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"Now you know how it feels to die!" he whispered

The Man From Hell

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

First published *Fantastic Adventures*, November 1939.

Dale Bradfield discovered atomic power, and was prepared to give the world the greatest of gifts. Then he was murdered and atomic power fell into the ruthless hands of Marvin Brant.

CHAPTER I

Murder!

“Gentlemen, atomic power is ours! As you are all aware I lodged with Dr. Carson yesterday the results of my five years’ research into the mysteries of atomic power. For next to no cost we can provide every city in the world with light, heat, and power. . . . And note these words, gentlemen! We have in our hands the greatest power man has ever known. It is born into a world crammed to the doors with diabolical armaments of every description. We all know how disastrously the attempt at world disarmament of 1970 ended. It is up to us to defy temptation. We must overrule the lust for barbarism and keep in check the desire for world-control which atomic force could certainly give us. I give my discovery to the world that it might benefit the world. . . . No more, no less.”

Dake Bradfield stopped speaking, his powerful hands resting on the broad table on the speaker’s platform. Then he stood upright, hands going to his hips, massive dark head thrown back. His piercing blue eyes passed swiftly over the faces of the hundred men gathered before him. For a moment he was conscious of the supreme power he represented. He of all men, son of a scientist, still only thirty-six years old, had done what all other men had failed to do—mastered the mystery of atomic power. His firm lips curved in a smile.

“I have nothing further to add, gentlemen,” he stated quietly, and sat down amidst a roar of applause.

But Dake Bradfield was not concerned with the eulogy: he was trying to efface from his mind the possible consequences of his discovery. Again he wondered if a world stalemated with arms was a safe place into which to bring atomic power. But the thing was done now! The formula was in the hands of Dr. Carson, respected President of the Scientific Research Association. Only he, Bradfield, and Elford—Secretary General to the Association—knew what the formula was about. But suppose there was a slip-up somewhere—

This was thinking too far ahead! Dake Bradfield forced his thoughts to the moment, was glad when the convention was at last over and he could escape outside into the great marble corridors of the Association Building.

He looked round eagerly amidst the swirling variety of people, nor was he disappointed. Presently, a slim auburn-haired girl in trim walking costume disentangled herself from the delegates and pressmen and came forward.

“Dake, you are marvelous!” she exclaimed, her dark eyes shining in admiration. “I heard it all over the relay speakers, of course. You predicted you would knock them cold—and you did! I’m proud of you, dear.”

Dake smiled, drew her arm through his. “The opinions of Sheila Carson matter more to me than all the vaporings of delegates,” he murmured. “If you think that, your father must think so as well. And since your father is my boss it sorta works out.”

They walked slowly along for a moment or two down the hall, then Dake spoke again.

“If every guy in the world had a girl like you to help him, we might have less bitterness,” he sighed. “Did you ever stop to think that you’ve wasted the best part of your life waiting for me?”

Sheila wrinkled her nose. "Well, you said you were too busy to marry me and settle down—and since you've proved your point now what does it matter? After all, our marriage is an insignificant thing compared to the discovery of atomic force. . . ." She broke off suddenly and gave him an indignant glance. "Say, what do you mean?—wasted the best part of my life? I'm seven years younger than you, remember. I'm no faded blossom yet!"

"Nope, I guess not," Dake amended. "Only I think sometimes I've been a bit of a heel making you wait. But now it's all finished with," he went on intensely, his blue eyes shining. "We'll be married tomorrow! We'll take a honeymoon for a vacation. God knows, I need one!"

"Tomorrow! But—but—"

"Special license. And no arguments! The best way to celebrate my success is to marry you. Now let's go and grab a bite to eat."

They turned away swiftly towards the dining rooms, unaware that the expressionless eyes of Elford, Secretary General to the Association, watched them go. Elford turned, a small and impassive enigma of a man, and walked unhurriedly out of the building.

On the topmost floor of the gigantic Brant Steel Corporation Building in the heart of New York reposed the sumptuous office of Marvin Brant himself, President of the Corporation, multimillionaire, autocrat, and quasidictator of America's teeming millions of average workers.

At the moment Brant was pacing his office very slowly with his plump hands locked behind him. He was a bullock of a man with vastly wide shoulders and the face of a champion bulldog. His hair though thinning was still raven black, an excellent testification to the iron strength of body that had lifted him from a smelting foundry to consummate power and wealth.

He paced his office as though he were alone, ignoring the man seated in the hide chair by the door. Not that the man seemed to mind. He smoked a cigarette leisurely and stared at the ceiling meditatively with steely bright gray eyes.

At last the desk buzzer sounded. Brant stopped his perambulations and snapped the switch.

"Well?" His voice was thick and husky, matching the folds of his heavy, pallid jowls.

"Mr. Jones to see you, sir."

"Send him right in."

Brant stood expectantly waiting, his keen eyes on the office door as 'Mr. Jones' came in. It was Secretary Elford. He glanced at the man in the chair, gave a calm nod of acknowledgment, then advanced to the desk.

"You heard and saw everything over the radio-televizor?" he asked the big man briefly.

"Naturally. What we're waiting for is your verification. *Has* this fellow Dake Bradfield *really* got atomic force?"

"No question of it," Elford replied in his level voice. "In the hands of the Science Association is the greatest power this world has ever seen, power which could have broken you down utterly, Brant, had you not had the wit to foresee what was coming."

The magnate's smile had no humor in it. "I sure had the right hunch when I engineered you the job as the Association's Secretary. In five years you have become installed as the essence of honor. It has been well worth the wait. Naturally you know where this formula is?"

“Do I!” Elford echoed, his pale eyes shining. “As the Secretary, Dr. Carson handed it over to me. It is entirely in my hands, and all you have to do, Brant, is pay me the sum agreed upon and the formula is yours. There are no copies of it, except in Bradfield’s own brain. Once I have taken the formula I shall vanish from the Association and team up with you—But I needn’t say any more.”

“No . . .” Brant whispered.

He sat down at his desk, rubbing his big paws together in grim exultancy. “At last we have it! Atomic power! What can we not do with that formula? I need it to save my own interests, yes—but we all need it for domination of the earth. You, Van Rutter, will use it for the creation of atomic shells, with which you will load our hidden air fleet in Europe . . .”

The man in the hide chair inclined his dark head. His lean, ascetic face was smiling twistedly. Henrich Van Rutter, of nationality unknown, was more than an arms magnate: his interests went beyond even the ruthless probings of Marvin Brant. But the two were inseparable because they knew each other’s power.

“You, Elford, will take control of my own munition and science laboratories under this very building,” Brant went on, turning to the Secretary suddenly. “You’ll be safe enough. Nothing can get into my laboratories, nothing. And every man is to be trusted. Between us we can master the earth.”

“Has this atomic force invention been tested by anybody else save Bradfield as yet?” asked Van Rutter sharply.

Elford shook his head. “He has given demonstrations, but our own scientists have yet to go to work. Bradfield’s formula shows how to release atomic force for commercial purposes, but he has withheld the secret of how to make explosives from it. Not that that signifies anything: our scientists will soon discover what to do. That I believe has been Bradfield’s main fear all along.”

“Bradfield,” said Brant slowly, “must disappear. I have it all arranged. As you know perhaps, Bradfield does not live in the city here. He prefers the privacy of a little isolated house two miles outside the metropolis. To reach his house he has to cover three miles of unmade road. That very fact makes him mainly immune from interference for an automobile cannot comfortably go along that road. Few people ever use it at all, in fact. Bradfield, my agents tell me, walks to and from his house every day to the city, probably for exercise. Tonight he will never reach home. He will be killed on the way.”

