

JULY

FUTURE FICTION

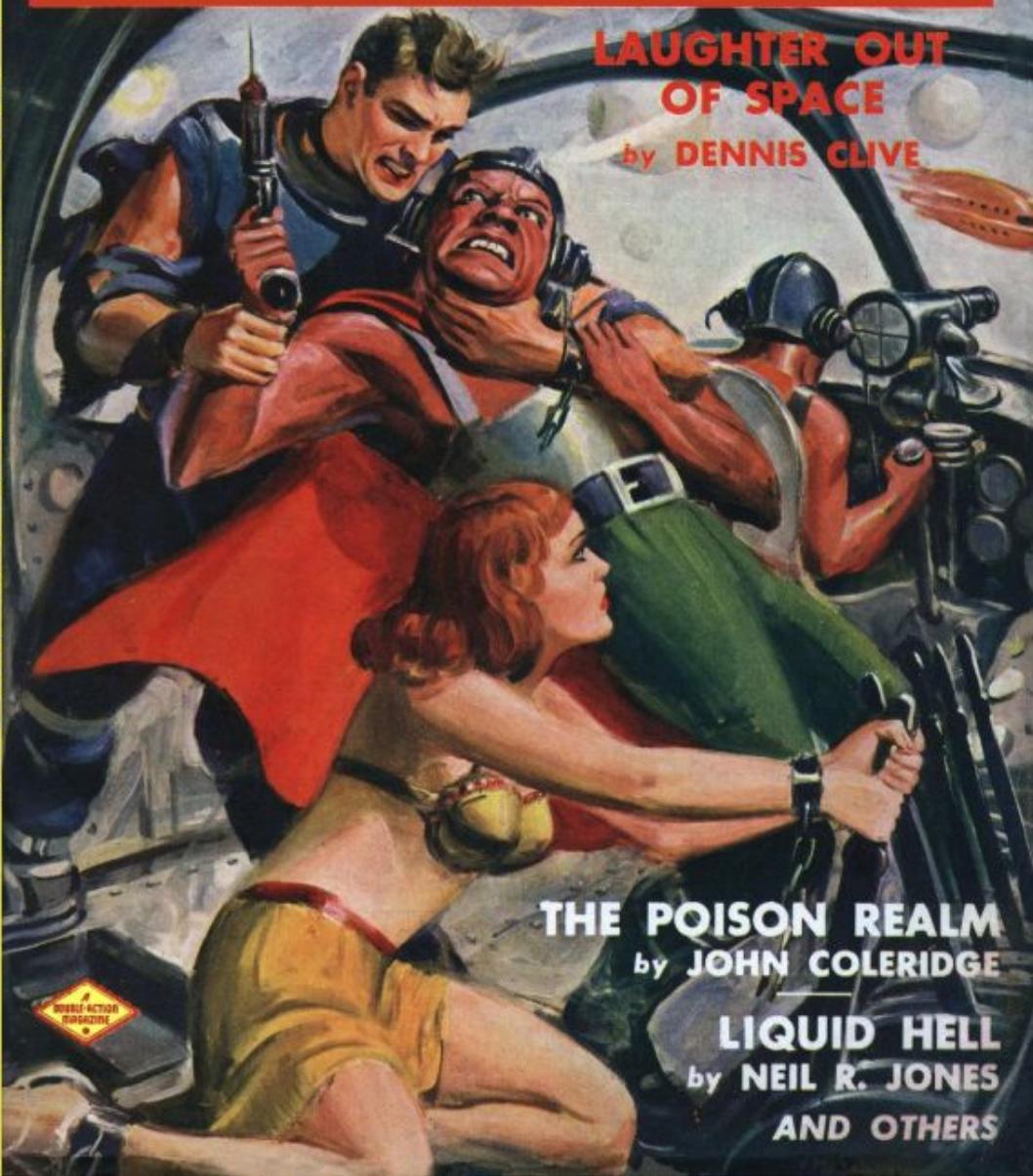
15c-JULY

LAUGHTER OUT OF SPACE
by DENNIS CLIVE

THE POISON REALM
by JOHN COLERIDGE

LIQUID HELL
by NEIL R. JONES
AND OTHERS

FUTURE FICTION



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Sober drivers turned suddenly into maniacs!

LAUGHTER OUT OF SPACE

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Dennis Clive.

Illustration by Lin Streeter.

First published *Future Fiction*, July 1940.

Conrad Smith finds himself in an insane world of laughing madmen! Earth is dying from a horrible doom out of the void—and we guarantee you a smashing climax that will leave you breathless with its powerful realism!

CHAPTER I

THE LAUGHING PLAGUE!

Senator Joe Kilburn's election campaign was nothing if not startling.

It had all the dynamic earmarks of the political genius of 1970—but when he staged a complete train smash, with each train full of people, thereby precipitating some two hundred deaths and injuries, matters were decidedly beyond a joke. . . .

Amazingly enough, Senator Kilburn was not in the least disturbed at what he had done. He only laughed—and laughed—and laughed . . . until they had to take him away—quietly.

Naturally, his opponent won the election hands down. The American people forgot the strange villainy of Kilburn in a sudden new problem. What had possessed a certain famous European diplomat to tear off all his clothes in the Chamber of Deputies and declare that he was a nudist? What, too, had prompted him to yell with amusement at his indelicate act? Why, particularly, had he dropped dead in the middle of his laughter . . .? Strange. Strange indeed!

And, from unexpected quarters of the world, there came hints of a strange type of insanity. In practically every land, men and women, here and there, were suddenly smitten with the weirdest desires and ideas, ranging from pure foolishness to downright cruelty. For no apparent reason natures suddenly changed—but they all had one thing in common—laughter!—raging, hysterical laughter that ultimated in sudden death. . . .

The psycho-analysts went to work looking for hereditary causes; but so thick and fast did the cases become, there was not time to investigate any individual one to the depths before death took place. Besides, in many cases the psycho-analysts themselves were overcome. There was the case of Sir Walton Hagoforth, the British psychologist, who stood in the middle of the Strand swallowing lumps of lighted paper under the impression that he was a fire-eater. He, too, died . . . laughing.

A sense of alarm began to settle on people. The cases of delusion and death were becoming so numerous and widespread that none knew when he or she might suddenly be overcome. There was, too, the serious side of the business—the problem of public servants—the engine drivers, the airmen, the ships' captains, upon whom thousands depended for safety. If any of them were suddenly overpowered . . .?

