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FEATURING

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By **DON TRACY**

THE TOMB OF TIME
A Novelet of Magic Life
By **ROBERT ARTHUR**

THE WHITE BROOD
A Spaceways Novelet
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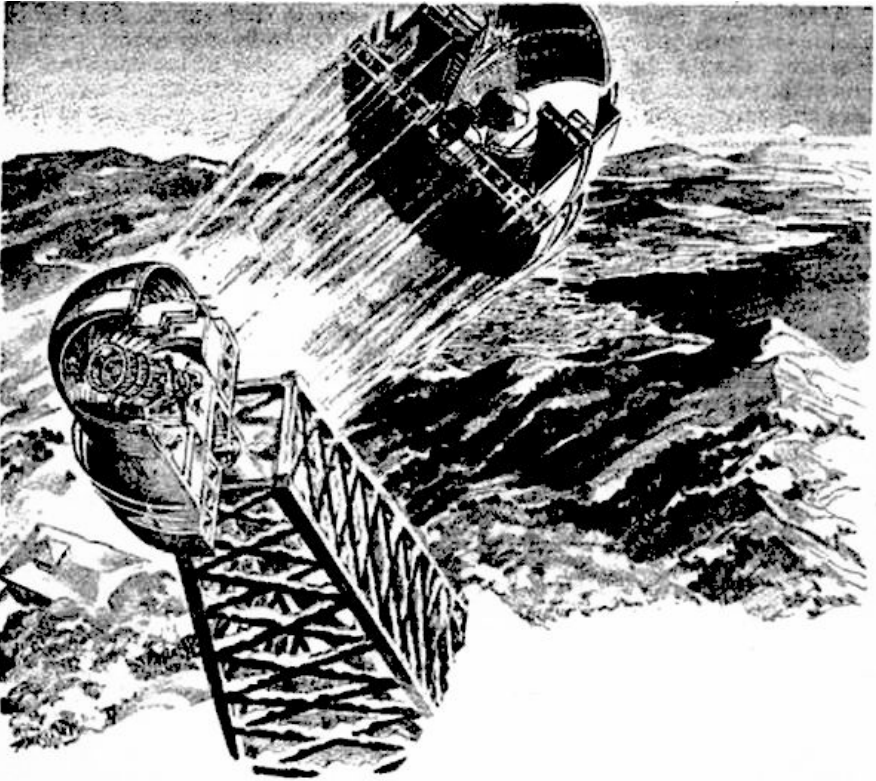
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REVERSE ATOM

By
HENRY KUTTNER

Author of "Hollywood on the Moon," "When the Earth Lived," etc.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, November 1940.



Quite suddenly the observatory was split neatly in half, as though sliced with a giant knife

A Blazing Riddle Out of the Cosmic Gulfs Poses a Problem That Men Must Answer!

It was a flaming enigma from the cosmic gulfs beyond the Solar System, a vast, coldly luminous comet that drove inexorably Sunward. No spectroscope could analyze it. Some element entirely new to man's experience was flashing past Pluto, beyond the great planets, on a path luckily above the plane of the ecliptic so that only little Mercury felt the alien breath of the strange visitant. Mercury—and the Sun. For the comet's tail, in defiance of all laws of logic and science, stretched Sunward, seemingly dragging that glowing, incredible gas into the heart of the Sun, where it came finally to rest.

And simultaneously solar radiation began swiftly to wane.

Max Molin, the Swiss astrophysicist, was completing his series of lectures at a famous English college when this was happening. The auditorium was warm, though outside snow was falling. It was late June.

The Swiss was striding up and down the platform, blowing out his lips occasionally with a gusty, impatient breath. On his chunky body hung an ill-fitting, gaudy golf suit. His coarse, craggy face looked as though it had been hacked out of weathered brown granite.

He stopped on the edge of the platform and purred:

“This will be my last lecture, gentlemen. Your classes are over forever. No doubt that pleases you, eh? Well, when you’re cowering in an insulated basement trying to get warm, chewing your shoes because there’s nothing else to eat, you’ll remember with pleasure this lecture series!

