

ADVENTURES OF FUTURE SCIENCE

May

HUGO GERNSBACH  
Editor

# WONDER Stories



VISITORS FROM MLOK //

by Clark Ashton Smith



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*Title:* The Third Vibrator

*Date of first publication:* 1933

*Author:* John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris) (1903-1969)

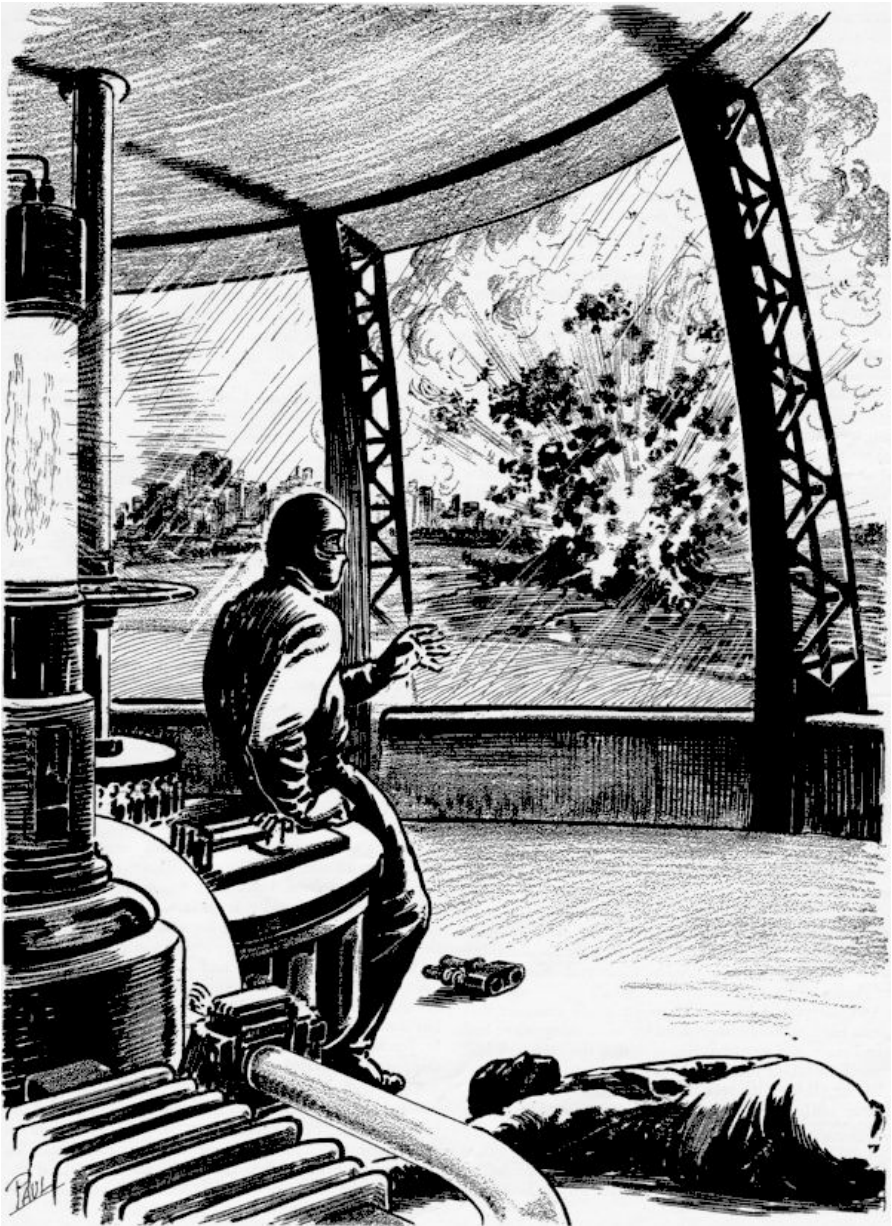
*Date first posted:* Nov. 8, 2021

*Date last updated:* Nov. 8, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211115

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*(Illustration by Paul)*

**Miles away the ground split from a center in radiating crevasses. I saw men far beyond it halt in dismay and turn back. A violent shaking of the ground sent me to the floor.**

# THE THIRD VIBRATOR

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

First published *Wonder Stories*, May 1933.

