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HENRY KUTTNER

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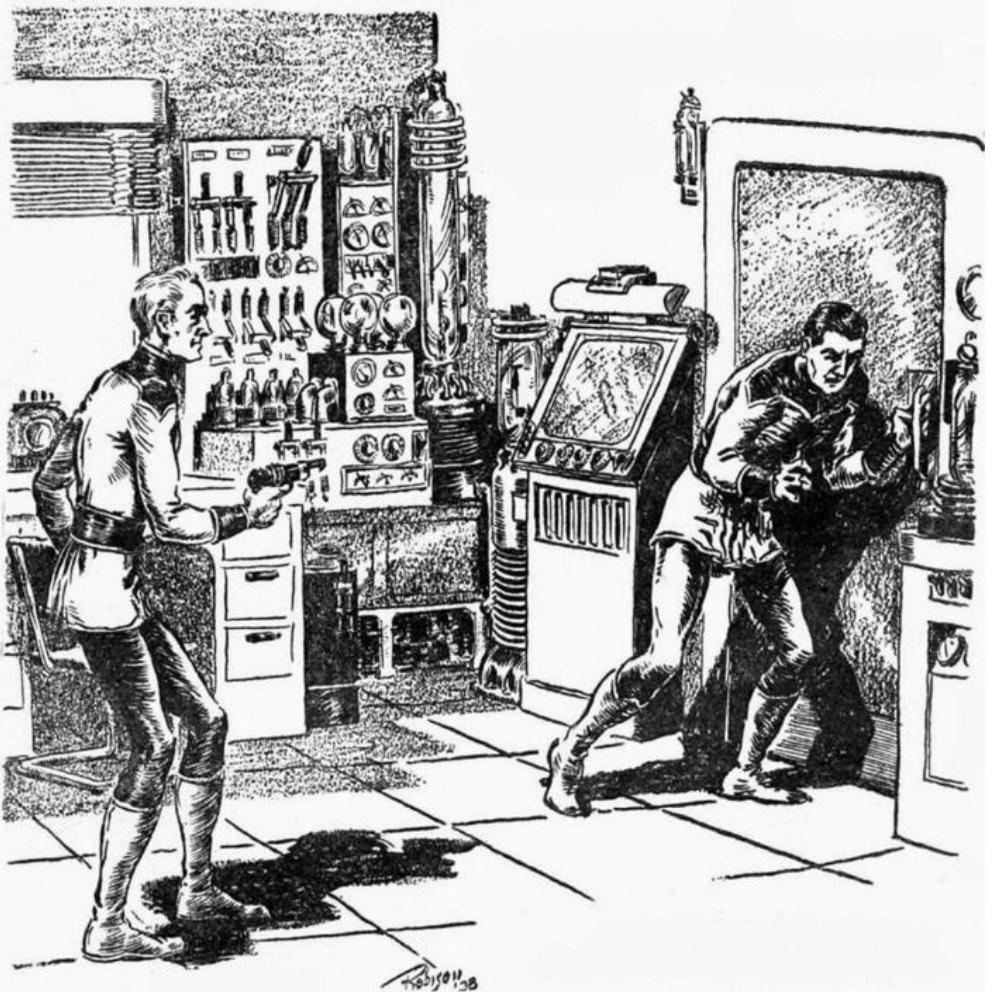
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“Stop or I’ll kill you, Dave,” he said hoarsely

THE DARK HERITAGE

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Robert O. Kenyon.

First published in *Marvel Science Stories*, August 1938.

Scott Holden became the Betrayer, using his vast scientific skill and power to destroy all metal—thrusting mankind back to elementals to save it from knowledge that would mean annihilation!

PROLOGUE

Without speaking the tribe followed Sorg, the chieftain, as he marched stubbornly through the wilderness. All were frightened. The tangled underbrush and the dark shadows of the trees looming overhead created an atmosphere of mystery, in keeping with the legends of this desolate land. Occasionally the rounded summit of a low mountain range was visible far ahead. The air was chill with early spring, touched with the remembrance of an iron-cold winter.

A woman broke from the straggling group, and came to Sorg's side. She touched the chieftain's arm furtively.

"I am afraid," she whimpered. "Sorg . . . let us turn back."

Sorg made no reply. His gnarled hand, gripping a wooden spear, tightened. His broad, fur-clad shoulders were thrown back almost imperceptibly, as though to meet a challenge.

