance we seem to stand of getting food we might as well be dead at this very moment!”

He swung the machine’s nose around and again following the course by instruments we made the return trip, taking it in turns at the controls or else putting in the robot-gear. A night came, in which a quite normal moon glowed, a day again, another night, then as dawn was coming we settled back on our island with nothing to show for our tremendous journey except the worry in our faces.

“I’ve made a checkup on food supplies,” Salsback said, getting up from the controls. “We’ve enough for a week, and fresh water we can always get from filtering the sea through our tanks. But I don’t know if you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” he finished quietly.

“That it’s staving off the evil hour?” I asked him.

“Just that.” His bald head nodded in the cabin lights. “We are in a world in which we don’t fit, Bob. The world we knew has been overwhelmed by a second Deluge. Our instruments for the original experiment we were making have gone and of course they can never be replaced. I don’t know about you, but I’m not the type to endure a slow death from starvation.”

He looked across at our solitary defense gun.

“There are a hundred small proton shells in that,” he went on. “If the worst happens, and I don’t see how it can fail to, we can empty them from the magazine and detonate them all in one blast, in here. It will be quick, clean and . . . sensible.”

I fell moodily silent. A man does not admit he wants to die that easily. Salsback was looking at it from the viewpoint of an elderly man, which I couldn’t share. In fact I wanted to rave at the crazy fate which had planted us in such an impossible position.

He did not badger me for an answer. Instead he wandered to the rear of the airplane and inspected our food supplies again. I remained where I was, looking absently through the window on to the gray waters and the dawn sky. Then I had a shock. I saw what at first I took to be planes approaching. Then as they came nearer I realized that they were birds, gigantic birds too, with a colossal wingspread.

“Doc!” I yelled, leaping up. “Look!”

Salsback stumbled across to join me and for a moment or two we stood watching the flying “things” as they circled and swept lower and lower towards our airplane. Then I felt Salsback dragging at my arm fiercely.

So intently had I been looking upwards I had failed to notice that queer, penguinlike beings were waddling like an army of waiters out of the ocean and over the rocks towards us. They were perhaps five feet tall, web-footed of course, but with very human-looking arms instead of flippers, and faces that somehow were not completely fishlike.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Salsback muttered, seizing the gun and sighting it. “They’re after us! Remember that they saw our plane. They must have followed us.”

“But suppose they are harmless enough and merely want to communicate?” I demanded.

“And suppose they’re not?” His face was grim. “If we don’t hit first and ask questions afterwards, it may be the end of us, and I prefer an end that’s cleaner than being pecked or hacked to bits by a collection of flying fish and pot-bellied penguins.”

I still felt that he was acting precipitately, but there was no opportunity to stop him. He swung the gun round, sighted it; and then fired, driving a stream of hellish protonic shells into the queer flying and waddling army.

The damage he did in so short a time was appalling. A scythe sweeping grass is about the best simile I can think of, but though he worked without pause, swinging the gun above and at ground level, the beings still came on, settling as thick as seagulls on an islet around our solitary plane.

At last the ammunition was exhausted. And still they came.

“Well,” I said grimly, “that finishes it. We’ve nothing left with which to blow ourselves up, and wiping out scores of these things hasn’t made any apparent impression.”

Salsback was silent, haggard, gazing at the queer scaly half-human faces which were peering through the portholes and main windows. There was a sound outside like the rippling of discordant music as the “things” evidently conversed among themselves.

Then suddenly the plane door was slammed inwards, its lock snapped by the battering of a piece of rock. Amidst an overpowering fishy odour three of the “penguins” came waddling into our cabin and stood regarding us.

That strange, remotely human appearance was more than ever evident now.

Despite the scales the outline of a human being was unmistakable; shoulders, legs, arms, but webbed feet and hands. The eyes were completely round and set in the front of the head instead of at the sides, eyes which were covered by a hard watery membrane. There were vestiges of what might have been a nose, and a thin scar of a mouth.

“For the love of heaven, what are they?” Salsback whispered, staring at them. Then he glanced out of the window. “Those flying things are similar too, except for the addition of wings.”

The chattering speech which broke from the tallest of the three creatures didn't make the slightest sense to us and we simply stared dumbly throughout the performance. Finally the creature seemed to become impatient and to our astonishment went over to the control board and sat down—yes, sat down—in the chair, its round, fishy eyes fixed on the switches.

“Don't tell me it's going to drive the plane!” I gasped.

I got my answer in a moment or two. Further piping orders had the effect of making the other fish-men fit the cabin door into place, then the one at the control board applied the power by moving the correct switches with his webbed fingers. Salsback and I stood watching helplessly, as the plane swept into the air and across the endless ocean.

What route we took neither of us had any idea, but after flying for perhaps two hours an island loomed up in the far distance, and followed by flocks of the flying fish we circled high above it. It didn't make sense to me, or I think to Salsback, that there should be a sprawling city down there, fairly well designed too with a central street and others radiating at right angles from it. But it was there and we were dropping swiftly towards it.

Salsback's eyes met mine blankly, but I was commencing to wonder about many things. If this being could sit at the control board and drive the plane so perfectly, why should not he and others like him be able to build a city? Queer, really, how the obvious truth persisted in remaining out of sight just round the corner.

Once the plane had landed in the city—which at close quarters proved to be quite well built and almost indistinguishable from any provincial town, we found ourselves ordered outside, by signals chiefly, and so we stepped into a gathered mob of the creatures who did everything they could to catch a glimpse of us.