“And what if the shot is heard?” Elford asked quietly.

The big man scowled. “Who in hell said anything about shooting? Give me time to finish, can’t you! Bordering this unmade road on one side, in the midst of undeveloped land, are old mine workings. You remember the radium search in 1950 when some nut figured he’d found radium near here? Well, those disused workings are the result. Ultimately our friend Bradfield’s body will be thrown down one of the mine shafts. But first he’ll be strangled to death—soundlessly and efficiently. For that I shall engage my old friend Vanson, the one time Manhattan Strangler. He’s a crook anyway, ready for the hot seat any time I say the word. He’ll do any job for a reasonable sum.”

“And if the police track it all down?” Van Rutter questioned.

“Can you imagine the police being very interested in the disappearance of Dake Bradfield when all their energies will be directed on trying to find a stolen atomic force formula?” Brant asked with calm cunning. “And even if they do get ambitious I can always find a convenient

maniac to take the rap. Money can buy anything. It's better we use a common or garden way of killing Bradfield than anything elaborate. The more ordinary it is the more suspicion is deflected from us, even granting there is any at all. It's all so simple, gentlemen."

"Yes—I think you're right," Elford admitted finally.

"O.K., then, the rest is up to you. Get that formula!"

Dake Bradfield's mood was a happy one as he swung along that solitary country road between the metropolis and tiny garden city suburb where he had elected to make his home. He had left Sheila Carson in the city with a promise of an early arrival on the morrow. Then at last their long delayed marriage. Afterwards, the South Seas, Paris . . .

Dake whistled as he strolled along, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his navy blue overcoat. A cold full moon shone through lowering autumnal clouds. In the field to his right beyond the barbed wire fence reared the broken skeletons of the mine workings, relics of a brief period when man had thought radium was on his doorstep. Now it was atomic power: but that was no dream. It meant the start of a new age, an age of—

Suddenly Dake stopped in his tracks, conscious of a faint sound in the clinkery dust behind him. He twisted around, but at that identical moment something thin and strong dropped lightly round his neck and instantly drew taut. With a frantic desperation he lashed out at the massive form he could sense behind him.

His efforts were useless, not because he lacked strength but because he was at a disadvantage. Besides, that damned cord was crushing the wind out of his lungs. He pawed air helplessly, gulped and gargled, dropped heavily to his knees.

Tighter the cord constricted, and tighter. Dake felt his lungs turn to liquid fire: the moon span crazily before his eyes. Darkness swirled in upon him in a singing tide . . .

Vanson, the Manhattan Strangler, waited a while with the cord still in position, then at last he stooped and felt for his victim's heart. It had ceased to beat. Vanson smiled, pulled the cord away and thrust it in his pocket. For several seconds he stood looking down on the dead, tortured face in the moonlight.

"The easiest thousand smackers I ever earned," he commented thoughtfully, then humming a tune to himself he lifted Dake's heavy body onto his broad shoulders, ducked under the barbed wire fence, walked steadily across the empty field toward the nearest mine working. At the top of the first shaft he stopped, released the body and stood listening.

Some seconds afterwards there floated back to him from the bottom of the shaft a faint squelching thud, announcing Dake had landed in the heavy mud at the bottom.

Vanson dusted his coat with calm movements, readjusted his hat, drew on loud yellow gloves as he strolled languidly back to the deserted roadway.

CHAPTER II

Sheila Makes a Discovery

The following morning scare headlines blazed across the front of nearly every American newspaper—

ATOMIC FORCE SECRET STOLEN! INVENTOR DISAPPEARS! Then the full resume of facts, including the disappearance of Secretary General Elford from the Association. Had he too been killed and disposed of, like Dake Bradfield?

The police were suddenly thrown into desperate activity, working in collaboration with the Intelligence Service—but Brant had laid his plans well and diverted every clue into a blind alley that led nowhere. Certainly nobody suspected the steel magnate. He had, in the five years at his disposal, prepared for every possible eventuality. Nor for that matter did anybody doubt the character of Elford. It was presumed he had met a violent and mysterious end in common with Bradfield.

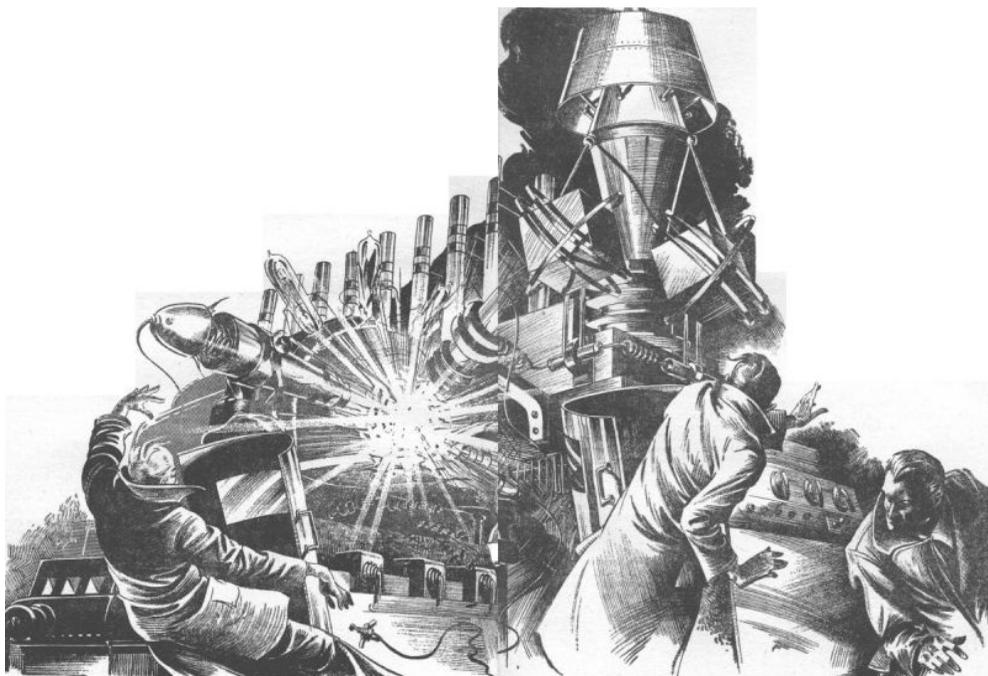
Dr. Carson, slim gray headed chief of the Association, was at his wits' end with worry. Upon him rested the sole responsibility for the theft. It would mean ruthless enquiries, accusations, probably the loss of his position for negligence, though God knew it had not been his fault. The whole business was an utter mystery to him.

To Sheila the news had come as an overwhelming shock. This day should have been her wedding day, the happiest of her life, was the cruelest of all. All through the morning she remained in something approaching a daze, then toward noon she bestirred herself far enough to dress and go down town to see what events had transpired.

"Nothing—nothing at all," her father told her drearily, once she was within his private office. "Frankly, my dear, though you know my heart goes out to you in your own sadness, I am far more concerned over the theft of that formula than anything else—"

"It's Dake I'm thinking of!" Sheila broke in with sudden fierceness. "He's got to be found, dad! Maybe he's been kidnapped or something. I just can't believe he's dead: it's too awful. . . Oh, what am I doing just sitting around talking? I—"

"Listen, Sheila—please!" Carson came round to her, looked earnestly into her tear stained face. "Dake's fate is only a small one when weighed in the balance with that formula theft. Do you not realize that it has fallen into the hands of an unscrupulous power? The very method of its theft shows that. There are no copies of that formula: they were to be made today, and Dake is the only man who knows all about it. He didn't even reveal the nature of his experiments to me. Oh, don't you see? There can even be war unless that formula is found! Dake's disappearance is matched against the possible slaughter of thousands of innocent people. Only a handful of police are engaged on trying to locate him and Elford. As the rest of the police, they're all looking for that formula. You must understand the situation, Sheila."