"You are strong," the woman said. "Strongest in the world, I think. But . . . the Destroyer dwells here, Sorg!"

Jal the shaman fell into step beside her—a shrivelled old man, bedecked with feathers and paint. His wise gaze was strangely comforting to the woman. He said, "In our own place we starve. The winter has killed all the game."

"And I will not grub for roots like a swine," Sorg said harshly. He fingered his stiff red beard, staring around into the dim corridors of the forest. "There is game here. If the Destroyer is so powerful—why has he not killed the deer?"

The woman caught her breath in a sob. "He hates only man—you know that. We shall all die."

"He is a fable," Sorg said in a voice that did not carry conviction. "An old woman's tale."

Jal's wrinkled face was turned to the chief. "No fable, Sorg! Remember—without me beside you, the tribe would not have come to this evil land. We must walk softly. The Sungod has cursed this place where the Betrayer dwelt."

Sorg was thoughtful. Since childhood he had worshipped the Sun, and with the rest of the tribe he had spat upon the huge black globe of stone that rested in the temple-cave—symbol of the Betrayer. Never yet, to his knowledge, had anyone ventured into the secret wilderness which, according to legend, was the home of the Destroyer. Yet now, shading his eyes with a calloused palm, he could see little to frighten him.

Ages ago this had once been the suburb of a great metropolis, though Sorg did not know it. The slow tide of time had blanketed it with vegetable life. Wood had long since rotted to dust, but occasionally a strangely-shaped stone pushed up through the underbrush. More than once before Sorg had discovered the ruins of cities, but he did not care to remember the desolate wreckage he had seen. He had felt emotions he could not analyze, and Sorg was a realist. He did not like things he could not understand.

Behind him the tribe straggled, a wretched group of half naked savages. Would they obey him when he ordered camp made here? Game was plentiful, and they were hungry. Though the great snows were over, it would be many moons before food could be had easily. But this was the land of the Betrayer . . . a little gust of rage touched Sorg; he shook his fist at the gray

sky in a gesture of foolish defiance. The woman moaned, shuddering in the cold wind that blew between the trees.

Abruptly Jal thrust up a warning hand. He pointed. The ground dipped from their feet into a little valley, thickly forested. In its cup was a clearing, and the ruins of a building. A building better preserved than any Sorg had seen before. Above it a vague opalescence shimmered in the air, intangible, inexplicable.

Whispers went up from the tribe. A movement of panic shook them. Even Sorg hesitated, staring down at the ruin.

Jal touched his arm and said softly, "You must go down there."

"What?"

With a movement of his eyes Jal indicated the tribe. It would not do for their chieftain to show fear now. They would flee back to the wilderness that was their home, where they would starve.

Realizing this, Sorg barked a harsh word of command and commenced to descend the slope. Presently he realized that Jal was following him. He felt oddly relieved.

They pushed through undergrowth till the clearing was before them. All around the hill-slopes mounted. Sorg could see a tiny knot of figures high above him. They were watching.

He walked swiftly toward the ruin. The flickering rainbow light in the air was like a dome, enclosing part of the clearing. He halted, hesitating.

He heard the breathing of Jal behind him. And he was conscious of the eyes of the tribe . . . with an involuntary shudder he put out a hand, touching the translucent, shimmering barrier.

There was some resistance, but no more than water would give. Sorg made up his mind and stepped forward, breaking easily through the strange wall. And he was conscious that Jal had followed him.

Here, within the wall, much had resisted the wearing grind of the centuries. Blocks of stone were sharply-edged instead of rounded. There were flakes of some gleaming substance on the ground—something Sorg had never seen before. He felt Jal's gaze on him, and looked up. The shaman pointed.

Between walls of stone, riven and shattered, a room was visible. Unknown objects were half buried in dust that carpeted the stone floor in uneven heaps. In the very center of that roofless chamber was a human skeleton, dust-heaped: amidst the bare whiteness of the bones something black shone.

Sorg whispered, "A man—" He could not finish. He knew what Jal would reply.

And the shaman murmured, "No man, Sorg. The Betrayer. See!"

He moved forward to the threshold of the room, and pointed. "See what he holds? He crushed man in his grip—long ago. And things haven't changed, still man is his victim."