Many of them were, as the weeks went by. Men and women were dying in ones and twos, then in groups, then in dozens. And all of them died . . . laughing.

The Laughing Plague had more than a curiosity value to the officials of Mount Wilson Annex, scientific headquarters of the United States—and to Conrad Smith, the chief, in particular.

To Con Smith, six foot four of bones poured into indifferent tweeds, the mystery of humanity's change meant scientific exploration. It was not so much a riddle for psycho-analysts and physicians as for men who probed the depthless mysteries of space.

To the end of solving the problem, Con spent every night in the Annex Observatory, brooding over the mirror of the 500-inch reflector, debating the mystery of why the stars to the north of the heavens were bluish and purple. The spectroscope indicated nitrogen, but that didn't mean a thing—possibly an increase in the nitrogen content of Earth's atmosphere. But since nitrogen didn't mix with anything, where was the connection between that and a few

crazy people? Of course, the nitrogen—if such it was—might be *beyond* Earth. But even then it did not make sense. . . . So Con Smith sat at his desk like a half-closed penknife, pondering, his prematurely gray hair clutched in his bony hands.

Some of the Annex staff thought he was crazy, but because he was the chief, in spite of the comparative immaturity of thirty-five years, they did not put their thoughts into words, but instead did not bother. Even so, he couldn't figure out anything.

For several weeks, as the number of victims to the Laughing Plague went up, he still found nothing. Now and again he would stalk like a bony wraith up and down the endless enameled corridors of the Annex, studying the reports of various departments with his roving, colorless gray eyes. He sucked his big teeth over the information he received, hurled the papers back to their owners. Nothing stung Con Smith more than useless news. . . . The stars were blue to the north. So what?

He was inwardly worried, too. His admirably balanced mind was keen enough to see that the mounting number of victims of the Plague would finally undermine civilization itself, and as a scientist—chief scientist at that, though astronomy was his main line—it was a sacred duty for him to solve the mystery. So he told his wife Marjorie all about it, because he had more faith in her than all the men with degrees ever born.

"Anyway, it isn't a disease," he said pacing the snug study of their Los Angeles home. He had come home early this time to catch up on some much-needed sleep. "If it isn't a disease, what is it? Answer that one!" He twirled around with lean finger pointed at the dark, slim girl coiled in the armchair.

She ignored his almost prosecuting-counsel manner.

"There have always been lunatics," she said quietly, "you know, people who think they're Napoleon, or the Statue of Liberty. Coming nearer home, what about Doc Bradley, former chief of the Annex? He was a lunatic if ever there was one; the world laughed its sides sore. Remember?"

"Yeah. . . ." Con's pale eyes narrowed in reflection. Doc Bradley had been crazy, at that. In spite of an endless chorus of derision from scientists and public alike, he had hurled himself into space in a crackpot rocket four years before. Spouted something about a new explosive. . . . Naturally he had never been seen or heard of again, and certainly no detonator flash, the prearranged signal, had announced his landing on the moon. The 500-inch reflector would easily have detected it.

Pity about Bradley . . . great scientist, but just a little cracked.

"What *causes* madness?" Marjorie asked suddenly, brooding.

"Huh?" Con started out of his reverie. "Oh . . . derangement of brain cells, usually, or actual disease of the brain. But this isn't disease. It's something else. . . . Don't forget that hellish laughter that follows. Then . . . death!"

He paced around again, stopped with his knuckles pressed in taut whiteness on the desktop. "If only I knew why the stars to the north are blue . . ." he muttered. "If only I knew! Can only be nitrogen, and that doesn't mean a thing. I mean, spectrum analyses don't lie, do they?"

"Not if *you* make 'em," Marjorie said, admiringly.

"Hmmm . . ." Con gave a ghostly smile; he never got further than that. Finally, with his usual watertight mind system, he said, "Coming back home, how's Doris?"

"Oh, not so bad. Saw her this morning. Expecting the baby any time. . . ."

Con gave a grunt. Babies were not up his street. Besides, though he loved Marjorie deeply, he was not impressed with her sister Doris. Her husband, Clifford Graham, wasn't so bad—bit of a wag, in his own estimation, anyhow.

Marjorie gave a sigh. "Not much of a world for any poor kid to be born into," she said slowly. "There could be so—"

She broke off suddenly, uncoiled herself out of the chair and straightened up. Her face had gone deathly white.

"What's the matter?" Con demanded, catapulting to her side. The moment he got near to her he saw perspiration gleaming on her forehead.

"Matter?" she repeated, and looked at him with big staring dark eyes. "Why, nothing! Only I—" She stopped in mid-sentence and abruptly started to laugh. It increased peal upon peal into high falsetto! Her slim body began to shake with the violence of her hysterical efforts!

"Marj!" Con snapped. "*Marj!*" He clutched her shoulders and shook her until her chestnut hair tumbled over her drawn, grinning face. "Stop it, you damned little idiot! Stop it—"

But she only laughed the more.

"*Shut up!*" he commanded brutally, and struck her a resounding blow in the face with the back of his hand.

Her laughter stopped dead. All of a sudden the room was horribly quiet. . . . She sat looking at him like a woman awakened from the dead. Then without the slightest sound, she slipped out of her chair and collapsed her length on the carpet.

Instantly Con gathered her up into his arms, stared at her curiously bluish pallor. Scientific interest and desperate alarm fought for the mastery of his emotions. At last, right on his own doorstep, the Plague had struck!

Even as he stared, pondering, he felt himself undergoing curious sensations of faintness. His heart raced; the furniture seemed to go far away and come back again; remote roarings boomed through his ears. A half-formed desire to laugh twitched his face muscles.

With a sudden tremendous effort at control, he hauled his wife up, staggered with her across the room, then up the stairs. The air cleared suddenly; he arose out of the miasma, keen and alert again. Once he was satisfied that Marjorie was recovering her senses, he left her and pelted back downstairs, raced through to the little laboratory adjoining the back kitchen, and came back into the study with an air ampule clutched in his hand.

He waited until the wafting sensations of dizziness began to creep around him again, then he sucked a sample of the vitiation into the ampule, corked it, and went back to the laboratory. But before he could make attempts at analysis, there came a plaintive call from upstairs. Immediately, he turned and went into the hall.