Suddenly Brant and his men were slammed back against the wall by a blinding flash of light and a stunning concussion as the copper dust ignited in one super-blast.

The girl nodded slowly, her lips tightening. "I understand all right, but the only thing that matters to me is Dake. I'm going to investigate for myself! I'm going over every inch of the route he must have taken to get home after leaving me last night. I've got to find him, dad! He means everything in the world to me."

"But Sheila, there may be danger—"

"I'll risk it!" she retorted stubbornly, jumping to her feet. "I'm not waiting for the police, or for anybody. I'm starting right now!"

Carson relaxed as he watched her go. He knew it was useless to argue. She was too much like him for that.

In the immense laboratory of Marvin Brant, completely hidden from the world and safe from attack under the Brant building itself, protected by five foot walls and ceiling of concrete and steel, white-smocked technicians worked with steady industry.

They had worked in relays through the night ever since Elford had brought in the formula at midnight the previous evening. Marvin Brant himself, sullen with impatience, wandered around the hot hive of industry, understanding little and condemning much, while behind him strolled the impassive Elford and alert Van Rutter.

"How the hell much longer are you going to be?" Brant demanded at last, stopping before a thin-lipped scientist with a broom of black hair sprouting from his big head.

The man glanced up from studying an equipment of globes, vacuum tubes, and projectors. He gave a taut smile.

"I think we're ready, Mr. Brant. The actual production of atomic force is achieved by etherial waves which are generated by vibration projectors. These incorporate a certain wavelength which shatters the molecular structure of matter and releases the—"

"Be damned to that!" Brant snorted. "I'm no scientist. How do we make bombs? *That's* what I want to know!"

"It won't be difficult," the scientist responded. "A shell made of copper can be fitted with a small detonator apparatus. The moment the detonator impacts with anything it will momentarily release the required vibration through the shell, which will of course transform into free energy. I have the men making a small shell and detonator right now. All they want is the exact wavelength for incorporation in the apparatus. I think I have it. I've rigged up this makeshift projector to find out."

"Then get busy, man! What are we waiting for?"

The physicist nodded to the tiny grains on the receiving plate of the apparatus. "I'm going to disrupt those," he said briefly. "If Bradfield's calculations are right they will explode with plenty of violence, but the plate underneath will be untouched. I have got an insulating current running through it. You see, there is a wavelength which can protect as well as destroy, and —"

"Endicott, I pay you to show results, not to lecture," Brant broke in, with ominous calm. Then he glanced at the reddish dust in some perplexity. "You don't expect to get anything from this, do you?" he demanded. "What is it, anyway?"

"Copper dust." Endicott smiled grimly. "I fancy you will be a trifle surprised. Just stand back—all of you." He glanced across at the other technicians. "Ready, boys?"

They nodded, and got their distance. Endicott closed knife switches, his eyes on the receiving plate. Brant watched uneasily as the multiple tubes glowed brightly, as the lenses of the roughly erected projectors shone with unholy luminance—

Then suddenly all the men were slammed back against the wall by a blinding flash of light and stunning concussion. Noise struck deep into their eardrums, scorching wind singed their eyebrows and hair.

When finally the balls of fire had receded from before their eyes they found themselves staring at an apparatus in total ruins, a mass of twisted girders and broken plates.

"My God, what power!" Brant whispered. "It's unholy! You actually mean, Endicott, that that explosion came solely from that copper dust?"

The scientist nodded: he was looking thoughtful.

"We've got the wavelength all right, but we've also proved something else. I had hoped we could devise an atomic force projector to disrupt cities on the death-ray principle, but this shows it cannot be done. The projector itself shatters. Bradfield had a system of his own for manufacturing a metal impervious to the release of atomic force with which he intended to build generating plants. Those details are not given in the formula."

"I don't want projectors anyway: I want bombs," Brant breathed, clenching his fists. "I want the power to smash a city with one bomb, to hold a threat over the world. Eh, Van Rutter?"

"I am wondering," the arms king said, "where you intend to drop an experimental bomb? I presume it will be from an airplane?"

"Naturally." Brant gave a triumphant grin. "I have been planning again. We could drop our bomb in the ocean, only it might attract attention. Suppose though we dropped it near, or even

on the mine workings where friend Bradfield met his death? Those old workings blow up now and again from fire-damp. One explosion more would not be considered strange, and at the same time we'd eliminate all traces of Bradfield who is lying, so Vanson told me, at the bottom of shaft number one. Simple, isn't it? And quite deserted around there too."

"Depends on the size of the bomb," said Elford, with a significant glance at the shattered apparatus.

"About half an inch diameter," Endicott remarked. "That will be ample for a test. Now I know the wavelength I can have it finished in another three hours."

Brant gave a slow nod and looked at Elford. "See to it that a plane is ready in three hours," he ordered. "A small bomber from my own flying ground will do. To carry four. . ."

It was late afternoon when Sheila Carson reached the lonely road leading to the garden city suburb. She walked slowly, watching keenly as she went, but the landscape remained undisturbed. On one side of her was the high grass bank: on the other the field with the mine workings. Footprints there were none: the road was too full of hard ruts and clinkers for that.

For half an hour she wandered on. An hour went by— Then she paused, having covered perhaps a mile and a half in the time. Her gaze fixed itself to a piece of fabric clinging to the spike of the barbed wire fence bordering the mine field. In another moment she snatched it free, turned it over in her hands. Blue cloth? She recalled Dake's overcoat of the night before.

With a racing heart she looked around her, then finally toward the mine workings. Stooping, she eased herself through the fence and raced across the intervening stretch of muddy field, following as she went the heavy imprints of a man's boots. Heavy because he had carried somebody? It was a hunch far closer to truth than she realized.

But when she reached the mine workings it was a different matter. The skeleton towers of wood and steel loomed all around her. There were monstrous pyramids of disgorged earth, treacherous seams and crevices. She moved warily, calling as she went.

"Dake! Dake! Oh, *Da-ake!*"

That there was no reply did not deter her. One by one she looked down the deep shafts of the abysmal mines into the darkness at the bottom, until she picked up the footprints again and found them leading to a shaft somewhat separated from the others. With a vague giddiness rolling round her head she peered into the pit, hesitating. She knew she had found the right shaft, that Dake was possibly at the bottom of it despite the fact there was no answer to her call. But had she the nerve to venture down there, alone and unaided by rope?

It was as she stood there debating that a beating hum crept into her ears, growing steadily louder. In vague surprise she glanced up, frowning as she studied a small fast bomber flying directly over the mines, circling to keep them objectified. Though she was already practically concealed by the mine's tower some inner premonition warned her of danger. Gently she moved into the massive shadowed protection of a girder, stood watching interestedly.

She did not have to watch for long. Unexpectedly, she seemed to be suddenly flung in the midst of hell! The world in front of her opened up in blinding fire as the clear field just beyond the workings was riven with explosion. She was flung off her feet and hurled backward like a rag doll, landed face downward amidst earth and rubbish, her ears singing with the roar of the concussion. Heat and choking fumes swept round her. Earth and stones came down in a deluge, most of it prevented from falling on her by the solid mass of the tower. Then the world was silent again, silent except for the drone of the plane.