*Empires have risen and fallen; and behind their fates often stand the grim shadows of warlike men who used them as pawns in their ambitions.*

*International war is today facing every large nation and war offices delve feverishly into their archives for new war weapons with which to make an easy conquest of their enemies.*

*Yet we know that a weapon of destruction might become as great a terror to those who use it, as to those whom it is used against. But war-mad men will not listen to this argument; they must be shown. How this can be done, Mr. Harris illustrates in this short but intensely interesting story of three catastrophic wars.*

Diana French followed a uniformed attendant across a well-kept lawn. Her manner was a blend of eagerness and reluctance, the former but little stronger than the temptation to retreat. The attendant stopped beside a clump of bushes. He pointed ahead.

“Mr. Hixton is over there, madam.”

Diana braced herself and walked with slow deliberation towards a grey-suited figure sagging in a garden chair. She could see that he was lost in reverie, his hands hanging listlessly, his eyes fixed sightlessly on the trees before him.

What twisted thoughts, she wondered, were playing in his brain? A spasm of panic made her falter. Suppose he were dangerous? Overwork, they had told her—overwork was not the kind of madness which made people dangerous. She pulled herself together again. There could be no danger or they would not let her see him alone. She walked on with a firmer step. Three feet behind his chair she stopped and spoke.

“David.”

It was little more than a whisper, but the man stiffened and turned.

“Diana!” he cried. He rose and took a step towards her, stretching out both hands. She advanced and took them in hers while she searched his face. She had not known what to expect save that he would seem different; but, except for lines of worry, he did not. Her eyes looked deep into his, searching the mind behind them, looking for evidence of what they had told her about him. But there was nothing alien, nothing to show a disordered mind. Her unconscious stiffness relaxed. She came closer and put her arms about his neck.

She tried to speak and failed. The tears she had restrained flooded out.

“They told me,” she said later. “They told me that you—that you—”

“That I was mad?”

She nodded. “That’s what they meant me to think. They said that you had collapsed—had a breakdown through overwork. One of your assistants had found you smashing up your workshop with a sledgehammer, and they’d had to—send you here.”

“Yes, that’s true—but, unfortunately, I had hardly begun to smash things.”

“You—?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t madness, my dear. It was a blinding flash of sanity. Another minute and I’d have finished it.”

“Finished what?”

“Smashing that vibrator. Crushing it into little bits beyond all hope of reconstruction. Alan was too quick. I don’t blame him for stopping me. He didn’t know—it must have looked like madness.”

“But, David, why? Why, after all the years of work, should you want to smash it?”

“Because I suddenly knew that if I didn’t smash it, it would smash us.”

“Explain, David. I don’t understand. I know the vibrator was a weapon, but—”

“Weapon, my dear? Would you call a volcano, an earthquake or a hurricane, a weapon? The vibrator is more than all of these. Its power is unthinkable. It may mean the end of everything, and I—I have let it loose upon the Earth for the third time.”

A worried, doubtful look crept into Diana’s eyes. She rested a hand on his sleeve, and gazed closely at him.

“Darling, you must explain—I think you owe it to me. Why did you suddenly want to break up the work of years—an invention which put you at the head of your profession? And what do you mean by ‘the third time’?”

He looked at her for some moments without speaking. At last he came to a decision.

“I’ll tell you. I haven’t told anyone else yet—they’d take it as a part of my ‘madness’.”

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It was a week ago today, he began. Old Fosdyke was making a speech of thanks on behalf of the War Department. It was not an official affair. There were only seven of us round the table, but still it was not entirely informal.

Fosdyke was rolling out phrases in that admirable way of his when the feeling suddenly came over me that I had heard it all before. You know that sensation of unplaceable familiarity, everybody knows it. You come suddenly upon a situation or even a view which you seem to have seen somewhere, somehow, in the past. The psychologists have an explanation, of course—they always have. But this time the sensation I felt was stronger than ever before.

“This is more than a mere weapon,” Fosdyke was saying. “It is no adaptation, no improvement of existing methods. It is a breakaway. It is the dream of the scientists come true—it is the death ray.” He paused.

“And yet,” he added, “even as the airplane when it came was unlike the early dreams of flying machines, so Mr. Hixton’s vibrator is unlike what we expected. In our more fanciful moments we pictured, if we gave it any thought at all, something akin to an enormous searchlight sweeping like a vast scythe in a destructive arc. Mr. Hixton’s invention is, it is true, a directable force, but it is an invisible stream of vibrations which disrupts the ordered vibrations of matter and produces complete disorganization. Without doubt the potentialities of the discovery are greater than we can now conceive. But I tell you now that Mr. Hixton has achieved what no man in the history of the world has accomplished before. He has ended war

...  
“With a weapon such as this, war will be impossible. Its colossal power will make a mockery of all our present arms. From this day no nation will dare to make use of force . . .”