“You don’t know what I’m talking about, perhaps,” Molin went on. “Let me explain. The Sun is constantly creating sub-atomic energy. You will not deny that, I suppose. Now there is a delicate balance in this Sun of ours, as in any other star. The interior of it is composed of atoms under intense pressure. Such pressure that their outer electrons are being constantly knocked off, and energy being thus created. Now there are ether waves also in the Sun’s interior—all sorts, light waves, X-rays, Gamma rays. The atomic excitation in the Sun’s heart forces out these ether waves.”

Molin made an expansive gesture with his long arms.

“See? That is solar radiation. But if all these ether waves escaped into space they’d wither the Earth like a—a—” He groped vainly for the right word, gave it up. “Anyway, the waves can’t get through. The atoms of the outside layers of the Sun provide a barrier—a mesh—through which these waves can leak only very slowly. Until lately, that has been the situation.”

Nobody was asleep now. This lecture was unusual, even for the unpredictable Max Molin. The astrophysicist hurried on.

“A comet recently collided with the Sun. Now the unusual thing about this comet was that it contained an element entirely new to us. It collided with the Sun, diffused itself, and has wrapped itself like a blanket around our star.

“Now how could it do this? Its atomic weight is less than that of calcium, which is light enough to float on the Sun’s chromosphere, and at the same time the atomic nucleus is very large indeed—larger than that of lead. You all know that lead will stop many ether waves. Well, this new element in the comet forms an opaque blanket around the Sun, a blanket that absorbs solar radiation almost entirely and prevents light and heat from reaching the Earth.

“So,” Molin said pleasantly, “in a short time all plant and animal life will die. Artificial ultra-violet light may help, but not for long. Solar radiation is necessary to grow food and human beings. Man may prolong his life for a while by migrating to Mercury, but I doubt it, for the atomic blanket on the Sun is very thick. We can’t save ourselves by seeking another Solar System, for our spaceships are as yet incapable of long interstellar voyages. And so, my young friends. I finish my last lecture and take the opportunity of bidding you a very pleasant death.”

The astrophysicist bowed, marched from the dais and went to his office, where he opened a can of beer. Gulping it, he mused, “I owed them that. For years I’ve endured their idiotic faces gaping at me, while I parroted other scientists. Well, if I had not lectured I would have starved and gone without beer.”

The craggy face was not harsh now. Once Molin had dreamed of a laboratory, equipped with the apparatus he loved, where he could follow out his theories. And he had never quite forgotten how to dream. In dreams he could forget what was to happen to the world.

One of the most obvious things that happened was that the world grew dark. Crops were blighted. Wheat and corn failed, and cattle and sheep began to die. Starvation hovered like a chill spectre in the drab twilight of a frozen world. . . .

It is a seemingly unrelated fact that Peter Joslyn's tenth birthday came four months after Molin's delivery of his last lecture. Peter's father, Dr. Howard Joslyn, famous for his quantum experiments, gave the boy a model spaceship.

On one of those ominously dark noons, young Peter was sending the toy whirling around the penthouse, and occasionally the boy glanced aside at the tired white face of his father, and at the man who was with him.

"I knew you'd come," Joslyn was saying, his grim features softening briefly as he put his hand on Max Molin's arm. "An hour—that was quick."

"Stratosphere ships are fast," Molin grunted. "Why send for me, though? Other men are more capable—"

"Better known, maybe—but I remember those theories you had when I knew you in Vienna. Our work has been along similar lines, and I need someone who can understand quickly. Most of the governments have given their approval to my plan—"

Max suddenly glanced down at a package under his arm. He swung about, bellowed at the boy.

"Here, you monkey—catch!" He flung the parcel, and Peter caught it deftly. Eagerly he unwrapped a transparent sphere, a suit of shimmering silver fabric. It was an imitation spacesuit, and Peter's eyes lighted up with pleasure.

"Thanks a lot!"

"Come along, Max," Joslyn said. "You need some beer. I haven't forgotten your liking for it."

"Yes, yes," Molin rumbled, following the other. "But this work of yours, Howard—you wired me you had a cure for the solar blanket?"

He took the foaming glass Joslyn handed him.