Sheila moved slowly, raised her face and looked cautiously about her. Where open field had been was a crater some twelve feet wide and perhaps eight feet deep. She got slowly to her feet, wiggling her fingers in her ears to clear them again. With weak knees she tottered forward, stopped at the edge of the working and stood well concealed, watching the airplane come swiftly to earth near the crater. It taxied for a moment, then the pilot reduced the engine to a tick.

“Marvin Brant!” Sheila whispered incredulously to herself, as the first figure climbed through the opened doorway. She would know the steel magnate anywhere. She pressed herself into deeper concealment as Secretary Elford followed. Van Rutter and Endicott she did not know: but in any case she had seen enough.

“Lovely! Lovely!” Brant’s thick, ecstatic voice carried quite clearly in the still air. “From a bomb half an inch wide we got this! Just think what a ton bomb could do! Van Rutter, we can master the earth! We’ve got everything tied up in bows.”

There was silence for a moment as the group studied the crater, then the plane’s pilot came ambling forward. Brant swung on him suddenly.

“Say you, why the hell didn’t you drop that shell right on the mine shaftings as I told you? According to Vanson, Bradfield’s body is in that first shaft there. Why didn’t you drop the bomb on it?”

“Sorry, Mr. Brant. I guess the thing was so darned tiny I had my aim all wrong.”

“O.K., maybe we’ll try again later,” Brant grunted.

“We’d better get out of here,” Van Rutter remarked abruptly. “Some of those people from the garden city will start blowing along if we don’t. We can say we saw the explosion happen, of course, but I’d sooner keep in the clear. Let’s go. Satisfied, Endicott?”

The scientist nodded. “Quite. I know now that these bombs will smash earth, rock, and metal. The rest is simplicity itself.”

The men turned back to their plane. Sheila remained in her position, watching as the propeller started up again. Only when the plane had climbed far into the sky and disappeared toward New York City did she dare to move. Her eyes were narrowed bitterly.

“So it was Elford who stole that formula—for Brant! All right; now *we* know what to do.”

Springing from her concealment she hurried across the field to the road as fast as her still shaky legs would take her. Half an hour or so later she was in a taxi being whirled to the Science Association.

Dr. Carson listened in grim silence as she told her story. If he needed any proof at all the girl’s dirt-caked clothing and frantic eyes were sufficient.

“. . . so Duke’s down the first shaft,” she finished hoarsely. “Vanson is a wrestler or something: I’ve heard of him before. Dad, we’ve got to get Duke to the surface. By myself I dared not try.”

“No, of course not.” Carson compressed his lips. “So it is Brant at the bottom of all this, eh? It’s one thing to know he is responsible, but decidedly another to prove it!”

“But—but I *saw* him and those others drop that bomb! At least we can have Vanson arrested.”

Carson shook his head slowly, his face serious. “Brant is the most powerful man in this city. You can be assured that Vanson is under his protection. He’d get him freed instantly. We’re dealing with a man who is utterly ruthless, Sheila. He can crush you, and me, the whole Association, without effort. No, we’ve got to think very carefully before we act. However . . .” Carson got to his feet briskly. “I’ll notify the authorities and let them worry over it. For our

part we'll get over to the mine with equipment right away. While you get changed I'll gather the boys. Be ready in fifteen minutes."

In his own office Marvin Brant was smiling complacently as he regarded Elford and Van Rutter.

"You know what to do Van Rutter?"

"Of course." The arms man thoughtfully regarded the photostatic print of the atomic force formula, then slipped it in his brief case. "I'll have every available factory in my European ring working at full pressure right away. After that it is simply a matter of loading the planes with bombs. Five hundred planes carrying no insignia are already waiting at the European underground base."

"Good!" Brant's eyes gleamed. "You, Elford, will work in conjunction with Endicott and see to it that bomb manufacture goes right ahead. We go into action in seven days . . ."

CHAPTER III

The Phantom Avenger

The autumn dusk was closing down when Dr. Carson, Sheila, and the workmen arrived with their mobile van at the mine workings.

Carson remained silent as the girl pointed toward the crater in the dying light, then she turned eagerly and flashed on her torch, pointed to the heavy footprints leading to the first mine working.

Carson stared into the black, windy depths and stroked his chin. Then he glanced around the landscape.

“Better lay off the searchlight for the moment, boys: we don’t want to attract attention if we can help it. O.K., Hurst, let’s get started.”

The gang boss nodded, signaled to his boys. Between them they slung a thick rope out into space, fixed it quickly to a pulley, let the free end hang over the shaft. Followed a snapping of clips and a cradle was in position.

“I’ll take it,” said one of the men briefly, a broad shouldered giant in corduroy. He settled himself in the cradle, switched on his torch, then gave a nod. The winch on the truck started to unwind the rope slowly.

Leaning as near the edge of the shaft as they dared Carson and the girl watched anxiously as the torch light went bobbing into the emptiness below. It became remote, vanished at last as the man’s body presumably hid it from sight.

“He’s a long time,” Carson said at last, uneasily—then the words were no sooner out of his mouth than from the shaft there came an unearthly, echoing scream—a scream of mortal anguish followed by heavy silence.

“Say—what in hell was that?” whispered the foreman huskily.

“Pull him up—pull him up!” Carson panted, recovering himself suddenly. “Quick, man!”

Instantly horny hands tugged on the rope winch handle. After twelve turns the dead weight in the cradle came sprawling like a sack of coals over the shaft edge. It was the laborer all right, gasping and choking heavily.

“What’s the matter, man?” Carson shouted, seizing him. “What went wrong down there?”

The man breathed erratically, swallowed air in great gulps.

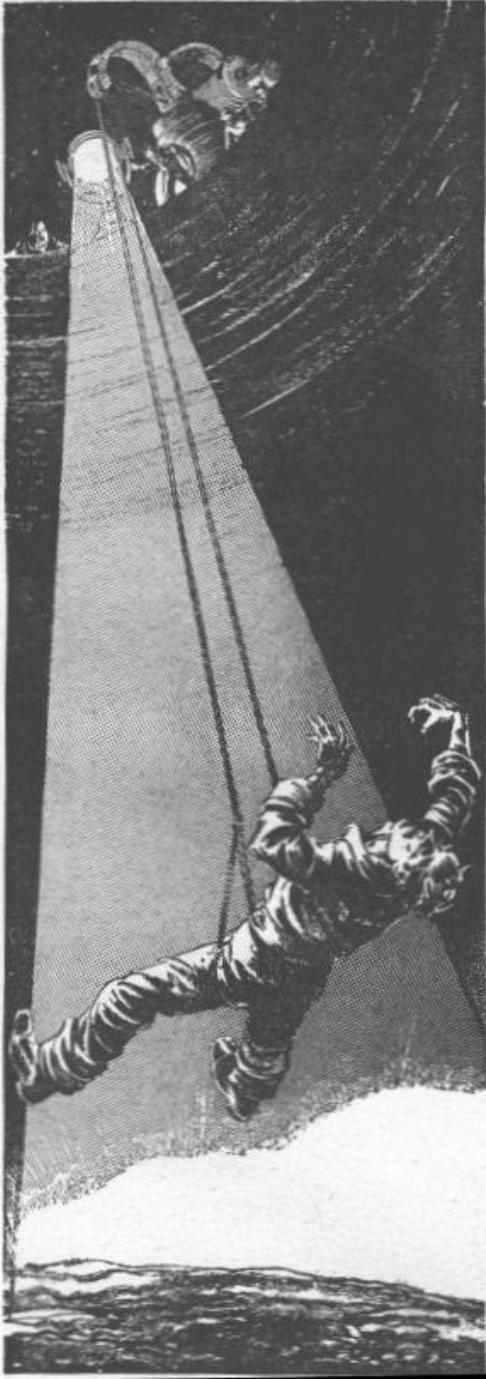
“Something—something horrible down there, Doc. Like—like bayonets going through my heart. I guess—I fainted—”

“Was Dake Bradfield there?” Carson demanded.