I heard Fosdyke’s voice booming on, but it seemed to be coming from further away. My eyelids became unaccountably heavy. Not with normal sleepiness, but rather as though a

weight were pressing them down. I struggled against the sensation as one does against an anaesthetic—and to as little purpose. Fossdyke's booming receded further and further as my lids dropped lower. By the time they were shut, I seemed to be alone. All external sounds had ceased. I felt that there was nothing about me but a dark, silent void through which I was falling, falling.

How long that sensation continued, I cannot say. There was no means of measuring. I only know that it ended as inexplicably as it had begun. I was aware again of a voice:

“—And thus the supremacy of our country was made absolute. While we have this weapon no race on earth can face us.”

I opened my eyes in bewilderment. The voice was not Fossdyke's; the language it spoke was not English, yet I understood it. I saw a large hall. I was seated on the foremost of a series of semi-circular benches all of which were crowded with men and women dressed in gleaming material not unlike silk. Before us, on a throne-like, high-backed chair sat the speaker.

I was bemused for no more than a few seconds. The memory of Fossdyke began to fade away. I was no longer David Hixton of the twentieth century. I was Kis-Tan, citizen of the mighty empire of Lemuria. The tall, serious faced speaker whom I knew now for Alhui, chief councillor of the empire, continued:

“But it is a two-edged weapon as it exists at present. Therefore I must lay before you a two-fold proposal. First, that all vibrators at present in existence shall be destroyed forthwith. And, second, that Kis-Tan shall be granted funds to begin experiments with a view to finding a new type of vibrator, far less drastic in its operation. If, and when, this is accomplished, the new machines shall be retained within Lemuria where they shall be used only in the event of a dire crisis, and then with the utmost circumspection.”

### The First Destruction

A murmur of dissent rose from the two hundred or so persons on the benches. Lemuria, already powerful had been made invincible by the vibrator. To attempt its suppression was, to most minds, like flying in the face of the Sun. The gift of Ra to his chosen people could not thus be spurned. A number of heads was turned in my direction to see how I would take this proposal against my invention. I did my best to make my expression unreadable. Alhui gazed on us calmly, measuring the temper of the council. At length his eyes came to rest upon me.

“I call first upon Kis-Tan to give evidence,” he said.

I rose and bowed to the golden image of the Sun which blazed on the wall behind him.

“In the sight of Ra, I speak truth,” I said.

“Tell us,” commanded Alhui, “of the trial of your vibrator.”

I turned to face the council, and addressed them.

“When the first vibrator was constructed, I was working to a great extent in the dark. I knew that it was immensely powerful, but I was unable to measure that power. The council, as you will remember, stipulated that the trial of my machine must take place outside the confines of the Lemurian Empire.

“My assistants and I understood and approved of this caution. We travelled a great distance to the southwest until we came upon a sparsely populated country, several thousands of miles from here. The location appeared to be ideal for our purpose. The few men we saw were blacks of a very backward type, and the animals also were primitive, being for the most

part marsupials. We decided that any damage we might do would matter but little in such a country. Accordingly we set up the vibrator in an immense plain.

“After we had put on our protective clothing, I myself, threw over the switch.

“The result surpassed even my expectations. There was no visible emanation, no ray, nor was there any sound: nothing to show that there was now in action a vibration which could throw out of phase that other vibration which we call ‘life’. The grass, the leaves, even the trees themselves seemed to wither while we watched. Every animal died where it stood. Every insect dropped. We were all overawed—perhaps a little afraid . . .

“Soon, however, our enthusiasm reasserted itself. We conducted a number of tests to prove range, directability, etc., and then moved on to fresh ground for further tests.”

As I paused Alhui asked:

“You have seen those experimental grounds since then?”

“I have.”

“Tell the council of their condition.”

“They were barren. There was nothing but lifeless desert sand.”

I sat down and there arose a murmur which Alhui quickly quelled.

“I call upon Aphrus, missionary of Ra, in the land of Aegypt.”

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A tall, shaven-headed man, wearing a robe much worked with gold thread arose, saluted the sign of Ra, and began to speak in a powerful, resonant voice.

“In Aegypt, where the people are being weaned from dark superstition and shown the glory of Ra, the Lord of Life, we, priests and converts, worked amid great dangers. When we heard of the vibrator we petitioned that one should be sent us for our protection. We were doing all in our power to ensure peace, but we must be prepared for war.