"Right, Max. Although my theory upsets a rather well known law. The conservation of energy—"

Molin blew foam from his lips.

"So! Those foolish dreams we had in Vienna have materialized, eh?"

"They weren't so foolish. Not after I carried them out to the logical conclusion. The secret's in potential energy. You know the rule—'total amount of work done on all parts of a system equals the total sum of the kinetic and potential energies of all its parts.' In other words, you can't get more energy out of something than you've put into it."

"Well?"

"It's common knowledge that electrons can be thrown from their normal orbits by external stimulus—temperature change, for example. And when an electron automatically returns to an orbit of lower energy, we get a quantum, a radiation that shows the energy-change that has taken place. In the quantum I've found the key."

Molin gulped the rest of his beer, poured more. His sharp eyes watched Joslyn unblinkingly.

“The Universe is gradually running down, Max, losing its energy. We know that; we take it for granted. Sub-atomic energy is released and converted—scattered, because it can’t be lost—changed to light and heat and so on. Well, my theory is simply this: a certain type of artificially-created atom can release more energy than it apparently possesses!”

The Swiss whistled softly.

“It’s crazy, Howard—you know that. Any scientist in the world would laugh at you. I’d laugh myself, except that my early experiments pointed in the same direction, to the fact that there’s some secret reservoir of power in the atom—in the nucleus, maybe, or even the quanta. But it’s unbelievable.”

“I’ve proved my case on paper.”

“So. But didn’t you find an x somewhere—an unknown factor?”

“Yes,” Joslyn said, and his gaunt face was puzzled. “Something I can’t explain, that crept into my figures somehow. But it has no effect on the calculations. I know they’re accurate.”

“Have you more beer? It helps me think. . . . Thanks. Well, if you can do this impossible thing—what then?”

“This ‘reverse atom’ of mine can reverse atoms surrounding it, just as a grain of gunpowder sets off other grains. My plan is to create such a thing and send it by spaceship into the Sun, where it will transmute the Sun’s atoms into ones similar to itself.”

“And if you do that, won’t the increased radiation kill everything on Earth?”

“Curiously enough, no. The damping blanket the comet left will be destroyed, and a tremendous amount of energy will be liberated, but chiefly in harmless etheric waves. Max!”—Joslyn’s voice was suddenly tense—“I’ve got to take the chance! It’s our only one. There may be holes in my figures, but I’ve checked and re-checked and the results seem sound and safe. If the governments are satisfied, that’s enough, isn’t it?”

“At worst, it’s a quick death,” Molin grunted, with a glance at the door. “You’re thinking of your son.”

“And of the human race,” Joslyn amended. “Unless we can destroy the solar blanket, Earth’s doomed. In a few generations our power will give out, we’ll regress and become savages. All the culture and science of civilization will die. . . .”

“I’m with you,” Molin rumbled, “on one condition. I cannot work when I’m thirsty. There must be plenty of beer.”

Four more months passed. A spaceship, the *Newtonia*, rested at the Washington. D. C., spaceport, ready to take off. Terry Webb, its pilot, couldn’t help getting a queer, tight feeling in his throat as he swung through the circular doorway. This wasn’t his first cruise beyond the atmosphere. Despite his youth, Webb was an experienced pilot, or he’d never have been chosen for this job. Special motors had been installed in the ship, engines that would pour a flood of power into the gravity plates—enough power to enable the *Newtonia* to pull free from the Sun’s grip. For Webb’s orders were to take his craft inside the orbit of Mercury, closer to the Sun than was really safe.

The youngster shrugged broad shoulders as he glanced around the little control room, checking his instruments. He shivered in the icy wind that knifed from outside. In ordinary times a huge crowd would have been at the spaceport, but only a few hardy souls had ventured out into the fringed November afternoon.

Webb ran tanned fingers through a mop of tousled yellow hair and reached for a cigarette. After the ship was sealed he could do little smoking, for the air supply wasn't inexhaustible. Now, glancing up, he saw Joe McGowan, the telecaster, hurrying toward him, chewing on an incredibly long and black cigar.

McGowan, one of the shrewdest newshounds on Globe Press' payroll, was short and dark, with a round pudgy face and squinting pale eyes.