Skeleton hands touched the black thing: a stone statuette of a nude male figure, feet on a black globe, face upturned, arms uplifted, striving. It lay amidst the bones, pitted a little with age, and filmed with a gray dust. And Sorg knew that he beheld the Betrayer, the dreadful Destroyer who had ruined the world ages ago. The old legends thronged into his mind. "He lifted Man up only to hurl him down. The Sun-god saved us, but even yet the Betrayer has power over Man. . . ."

Sorg was breathing harshly. He said, "Jal, if I—"

The shaman nodded. He pointed to where the tribe waited. "It is in your power to free the world from the Betrayer—or his legend," he added in a whisper, for Jal was more intelligent

than his fellows. He watched now while Sorg slowly advanced to the side of the skeleton and lifted the black statuette with thick fingers that trembled as he held it.

No doom fell. The Destroyer did not resent this blasphemy. And suddenly Sorg knew a new sense of power, a realization of his own achievement that sent him, heedless of Jal, racing back up the slopes, holding the image high, shouting words that would strike fetters of fear from the tribe. . . .

And on the threshold of that ruined room, Jal the shaman stood, peering down with age-dimmed eyes at the pitiful remnant of a living, breathing being. Vaguely in his mind incomprehensible thoughts stirred—a question, and a doubt, and above all a tremendous wonder and a wish to know, to look into the forgotten past when Man had been a giant instead of a brutal savage that he was now.

“We shall never know,” he whispered, and turned away to follow Sorg. Yet something seemed to reach out from the skeleton on the floor, a queer affinity, and a strange understanding. Because, uncounted centuries ago to human comprehension, but a brief moment in the galactic drift, the Betrayer had been a man like Jal. . . .

Scott Holden was not an impressive figure as he crouched over his desk, laboriously working out an equation. His face was thin and pale and wrinkled, though Holden was not yet fifty. Yet he was the most powerful man in this world of 1985.

He nodded at last, grunted with satisfaction, and pressed a button. While he waited he extracted a worn briar pipe from a pocket of his stained smock, and filled it carefully. Clouds of blue, foul-smelling smoke wreathed him when David Glynn entered.

Holden let his mild blue eyes wander over Glynn. An intelligent man, ears set well forward on the head, forehead high, lips firm—though Holden could never bring himself to admire or even understand the cynicism that sometimes twisted Glynn’s lips into a wry sneer. Glynn was to be Holden’s successor as ruler of the world.

This rule had not been sought by Holden, but thrust upon him by virtue of his accomplishments. His power lay across Earth like a Titan shadow—a shielding shadow. His experiments with the atom had enabled man to create a Utopia. And the secrets he still held enabled him to put down the wars that occasionally threatened to disrupt civilization. If Holden had not kept the greatest power for himself alone, the world would have long since perished in a holocaust of battle, with new and frightful weapons of atomic warfare. Luckily, Holden was wise, and therefore maintained his peaceful rule unhindered, with the full consent of his subjects.

Glynn said briefly, “Have you finished?”

Holden nodded. He arose and wandered to a pedestal where stood a black stone statuette—a figure of a man, feet bound to the earth, face and arms and eyes striving upward. He lifted the image gently.

“Yes, Dave,” he said. “I’ve finished. The last details are worked out. When I throw that switch—” He pointed—“I will be able to move in time.”

“When will you—”

“Why not now? But first there are some things I must tell you. This experiment—well, it’s dangerous. I may not succeed. If I die, you will take over the rule of earth.”

Glynn’s eyes did not change.

“I know you,” Holden went on. “Therefore I trust you. I could wish that you had more heart and less brain, but—”

Glynn said sharply, “Why must you be the guinea pig? Let someone else. Let me!”

Suddenly Holden’s eyes were dreaming. He glanced at the stone image he held. “No, Dave. This is my reward. I’ve worked for years to help mankind. I’ve given him new powers, new frontiers of science. I’ve helped him upward a little from the brute. My reward is to see the end.”

Glynn’s lip curled.

“What do those swine care what you’ve done?”

“I didn’t work for a reward, Dave. You know that. I worked for man—courageous little pygmy that can face all space and time!” He laughed a little self-consciously. “I sound maudlin, eh? Well—you worship science. I worship mankind—and that’s why I’m being my own guinea pig. I want to see the pinnacle of human evolution.”