“The inevitable day came when the heathen essayed to contest the mightiness of Ra. From the south and the west, black men and brown, they marched upon us. We sent messengers to warn them that we were invincible. They killed our messengers. In their hundreds and thousands they advanced—we had no choice but to use the vibrator.

“As the switch was pulled over they dropped in their legions. In men and horses alike that vibration which we call life, given of Ra, was quenched. The very trees and flowers drooped and died. The heathen covered the ground with their innumerable bodies.

“Ra blazed down in great anger on their corpses, and they were corrupted. But Ra was displeased also with his servants. From the field a stench arose and floated over all Aegypt, and with it came plague . . .

“Out of every four men, three died. When it became safe, we went out to see the battlefield. It had been a fruitful, pleasant land. Now we found it scorched and sandy beneath the pitiless eye of Ra—an arid desert.”

He finished and walked back to his seat. Calmly Alhui called the next witness.

“Yoshin, of the Temple of Knowledge.”

Yoshin stood up. He was a bent, bearded man of great age and spoke in a voice scarcely audible.

“In our mountain fastnesses we have for centuries pursued pure knowledge. We have been but little molested for we have not the things which most men value. But more lately we have been disturbed. The brown men to the southwest caused us no anxiety for they are content to stay behind the mountain barriers, but the yellow race of slant-eyed men to the east and north-east became dangerous. Lemuria provided us with vibrators. Many of our members reverted

temporarily to a state of less enlightenment. They grew vengeful and pursued our attackers far to the north-east. As a monument to their folly and their madness there is now a great desert beyond our northern mountains.”

The next witness was called. He wore a military uniform, and his speech was brief and concise.

“To protect the communications on the west between ourselves and the new colony of Atlantis, I was given a vibrator. In repulsing continual attacks by red-skinned men from the north, several deserts have been created.”

He retired and Alhui called another witness, and then another. Endlessly it seemed to go on, this tale of deserts large and small created by my machine. And as the recital continued, the temper of the council changed. At last Alhui disposed of the final witness and called upon me again.

“You agree with the council’s proposal, Kis-tan?”

“I do.”

“And you will do all in your power to construct a modified form of the vibrator?”

“It may not be possible, but I will do my best.”

There was a break here in my vision, projected memory, or whatever mental process I was undergoing. Some months (I cannot say how many), had passed, and I was in my laboratory with my assistants. We had worked hard, and now fancied we had met with success. A fair trial of the new machine we had produced would have been too dangerous, but for a preliminary test to ensure that the working parts functioned properly, we had constructed a special chamber of stone slabs, lined with insulating material. Into this we moved the machine with infinite care, and together with it we enclosed growing plants and a few small animals.

I pulled over the switch.

We intended to give the equivalent of one minute’s exposure to the vibrations. Half the time had passed when the catastrophe came without warning.

The stone chamber collapsed. Its walls did not merely fall, they seemed to dissolve abruptly into a fine dust. I had a brief glimpse of the machine still standing; then some titanic force gripped and seemed to wrench me apart . . .

### Back to Atlantis

Again that sensation of falling timelessly through a silent, swirling blackness until suddenly I was aware that I stood upon a solid floor.

Before me was a tall window and I looked down through it on a scene of bustling activity. Immediately below ran broad, busy streets and beyond them lay the quaysides of a harbor. Ships were being unloaded there by swarms of hurrying men. Still further off ships with sails of red, purple or russet, looking like huge butterflies, were sliding over a blue sea; homeward bound with a small, joyous white wave curling from the bows. My gaze followed one as it rounded the headland and passed the harbor pylons. I saw the tumult on deck and the lowering of the vivid scarlet sails, embroidered with the golden emblem of Ra. The wealth of the world was pouring into Zapetl, the greatest port in Atlantis.

I knew that I was Xtan, a person of rank, as was shown by the feathered headdress which I now held in the crook of my left arm. A glittering, embroidered tunic clad me to the knees, while from my shoulders hung a cloak of gorgeous featherwork.



Behind me in the silent room stood two guards flanking a pair of doors which led to inner apartments. They were rigid as statues of wood and gold; not a movement, not a creaking of their military harness revealed them for human beings. Even when, with a sudden click, the doors flew wide open, their eyelids did not so much as flicker. Without hesitation I crossed the room, and as I crossed the threshold the doors slid together once more and refastened themselves.