Marjorie was at the top of the stairs, swaying giddily, her face as white as a sheet. One hand was clutching at her heart.

"Con," she said slowly, "I think—think I'm going to—to die. . . ." She laughed a little at that. It went upwards into a wild scream of panic merriment; then to the paralyzed Con's horror, he saw her knees buckle under her and she came crashing down the stairs headfirst, landing in a sprawling heap in his automatically out-thrust arms.

"Marj . . ." he whispered, ashy-faced, shaking her. Then he screamed it out. "Marjorie! Oh, God. . . ."

His hand flew to her heart, froze there as he failed to detect any sign of beating. Fascinated, he stared into the bloodless face and glazing eyes. Merciless truth slammed into

his aching brain.

Marjorie was dead.

CHAPTER II

STRANGE BIRTHMARKS!

For two weeks nobody could find Con Smith. Nearly everybody knew of his wife's sudden death following Plague hysteria; they knew, too, that Con had been at the funeral, morose and silent—but where he went after that was a mystery. Truth to tell, he had done something foreign to his coldly precise nature—had indeed drunk himself into a stupor in a vain endeavor to drown his grief. . . .

Then, little by little, the smooth rhythm of his brain began to reassert itself. Scientific curiosity replaced some of the barren emptiness in his heart. He remembered the ampule of air he had left sealed on that tragic evening.

Suddenly he returned to Mount Wilson Annex, more bloodless than ever, a gaunt, resolute phantom of a man. The first person he met during the morning of his return was Nat Chambers, the rotund little physicist of the organization. He came into Con's laboratory with a baffled expression on his red, schoolboyish face.

"Anything fresh?" he asked quietly.

"Mebbe . . ." Con retorted, tight-lipped. He was poised like a vulture over his ampule and instruments. For a long time, he busied himself, then straightened up and took a deep breath. He made a brief motion.

"Take a look . . ."

The scientist came forward, studied the instruments carefully. Then he looked up in surprise.

"Some new sort of gas!" he exclaimed. "Looks like nitrogen to me, only—"

"Only it isn't!" Con snapped. "Therein lies a world of difference. . . . That's a sample of the air that has affected people with lunacy and hysteria, that killed my wife." His face set like granite. "Didn't kill me," he said, relaxing. "I'm as tough as shoe leather. Marj wasn't . . ."

"But—but what is it? How'd it get into our atmosphere?"

For answer Con picked up a spectrograph color plate and tapped it significantly.

"Spectrum of Venus," he commented. "You notice that down here at the violet end there are distinct traces of purple-blue banding? That represents a proportion of Venusian atmosphere in the upper levels of that planet's air—a proportion that has always baffled astronomers. It isn't exactly nitrogen, but something very near to it. Anyway, we haven't anything like it in our chemical knowledge."

"Uh-huh," Chambers acknowledged slowly, eyeing the plate.

"And here," Con went on, "is a spectrum analysis of the gas in the ampule. . . ."

"Identical!" Chambers cried, dumfounded.

"Exactly . . ."

The physicist was silent for a long time, stroking his round chin. At last he glanced up with his bright blue eyes.

"Little doubt of the fact that this alien gas has its counterpart on Venus—but how the Sam Hill did it escape from Venus and come here? It just couldn't happen. Against all scientific law!"

Con mused, spoke slowly. "I don't pretend to know *how* it happened, how it escaped from Venus. But it is pretty clear that the earth in its spacial journey has run into a mass of the stuff.

It differs from nitrogen in that it combines readily with oxygen. Little by little our atmosphere is getting impregnated. Whiffs of the stuff are touching down to the surface and produce results on human bodies which range from lunacy to hysteria—but always death follows . . . death with laughter. It's damnable!"

"Yes," Chambers admitted quietly. "Well, what now? Now that we've got to the root of the mystery, what comes next?"

"We *haven't* got to the root, and that's what worries me! We know it is an unknown gas producing fatal effects, but why did it happen? Why is it identical to a gas existing in the atmosphere of Venus? That's the real riddle—"

"Maybe, but that won't interest the public. Our job is to advise the Government of our findings, then try and find a way of stopping the trouble."

"Only thing we can do is try and devise a mask that will resist the gas," Con mused. "We'll get every chemist in America on the job right away . . . in the world, in fact. Once we have the right formula, they can be manufactured by the million. Every man, woman and child must have one. . . . This is emergency."

It seemed curious, but no sooner had the S.O.S. gone out from Mount Wilson Annex to the scientists of the world than the pollution of the atmosphere increased suddenly by nearly a hundredfold! The stuff was even visible next day in the highest reaches of the atmosphere. The sun hung through a smoky violet haze. Suddenly Mankind was forced to the realization that danger was poised right over its head.

Strange indeed were the effects of the gas as it seeped down in places to earth's surface. Eastern America caught it far worse than the west. Radio messages that might have been broadcast from a lunatic asylum stabbed through the ether for all the world to hear. . . .

There was the case of the twenty dock workers in New York who had died of hysteria in the same way as Marjorie Smith. There were no fewer than two hundred auto smashes as sober drivers turned suddenly into maniacs and deliberately drove into each other, or else rammed their cars into shop windows with disastrous results.

Under the impression that he was driving an airplane, the driver of the Overland Limited wrecked his train and killed six hundred people. He died after making the admission, died screaming with merriment.

On the less serious side was the case of Lawton Casterly, the famous art critic. He was discovered walking down Broadway clad only in a pair of shorts and holding up an open umbrella. Upon arrest he declared he was out to reform the laws relating to pepper. In an hour he was dead, laughing at his own joke.

No sooner had he died than the harrassed police had the call to go to Times Square. There they found a traffic holdup caused by Madeline Beucort, the ash-blonde actress. Clad in an artist's smock and slacks, they found her standing on her head in the middle of the Square, with an inverted easel and canvas before her. Questioned, she averred she was a surrealist getting new angles on life. . . . Ten minutes after the police had turned her right side up and led her off, she threw herself under a car, laughed deliriously as she died, horribly. . . .

So it went on. One after another, sometimes in batches, throughout the first day of the gas's deepening influence, came reports of incredible happenings—and not only from America. Parts of England were affected, half of Russia, some parts of France and Germany. With terrifying swiftness, sanely balanced people were developing into utter lunatics, then dying. . . .