"All ready, Terry?" he asked excitedly.

"Yeah," Webb said. "Molin and Joslyn are in their lab." He pressed a button that closed the port. McGowan straddled a chair, flipped a microphone into his hand, and chattered:

"Just about to take off, folks! You've already seen Dr. Joslyn and Max Molin on your television screens, as well as Terry Webb, our pilot. This is my last direct broadcast. After we head Sunward I'll keep sending, but radio waves can't get through the Heaviside layer, you know. Globe Press has three ships stationed beyond the layer, transmitting my messages by visual signals down to the observatories closest to them. This is remote control with a vengeance! Here it comes!"

Webb fingered the switchboard. With no sense of motion, the *Newtonia* floated up as power raced through the gravity plates. It was difficult to judge the force of the compensating gravity field necessary within the ship, and so for a moment the passengers were weightless, till Webb's experienced fingers adjusted matters.

"All power's on, folks," McGowan yelled, his unlighted cigar dancing. "We're driving right at the Sun. Won't be long before we get close enough for the big experiment. Considering the distance—it isn't a five minute walk, you know."

Over sixty million miles! Webb chuckled; despite the tremendous acceleration the gravity plates supplied, it would be a fairly long trip. But already they were far beyond Earth's atmosphere. He sobered suddenly as he remembered the possibility of failure. Joslyn had been explicit on that point. And Webb didn't want to die just yet, for he was to be married in two months. But no pilot on Earth would have turned down the chance to command the *Newtonia*.

On Earth a few days later, in Joslyn's penthouse apartment, Peter squatted by the television. Lounging in a nearby chair was Mahaffey, Joslyn's chauffeur, who was utterly devoted to his employer and his employer's son. From the television came the announcer's voice, relaying McGowan's messages.

"We're swinging around the Sun, in an orbit well inside Mercury. The experiment's coming along fine. Joslyn's reverse atom is due to hit the Sun any minute now. As I said, it was released just before the process was complete—the whole auxiliary cabin went with it, because we didn't know how fast the reversal process might spread. Terry's an expert pilot. He got rid of the excess baggage at just the right moment. All three men are with me now in the control cabin. Molin has a spectroscope set up. And we're heading back to Earth—wait a minute! The atom should have hit the chromosphere by now."

Peter glanced up at Mahaffey.

"That happened quite a while ago," he observed. "Radio waves travel through space at the rate of—uh—" But his memory failed him at that point, and he turned to the television again. Mahaffey grinned.

Meanwhile, in space, the *Newtonia* gave a lurch. Molin stared in amazement at the spectroscope. He was flung to his knees as gravity was abruptly increased. All four men went down on the cushioned floor.

Terry Webb fought his way back to the instrument board. McGowan, flat on his back, still clutched the microphone and was shouting into it.

The ship began to whirl crazily. Webb battled the controls. He glared unbelievably at his instruments, let out a meaningless shout. Joslyn lurched unsteadily to his side.

"They've gone crazy!" the pilot screamed. There was a grinding bellow rasping through the ship, from what source it was impossible to tell.

Without warning deathly quiet fell. Normal gravity was reestablished. The four men stared at each other.

Molin broke the silence.

"Power," he rumbled shakily. "It caught us—"

"What does it mean?" the telecaster asked. "What happened?"

"It's still happening," Molin said, gesturing toward the instruments. "We thought only the Sun's atoms would be reversed. But the atoms of *space* are being reversed—"

"Space—I thought—a void—" Webb managed to get out.

Joslyn's face was a haggard mask.

"There's about an atom to every square inch of interstellar space," he said, a curious horror in his eyes. "It's spreading, Max! It must be. If the void can't stop the reversal process, it'll spread out through the Solar System—the Galaxy!"

McGowan gripped his arm. "But what'll happen?"

"God knows." The scientist made a futile gesture. "Too much energy—it may do anything, released like this. It may warp the framework of space itself."

"Listen," Webb said sharply. "You mean it'll cause trouble on Earth?" He was thinking of a girl in Washington—a girl he was going to marry.

"It may wreck Earth," Molin rumbled.