The room I now entered seemed austere to my Atlantean taste. There was comfort in its chairs and couches, but unnecessary decorations had been discarded. There were none of the prized featherwork pictures essential to any house of social standing, nor were the usual intricate screens visible, while the lighting arrangements instead of providing an excuse for an orgy of gold-work were carefully concealed.

I approached the far corner and saluted a figure which sat sunken in a chair.

"You commanded me, Zacta, and I have come," I said.

Zacta raised his white-haired head and searched my face with a troubled look. He was a very old man; so old that none knew his true age. Even the oldest could remember but little change in him, and in the popular mind he was all but immortal. The wisdom which the phenomenal man had amassed his longevity had guided Atlantis through many a crisis until he had come to be regarded as a mixture of oracle and demigod. There was even a growing superstition that when Zacta should die, Atlantis would fall.

"Yes, Xtan, I sent for you," he said, still studying my face. He put up a hand and stroked his beard, pausing so long that I became uneasy. At last he said:

"I have been told that you are experimenting with vibrations—with a view to finding a new weapon. Is this true?"

I nodded. "It is perfectly true—and I have been more successful than I had hoped."

Zacta shook his head slowly. "I have always feared this—that vibration should have remained unknown."

"But you have taught—"

"I have taught you to seek truth, and science is a form of truth. My quarrel is not with your discovery, but with your publication of it. There are some forms of knowledge which it is unwise to spread; men are not yet ready to handle them. They cannot control themselves; how then should they be able to control mighty weapons? This knowledge of yours must be suppressed—it is a danger, not a blessing."

"But—"

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Zacta lifted his hand. "It must be forgotten. I have given the matter my deep consideration and I know that it may be perilous for Atlantis—for the world."

I grew angry. My researches had taken considerable time and money. My invention acclaimed by the military authorities. But if this old dotard were against me, all my work would go for nothing. I knew only too well his power and influence. Scarcely a soul in all Atlantis would dare to disagree with Zacta. It was plain that the old man was losing his grip. Could he not see that my invention meant the dream of ages come true? The mastery of the world.

He saw my rising temper with increasing displeasure.

"You are not even a pioneer," he said coldly. "There was a weapon such as yours in Lemuria."

"I am not interested in mythology," I answered contemptuously.

“Lemuria is no myth. It existed as a great empire, greater than Atlantis is today. It discovered a form of vibrator and though it was wise enough to see the danger, it was not wise enough to suppress the invention entirely. The scientists experimented with a new type. Something went wrong. Matter was disintegrated. The crust of the earth was weakened so that the volcanic fires burst through. The earth cracked open. The whole world shook in great paroxysms, and when all was quiet again Lemuria no longer existed.”

“A legend,” I said. “An exaggerated version of some little local eruption. As for this tale of the great Lemuria—well, it may amuse children as much as any other fantasy.”

Zacta shrugged his shoulders. “Truth is not altered by belief or disbelief. Lemuria, I say, destroyed herself: it shall never be said that Atlantis destroyed herself.”

We looked deep into one another’s eyes, exchanging a challenge.

“You must suppress that knowledge,” he repeated. “Vibrators must not be built.”

I laughed. “Your information is out of date. Six vibrators have already been built and mounted.”

The old man sagged further in his chair. He looked even older; his eyes were tragic as he stared, at last he asked:

“Where are they mounted?”

“They are strung along the east coast from Azco,” I told him. “It is a chain of defense against attack from beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The barbarians in Aegypt and the countries round its sea have become restive. They are jealous of our prosperity, and sooner or later they will attack us. The vibrators will strike their crews and their rowers dead, and not a drop of Atlantean blood will be spilt. Think of that, Zacta, think of that mastery and then you will see what the vibrators really mean to us.”

Zacta answered slowly: “Truly you have limited vision. How long will your machines remain mere defensive weapons? How long will it be before they are carried out into the world to conquer; to spread death, destruction and deserts? No, I say, the vibrators shall be destroyed.”

“And I say they shall not.”

We faced one another tensely. Zacta’s eyes grew hard and menacing. A youthful strength and purpose seemed to shine in them. I knew that he saw Atlantis, perhaps all culture, hanging upon our decision. So did I, but from the opposite angle. His blue veined, fragile hand began to move towards his side.

I was younger and quicker on the draw. There was a faint “phut” from my hand tube. Zacta’s tube clattered on the floor. He fell forward with a little feathered dart in his heart . . .