“No—the shaft’s empty. . . .” The man stopped, made a twisting motion, then relaxed. In horrified silence the group glanced at one another. Then Hurst stepped forward and took the man’s pulse.

“He’s dead, chief,” he said soberly, glancing up.

Carson’s jaw set. “A man of his strength killed by something we do not understand, and no sign of Dake in the shaft. Listen, Sheila, either you were wrong in what you heard or—you are quite convinced you heard Brant say that Vanson had thrown Dake’s body down this shaft. You are sure you *saw* Brant, Van Rutter, and the rest of them?”



"Pull him up—pull him up!" Carson shouted. "Something's happening down

The girl nodded wearily. "Of course! Let's have the searchlight down the shaft. We should have done it at first."

Carson nodded to the waiting Hurst. The dead man was gently lifted onto the truck, then the searchlight swung into action, poured its blazing beam down the shaft. Motionless, the party gazed to the bottom of the length. The light reflected slightly from soft mud.

"There are ruts all the way up the shaft," Hurst remarked at length. "A guy *could* climb up—"

"Don't talk rubbish!" Carson snapped. "Dake Bradfield was dead."

"But suppose he wasn't?" Sheila put in quickly. "That soft mud would save him from injury if he fell slackly."

Carson stood brooding. Hurst said, "Well, he ain't there anyway. What's next, chief?"

"I wonder what he means by bayonets through his heart?" Carson's keen eyes wandered to the position of the bomb crater in the darkness.

"You boys stay here," he said suddenly. "Kill that searchlight and wait for me. I'm going back to headquarters for some instruments. Whatever killed Mason must have a scientific explanation, and I think it just possible that bomb crater may have something to do with it. Come Sheila."

He turned swiftly towards the car parked next the truck.

Vanson, the Manhattan Strangler, put the finishing touches to his bow tie, patted his tuxedo in satisfaction, then turned from the dressing table mirror. Humming through his heavy, scarred lips he walked briskly into the comfortably furnished lay-out of the drawing room. This uptown apartment did not match his personality, but what of it? It was a good joint to bring a blonde to.

He turned to the wall-safe, twisted the combination wheel, took out a wad of

there!"

currency.

"A thousand smackers for bumping a guy off with a piece of sash cord," he said slowly. "Brant sure pays well for service—and did he get good service!" He flexed his vast shoulders, stuffed the notes in his wallet, then glanced at his watch. In ten minutes he was due to pick up Daphne Gibson. Then—

He grinned in anticipation. Daphne wasn't too tough when a guy with money wanted to do a spot of necking. Supper uptown, then back here. . . .

Humming leisurely again, Vanson shut the safe and ambled over to his hat and coat, put them on with the air of the gentleman he fancied he resembled. He moved to the main door, then stopped at a sound behind him. Slowly he turned to look at the cause of it—and if Vanson had never known fright in his life before he certainly knew it now.

A motionless figure stood in the doorway leading to the bedroom—a figure in a torn, clay-caked suit, a figure with dark hair trailing down over his ashy, merciless face. There were eyes watching from that face, eyes that did not blink, eyes of piercing blue that took account of every move. The mouth was one straight line, unyielding and inflexible.

Slowly Vanson's horrified gaze traveled to the apparition's hands. They were level, and apart, holding a length of sash cord between them.

"Dake Bradfield!"

The words belted from Vanson's lips by the sheer force of the terror behind them. He stumbled backward for the door, fumbled with the knob, fished for the key. The door was locked, being the outer one, and somehow that key failed to work in his paralyzed fingers. All the time he kept his eyes fixed on that figure. He could feel sweat pouring down his face.

"Why did you kill me, Vanson?" the figure asked at last, in a cold, brittle voice—and at the same time he advanced with soundless tread, the cord dangling from his fingers.

"I—I didn't!" Vanson shouted hysterically. "Now listen, get this straight! Give me a break, can't you? I—"

"You killed me, Vanson, for a thousand dollars," Bradfield said, in the same dead level voice. "I heard you say so when you took your money from the safe. I came through your bedroom window. You killed me, Vanson, and now I'm going to kill you. Simple, is it not?"

"But—but you can't! You died! I—"

Vanson broke off and made a dash for it, but that was his undoing. The cord dropped suddenly round his bull neck and pulled taut. He twisted, lashed around with a ham of a fist, but another like the bumper of an automobile crashed into his jaw and sent him reeling.

He fought helplessly against relentless, overpowering strength. His muscles seemed like putty against the man he had killed. This strangling cord. . . . As he reeled into darkness he saw that gray, unsmiling face watching him.

Bradfield left the cord where it was round the Strangler's neck, went out silently the way he had entered.

It was midnight before Dr. Carson finished his experiments with a battery of instruments at the mine working. His face was perplexed in the light of the moon.

"I don't understand it!" he declared worriedly. "The instruments show that some kind of powerful radiation is prevalent in the bottom of the shaft. But it doesn't fit into any classification I know of. I thought at first it might be the emanations of radium, that there might really be radium deposits down there. Now I realize I am wrong."

"Then Mason got the full force of this radiation?" Hurst asked quickly.

“Yes: none of which explains where Bradfield has vanished.”

“What—what do we do now?” Sheila asked anxiously.

“What *can* we do?” Carson turned disconsolately to the car. “All I can do is turn these instruments over to the Association for examination and see if they can analyze anything. The police will have to try and solve the mystery of Bradfield. Come, my dear. It’s no use standing moping here. Besides, we’re in danger all the time we stop here. Brant and his men might come along—

“All right, boys, pack up and let’s get home.”

Sheila turned slowly away, too miserable to speak a word.

Henrich Van Rutter stirred uneasily in bed, aware of a distant strident noise. By degrees wakefulness came to him: he switched on the light and squeezed his eyes at the telephone, lazily lifted the receiver.

“Well?” he yawned into the mouthpiece.

“Van Rutter? Say, something terrible’s happened!” The urgent voice of Marvin Brant at the other end of the wire was sufficient to spurt the arms king into alertness. He stared at his watch—2:20 a.m. What the hell did the big fellow want at this hour. And as he thought, he listened.

“. . . and Vanson has been killed, strangled with a piece of sash cord. It’s serious, Van: somebody’s onto our plans.”

“Needless worry,” Van Rutter growled. “Probably some pal of that ape’s that had a grudge against him—”

“Then why was he strangled in the same manner as Dake Bradfield?” Brant demanded. “Suppose Bradfield didn’t die after all? I only got the news a little while ago. A dame called Daphne Gibson rang up and asked me for help. She was found at Vanson’s apartment and the police are holding her. I’ll help her, of course. She wouldn’t have the strength to strangle Vanson anyway.”

“And what now?” Van Rutter asked, with ominous calm.

“We’ve got to hurry things up, Van. You were planning to start for Europe tomorrow, weren’t you?”