He put down the image. There was a glass of water on the desk, and he filled it from a carafe. Sipping slowly, Holden said, "If I don't return—"

"You're a fool," Glynn snapped.

Holden did not take offence. He ruffled a few of the papers on the desk. "The secret's here. If I fail, experiment again. Eventually we'll be able to control the time-extension."

Glynn was suddenly the scientist, cold, alert, attentive. He tapped a pencil against his hand as Holden continued, his keen brain searching for possible errors in the other's theory.

"Atomic structure is the secret, Dave. Time is a dimension that interpenetrates the three spatial dimensions we know. We're like pebbles in a stream-bed, half embedded in the sand. The stream itself, flowing all around us, is time." He paused, smiling wryly. "Difficult to explain. However—we move with the stream, but slowly. All earth moves in the time-current, impelled by the stream's drag, held back by the sandy bed—our atomic structure. Now listen: if the pebble I've used as an example could be thrust up into the current, freed from its bed of sand, what would happen?"

"I see," Glynn said.

"Yes. The stone would move with the current more swiftly than when the friction of the sand impeded it. If the pebble were made buoyant, it would go even faster. To make a man move with the current of time—to free him from the friction of his atomic structure—I change that structure."

"You've done that before."

"I've experimented, yes. Unsuccessfully till now. This experiment involves the slowing-down of the electronic orbits, automatically decreasing the time-rate. Actually, the heavier elements have a slower time-rate than the lighter ones. They are more permanent. D'you know the reason? They have a greater extension into the time current."

Glynn nodded slowly. "Rutherford and Chadwick showed the way. Their experiments—"

"But they didn't know—they couldn't." A flash of pride showed briefly on Holden's gaunt face. He went on: "Electricity and light, of course, are the important factors. My papers will show you the details. Slowing down the electronic movement automatically extends the object into the time dimension. To return to our example, the pebble is rendered buoyant, lifted off the bed of the stream, and permitted to flow with the current. Because it moves *with* the current, there is no friction—and no time. It is this friction with the time-stream that causes us to grow old.

"But I'll move with the current, through the ages until an automatic switch releases energies that will reactivate my electronic structure. And I can return, Dave—it won't be a one-way trip. I'll still be bound to this time-sector, as though by an elastic band. I can retrace my way. The papers will explain it all." Holden turned away to open a door. He glanced back from the threshold, his eyes lingering on the black statue.

"Come on, Dave. Everything's ready."

The two went into the adjoining room. It was a laboratory, neat and spotless. In one corner of the room a flat gray disc, seven feet in diameter, topped a low platform. Wires led from its base through hollow pipes into the walls.

"Not very impressive, is it?" Holden said. "There's a lot of power there, though. Wait over there, Dave. If I'm successful, I won't be gone a second—no matter how long I stay in the future. Wait a minute!" He hurried into the adjoining room and came back stuffing a tobacco pouch into his pocket. He climbed on the platform. A lever protruded from its base.

Glynn said, “Scott!”

“Eh?”

“I—nothing. It’s queer, that’s all.”

Holden nodded understandingly. He lifted his hand in a mute gesture of farewell and swung over the lever. Instantly a black sphere seemed to engulf platform and occupant. It sprang out of empty air, a globe of nothingness—of alien matter—

And within it stood Scott Holden, a motionless statue, utterly inert in every atom and electron—borne down the limitless eons on the sweep of time’s current . . .

II

Under his hand the lever stirred and moved; it seemed the fraction of a second since he had swung it. The black globe had vanished. Holden did not know it had ever existed. A moment ago, he felt, he had been in a familiar world. Now all was changed.

He stood on the platform, and around him was a great sweep of vastness—a room, hundreds of feet broad, perfectly circular, and towering up to a high, lambent dome of glowing brilliance. The droning vibration of some sound was just dying in the air. Holden hesitated, wondering, and his hand went to the automatic in his pocket. Glynn had insisted upon his taking the weapon.

But the room was quite empty. There was nothing here.

Carefully Holden clambered from the platform. He hurried across the floor, feeling curiously insignificant in that vast chamber. The wall was bare, and made of a grayish metal that felt blood-warm to the hand.

The silence blanketed Holden. He felt an unreasoning surge of fear, and shouted, “Hello!” Echoes boomed.

“If I could get out of here—!” he thought—and stepped back involuntarily. The wall before which he stood was dissolving, a great square of it, melting into nothingness. Before him, below him, was a city.