"Eh?" McGowan's eyes widened. "Listen, I've got a wife in Hollywood—"

"And I've a son in New York," Joslyn said with nervous harshness. "But there's nothing we can do. This energy will keep increasing—created out of nothing—"

The pilot jerked roughly at the controls.

"God Almighty, if anything happens to Stella!"

In the silence Molin spoke.

"I have no family. So I'm not afraid of death."

He was thinking of unleashed energy, an inconceivable Titan, spreading out from the Sun, catching Earth in its grip, flashing out at a speed that traversed light-years with incredible rapidity—pure energy, shaking the foundations of matter, warping and twisting physical laws insanely. . . .

In other places other men were thinking too. In Mount Wilson Observatory for example. A shining dome, built in 1985, perched atop a tall, snow-drifted scaffold of toughened steel. On one side, white mountains; on the other, steep slopes, the cities of Pasadena, Glendale, Los Angeles, and in the far distance the chill blue of the Pacific. Scientists, astronomers, Globe Press men under the great dome, watching for the signals from the ships beyond the stratosphere.

Quite suddenly the observatory was split neatly in half, as though sliced with a giant knife. One half of the huge hemisphere was lifted and hurled violently northward, rocketing through the atmosphere at a speed which instantly melted the snow which capped its top. A minute later the Gargantuan missile was dropped gently on the prairie six hundred miles away,

approximately midway between Lake Tahoe and Reno. The half-observatory, incredibly, seemed undamaged. But every living thing within it had died, as though by a violent electric shock.

Stella Hart, the fiancée of Pilot Terry Webb, was fighting the icy wind that rushed along Pennsylvania Avenue. Washington was buried in snow. The Capitol's dome glistened whitely with it. Stella, a rather pretty girl of twenty, was shivering despite the old furs she hugged to her small figure.

Terry had wanted to buy her a new coat, but she wouldn't let him. They needed all the money they could get to buy that cottage in Maryland. But Terry had said that if he returned safely from this voyage, they'd never have to worry about money any more. He didn't realize, Stella thought, just how much she was worrying about him now.

Televisors everywhere were blaring the latest reports from the *Newtonia*. Her nerves were rasped and raw from the strain. She marched doggedly along the icy street, trying to shut out from her mind the picture of Terry—so close, so terribly close to the Sun.

Gray daylight, and a cold wind blowing. A few hurrying dark figures in the distance, blacker blotches against the drab snow. The whine of an airship flashing invisibly past in the cloud-blanket overhead. And the snow sifting down softly, endlessly. . . .

There was a brittle, curiously penetrating snap, like the sound of a taut violin-string breaking. Simultaneously dozens of small points of fire sprang into existence in empty air, about a hundred yards from Stella. Strangely the snowflakes did not hide them from her. Little glowing specks of flame. They darted about in long, arcing curves, swinging, dancing.

What were they? A moment before they had been living inhabitants of a white dwarf star, the Companion of Sirius. Unleashed energy, warping matter, had crinkled the fabric of space as a sheet of paper is crushed, had scooped up these flaming beings and deposited them neatly on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue. Though they were alive, even the atomic structure of their brains was alien to that of human beings. Their reactions were disastrous.

They may have been puzzled, frightened, angry, or perhaps hungry. They danced among the snowflakes briefly, and then swung in widening spiral orbits, glimmering like tiny stars. Stella, watching them, did not at first realize that she was seeing anything more than an unusual electrical display. She felt a surge of fear only when one of the sparks brushed the stone wall of a building and brought the structure down in quick ruin.

How could this happen? Simple. The Companion of Sirius is of tremendous density. Living beings existing on the white dwarf's surface must be similarly compact in atomic structure. As a man's finger brings down a house of cards, so the touch of the glowing star-point brought a ten-story office building crashing in destruction, collapsing upon itself, with a great, earth-shaking roar that drowned the victims' screams. The concussion knocked Stella down. She scrambled to her feet, the sleazy fur wrapped around her face, momentarily blinding her. She tore it free.