In their laboratories, the scientists worked feverishly, devising ways and means to defeat the gas of which they now had all too many samples. No man knew exactly what it was—but one fact was grimly obvious, to Con Smith in particular. There was no type of mask that was perfect insulation against the stuff!

For endless hours, he and the rest of the Annex technicians, as apart from the other chemists of the world, had worked on countless samples of synthetic and pure materials—rubbers, fabrics, metal meshes, glass, composites, compounds; but the fact remained that nothing was at once strong enough and light enough to make a helmet and give insulation against the gas. Its molecular build-up was such that it seeped through. Only one thing would block it—lead, and lead for a helmet was out of the question.

It had taken two days and nights to arrive at this conclusion, then with the consent of the other scientists, Con gave it out rather reluctantly to the anxiously waiting governments. Helmets were useless for the masses; the alternative lay in sheathing buildings with lead and rendering them airtight until the gas had passed, providing all the usual means for ridding the air of carbon dioxide and other toxics.

Deeping tragedy stalking the world lent a spur to the governments. Red tape was ruthlessly slashed, labor conscripted for the task of manning every known lead mine. Armies of men and women set to work on utilizing the lead as fast as it was turned out from the factory moulds. They set to work to provide the great public buildings against the ravages of the approaching blue fog.

The scientists could do no more, only watch events. Con Smith remained at his post, a silent, embittered man. He had nothing to live for, anyway, now that his wife was dead. To him it did not represent a risk to sit in the Annex by day and night when at any moment the gas might seep down to the mountain heights and catch up with him. Suppose he did die? What of it? And if he did not, he might find a reason for this madness and disaster . . . He knew now why the northward stars had been blue. It had been the gas field. . . . But why *Venusian* gas?

That was the mystery that still hammered in his brain. How had such a vast area of gas escaped from Venus, anyway? Hour after hour he sat brooding over the problem, to have to admit himself beaten in the end.

At night he spent much of his time peering at the stars through the giant reflector. But they were blue in all directions, now. Earth was fairly and squarely in the midst of the fog. And therein too lay another singular problem. Since Earth was whirling through space at 18 miles a second, the gas cloud must be countless millions of cubic feet in area to have lasted so long—far more gas in fact than could ever have been encompassed in Venus' atmosphere anyway!

Puzzle . . . absolute.

Irritated, forgotten pipe between his teeth, Con snapped on the radio at last and sat listening to the world reports still coming in. New York swept by mass hysteria! London panicking! No sounds from Berlin! Stratosphere planes crashing wholesale! Transatlantic liner *Albatross* lost with all hands! Asylums full! Business sliding downhill! Doom—doom—doom! Except for the gallant men and women battling the incessant threat of death in order to make refuges from the onslaught. And in many ways, the reports said, fortune had so far favored them. One woman and three men had succumbed in raving madness at a whiff from the empurpled heights above. . . .

Wearied, too tired to think straight anymore, Con switched off at last and pulled on his hat and coat, went to his now lonely home in moody thought, hardly giving a glance at the violet stars as he tramped the mountain road towards the city. His whole brain was aching to find explanations, striving to find some way of stopping the rot, the inevitable destruction of humanity he saw ahead.

He pondered the possibilities of other gases as an antidote; but in that he came up against the evident factor that he might experiment with millions of gases before he found the correct reagent to reduce the poison gas to harmlessness. Besides, there wasn't time.

He had hardly entered his home and sat down to a lonely meal in the cold, empty kitchen before the telephone bell rang. Sandwich in hand, he went into the hall and took up the receiver.

"Hello? Con Smith speaking."

"Oh, howdy Con!" He recognized the genial voice of Clifford Graham, his brother-in-law. "Say, I'm glad I caught you in. I guess you're pretty lonely all by yourself, eh?"

"What do you think?" Con munched between words.

"Well, that's what I thought, and that's why I figured you can't have much to do at home now that Marjorie's dead." Cliff could be brutally tactless at times. "Why don't you come over to our place tonight? We're having a bit of supper and celebration. The baby was born two days ago, you know."

"Baby?" Con frowned; then out of the haze of his mind a light dawned. "Oh, yeah, the baby! Marjorie mentioned it. . . . Well—congratulations!"

"Oh, come over, can't you? Cheer you up a bit! So many things can happen to any of us at any time—have to defeat it by being cheerful, you know. Might be dead tomorrow. *Come on!*"

Con shrugged to himself. "O. K., Cliff. What have I got to lose, anyway? Be there soon."

He hung up and finished his sandwich, shaved and tidied up, then set off. The Graham home, a modest residential place, was only half a mile distant. Cliff Graham met him in the cheery hall—a big, rotund fellow of thirty-four, whom not even death vapors and crumbling business could depress.

"Naturally the wife's upstairs," he said, leading the way into the drawing room. "But that doesn't stop the rest of us from celebrating. 'Sides, Doris can hear us upstairs and it sort of cheers her, see?"

Con nodded slowly, glanced around the room at the men and women relations and friends as he was introduced to them en masse. They smiled back at him, rather drawnly, he thought. Spontaneity of pleasure had gone these days under the eternally hanging threat of lunacy and death. Only irrepressible men like Cliff Graham could go on as if nothing had happened.

Con went over to a chair and folded up in his usual way. He tried to laugh at the jokes Cliff cracked, tried to extract some pleasure out of the champagne handed to him, tried to be civil to the old girl with a face like a deviled kidney who sat on his right, but somehow. . . . Well, his mind was wandering again to the mystery of the Venusian gas and how to destroy it. All this was so silly, so damnably empty, with the fate of humanity in the balance, perhaps even in his hands.

"To the baby!" Cliff kept saying, endlessly, raising his glass.

"To the baby . . ." acknowledged the relations, and laughed and chattered under the fancied notion that it was all so enjoyable. They meant no harm to the baby, even less to the

good-hearted Cliff and his absent wife—but right overhead in the sky was a purple cloud. And Con couldn't forget it.

He started suddenly out of meditation at a plucking at his sleeve. It was the old girl with the net-worked face.

"Strangest thing about the baby . . ." she confided, with an artless smile, and her gray-rimmed brown eyes shone with the brightness of the champagne. "The *strangest* thing. . . . I really shouldn't tell . . ."

Con looked interested and said, "Damn the baby!" under his breath.