### The Inventor Berserk

I stood for a moment scarcely conscious of what I had done. And then as I gazed at his slumped form the true enormity of the thing came home to me. I had killed the greatest man in all Atlantis. Yet I was but the instrument of his destruction; the true contest had been between Zacta and my vibrator—and the vibrator had claimed the wisest of men as its first victim. Somehow I began to think of my machine as a sentient creature; I was fighting to protect the thing to which my brain had given birth.

I glanced swiftly round the room. There had not been noise enough to alarm the guards, but they were posted outside the only door. Could I march out trusting to bluff? The risk would be great for I did not know Zacta’s usual method of dismissing his visitors. The

window offered more hope, providing that I was not noticed from the street. I decided that it was safer than an attempt to pass the guards. Impatiently I kicked off my sandals and fastened them to my belt, and then, thankful that Zacta's austere taste had not caused him to remove the decoration from his house front, I grasped the scrolled stonework beside the window and began to climb.

Luckily there was only one floor between me and the roof for though the carving offered easy holds I was in bad form for such exercise, moreover, I was afraid of becoming giddy. It was with intense thankfulness that I at last pulled myself across the coping. There was little time to waste. I had no idea when someone would enter Zacta's room and find the body.

As swiftly as I could I refixed my sandals and looked for the roof door. It was not difficult to find, and luck was with me for it was unlocked. At the top of the stairs I pulled myself together and began to descend with an appearance of unhurried dignity.

In the forecourt my car waited, balancing on its gyroscopes. I approached it unmolested and slid thankfully into the driving seat. The hand which I put out for the steering stick was trembling violently. The gates opened before me and I jerked the machine forward.

So far, so good. But where was I to go? When Zacta's body should be found every man and woman in Atlantis would be against me. Every man . . . ? No, perhaps some of my assistants would understand. The vibrator meant everything to them. They would realize that obedience would have caused all our work of years to go for nothing. Tlantec, my head assistant was near Azco where he had been superintending the erection of the vibrators. A glance at the indicators showed me that the batteries were almost full; there would be more than enough power to take me to Azco. I made to the east side of Zapetl and opened flat out. The little gyro car gave everything she had.

Some hours later I slid to a stop outside the control house on the cliffs above Azco. Over the house towered Number One Pylon, supporting the greatest of the vibrators. Far to the north I could see a similar though smaller pylon, the second of the chain we had erected. Before I could climb out of the car, the door of the house opened. Tlantec, with a dart tube in his hand, stood facing me. I knew that the news had reached him.

"Zacta is dead," he said. "They say you killed him."

I began to explain and Tlantec's eyes grew wide as he listened. When I spoke of Zacta's ban on the vibrators he stared incredulously.

"But why—why?"

I repeated the old man's words and he frowned.

"He must have been mad—the greatest power in all the ages to be thrown away for an old wives' tale."

"—And so," I finished, "It came to that. Nothing would alter Zacta's mind once it was made up. Either he or the vibrator had to be destroyed."

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There was a considerable pause. I waited anxiously for Tlantec's decision for my immediate fate was in his hands. If he should choose to shoot me where I stood, he would be acclaimed a national hero . . .

He lowered the tube slowly, gazed at it in a half absence of mind and then turned his eyes back to me.

"You were right, Xtan," he said, "but I wish there had been some other way."

I nodded. "So do I—but you know Zacta's power. There was no other way."

We walked together into the house. "And now?" he asked.

“We must communicate at once with the other pylons. If necessary the vibrators must fight against their own destruction. As soon as it is known that I am here we shall be attacked.”

Tlantec looked white. “You mean that we must turn the machines to landward—train them on our own people?”

“How else can we protect them?”

He went away to call up the other pylons while I searched for some badly needed food. He was gone perhaps half an hour. When he came back it was with a serious expression.

“Pylons 2, 3 and 5 are agreed to stand with us,” he reported, “but numbers 4 and 6 are opposed. They say that if Zacta condemned vibrators, then vibrators must be destroyed, and they will obey him.”

I thought rapidly. If pylons 4 and 6 were to turn their machines on us it would be the end.

“Quick,” I said, “get the protection suits.”

While I was still struggling into mine Tlantec had fastened his and gone to the window. He called me to him and pointed down to the town. Even at this distance of three miles it was plain that something unusual was taking place. From the city gates a crowd of men and women was hurrying along the road towards us. Either Pylon 4 or Pylon 6 must have informed the town where I was to be found and the crowd was out to avenge Zacta. I hurried to the message machine and made connection with the military barracks in Azco.