A cloud of dust was still billowing up, meeting the sliding rush of the snowflakes, luridly brightened by the streaking orbits of the stars as they raced faster and faster. Blocks and fragments of stone lay all around Stella, but, save for a shallow cut on one arm, she was miraculously unhurt. With panic tearing at her throat she turned, slipped, and went down in the slush. Quick footsteps sounded.

A man gripped her arm, jerking her roughly to her feet. Half dragging her, he rushed away from the scene of destruction. Now that the noise of the collapsed building had died, Washington was strangely silent.

Their breaths whooping, their throats raw, the two paused, looking back. Only a faint glow shone through the flickering veil the snow made. Stella glanced aside, saw that her rescuer was a short, pudgy man, with fogged gold-rimmed glasses and a bald spot that was speedily capped by snow.

From the distance came a crashing bellow of grinding masonry.

“War,” the little man said vaguely. “Some new kind of bomb. I don’t know—” Then his nostrils flared; there was sweat on his pink brow. “We’ve got to get out—eh? My wife and kids—they’re in New York—”

Stella could not speak. Shuddering with cold and fear, she ran with her companion along Pennsylvania Avenue, goaded by the slow crescendo of sound that was rising to a world-shaking symphony of fear from doomed Washington.

“Where? Where can we—” she managed to gasp.

“My helicopter!”

They reached the landing platform, not yet crowded with the refugees who would soon arrive. Stella had no relatives in Washington. She could not yet understand the full extent of the catastrophe, and she crouched in the cabin, watching her rescuer silently as he nervously worked the controls. The door was opened, and a man’s unshaven face was thrust in. He cried something unintelligibly, and, despite the pilot’s remonstrance, pushed into the cabin a squat, dumpy woman carrying a child in her arms.

“You take her, eh, meester? Maria—”

“Ramon!” The woman tried to pull him in. “You come too!”

“No—I mus’ get my father—I fin’ you after, Maria. An’ the *muchacha*—”

A mob was pouring out on the platform. The helicopter drifted up. Below them a man stood waving, tears on his grimy, stubbled cheeks.

“*Vaya con Dios!*”

Stella, looking from the window, saw the platform suddenly split across the middle. The man was flung, a small black figure, into blinding clouds of chaos; flaming star-specks whirled into view. Thunder of ruin bellowed up. . . .

The pilot desperately battled air-currents. The squat Mexican woman screamed, huddled low, hugging her child till it began to cry with fright and pain.

“Carmelita—*muchacha*—*ohé, ohé!*” the woman sobbed.

Stella shivered, trying to understand what had happened, battling the cold, dark fear that was overwhelming her. *Terry . . . Terry! Will I see you again? We can’t die now, either of us. We’ve got to live. That cottage in Maryland. . . . God, God be merciful! Terry!*

THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD, said the sign at the end of Virginia Street, Reno. The city hadn’t changed much in a hundred years. The state capitol had been moved here from Carson City; bars and gambling establishments still thrived. So did Reno’s most famous trade—divorces.

Iola McGowan, wife of the telecaster, had taken advantage of his absence to go to Reno and start divorce proceedings. She was an artificially luscious blonde, and she had been married to McGowan, her fourth husband, for almost a year. She felt she was getting in a rut.

So Iola, after an unpleasantly early visit to the courthouse, demolished a lamb chop and went for a stroll along Virginia Street, wondering how to pass the time. The man she had chosen as her next husband had been unfortunately detained in Hollywood working on a picture for Summit Studios, and so she was alone. Casting a glance at the snow-capped mountains to the west, she hastily turned into a comfortably warm establishment where the busy clicking of a Wheel of Fortune immediately intrigued her.

Even at that hour inveterate gamblers were busy, though the tourist trade wasn't due till evening. Iola found a seat next to a lean, good-looking fellow who was playing with a reckless disregard for consequences. He glanced at her with sleepy, appraising eyes as she placed a bet.

Maybe Reno wouldn't be so dull after all, Iola thought. The man was quite handsome.

"Place your bets," the attendant called. "All in—here she goes. . . ."

There was a faint snapping sound, strangely piercing. To an observer in an airplane, Reno would have looked exactly the same a half minute later. But actually it was considerably changed. Everybody had suffered. As a result of the tremendous energy that had been released, most of the inhabitants lived in a few seconds the span of decades. They grew old.