"I'm Aunty Minerva," she went on, crossing her black-stockinged ankles coyishly. "I've seen the baby. I shouldn't tell of course, but— He has birthmarks!"

"Amazing!" Con said listlessly.

"Black ones!" Aunty embellished, and drained her glass.

"Huh? *Black* ones?" Con sat upright again, staring. "Say, that *is* something!"

"Eight little black spots on his back— No, no, that's wrong." Aunty closed an eye speculatively. "Nine! That's it! One in the center and eight little ones round it. . . . But it's a secret. The *strangest* thing. . . ."

"I'll say!" Con murmured, and lay back again—then when Aunty got up and sought fresh fields to conquer, he lay pondering. Her slightly tipsy confession had arrested his thoughts. He sat staring in front of him, blind to Cliff's gesticulations, deaf to his asinine jokes, mentally separated from the chatter and smoke of the stuffy room. Nine birthmarks. Eight planets and a sun! Nine! Damn silly, of course, but—The problem on his mind was taking fantastic twists. But after all, *black* birthmarks . . .?

Suddenly he got to his feet, mingled with the guests for a moment, then slid unnoticed out of the room and went quietly upstairs. His knock on the door of Doris' room brought forth a trim nurse, very starched and efficient—not a little surprised either at beholding the gaunt, roving-eyed scientist towering over her in the corridor.

"Con Smith's the name," he said briefly. "I want some information, nurse. . . ."

She closed the bedroom door quietly and came forward to the center of the corridor.

"Something I can do, Mr. Smith?" The chief of the Mount Wilson Annex was entitled to plenty of respect.

"Yeah. I've just heard that this baby of Cliff's has nine birthmarks on his back. That right?"

"Quite. Coal black ones."

"I suppose it wouldn't be possible for me to see them?"

"I'm afraid not." The nurse pondered a moment, then said brightly, "But I could draw you an exact copy."

"You could? That's fine!" Con tore a leaf out of his notebook. "O. K.—get busy."

The nurse went over to the landing table, pondering a moment or two, then set to work with her pencil. Con stood watching silently as she drew a rather large central black dot, then different sized ones at intervals in varying positions, finishing off with a rough outline of the baby's back and shoulders.

"Incredible!" Con breathed at last. "Nurse, did you ever see anything so absolutely like the scale drawings of our solar system? Eight planets, ignoring Pluto, and a central sun!"

The nurse looked up sharply. “But how odd, Mr. Smith! Doctor Grantham made that very same comment when he first saw them on the baby. In fact, he made the jest that perhaps he was going to follow your profession and become an astronomer. . . .”

Con smiled bleakly at the compliment, then he asked curtly, “Where is Doctor Grantham?”
“General Hospital, just around the block.”

Con debated a brief moment, then folded up the sketch quickly. All the listlessness had gone out of his bearing now. His sunken eyes were suddenly glowing again. With a brusque word of thanks, he turned to the staircase and pelted down into the hall. He ran into Cliff as he emerged from the drawing-room.

“So there you are, Con! I just wanted to—”

“No time now, old man,” Con broke in, scrambling into hat and coat. “Urgent call—see you later. And take good care of that kid of yours. Maybe he saved the world tonight. . . .”

“Huh?” Cliff was left staring uncertainly at the closed front door.

CHAPTER III A WEIRD CODE!

It did not take Con more than five minutes to reach the hospital, but once inside it, he found it packed to the doors with all manner of emergency cases, direct outcomes of the failing human element. In silence, he passed through the rows of waiting victims, moved into the deeper reaches of the hospital. Had he been a stranger, not the least attention would have been paid to him, but his card and obvious urgency finally secured the busy, harrassed Dr. Grantham in his private room.

Short, square-faced and blue-eyed, clad in his white smock, Grantham came in rather impatiently and shook hands.

"Exactly how urgent, Mr. Smith?" he asked, with remarkable economy of words.

"Urgent enough to perhaps save the human race!" Con replied, his pale eyes bright. "I want the facts concerning the birthmarks on that baby of the Grahams—the nine black ones."

"I haven't time for such things now, man! Out there is a whole string of people who—"

"They must wait!" Con snapped, jaws tightening. "In fact, I demand it. As the chief scientist of the Annex, I'm over you in authority, doctor—remember that. Now . . . I believe you noticed the resemblance in those birthmarks to a solar system drawing. Right?"

"Well, yes, but after all— Plain coincidence."

"If that be so, you'll have to admit another coincidence. Just when did a black birthmark happen before?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"So I thought. Then the combination of black birthmarks in a solar system formation is no coincidence. . . ."

Some of Grantham's impatience began to abate. He stroked his square jaw, looked at the sketch Con tugged from his pocket.

"This," Grantham said presently, "is not entirely accurate. There is a tiny long birthmark too—like this . . ." His pencil made a mark. Con stood staring at it. The sketch now had a mark against the second circular dot from the central big one.

"Venus!" he whispered in a tense voice. "Stress is definitely laid on the planet Venus!"

"I beg your pardon!" the doctor asked sharply.

"O. K., I haven't got delusions," Con said, with an apologetic smile. "Not yet, anyway. I guess all this seems queer to you, but then I'm an astronomer and just can't help linking up nine birthmarks with eight planets and a sun. This is certainly a solar system pattern, a coincidence we cannot admit—in *black* too, to arrest attention. Your addition has shown that Venus has something to do with it, and Venusian gas is responsible for the world Plague, you know."

"It *is* peculiar," Grantham admitted. "But what possible connection can you see—"

"Perhaps you can help me. Tell me, what causes birthmarks?"

"Nobody knows. They just happen—to anybody. Certainly they have no connection with an impression made on the mother before the child's birth. That is so much fallacy."

"There have never been black ones before?" Con insisted.

"In my knowledge, black ones are unique. There are the other types without end, of course—mole, port wine stain, and so on. We can sometimes get rid of them by ordinary methods; at

other times we try ultraviolet radiations, injections of sclerosing solutions, or even freezing with solidified carbon dioxide. Then there are X-rays, radium, electrolysis, acid . . .”

“But black ones would defy all these things?”

“The ones on the Graham baby would, unquestionably,” the doctor nodded. “From what I studied of them on the baby’s back, I’d say they were produced by some prenatal burning process, obviously not painful or the mother would have noticed it. I thought at first they were thickly convuluted blood vessels, but my tests showed otherwise. They’re—well, simply patterned into the child’s skin.”