“Correct. Everything to be ready in seven days.”

“We’ve got to alter that,” Brant said grimly. “You must leave for Europe within the hour, and we want action before seven days. How soon can you make it?”

“I can have a hundred bombs manufactured by sundown tomorrow if I get my factories on double shift. A hundred can do plenty of damage for a first warning. The rest can follow for the attack proper.”

“O.K.!” Brant sounded relieved. “Hop to it, and let me know how you make out. I’ll increase the shift on my own production too.”

Van Rutter hopped out of bed, yelled hoarsely for his manservant. . . .

At the other end of the wire, Brant sitting up in bed like a vast porpoise in a vividly striped pajama suit, dialed another number with frantic haste.

“Elford?” he snapped, as that calm voice answered him.

“Yes, Mr. Brant. Anything wrong?”

“Plenty! I have an uneasy feeling that Bradfield isn’t dead after all. I’ve no time for details now; I’ll tell you tomorrow. Where’s Endicott?”

“Home. I’m supervising the shift.”

“Get Endicott and tell him the shift’s doubled. Press every available scientist into action. We want bombs in half the time we planned. Understand?”

“Right!” Elford rang off without further questions.

“Good man, Elford,” Brant muttered, lying back on the pillow and meditating. “Knows how to keep his trap shut.”

He switched the light off and composed himself for slumber again. But somehow he could not doze off; his mind was too active at this sudden upset in his plans. He opened his eyes again and lay looking at the long oblong of moonlight cast through the unshaded window.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when he saw the moonlight dim before a shadow—the outline of a man’s head and shoulders. He lay rigid, listening, heard the window catch slide back gently. Through his eyelashes he watched a figure jump softly down into the moonlit area and stand watching him.

Stealthily, Brant’s hand crept under his pillow and closed on the revolver that always lay there. Then in one movement he whipped the gun level and fired—the figure did not budge for a moment, then it came through the smoke of the discharge, switched on the bedside lamp, and stood glaring down with unholy calm.

“Bradfield!” the steel man gulped. “Then my guess was right!”

Bradfield said nothing, but his hand shot out abruptly and whipped the gun from Brant’s hand, sent it spinning across the room. That done, he wrenched free the telephone wire from wall and phone and swung it gently between his hands. Brant lay watching with his eyes popping.

“At your orders,” Bradfield said slowly, “Vanson strangled me with a piece of cord and threw me down a mine shaft. For something like fifteen hours I was dead! *Dead!* Then I came back to life. How, is my business. Of all the men that have ever died, Brant, one came back—and that one is me! I have many things to do, but vengeance comes first. I have killed Vanson; I shall kill you. Then Elford, then Van Rutter. One by one!”

“Wait!” Brant exclaimed, his jowls quivering. “I’ll give you back the formula. It hasn’t been used yet.” He thought swiftly of Van Rutter’s photostatic copies. “I’ll—I’ll give it back to you and a million dollars in cash. That’s a fair bargain!”

“You consider that fair recompense for seeing beyond the grave?” Bradfield’s voice contained an awful, chilling solemnity.

“Two million then—anything you want!” Brant was sweating visibly.

“*Anything?*”

“You have only to name it!” Brant cried, hope flooding his ashy visage.

“Very well, I will. I want your life!” And with that Bradfield’s hands suddenly shot out and whipped the telephone cord round the magnate’s neck. It tightened with irresistible force.

“Now you know how I felt, as I died,” Bradfield whispered. “It got tighter—and tighter, like this, until. . .” He left the cord knotted and watched the final threshings of the gross form amidst the bedclothes. That empurpled face with its starting eyes was not a pretty picture.

“At this moment it is a cleaner, sweeter world for being without such as you.” Bradfield spoke to the dead man calmly, then he glanced up at a sudden hammering on the door.

“Mr. Brant, are you all right, sir? I heard a shot a few moments ago. Mr. Brant—”

Bradfield turned, glanced toward the buried bullet in the window frame whither Brant’s lightning aim had sent it, then he moved to the window and slid out gently into the night.

“Van Rutter. . .” he mused as he dropped to the grounds.

The newspapers next morning carried a conglomeration of news, most of it under the heading of—

MARVIN BRANT MURDERED

All over America people read of the magnate's death at the hands of an unknown slayer. The parallel case of Vanson was quoted, but not played up. Some people were sorry to hear the news—Brant's financial friends mainly—but everybody was disturbed by the hints contained in the general write-up.

“. . . and according to our European representative's information, received only an hour ago, the death of Marvin Brant will have wide repercussions. It is not even improbable that International complications may develop between this country and Europe. Henrich Van Rutter, the eminent arms king, hinted at possible complications in an early interview this morning when he landed at Paris airport to attend to financial matters precipitated by Brant's death. It is thought. . .”

So it went on, until most Americans realized that the death of Marvin Brant was to mean far more than just that. His interests were so far reaching, so complex.

Sheila Carson, haggard from a restless night, burst into her father's office during the morning, waving the newspaper in her hand.

“You've read this, dad?” she asked breathlessly, and he nodded gravely.

“Long ago, over breakfast.”

“It's Dake!” the girl cried, her eyes wide. “I—I can sort of feel it inside me. Brant and Vanson both died the same way as Dake, and since we couldn't find Dake it proves—”

“It might prove that the man who murdered Dake also murdered Vanson and Brant,” Carson said quietly, then at the girl's troubled look he came round the desk and gently put an arm round her shoulders.

“You've got to think clearly, Sheila,” he went on gravely. “Don't get hysterical notions because you want them to be true. I realize what you're thinking—but I've been thinking a bit longer than you. It cannot be Dake because he was killed and nobody can come back from death. Certainly this strangler has done us a good turn by killing Brant—but there's an even more dangerous enemy in Van Rutter. In that newspaper it says he went to Europe to settle up Brant's affairs. Brant, according to the police, was strangled at 2:40 this morning. Van Rutter, however, caught the 3:00 a.m. express air liner for Paris. He could not have known of Brant's death when he started off, as he'd have us believe. He must have got news over the radio as the plane flew and altered his story to match up with it in Europe.

“So why did he *really* go to Europe? An arms king does not go there at such frantic short notice without grim meaning behind it. We can assume he has the atomic force secret in his possession, that he went under the orders of Brant. All of which means trouble with a capital T. For one moment I dared to suspect that *he* had killed Brant until the time discrepancy showed he couldn't have done it in the time. The airport authorities cleared that up very quickly.”

“Elford, perhaps?” Sheila mused: then she shook her head firmly. “No, dad, it was Dake! Call it intuition, but I'm convinced—”

She broke off and waited as the desk buzzer sounded.

“Well?” Carson said brusquely.

The girl's voice in the outer office was nearly a whisper. "There is a strange man out here who says he must see you, Dr. Carson. He has got sticking plasters on his face and dark glasses. Says the name is Mr. Brown."

"Brown?" Carson frowned. "Oh, send him away. I'm too busy right now to—"

"He says he can tell you about Marvin Brant."

"He can! That's different. Show him in. . ."

Sheila and Carson stood watching curiously as the individual with the dark glass and long overcoat was admitted. He waited until the door closed, then swiftly locked it. Rapidly he pulled off his soft hat, glasses, and plasters, revealed his face in all its ashy whiteness.

"Dake!" Sheila screamed, springing up. "Oh, Dake, thank God you're safe! I—I—thought —"

"Quiet!" he commanded, as she flung her arms about him. "I don't want to give myself away. I'm just Mr. Brown."