But on some of them the process was reversed. They got young. Automobiles crashed against lamp posts and into store-fronts, driven by wrinkled, toothless oldsters. The Governor, who happened to be in his office at the capitol building, was abruptly reduced from a florid, portly man of sixty to a small, chubby child who ignored a visiting committee of ranchers to play with the fountain pen he had been using. The ranchers had their own troubles, however; they had become at least octogenarians, and four of them suddenly died of old age.

Iola was changing her mind about her neighbor's good looks. His face was too lean—why, it even had wrinkles in it. For heaven's sake! His face looked like a skull with withered parchment stretched over the bones, and a straggling white beard dangled almost to his lap. But she couldn't see him clearly. What was the matter? She lifted a trembling hand to rub her blurry eyes, and paused, transfixed, by the sight of the incredible claw attached to her arm. She screamed in a cracked voice. . . .

Then she caught sight of her face in a nearby mirror, and mercifully fainted.

In Joslyn's penthouse, Mahaffey was fixing himself a Scotch and soda, listening to the televisior voice from the next room where Peter was. The kid was growing, Mahaffey thought. He could remember when young Pete was about knee-high to a grasshopper. Well, if he grew up like his old man it'd be okay. A swell guy, the doc.

A faint snapping noise sounded.

Peter called out, a note of panic in his voice: "Mahaffey! There's something—"

The chauffeur put his glass down and was through the doorway in a split second. His eyes bulged. The room had gone crazy!

It looked familiar enough—same chairs and tables, bookshelves and televisior—till you got to the end. But instead of the further wall there was only—something else! Mahaffey shook his head, blinking. His eyes hurt. Angles here—crazy looking colors—

Dr. Joslyn might have guessed that some utterly alien segment of the Universe had impinged here at the moment the energy had been released. But Mahaffey could only stare, sensing somehow that he looked on something very horrible—and very dangerous. A blaze of incredible colors that hurt the eye, angles and curves that were warped and twisted insanely—

He made a quick dash and scooped up Peter, who was standing by the televisior, paralyzed with uncomprehending fright. Turning to escape, Mahaffey sensed danger. He whirled.

Something was coming toward him, tacking and veering in mad flight, racing out from that crazy blaze of colors. A gray, leathery thing it was, and Mahaffey was perturbed because he couldn't manage to focus it in his vision. Its outlines kept shifting. One moment it was big as a man; the next it was a speck; and then it was in the penthouse.

Mahaffey raced for the desk, snatched a gun out of a drawer. The thing, whatever it was, seemed to be coming forward, though he couldn't really be sure. Everything had gone crazy. He couldn't see clearly enough to aim. But he fired.

Something hit him, sent him spinning in one direction while Peter hurtled across the room to crash into a chair. Mahaffey felt a sickening pain knife into his chest. A rib's busted, he thought. Maybe more than one. Was the kid okay? Yeah, he was moving. His arm, though—broke. Well, that wouldn't kill him. *Look out, kid!*

Gray leathery flesh moved swiftly toward the boy. Mahaffey got to his feet, sprang across the room. He grappled with the thing. Sickening, abysmal pain lanced through every part of him. The creature had hold, seemed to be wrapping itself all around him. The touch of its flesh burned like acid. The gun—

He emptied the weapon at point-blank range. An endless, brain-piercing shrilling screamed out. And, quite suddenly, the leathery thing was gone; the wall of the room was back again, and everything was normal. There was a yellowish, musky smelling liquid on the rug, but this was already evaporating. Peter was lying still, but he was breathing, Mahaffey saw. Tough little sprout; all kids were. *I'm dying*, Mahaffey thought. *That thing's killed me. What the hell was it, anyway? Doesn't matter . . . it's gone now . . . so this is dying. Funny I'm not scared. No worse than a knockout punch.*

So long, kid. See you again sometime, maybe . . . maybe . . . wish I could say goodbye to your old man before I croak. . . . So long—

DANGER OVER, JOSLYN SAYS—SCIENTIST RETURNS, DECLARES ENERGY EXHAUSTED

NEW YORK. Feb. 2—(GP)—Dr. Howard Joslyn today said no further danger from his so-called “reverse atom” exists, for his instruments show that the surplus of released energy has been dissipated. Since the destruction of Cleveland last night there have been no reports of similar catastrophes, and it is hoped that Dr. Joslyn's statement will be confirmed. The mysterious lights that razed Washington are said to have disappeared. . . .