A city built like a ziggurat—a ledged pyramid, all of gray metal, dropping down beneath him to the pale yellow of jungle. Even at that tremendous distance Holden realized the enormous size of that alien forest. A glance upward, at a red sun that gave little warmth, told him the reason. Decreased solar radiation meant a corresponding increase in the leaf-surface of vegetation.

Movement shook the far jungle, though there was no wind. It seemed alive. Its pale stretches moved . . . moved . . .

But Holden was never to solve the forest’s mystery. Glancing at the abyss at his feet, he knew that he could not leave the room thus; and simultaneously with the realization he felt himself lifted into the air as though by unseen hands. Weightless, he hung there, without discomfort, but with a momentary horrible fear of falling. He fought for calm.

Gravitation-control—man had not yet mastered it in his day. But in times to come . . . He saw the walls glide past, and realized he was moving, though when he closed his eyes experimentally the sense of motion vanished. A wall melted into haze as he drifted toward it, and he glided through.

He was suspended near the ceiling of a gigantic chamber. Though the floor was far below him, yet the towering metal of certain strange edifices was almost beneath his feet. He saw that they were machines, immense beyond imagination, built for some purpose he could not understand. Machines not of metal alone, but of light and movement and sheer power, he thought, staring down in wonder.

He strained his eyes for glimpse of a human figure. Fear touched him; the apprehension of finding this incomprehensible city deserted. Again he shouted, not knowing what words his lips formed.

The unseen power that held him unsupported in empty air, as though at a signal, lifted him. He drove up through a gray ceiling that vanished as he touched it. And Holden saw

above him—a light.

He was conscious of nothing else; it seemed to grow and swell till it dwarfed all else. Yet Holden could not have said its color. It seemed rainbow-hued, and yet pale as moonlight; flaming with white fury, and yet, paradoxically, a thing of black light that loomed gigantic in a universe of brightness. Holden had a queer, impossible idea that he was not seeing the light with his eyes, but, rather, with his brain. He felt an impulse to laugh shakily, and fought down incipient hysteria.

He was drawn up within the light.

There are no words to describe a blind man's emotions when he first sees. There were no words for Holden's emotions now. His mental vision was broadened as though veils had been drawn up suddenly; new vistas, undreamed-of images, rose up before him, and he knew unimaginable things. Knowledge seemed to be pouring into his brain. Knowledge—and understanding of this incredible city. He knew what the light was. He knew it was alive.

Yet with no life akin to ours. It had been created, the knowledge came to him, with one purpose: a storeroom for the secrets of man's brain. It was a library, and more than a library. It held all wisdom that man had gained, incorporated in its essence when it had been created. And that wisdom it could impart to any man—educating him in an hour with the whole arcana of man's past and present.

Realizing this, some measure of reassurance came to Holden. He relaxed, allowing the flood of thought to pour into his brain, slowly coming to understand . . .

The light told him of his own world, and of himself. He had lived unthinkable ages ago. Yet in those long-past days were hidden the seeds of the future, the germs from which this colossal civilization had sprung.

The first keystones of science's edifice had been laid even then. Slowly, painfully, through the years and centuries and eons scientists had added to their store of knowledge, ever expanding their frontiers, ever pushing outward into the unknown.

But with these new things that came into the world there mingled very old ones, emotions and passions older than mankind. Passion, greed, hatred, lust—all of these kept pace with the advance of science. Wars decimated Earth again and again. Heedless, the scientists worked on—delving into the mysteries that always lay beyond each new discovery.

And Holden had a terrifying mental picture of minds that were crippled and warped by beast passions, transmitted in the germ plasm, undying in its malignant effects—minds ridden by this fearful heritage plunging on into the secrets of space and time.

The cities of Man towered into the stratosphere, extended far underground. Space travel became an accomplished fact. Adventurers drove out to Mars and Venus, and later to the moons of the giant planets—and then beyond Pluto, out into the great gulfs beyond the Solar System. And travel was not limited to three dimensions alone. The scientists found ways of reaching worlds that commingled with ours, on different planes of vibration.

And to Mars and Venus, to Callisto and Ganymede and Io, to the frigid wastes of Pluto man brought fear and hatred. The heritage of the beast ruled. The life-forms of other planets were murdered or enslaved. Other dimensions submitted to the rule of the Earth.