So finally, protected on both sides, we were led into a building, along a wide stone hall, and then into a great empty room, or rather nearly empty. There were benches arranged in semi-circular rows but nobody was seated on them. In this

gaunt, bare space we were motioned to sit down and two of the fish-men guards remained to keep an eye on us.

I looked at Salsback troubledly. "Any ideas?" I questioned.

"Not any that bear weight," he sighed. "At the moment I'm past forming theories, I'm just feeling glad that we are not so utterly alone as we had thought."

This speculation may have cheered him but it didn't me. I had the unpleasant feeling that we were running neck and crop into something decidedly dangerous.

After a time, half an hour perhaps, there were signs of activity as members of the strange race began to enter the room. Sometimes they came singly, sometimes in pairs, and without once glancing at us they went and took up positions on the forms which were raised tier upon tier above each other.

It was to me grimly suggestive of a court of law, a suspicion which deepened in my mind when twenty-seven of the beings had assembled, and one in particular took up a central position and sat gazing down upon us. It was, I suppose, the queerest situation in which two Earth men had ever found themselves.

The flutelike remarks of the central one, whom I mentally dubbed as "The Judge," made no impression on us of course, and to show as much we shrugged our shoulders. Promptly another of the beings got up and began, with obvious effort, to talk in English. He spoke it rustily, like somebody struggling valiantly with a dead language.

"You—er—are ancient men," he said at length, and Salsback glanced at me.

"Ancient?" he repeated, gazing back at the assembly. "We're nothing of the sort! We represent a modern age—"

"But a modern age that has gone," the interpreter pointed out. "You are throwbacks." He seemed to be getting a grip on the language now. "Your physical structure and your airplane both place you as Pre-Atom men, which to us means prehistoric."

"Prehistoric!" I ejaculated, stung. "Why, what era—what year—is this?"

"The year Fourteen Hundred of the Post-Atom Era. You date back to a period some five thousand years ago before the Catastrophe and the Deluge."

"You mean that you are Earth people?" Salsback demanded, obviously finding the business hard to credit.

"Certainly we are." There was even dignity in the queer being for a moment. "The atom war destroyed the world in which beings of your type existed. Continents went under the waves; radio-active force was everywhere. There were survivors on mountain tops and islands, but they too had changed. Their offsprings were different. There was a great mutational alteration and gradually we evolved."

“Great Scot,” I whispered. “That’s the very thing you were trying to do, Doc—alter the genes. The atom war did it for them.”

“And nature added her percentage,” he added. “I should have thought of that. Nature will always find a balance, just as it has here. There being no land left the germ-plasm altered to the existing environment and produced flying aquatic beings who live in water and air and yet retain functions which are basically human.”

He became silent again. The gathered assembly had allowed him to go on speaking, perhaps in the hope of learning something.

“That,” said the interpreter, after the judge had listened to a jabber of words, “is correct. We are the new race, and we populate the deeps, the air, and what bit of land there is left. We thrive and we progress. Since the Great Mutation, there has been no strife amongst us and the secrets of the atom have been lost in the Deluge, and as far as we are concerned will remain lost. So it should be since none of us has any wish to fight the other. That way lies the destruction which overwhelmed the race from which we sprang, and of which you are still a part.”

“Just a minute,” Salsback said slowly. “Do you mean to say that you are a peaceful peoples with no wish to fight? No lusting after power?”

“That,” said the interpreter, “is the situation.”

Salsback stared for a moment, then he shook his bald head wearily and gave a wistful smile. “The very thing I set out to do nature accomplished for me,” he muttered. “The old lady has stolen a decided march this time.”

“What was it you set out to do?” the interpreter asked. “How does it come about that you are in this Post-Atom Era?”

Salsback hesitated, then with technical details concerning hyper-space, time, and the effects of atomic energy radiation, he explained exactly what had happened. The beings listened in stony attention without once interrupting. When it was over they conversed in their weird voices for a while; then the interpreter spoke again.

“We neither believe nor disbelieve your story, my friends. In fact we are just not interested. But it does so happen that in this peaceful, ordered community there sometimes have appeared beings such as you, beings we call throwbacks. They are caused by the action of what you call the recessive unit. In other words, men and women of the Pre-Atom Era emerge from time to time full of the old urge to power and destruction which brought about the end of the earlier civilization.”

“But we’re not recessive units!” Salsback cried, leaping to his feet. “Good heavens, all we want to do is live as peacefully as you do. We want to—”

“I am sorry, my friend; but we have an inflexible law regarding the appearance of

these archaic types. They must, for the good of our race at large, be eliminated before their atavistic power-lust can upset the peaceful minds of the rest of the community. You say that you had an experiment afoot, that a bomb blew you into hyper-space and out of it. At least your story is more original than that of the other throwbacks we have so far discovered. They merely said they had come here and didn't know how."

"Then they must have been survivors, like us," Salsback insisted. "Only they evidently hadn't the scientific knowledge to grasp what had happened to them."

"Be that as it may," the interpreter said, after communicating with the judge for a moment, "this court is adamant. You clearly showed your tendencies when you killed and maimed hundreds of our fellows without even attempting to reason. That is a fair sample of a Pre-Atom man and by it you both stand self-condemned."

There was nothing we could do to alter the decision. It was cold, ruthless, yet understandable justice. But, writing these last words with Salsback beside me, as we await the carrying out of the death sentence, I cannot help but see something remotely funny about it.

We who tried to make a perfect race, and theorized on how recessive units should be eliminated, are ourselves condemned by the perfect race because we are recessive units.

Ironical? I think so.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *After the Atom* by John Russell Fearn]