SUN SAVED! RESUMES FORMER BRIGHTNESS Joslyn's Experiment Successful

NEW YORK. Feb. 3—(GP)—The atomic blanket that smothered the Sun for so many months has been destroyed, Dr. Howard Joslyn declared today, by the energy his famous “reverse atom” released. The delicate balance necessary to maintain the comet's matter on the Sun's surface has been upset, and a hitherto unknown type of ionization has shattered the atomic nuclei of the radiation-smothering blanket. Scientists predict startling discoveries dealing with new properties of matter given immense energy-charges. . . .

Spring came again to the Earth. Blighted crops began to yield. Sheep and cattle thrived again under the vital radiation of a newborn Sun. The snow that had covered nearly all the world melted and was forgotten. And Joslyn and Molin worked again in the former's laboratory, helping to repair the damage the experiment had done.

Joslyn came in one day smiling.

"Remember Terry Webb?" he asked. "Our pilot on the *Newtonia*? Well, he's getting married. I just got a telegram from him. We're invited."

"Bah!" Molin rumbled. "We have no time. Send him my condolences, the young fool. Why should he get married? He's a hero now—everybody giving him medals and money."

The Swiss pointed at a dozen sheets of calculations on the table.

"But look, Howard—I have found the answer. The unknown quantity in our calculations. It explains your reverse atom very simply."

"What?" Joslyn hurried forward, snatched up the papers. "You've found the missing factor?" His keen eyes searched the calculations.

"Sure. Your figures were right, but your reasons weren't. You got energy, plenty of it—but how?"

"By creating a reverse atom," Joslyn said slowly. "One that released more energy than it apparently possessed."

Molin roared assent.

"So! But we did not look far enough. It does not make sense, Howard—we should have known two apples and two apples don't make five apples. If they do, the extra apple must come from somewhere. And all this energy we got out of nothing—it, too, came from somewhere."

"From the atoms."

"Not *from* them—*through* them. You didn't create energy out of nothing; what you did was to tap a reservoir of power. It got you the correct results, but the origin of this power—we both guessed wrong about that. We must have siphoned energy, so to speak, into the atoms of our Universe, from some reservoir of power."

"Perhaps you *have* hit it," Joslyn said excitedly. "Of course! But this reservoir—"

"Is another continuum. Another Universe, one separated from us perhaps by space and time, filled with potential and kinetic energy as our own Universe is so filled. You simply bridged the gulf between the two continua with your reverse atom, Howard, and siphoned energy to us from this other Universe—emptied it, drained it dry."

"But look here, Max," Joslyn frowned. "You say the known scientific laws weren't violated. Where has this excess energy gone? If it's been destroyed—that's impossible, you know."

"Not destroyed—converted. It hasn't gone into nothingness. It was utilized in warping and twisting the foundations of the Universe as it did. It was converted, scattered all through our continuum, changed to light, heat, maybe matter. We have far more potential energy than we had before, and the Universe will last longer. It's been rejuvenated."

Joslyn nodded, a little sadly.

"Converted energy—you're right, Max. Changed, like so many lives have been changed and destroyed by our experiment. Mahaffey . . ."

But Mahaffey was beyond pain and fear, separated from them by six feet of earth. There were flowers by the grave, some of them put there by Peter.

So many lives . . . changed . . .

A squat Mexican woman searching in the ruins of Washington, her stolid face betrayed by the eternal sorrow of her eyes. . . . Two happy lovers in a Maryland cottage, already forgetting the terror they had known. . . . A woman in Reno, gasping bitter, dry sobs, staring at a mirror and a ravaged shrunken mask. . . . Joe McGowan, the telecaster, getting a divorce and going to Hawaii on his honeymoon with a famous actress. . . .

The world moved on. . . .

[The end of *Reverse Atom* by Henry Kuttner]