Power, power, power—always science gave power to man, and always he abused it. But the subtle weakness that the beast heritage brought to man's mind went unnoticed, passed from generation to generation in the germ plasm and chromosomes.

Man's vision swept outward—outward—

New secrets unfolded. Greater and greater mysteries bowed to his rule—cosmic arcana—
Until man went too far.

The thoughts pouring into Holden's brain raced on . . .

III

As the black globe sprang into existence in Holden's laboratory, David Glynn started forward. Two steps he took—and the sphere vanished. On the platform was Scott Holden—and he was old.

His shoulders were slumped and drooping, and on his face was stamped the weary tragedy of what he had seen. Glynn felt his stomach move sickeningly as he stared into Holden's eyes. They were the eyes of a dying man.

The pale lips moved.

"You're right, you know—" Holden said, and swayed and toppled forward into Glynn's arms.

But an hour later he was seated lifelessly at his desk, facing Glynn as he talked. He explained what had happened, while the younger man watched, his dark face immobile. Once he broke into the story.

"I don't see that, Scott. Man went too far? You mean he met some enemy—"

"He met himself," Holden said dully. "Oh, I was a fool; I know that now. It was pleasant to think of man as a courageous little mite bravely going forward into the unknown, facing the mysteries of all time and space. But what do we know of the tremendous secrets—out there? In the cosmic vastnesses—things too big for us, Dave. What are we, anyway? Fungi, lichen, parasites, growing like fleas on a ball of mud and water. If the flea had a brain comparable to ours, he'd think himself the pinnacle of evolution's pyramid. Yet he could be squashed by your little finger."

He gulped the rest of a tumbler of brandy. "We're only on the outskirts now. Just touching the fringes of the universe's secrets. When we get further in—don't you see what happened?" he said shrilly, smashing the glass down on the desk. "The race learned too swiftly! I don't know how far I went in time. A million years—a hundred million—that doesn't matter. Man won't be able to understand or face the greatest mysteries of space and time till his brain has evolved to a certain point. Science went too fast. Man hadn't evolved sufficiently to understand or make use of those incredible secrets when scientists discovered them. It takes tremendous moral and mental power—a very great will—to face the last secrets of the universe. And those secrets were uncovered before man's brain had evolved enough to bear them.

"I saw what happened then. Many died. There were other cities like the one I was in, scattered through the Solar System and beyond, and in other space-time continua. This one had been built chiefly to house my time-sphere. You see, after I created the globe it would naturally remain a 'dead spot' in the three-dimensional world through the ages, until the time, far in the future, when the switch was reversed. It couldn't be destroyed, for it was static matter, created by power within the globe it formed. At any rate, the geologic shifts changed the Earth's surface, so that sometimes the sphere was underground, and sometimes far up in the air. Ages, Dave—I wish I knew how many. Such changes don't take place in a century or two.

"Well, man went too far. His brain had been given power too soon. There are secrets of thought and being that will be the last to be discovered, and they are too tremendous for any but a perfect mind to face. These last men could not face them. They tried to retrace their

steps, to establish a more mundane life. It was too late. They had no interest in anything but the pursuit of knowledge—and the only knowledge left they weren't able to face. They were misfits, cursed with brains that learned power too soon. The heritage of the beast from which they evolved bound them irretrievably in the mire. They—they found a way out."

Glynn leaned forward, frowning. The expression on Holden's face was ghastly.

"I got out of the light—that brain-thing, whatever it was—before it could tell me too much. Those last secrets are still unknown to me. The city is run by something like a robot system. There are artificially created intelligences at various points within it that automatically satisfy the mental desires of human beings. That's why the wall opened when I wanted to get out, and all the rest. The intelligences were trying to obey the confused thoughts I gave them.

"Once I knew that, I willed to be returned to the room where I'd left the machine. I felt sick and nauseated, Dave. Twice I started to get on the platform to return, and twice I turned back. You've guessed why. I wanted to know what was the way out mankind discovered."

Holden gulped more brandy. "I found out. I willed to be taken to the place where the other humans were. That unseen force lifted me, sent me plummeting down through metallic floors that vanished at my touch, down into the heart of the pyramid. At last I saw them, in a great room far underground. About a hundred, more or less. Beautifully formed men. Giants. Mighty heads—their craniums were magnificent."