“Xtan speaking,” I called. “Head back your people or I will not be responsible for the consequences.”

I crossed to the big control wheel in the middle of the room and spun it. The big vibrator far above swung slowly to face the town. Tlantec was looking very pale.

“But this is only a mob—unarmed,” he protested.

“A mob is capable of destroying the vibrator. They must be stopped. Switch on minimum power.”

He obeyed with reluctance. The crowd was as yet out of range and we watched intently.

A mile and a half away from us they came to a stop. Those in front were behaving queerly. Staggering and moving with queer, twitching, wooden actions. The vibrations at that distance were too weak to kill them, but strong enough to disorganize their movements. Those behind did not understand what was happening and relentlessly pushed forward; several of the leaders dropped and lay still. Those to the rear suddenly realized what they faced. They surged to and fro in panic, then broke and retreated pell mell.

The message machine rang stridently.

“Pylon Number 2 speaking. Have you gone mad, Xtan?”

“The vibrators must be saved—at any cost.”

The reply was bitter. “You have killed a score of unarmed men already, Xtan. We won’t stand for massacring our own countrymen. Get that?”

“But if they get close they’ll wreck us,” I said desperately.

The voice answered with a sneer. “Are you sure it’s not your own skin you’re worrying about? You murdered Zacta. Pylon Number 2 is quitting, and I guess the rest will, too.”

The machine went dead. Tlantec spoke from the window.

“They’re running back into the town.”

Following his words came a whine overhead, followed by a dull, distant boom. We looked at one another. The guns behind Azco had opened up. There was only one way for us to silence them.

“Full power on the vibrator,” I ordered.

Tlantec did not move. He stared at me with a curious intentness.

“We should destroy all Azco.”

“Those guns must be stopped.”

“Every man in the town and for miles around would die. You must be mad. Think of the consequences, man. You’d ruin the country.”

### The Last Destruction

I shrugged my shoulders and walked across to the switchboard. What were a few lives? To me at that moment no price seemed too big to pay for the preservation of the vibrator. But before I could pull over the handle Tlantec was upon me. The force of his attack hurled me to the floor, but he could get no hold upon the cumbersome garments I wore. I wrenched free and rolled to one side, but before I could rise he was on me again, hammering with futile fists against the heavy clothing.

I groped desperately for my dart tube only to remember that it was inside my suit, out of reach. With a heave and a twist I managed to roll uppermost again. Both of us were breathing hard for the suits were weighty. I sought with clumsy gloves for his throat, but when I found it, it was impossible to get a grip. Swiftly I changed my tactics and began to fumble for the fastenings of his suit. The vibrator was still at minimum power and directed towards the town, but here, right below it, there might be sufficient radiation to do the job . . .

He felt my change of plan and knew what I was after. His struggles grew still more desperate, swinging from side to side in an effort to throw me off, and causing my groping hands to slip again and again from the fastener. At last I managed to get a finger through the ring, and at that moment Tlantec put forth his mightiest effort. The heave he gave sent me flying to one side, but my finger remained crooked in the ring, and as I went his suit was ripped wide open. I felt him quiver as the vibrator did its work. He never moved again.

I struggled up, dizzy and panting. Another rumbling boom reached me. How many shots had been fired while we struggled, I could not tell. It was surprising that the pylon had not been hit already. With an effort I lurched across the room and pulled the full power switch.

I let it stay for a minute before I pushed it back into place and crossed to the windows. The sight I encountered shocked even me. As far as I could see the country was devastated. The vibration had withered grass, leaves, bushes and flowers alike. They drooped and sagged where a few minutes ago they had proudly waved. I turned my gaze towards Azco. The city was lifeless; men lay where they had fallen in the streets. The only moving thing was the smoke which still rose from untended fires. On the road in the foreground was a tangle of men and women; a minute ago they had been a crowd in full flight, but none of them would ever run again. In the harbor vessels, still with the wind in their sails sped unguided to ram one another or to crash upon the stone quays. But—and most important to me—the guns had been silenced. The vibrator was safe.

I crossed back to the board and switched it off entirely. There was no longer need even of minimum power. Within miles of me was nothing living.

I went outside and looked up at the great vibrator. My right hand came up in a salute.

“You and I will rule the world,” I told it. Suddenly it all seemed irresistibly funny; I began to laugh and laugh . . .