“Hm . . .” Con fell to thought, presently asked, “Have you no possible idea what *might* cause birthmarks?”

“None sound enough to bear publication,” Grantham smiled. “Privately, I can only think that cosmic rays might cause them. They are unquestionably the basis of life and evolution—the cosmic rays, I mean. They can produce pigmentary changes without actual burning, and so . . . Well, cosmic rays are a different wave-length to those producing the etheric sensation of heat. Just an idea of my own, mind you. May be nothing in it.”

“Cosmic rays,” Con repeated slowly. “I just wonder . . .”

He stood in thoughtful silence for a long moment, then looked up sharply.

“Well thanks, Doc, you’ve been a swell help. It’s only a hunch I’ve got. I’ll let you know how I make out. . . . See you again.”

Grantham nodded quietly. He was trying to decide in his own mind if Con Smith was a new victim of lunacy. . . .

But Con Smith was not a lunatic. Certainly he was working on a preposterous hunch, but in the conditions assailing the world, nothing struck him as too preposterous or outlandish for at least one try. Scientists, driven desperate in their endeavors to find a solution to the lowering purple gas, listened to what Con had to say and then obeyed his orders with some dubiousness.

He issued an extraordinary request—that all recently born babies, alive or dead, the world over, be examined for birthmarks, and if any were present, photostatic prints were to be made and sent or brought to him immediately. Naturally there was a lot of haggling over such an order, but because of his feverish belief in his own mysterious discovery, he was humored. A systematic search began in every country.

And it was a search that was a race against time.

In all parts of the world now the gas was wreaking havoc. Whole populations were being affected. With every day there was the story of growing tragedy, of collisions, death and injury, destruction and fires, of drowning and hysteria. Madness walked the earth, was only stopped in those places where lead had been fitted to houses and buildings to hold the curse at bay . . .

While he waited for the results of his baby search, Con was not idle. Flogging his lean, energetic form to even greater activity, he forced men and women into the building of lead protections for the Annex. His former disregard for whether he lived or died had gone now; he had to live to see if there really was a solution to the problem—not that he cared for his own life individually, only for the benefits he could perhaps bestow if he escaped death.

While the baby search went on, he moved in permanently to the safety of the Annex’s lead-sheathed reaches, his scientific colleagues within call. Outside, further things went awry with the world. The radio carried news of the slow death of vegetation.

That came as a shock to Con and the scientists. All of them had been pretty sure that the chlorophyll of plants would break down the unknown quantity with chemical synthesis and continue to survive as of yore, but evidently the gas's nature was such that it could not be assimilated or changed. At any rate, crops began to blight and wither, whole orchards turned black, great areas of meadowland began to look as though fire or acid had swept over them. . . . It brought the inevitable problem of failing food supply before the governments of every country.

A world peopled by starving lunatics?—that seemed the likely prospect.

And still the purple gas persisted, day in and day out, masking the sun under an amethyst haze, dimming the stars. Some cities had still escaped the full force of the hideousness. Los Angeles was one, New Orleans another. Pennsylvania, too, was hardly touched—but New York and points eastwards had become almost entirely enveloped. Thousands of the population were dead; others were deranged beyond recovery, which added to the difficulties of the heroic band of rescuers always arriving to lend assistance.

Through days and nights, sleeping and eating at irregular intervals, Con waited for reports. He divided his time between the radio and the sealed windows, gazed out on murky dark blue vapors poised far overhead in the mountain fastnesses. Down in the streets of the cities he could imagine men and women braving death to find food. In the Annex, with instruments at their command, the scientists had no fear of starvation. And certainly they could not help the masses, who had already changed to a semi-Neolithic way of living. . . .

Then, at last, Con began to get results. Two of the men in charge of the baby search in America survived the gas. Eight of them had died in the struggle, but not before they had handed on their photostatics to relays of men with them. So, from the American end of the search, came some twenty photostatic prints, half of them belonging to babies who had died, the other half to those still living.

Whether living or dead did not concern Con. What interested him was that there were other babies in the land with black birthmarks. The instant he received the prints, he went into action, poring over them, his little group of colleagues around him.

Remarkable indeed were the birthmarks the plates revealed!

They ranged from incomprehensible lines and dots to a fairly understandable outline—incomplete—of a radio instrument! For hours Con sat pondering and considering, shifting the prints about on the broad table under the strong light, linking up one with another, until finally he began to see that the incomplete radio instrument design fitted into place like a jigsaw puzzle once he had ten of the prints in a given formation. He sat gazing down in amazement upon a perfect plan.

“Say, that’s a spark-gap receiver!” Stonehurst exclaimed, the radio expert of the staff. “I’d stake my soul on it—! But I’ll be damned if I ever saw one like that before!”

“Receiver, eh?” Con’s eyes narrowed in thought.

“Yes; transmitter too, by the looks of it. . . .”

“Then,” Con said, “these dots and dashes must be the code that can be received over this receiver. . . . I think we’ve got something, boys!” He glanced up at Stonehurst’s sharp-featured face. “Any hopes of disentangling what this code is supposed to mean?”

“Nothing to it; it’s ordinary Twentieth Century Morse, such as was used for long distance telegraphy a few years ago. I understand it well enough, and it’s got me puzzled. Those dots

and dashes don't signify any message; I figure they're only put there to show that Twentieth Century Morse will be used over that particular receiver. . . ."

"And who the hell would use Twentieth Century Morse in this fashion, anyway?" Chambers demanded.

"Only one man," Con said slowly. "Doctor Bradley, our former chief, who tried to get to the moon. . . ."

"That old crackpot!" Stonehurst exclaimed. "You're wrong, Con. He never got to the moon, anyway. He never *could* have done it in that rocket of his! Remember how everybody laughed?"

"I remember," Con assented quietly. "But even so we *might* have been wrong. He's mixed up in this somewhere, I'm pretty certain. The only thing to do is build a receiver-transmitter to this design and see what happens. . . . Let's get started!"

CHAPTER IV DEATH TO A WORLD!

With curiosity as the spur, the scientists of the Annex worked tirelessly from the resources at their command, following out in every detail the clearly-drawn black imprinted sketch shown in the photostats.