Holden laughed harshly. "They were mad, you know. Quite hopelessly insane. Pinnacle of man's evolution. Idiots. They'd destroyed the thing that had destroyed them—their brains."

He picked up the brandy bottle; it was empty. Staring at it, his voice a little thick with the liquor, he said: "They were quite happy, too. In non-realization of themselves. Automatically fed and cared for by the robot intelligences." He laughed mirthlessly. "It's funny, Dave. Why don't you enjoy the joke? Man and science fighting. You're the champion of science—and you're going to win."

He swung about, eyeing the black statue on the pedestal. Suddenly he snarled a wordless oath, sprang up and took a few steps toward the image. But he stumbled and came crashing down in a huddled unconscious heap. . . .

For ten days Holden was a grim, dis-spirited shadow. He moved purposelessly about the laboratories, drinking incessantly. Worried, Glynn secretly watered the liquor, but presently Holden returned to his desk, neglecting alcohol for black coffee. He worked on his calculations for days, vainly trying to find a solution. It seemed useless. Time was unchangeable.

Then, at last, Glynn gave him the clue he had been seeking. "Scott," he said, "there's a discrepancy somewhere. According to your story, the globe of static matter will exist—did exist—from the present day to the time you reached in the future. That right?"

Dawning realization shone in Holden's eyes. He said, "You mean—"

"Well, it isn't there now. It vanished when you returned."

"You're right. Obvious! I should have known—it means the future can be changed, Scott."

"How?"

"I changed it when I came back to 1985. Time isn't a stream—it's a network, a labyrinth of branches. Each moment we're at a fork. If I throw a switch now, Earth's destiny is borne along one branch of the stream. If I don't, it takes another path. Time isn't unchangeable."

Holden whirled and returned to his desk. Only once he glanced up to say triumphantly, "I learned a great deal in the future. Knowledge I can use now. In vibration—" He laughed

shortly and again bent over his pages of calculations.

Glynn learned the plan in snatches as he worked with microscope and electric apparatus under Holden's direction. The old man was energized by a fire that would not let him cease; he worked both day and night, with the aid of caffeine tablets and other stimulants.

"You see," he told Glynn once, "the factors that went to make up the ultimate collapse of mankind are still in existence. There's too much science. Man must relapse into the barbarism from which he emerged too soon. Eventually he'll recover the lost sciences, but not until his brain has grown and evolved a good deal. This vibration—"

Glynn's face was queerly cold. "What will it do to metals, Scott?"

"Destroy them. I learned that, at least, in the future. Sympathetic vibration applied to the atomic structure—"

"But it'll wreck civilization!"

"Only so that a better one may be built up later."

"What of the human organism?" Glynn asked quickly. "Certain metallic elements are necessary—"

"The destruction of metals will take a long time—perhaps several hundred years. In that time man can adapt himself to the slowly vanishing supply of metal. I've taken that into consideration."

All metals would be destroyed. The thought hammered at Glynn's mind as he moved about the laboratory, examining slides through the microscopes, testing currents and rheostats, adjusting wires. Curiously enough, the cold cynic became man's champion. He argued with Holden, pleaded with him, accused him. But he accomplished nothing.

One night Holden, working in the laboratory, straightened at a furtive sound from the next room, Glynn's workshop. He laid down his instruments and hesitated. Then, as a thought came to him, he hurried into his own office and secured the gun that lay on his desk. He had realized that the sound he had heard was a voice—and not Glynn's.

But when he entered the younger man's room, the gun hidden in his pocket, Glynn was typing busily. He glanced up, lifting inquiring eyebrows.

"Who was that in here?" Holden asked.

Glynn's lips parted slightly. "There was nobody—"

"Who? The police? The government? You've told them."

"Well, what if I have?" Glynn stood up, scowling blackly. "I gave you your chance. I tried to stop you, but I couldn't. Now *they'll* stop you."

Holden glanced at the door, and saw that it was locked. Glynn, seeing the direction of his look, nodded. "They can break it down. Scott, give it up! I'll tell them I lied—"

"No."

"You plan to wreck the world!"

"Not permanently," Holden said with an odd flash of humor. Somehow he felt calm and steady, with nerves of ice, though he knew he faced the greatest crisis of his life. He wondered briefly at himself, at the queer and inexplicable engine that was the human brain. "Not permanently. Man will recover the lost sciences. He'll get back metal when he masters atomic transmutation. And he'll find substitutes."