I stopped laughing as abruptly as I had begun. Why had I been laughing? I did not know and I began to feel soberly frightened. “You must be mad,” Tlantec had said. Had he been

right? Was I going mad? Why, why had I begun to laugh so wildly, senselessly? I went back into the building queerly afraid. I seemed to be two people, one of whom I could not trust, and who might take control at any moment.

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My memory of time is hazy, but I know that it was two or three days later that I saw something moving in the distance. I fetched field glasses and managed to make out a marching column of men advancing from the interior. They wore uniforms, but of no regiment which I knew, moreover they were accompanied by unfamiliar machines. Evidently the attack was beginning. I had expected it. I would let them get a little closer, and then blast them out of existence.

I waited impatiently. I was filled not with the desire to kill, but with the determination to assert the supremacy of my vibrator—the greatest power in the world, the triumph of man’s genius.

“At ten miles,” I said aloud, “you shall conquer them.”

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But the marchers were still twelve miles away when my patience gave out. They seemed to be in no hurry to attack. Once more I laid my hand on the power switch.

“Now show them who is master,” I cried as I pulled it over.

I took but one glance before the field glasses dropped to the floor. The advance had not stopped. The men were plodding on as deliberately as before. A hurried glance at the dials assured me that the machine was working perfectly. What, then, could have happened?

Suddenly I had it. Those unfamiliar uniforms were insulating suits. One of the other pylon commanders had given away the secret. The vibrator was straight upon them. How long, I wondered, would the suits withstand its full force? I, myself, was only assailed by reflected vibrations, and safe enough. All I could do was to keep the machine full on and trust to time.

Half an hour later they were still advancing. I began to lose hope. For all appearances the vibrator might as well have been inactive. I smiled rather bitterly when I recalled that the longest time we had dared to run even a small vibrator in our tests had been two minutes. We had not known what we had feared, but we had feared something.

Suddenly, that something began to happen.

Five miles away the ground split from a center in radiating crevasses. A large circle crumbled away to dust before my eyes, leaving a vast, shallow bowl. But the bowl did not remain shallow; its bottom continued to crumble and to sink. I saw the men far beyond it halt in dismay and turn back, hurrying as best they could in their heavy clothing.

A violent shaking of the ground sent me to the floor. The pylon above rocked and groaned, but it did not fall. I crawled across the room and threw out the vibrator’s switch, but as I did it, I knew it was too late. Zacta had been right. My vibrator was bigger than I knew; it could not only take life, but by prolonged exposure it could disintegrate matter. The shallow bowl had now become a stupendous shaft. The internal pressures were shifting. Another shock set the whole room shivering. I staggered back to the window. The ground had heaved and was cracked in all directions. What had I done? What had I started? A cataclysm which would shake the world: which might destroy all Atlantis.

A still greater shock made me clutch the window frame. The mighty cliffs to the north had split asunder; up the cleft the sea was roaring in one stupendous wave. From inland came a spurt of livid flame, searing the heavens. The internal fires were loosed.

David Hixton paused and then he added: “The next thing I heard was old Fossdyke’s voice. It was still booming away about ‘this weapon which will give us the mastery of the world.’ I could not stand it. I got up and ran from the room.

“I did not stop running until I had reached my workroom, for there was only one thought in my mind. I must smash the vibrator . . .

“Kis-Tan had let it loose on Lemuria. Where is Lemuria? Xtan had let it loose on Atlantis. Where is Atlantis? No one should say that Hixton had loosed it again.

“I went at it with a sledge hammer, but Alan heard me and came in too soon. And now they’ve got it. In ten years or less every man will be reviling my name—every man, that is, who is still left alive.”

Diana put a hand over his.

“My dear, they have not got it all. Only part of it. You smashed some important piece—I don’t know what piece, nor do they. They can’t make it work.”

David looked up at her, half-comprehending.

“They can’t—?”

“No, dear, it’s useless. None of your assistants knows enough to help them.”

David’s eyes brightened, his face twisted. He began to laugh and the tears trickled down his cheeks. Diana stared while the laughter grew wilder and louder. Aghast, she tried to silence him, but the laughter and the sobbing both increased. Two attendants came hurrying across the lawn. One of them attempted to sooth David from his paroxysm. The other took her away.

“You’ve let him excite himself too much,” he said, accusingly.

“But he isn’t mad,” said Diana. “Not really mad.”

The attendant listened for a moment to the hysterical laughter behind him. He shook his head.

“Well, that all depends on what you call madness,” he said.

THE END

[The end of *The Third Vibrator* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]