"I don't care who you are—you're safe," Sheila whispered, then she looked up surprisedly as he pushed her gently away.

"Not now," he said shortly. "That can come later—"

"So you were not killed after all?" Carson asked levelly.

"Well of course he wasn't!" Sheila exclaimed. "What more proof do you want than him standing here? Dake, you—you look ill. Did you hurt yourself getting out of that mine?"

He hesitated briefly, then said, "No, I guess not. That does not matter right now. My worry at the moment is that Van Rutter got away. I killed both Vanson and Marvin Brant last night, but when I went for Rutter he was missing. I've found since that he went to Europe. I might never find him there. Neither can I get at Elford, deep under the Brant building."

"Then you knew Brant was the one who tried to have you killed?" Carson said.

"I knew the facts from you and Sheila. When you were at the minehead I was close by, heard all you had to say."

"You let us go to all that trouble!" Sheila exclaimed, amazed. "That wasn't very—"

"I had no time to explain then," Dake broke in. "I set out to find Vanson and Brant. I may as well tell you I'm alarmed. From the morning papers I believe Van Rutter had some orders from Brant before I strangled him—and from the trend I'd say my stolen atomic force is going to plunge us into devastating war before many days have gone by. To find Van Rutter or Elford now and stop them is impossible. The only other course is to defeat this attempt at domination by scientific means. I only hope to Heaven I have the time."

"Time? For what?" Carson frowned.

Dake gave a start. "Nothing—just something I was thinking about." He looked at the pair steadily. "I know you're puzzled by all this, but you're going to be even more puzzled when I tell you that I *was* strangled. I died. For fifteen hours I lay dead at the bottom of that shaft, and then—I *returned to life!* I cannot describe it. It was both horrible yet fascinating, like awakening from a long adventure in a strange land."

He stopped. Father and daughter were staring at him blankly.

"It—it isn't possible!" Sheila stammered, white-faced.

"It happened," he said gravely. "And while I was dead I saw and heard so many things. Learned so much. Some day you will know. . ." He stared in front of him: for a moment he was a man apart.

Then Carson said slowly, “Is it possible that that atomic bomb crater had anything to do with bringing you back to life?”

“Maybe.” Dake listened attentively as the doctor went through the story of Mason’s strange death and the ultimate recordings of the instruments.

“Is it possible,” Dake mused, “that atomic force has other powers of which we never even dreamed? The power of life and death? While I was dead I gained knowledge, enough knowledge, to work out all the powers of atomic force, given time. Since you made instrument recordings the task won’t be so hard. My return to life must have had something to do with that bomb. I’ll find out . . . if I have the time.”

“Dake, why do you keep saying that?” Sheila asked, stirred by an uneasy premonition.

He did not answer. Instead he said, “We must prepare, Doc. I want the full run of the laboratories to put certain ideas into effect. The staff will help us whilst maintaining secrecy. We face a very real danger from Van Rutter. Strange indeed if the dead defeat the living! For such it really amounts to.”

He turned, donned glasses and sticking plaster again.

“I’m waiting, Doc. How soon do we get down to the lab?”

“Now,” the scientist answered quietly, and glanced mystifiedly at the girl. He fancied he saw a faint horror in her eyes, a horror that her waxen smile could not entirely hide.

Death had changed Dake Bradfield in some subtle, unexplained way. He was unquestionably a man from Beyond. And marriage? The very idea of it seemed completely forgotten.

CHAPTER IV

Cataclysm

Paris saw them first, against the wild autumnal sunset. Out of the silence of that fateful October evening came a low droning note, at first attracting no attention, then gradually establishing itself in the senses as a very definite thing—the roar of airplane engines. The frontier posts of France, always manned, became sudden hives of industry. Alarm gongs rang throughout the mighty entrenchments of the Maginot Line.

Fifty unknown airplanes heading toward Paris in V-formation from the direction of Russia! By radio the news flashed to Paris headquarters. Possibly undeclared war from somewhere! The reports became an expanding ball of frenzied warning reaching to all parts of the world.

Russia, the mighty, the mysterious, evolving unknown plans through numberless years, had decided to strike. The planes *must* be Russian. The planes of every other country were recognizable. Paris waited, warned in five minutes of the approaching horde. Not very many people were concerned. Possibly it was a trial flight by somebody or other; somehow frontier laws had been violated. As for a possible attack, nobody believed it. The French authorities went about the task of demanding inquiry from Russian headquarters.

Air-raid warnings sounded in Paris. Antiaircraft guns swung to the defensive. Searchlights penciled through the twilight. If it was a mistake it would be good training, anyway— But it was no mistake! In another fifteen minutes, flying at bombing height and with a velocity making them difficult to catch with the hastily manned guns, the planes arrived.

No air raid in military archives, no earthquake in history, could match the fifteen minutes that followed. Three shells dropped simultaneously and Paris lifted right out of the earth! Endless miles of brick, steel and concrete lifted in crumbling ruin to the skies, fell back in a thundering deluge of debris. High quarters, low quarters, business and suburban regions. The whole lot went up in blinding explosive fire under the impact of atomic force. Nor did it end there. A cataclysm followed as the English Channel raged over the ruptured land and pounded a new coastline where Angers and Dijon had formerly stood.

The horror, the incredible violence of those bombs, was something defeating imagination. Three bombs, no more, and half France ceased to exist. There were no survivors. The people were destroyed before they realized what had happened to them. And those of other countries who had felt the earthquake concussions only had a glimpse of planes returning toward Russia as genuine night began to fall.

The world waited, stunned. But the wait was not for long.

At 10:00 p.m. a radio call on an unknown wavelength swamped the frantic yammerings of newscasters. A voice spoke with clear-cut decision. England heard it, and America, and in other countries interpreters went to work. Hardly anybody in the world did not hear that voice.

In the laboratories of the Science Association, Bradfield, Sheila, Dr. Carson, and the assembled scientists stood listening in grim silence.

“I address this communication to the respective Governmental heads of every country in the world. All of you have seen what happened to France. That country, as a country, has ceased to be. I have power such as no man has ever known before. I can destroy, ruthlessly:

but I can also build. I have no intention of destroying anything further for the pure sake of it. France was used as an example. Here is my ultimatum—

“Each country individually will resign its existing form of government and surrender unconditionally to me. Who I am will be revealed in due course. You may rest assured that my rule will be one of progress. If my ultimatum is accepted, agents will make themselves known at a specified time. They will complete the legal negotiations. If the ultimatum is refused, remember France!

“You have until midnight on Wednesday, four days hence, to decide. Broadcast your decision: I shall hear it. A last warning—any attempt to find me will result not only in the destruction of the investigator, but in the annihilation of the country he represents. That is all. Think carefully.”

The communication ceased. Dake reached forth his hand and switched off, then gazed on the morose assembly.

“Obviously Van Rutter,” Carson said finally.

“And if that massacre he pulled in France is any guide he means it too,” Sheila exclaimed. “He must be an idiot, though: he might know that no Government will accede to a demand like that. The world is armed to the teeth anyway. There’ll be the most unholy war over it.”

“Four days,” Dake mused. “I just wonder if it’s possible for me to do it in the time?”

“Do what?” Carson’s voice was clipped with impatience. “Even if we manufactured similar atomic bombs we’d only create havoc just as bad. He’s got us cornered, Dake.”

The scientist paused as he saw Dake smiling, that cold infinitely superior smile.