The door vibrated to a low, urgent knock. Glynn said with fierce desperation, "Scott, give it up! I tell you—"

"No."

Glynn drew a deep, unsteady breath. Then he turned to the door. Holden said sharply: “Don’t open it!”

Glynn stopped, but did not glance back. He took another step forward.

Holden took the gun out of his pocket. “Stop or I’ll kill you, Dave,” he said. Glynn looked over his shoulder, gave a low, hoarse shout, and rushed toward the door. His hand was on the lock when Holden fired.

There was no time to aim. So the bullet killed Glynn instead of merely wounding him. Glynn dropped to lie motionless on the floor, and abruptly a volley of knocks thundered out. Holden put the gun in his pocket and raced back into his laboratory, locking the door behind him. He worked furiously for perhaps five minutes, and then the attackers broke down the outer door. But another panel still barred their entrance—a panel of tough steel.

This gave Holden time enough to complete his task. He had learned many things in the world of the future, and now he hastily made a number of adjustments on his time-platform. The device, he knew, could be adapted to influence atomic structure in various ways. Presently he had finished, though the door was warping beneath the noisy attack. Bullets had dented it.

Holden moved the lever. A globe of shimmering, opalescent light sprang out all around him—and swiftly it darkened. It became black as the time-sphere had been. But the attributes of this globe were somewhat different. It was a barrier—a hollow shell of atomic energy that could not be penetrated by anything man had ever created.

It expanded slowly, passing through walls and ceiling without effort. But the men beyond the door hesitated at sight of the strange wall of darkness that was welling out before them, and drew back. One man waited too long, and as the atomic shell passed through his body he screamed in agony and died, to vanish beneath the blackness, his molecular structure disrupted. The others fled.

The globe was quiescent at last, and the men tried their weapons on it. But it seemed to have solidified now, and bullets merely fell flattened to the ground. Later, machine-guns and airplane torpedoes were tried, without success. For a while the entire forces of civilization were bent upon penetrating the atomic shell and reaching Scott Holden. For Glynn had given Holden’s secret to the world, and had explained Holden’s attempt to destroy all metals. In self-protection mankind tried to destroy Holden and his laboratory.

But the scientist, unmoved, continued his work within the sphere. In a day he had finished the machine, and without delay moved the switch that would send around the Earth the destructive radiations. And, sighing a little, he straightened and looked around for the first time in hours.

He was extremely thirsty. But the carafe was empty, and the faucet gave only a trickle of muddy liquid, having apparently been cut off at the main. Holden drank some sherry instead.

He stood for a while looking at the door beyond which Glynn’s body lay, but he did not open it. Shrugging, he went to a cupboard and began to measure out fine crystals into a large glass container. Since Glynn’s death Holden had thought himself beyond all emotion, working only on his brain. And now his intellect told him coldly that only slow starvation awaited him within the atomic shell. He did not dare remove it, for he guessed that even now attackers were trying to shatter the globe with every weapon they had.

No, the shell must remain, guarding the machine that sent out radiations that would gradually destroy all metals. In a hundred years metals would start to weaken and fail. Then

the cities would go. In two hundred years only stone or wooden structures would exist; man would have adapted himself to a body without metallic elements; and he would be slipping backward into barbarism. For all the instruments of science would go, from the great telescopes to the smallest micrometers.

Holden poured a liquid into the container. As it touched the crystals, gas was generated. A painless death—and quick.

Turning, his eyes fell on the black stone statuette. He quickly took it from the pedestal and dropped into a chair, cradling the image in his arms. It seemed oddly heavy . . . the effect of the gas, no doubt.

The machines would be gone in a few hundred years, when the metals went. But the shell would remain on, Holden knew, gradually growing weaker and more tenuous as its energy was dissipated into the air. But not for many ages would man be able to break the barrier.

The gas hissed. Death . . . it was just, after all. He had killed Glynn. Holden's eyes stung; a strong bond of affection had existed between the two men, and now his harshly repressed emotions came flooding back to him.

But they could not hurt him now . . . nothing could hurt him any more, not even the hatred and fear that future generations would give him. . . .

Imperceptibly the sleep of the Betrayer merged into death.

[The end of *The Dark Heritage* by Henry Kuttner (as Robert O. Kenyon)]