Con himself, indefatigable as ever, concerned only for the completion of the work, lashed himself and his followers to a superhuman pitch, spent his time checking over the slow assembly of apparatus, becoming more amazed as he went along at the curious designing of the receiver, the peculiar arrangement of wiring necessary to receive and transmit. The more he progressed, the more obvious it became that the apparatus was designed to receive signals not from earth, but from outer space. . . .

To the troubles of the outer world, bewitched in drifting blue vapors, the scientists had little time to listen. They worked day and night for two weeks before they finally had the apparatus completed exactly to the design on the birthmark photostats.

Once that was done, they all took a long sleep, recovered their lost energies; then at nightfall they gathered in an anxious group before the instrument with Stonehurst, the radio engineer, doing the actual operating.

He spelt out the usual KIH radio signal of the Annex, added "America," then waited in expectant silence. The receiver buzzer remained mute as the seconds ticked by on the chronometer overhead. The scientists glanced at one another hopelessly.

Time and again Stonehurst repeated the signal. . . . Fifteen minutes dragged by. Then thirty. Forty-five—

"Guess we must have made a mess of it somewhere," Con said at last, his face haggard. "In that case—"

He broke off with an eager start as the receiver buzzer answered powerfully under electromagnetic stimulus. Instantly Stonehurst's brown hand seized the pencil and wrote busily. Not a sound save the *zzz . . . zzzzz . . . zzz* of the instrument disturbed the laboratory quiet. Steadily, Stonehurst went on writing, the others looking over his broad shoulders.

"Message received. This is Doctor Bradley, sending from Venus. I have been here four years. I am safe. My rocket, aimed for the Moon, had too much fuel. I could not stop, missed the Moon, and landed finally on Venus. I was not hurt. There is a friendly race here. . . ."

The communication stopped momentarily. The scientists glanced at one another blankly.

"He got to Venus!" Chambers gasped out. "Who'd have guessed it? You were right, Con —"

"Hello, Earth! For technical reasons, it is impossible to use short-wave radio from planet to planet. Earth's Heaviside Layer and Venus' own ionized upper blanket prevent a verbal communication. Spark gap and 20th Century Morse the only alternative. Glad my ruse to attract your attention succeeded. . . . Signal back if you hear me. I want to be sure before giving the next message."

Immediately Stonehurst sent forth an answering call, added the questions: "How did you do the birthmarks? Is there any way to stop the gas overpowering Earth? Do you know what has caused it?"

The answer came after a long interval.

"For untold generations the Venusians have tried to warn Earthlings of the approaching gas cloud you have now entered. They knew it would happen. The Venusians tried to get in touch with Earth by short-wave radio, but it failed for the reason I have given. Then the spark gap method occurred to them, but they had no code you could understand, so the idea fell through. It is only since I arrived and decided to use a known code that a communication has become possible. . . ."

"For ages, the Venusians have tried to send a message by the medium of birthmarks. Some birthmarks, of the usual wine or brown variety, have borne resemblance to machines, radio equipment, Venusian letters of the alphabet—all manner of things which, through sheer ignorance, have failed to attract any attention on Earth. Since coming to Venus I have found out exactly how they do it. Their telescopic powers, perfected to pierce Venus' eternal cloud veil, can easily reach Earth and give a full length screen picture of any single individual. X-ray devices added to this immense telescopic power make it simple to see right through any human being and study the bone structure and organisms. . . . Among other things the Venusians are masters of cosmic rays—not the variety which flood down from outer space, but rays of their own making, created by the disintegration of matter. In this city from where I am communicating, there are some two hundred cosmic ray projectors, which they use for a variety of purposes, one giant one being used for producing earthly birthmarks. . . ."

There was a long pause as though Bradley were considering. Then he buzzed again and Stonehurst resumed writing steadily.

"Naturally, you are aware how a negative image in an enlarging machine can be imprinted in the positive, enlarged form on bromide paper? Imagine then, if you can, a tiny image imprinted on a slide in a cosmic ray projector of colossal size. Imagine this image so tiny that it demands atomic science to observe it! The Venusians can only see the slide by atomic means. . . . Now, basically this slide is lead, which of course blocks cosmic rays. It therefore blocks the cosmic rays except for the places where the tiny image is engraved. Picture the result. . . ."

"That image is flashed over the 60,000,000 mile gulf from Venus to Earth. Because it covers that distance it enlarges to small but visible proportions upon imprinting itself. The cosmic ray does not actually burn. It imprints the slide image at any spot desired by alteration of the controls governing the extent of the beam. It can pass through one form of flesh and imprint itself on another right behind it.

"What the Venusians did, then, was to single out among Earthlings any solitary woman about to give birth to a child. The ray passed through her. Whatever was on the projector slide was impressed painlessly on the baby's sensitive skin and so became a birthmark. . . . Do you understand this?"

“Carry on,” Con said quickly, and Stonehurst transmitted the words.

“You have seen by now how the Venusians tried to warn you by a series of pictures on flesh. When I saw their work and realized what was facing Earth, I knew the only way to attract attention was to use BLACK birthmarks, a simple enough matter by adjustment of wave-length. In that way it would arrest attention. Preferably I wanted a baby about to be born who would be near a scientist. I saw the connection, via the telescope, between Con Smith and the Graham baby. On that child we imprinted the solar system. As I had hoped, Con tumbled to the idea and followed it up. It was simple then to single out other babies in America and finish the job. . . .”

“And the gas?” Con dictated to Stonehurst.

“The gas is the dispersed atmosphere of Venus’ moon. Many thousands of years ago Venus had a moon. Its atmosphere in entirety was poisonous; parts of such similar gas exist on Venus itself even yet in certain areas. I have named it nitrogen-x because of its similar spectrum to genuine nitrogen. An inner cataclysm blew the Venusian moon to pieces, leaving the nitrogen-x atmosphere free in space. It was inevitable, according to celestial mechanics, that Earth would float into that gas one day. You have done so. Actually you passed through it long ago; its duration is caused by the fact that it has mingled with Earth’s oxygen. But there is a way to be rid of it. Now listen carefully. . . .”

The scientists pressed forward anxiously to watch Stonehurst’s handwriting.

“The Venusians have rid some of their poisoned areas of nitrogen-x by planting what are called EGUS trees. These, unlike natural trees, have a pale yellow solution for sap instead of chlorophyll. Naturally, on Earth, plant chlorophyll under the photosynthesis of sunlight rids the air of poisonous toxics, but chlorophyll is useless for breaking down nitrogen-x. Hence your vegetation is dying.

“Your last chance is to drain all trees and plants that still live of their chlorophyll and replace it with EGUS sap. It will not harm them, and it will enable them to absorb nitrogen-x and give off normal pure gases. Gradually a new balance will be restored. The basis of EGUS sap is actually solution of rubber. It can be synthetically made from laboratory stock. Make it in the tens of thousands of gallons, spread your workers throughout the Earth, tell them to add the EGUS as they drain the chlorophyll, otherwise the plants will die. Now, here is the formula. . . .”

Stonehurst began to write down the chemical numerals and ingredients as fast as he could manage. In twenty minutes the formula was complete.

“Some day,” Bradley’s message ended, “I hope to return to Earth. It depends if I can find the right explosive to drive my rocket back. The Venusians will help me, because with all their vast knowledge, they still have not got space travel. I shall watch earthly events through the telescope. . . .”

Like a raging fire, the news of possible salvation flashed across the world through stricken cities peopled with deranged thousands. Those who were still sane obeyed the orders sent out from the Annex, and as fast as it could be manufactured and transported *egus* sap was transferred to the forests of the world where trees still lived, to those places where the gas had not yet reached.

It was desperate work. It demanded hours of grinding toil in heavy lead suits but because they knew that upon their success depended the last hope of salvation, men and women the world over worked with a will.

In a month, vast progress had been made. The gassy areas in the period had shifted but little. The populations had shuffled themselves out as best they could to the areas least polluted, were waiting with desperate anxiety for the first signs of a let-up in the poison.

Con too, and his fellow scientists, were waiting—with a growing alarm as week succeeded week, as millions of trees were impregnated with *egus* sap. But the needed relief did not come! No; from north and south, from east and west, there came not a tale of lightening skies, but of deepening fog, of wreaths and banks of it, denser than ever before, closing down on the already stricken cities, from the midst of which came the laughter of the dying. . . .

Slowly, ruthlessly, the lowering cloud crept down on every continent. A hundred, a thousand times, thicker! It filled every valley now; it was opaque at three inches distant. The world was slowly vanishing in blue density. Life was stifling in a devil's chorus of insane laughter. And, worst of all, the stuff was now *penetrating lead*!

Con Smith was shaken to the depths of his being when he made this discovery—when he realized that the miasma had at last reached the mountain heights where the Annex was perched.

He began to realize the desperate nature of the situation when he found Nat Chambers laughing and rolling on the floor of the east observatory. Blue wraiths of gas were around him like steam. He died within minutes. . . .

Con and the other scientists were driven back to the last room of the great place, stood looking at each other with set faces, glanced at the blue against the windows, the faint haze in the muggy air.

“Well?” Stonehurst asked at last, in a level voice. “Where do we go from here? We’ve improved things—like hell! I doubt if there is anybody alive on earth now outside us! Even the *egus* factory workers don’t answer the radio call. . . .” He stared grimly across towards the instruments.

Con rubbed his aching head. “I can’t begin to understand this,” he muttered. “I can’t begin to . . .” He forced himself suddenly back into action, strode over to the spark transmitter and switched on the power.

“Call Venus!” he snapped to Stonehurst. “Maybe we can do something even yet. Must have got the formula wrong. . . .”

The engineer sat down, shrugging, depressed the button monotonously. The scientists stood around him in the slowly gathering haze, perspiration wet on their faces, their jaws lean and taut. Con rose out of a daze at an answering buzz.

“Ask him—” he started to say, then he stopped as a message went on coming through. Incredulous, he stared over Stonehurst’s shoulder as he wrote down an amazing message.

“So you transferred the EGUS sap to your trees? Splendid! I have been watching you do that. And what happened? The EGUS sap broke down the nitrogen-x, yes; but it only broke it down into more molecules, multiplying its virulent power! Just as oxygen will break up under electric stimulus and add a molecule to produce ozone. And it didn't save you? That is what is amusing me! How it amuses me!

“Do you remember how the world laughed at me when I tried to fire my rocket into space? Do you think I swallowed those numberless insults without resentment? No!

“All that I told you last time about the gas, about the Venusian moon, about everything, was true—except about the EGUS sap. I lied there—cleverly! I cannot forget that a world laughed at Bradley, the greatest scientist who ever lived. I have NEVER forgotten it. . . .

“I evolved my plan. I visited the poison areas of Venus and saw how EGUS trees intensified the gas' power. Such areas are left severely alone by the Venusians. I knew from my telescopic studies that you on Earth had found lead was a protection from the gas; I realized that my hope of all of you being destroyed was not going to materialize. You could survive behind lead indefinitely until the gas had assumed a breathable balance—unless I could intensify that gas!

“EGUS sap was the solution. . . . Hence my elaborate planning. But oh, how it was worth it!

“Do you know, I think these Venusian people believe me a lunatic. They say I have been so ever since I visited a poison area, but then . . . they are trying even now to restrain me! I—”

The instrument suddenly stopped buzzing. With it, Stonehurst's hand dropped limply to his side. He gave the faintest of smiles, then slumped heavily forward on his notes.

Con steadied himself with terrific effort. In his mind's eye he was picturing the mad Bradley being dragged away by Venusians. He mastered a mad desire to burst out laughing.

“Insane!” he breathed. “He said he visited a poison area. It was not enough to kill him but it deranged his mentality, even as it deranges people's minds on earth. His scientific genius, matured by a resentment, made him evolve a frightful scheme. . . . God! He avenged himself on all the people in the world! And we fell for it!”

The scientists nodded slowly. The cold, inhuman brutality of Bradley's plan was all too evident now. Only a madman could have thought of it, anyway. Humanity was dying out; of that there was no question—humanity destroyed by the perverted genius of a man under the influence of the selfsame gas . . . !

Con stood swaying on his feet. There was laughter in his ears now. The scientists in front of him were grinning insanely.

He could feel great gusts of ironic laughter being torn from him, gusts that tore at his throbbing, twinging heart. The air was thick with deepening blue. . . . He swayed forward.

The darkness beyond was absolute.

[The end of *Laughter Out of Space* by John Russell Fearn (as Dennis Clive)]