“There are some things about atomic power which Van Rutter does not know,” Dake said slowly. “And there are some things about science which I never knew—until I died. I thought when I had found how to release atomic force that I had discovered the mightiest of powers. But what I learned beyond death showed me that I had but unfastened the first of many doors, leading to deeper and more formidable forces, basic universe strata.”

Involuntarily Sheila Carson gave a little shiver. There was something eerie, overpowering, about the inhuman calm Dake radiated. There was something frightening in his constant reference to after-death experience.

“Just—just what are you getting at?” Carson questioned.

“I found spatial power . . .”

“Seem to have heard of that some somewhere.” Carson thought for a moment. “Theoretically, of course.”^[1]

[1] It was Soddy, in his “Matter and Energy,” who said there might be another power of which we know nothing, from which electricity and other forces are merely offshoots.—Author.

“You’re right,” Dake said, with a quiet nod. The first man to moot spatial power was Aristotle. “But Soddy slightly enlarged on the original theory.”

Carson laughed shortly. “Some use that is. Aristotle’s been dead for centuries—since around 400 B.C.!”

“Did you ever stop to think how much his mind could have progressed in the time that has passed since then to the present day?” Dake asked quietly. “I met Aristotle—out there. I met them all—the ancients and moderns who have died—Sir William Barrett, Henri Bergson, Archimedes, Nicolas Carnot, Copernicus. Their bodies died, some recently, some centuries

ago, but their minds have lived on, progressing into the vast forever. While I was dead I met them, found that the theories of each one had reached fruition in positive fact. But to them there was no way back with their knowledge: it was knowledge for space and eternity alone. To me, for reasons yet to be unearthed, life was given back again—and with it much of the knowledge of the men I met.”

There was an awed silence. Dake smiled reflectively.

“And I thought I was clever! To be clever, one must die.”

Suddenly he seemed to lose his thoughtfulness and went on quickly, “Much of what Aristotle originally theorized you will not remember, but you will recall some modern scientists’ elaboration of his theories. Some of them have said that one dominant radiation, or force, constitutes the entire universe. In its essence it is ether, but in its variable states—created by opposing and lesser forces streaming through its midst—it is altered slightly to form into matter, energy of tabulated sorts, life, and intelligence, all different expressions of the *basic* power, but none of them having that basic power’s efficiency. No man can ever know what force is unless he understands what *ether* is, for ether is the father of force. In the beginning, there was only this streaming force. Opposing radiations created the planets and suns of the universe, begot that ultrasensitive radiation known as thought, which commingled with matter and gave it lie.”

“You mean,” said Carson slowly, “that space itself, the vast emptiness of the void, is really a mono-force, and that everything else is a warp in it?”

Dake nodded. “All scientists know of the theory: it was left to me to see it as a fulfilled practicality beyond death. It is the answer to power unlimited. It is the key to the universe, beside which atomic force is like a dry battery compared to a power house. What we call empty space actually possesses unbelievable power. And, even as certain radiations warped that space and coalesced to produce matter, so can other radiations destroy the coalescence and bring empty space back to its normal position.^[2]

[2] Einstein himself has said that matter is a pucker or rumple in otherwise clear space.—Author.

“Matter can be removed by using the counteractive wavelength that formed it in the first place. It was built up by wavelengths, and can be broken down by the same process.”

“And you think you can do this?” Carson asked unbelievably.

“I know I can, because I have the knowledge of the dead. And when I have done it I shall first remove the Brant building and all its underground laboratories from the face of the universe. I shall make allowances for atmosphere and nothing more. Without fuss or disturbance the Brant Building will give place to clear air! Then I shall find Van Rutter.”

“How?” Sheila looked puzzled.

“Atomic force gives off radiations which are detectable by a compass, even as ordinary radium gives itself away. It is certain that Van Rutter will have some measure of free atomic force in those concealed European laboratories of his. I’ll find him.”

“You are sure this idea has an advantage over atomic bombs?” Carson mused.

“Certainly. You saw what happened to France. Atomic bombs means ungovernable power—and I *mean* ungovernable. In making sure of two enemies we might destroy thousands of lives and create millions of dollars’ worth of damage. Sheer force is our weapon. Besides, I have other uses for atomic force later and other uses for even deeper principles of science.”

“Sounds all right to me,” Carson admitted at length, “even though I don’t figure out how you’re going to do it. What will you use for the power to generate these wavelength radiations of yours?”

“Atomic force!” Dake smiled. “A use for it which Van Rutter could never have found—nor any earthly scientist for that matter, unless he died and returned. From a tank of water I can generate enough power for my purposes, power which will pass through circuits and transformers until it has the wavelength which my mathematics will show as necessary to correct the particular matter-warp we are aiming at. The rest will be simple.”

“But how long will it take?”

“It must take no longer than three days. It can be done with all of us working at full pressure. The instrument itself will be no larger than an ordinary searchlight. In the meantime, Doc, get in touch with the President and advise him to contact other countries and tell them to ignore the radio ultimatum, and to keep all news of such activities from the general public, so far as is possible. All we need, outside laboratory work, is a plane to be converted to transparency on all sides of its control room. I’ll work out the formula for a transparent metal right away.”

“Right,” Carson said rather dazedly. “I’ll—I’ll see to it.”

Acting under the advice of the scientists, American Congress deliberately treated the ultimatum of the Unknown—for such Van Rutter was to all save the Association—with contempt. The same line was adopted by every other country, but behind the scenes every nation carefully marshaled its armaments just in case. Even had the scientists not advised ignoring the warning, there would have been no concession to the Unknown anyway. The world was too well supplied with military equipment to give way before threats.

What Van Rutter and Elford thought of the defiance was not known, and certainly nobody was much concerned anyway. Clever propaganda had convinced the masses of every nation that the French affair had been a natural disaster, on which a European power—it did not say which—had cashed in in an audacious effort to get world control. Every nation disowned the unknown planes, Russia included. The whole thing was a trick. It was marvelous how the propaganda experts sweated blood to clear the air.

But in the laboratories of the American Science Association Dake Bradfield worked with unceasing effort, had the entire staff working day and night in shifts to help him. He seemed tireless, heedless of sleep, his mind always superhumanly keen, and his manner still retaining that hint of mystery that had been present with him ever since his return. To Sheila he was a complete paradox. That passionate love he had had for her before seemed to have vanished: instead she had become absorbed in the small army of workers he relentlessly directed.

Nobody had the remotest understanding of the scientific principles involved in the work they performed. They only knew that, in order, they created a metal as transparent as glass and tougher than tungsten, which was promptly molded to shape and replaced the ordinary metal body of a roomy, high-powered plane; that they rebuilt a radio transmitter-receiver to embody atomic force, which was put in the plane’s control room; that the plane’s engines were converted to use the power of tanks of water.

Then lastly they went to work on a device like a searchlight, fitted on universal bearings, its internal workings small but compact, utterly complex except to Dake’s agile brain, containing all the necessary self-contained power to produce atomic force which afterwards

passed through the mesh of apparatus for transforming it to the particular wavelength Dake would require. The thing was a miracle of engineering and scientific genius.

On the evening of the third day the projector was finished, was mounted inside the airplane's transparent control room. The idea of the transparency immediately became evident to the others. By this means the projector could swing freely in any direction and pass its powers through the glasslike metal without disrupting it in the process.

But Dake was not satisfied even then. In between times he had been engaged on remodeling an ordinary compass. Now it stood among the equipment—an almost airless glass globe in the center of which was a needle, the whole being sunk in a mercury bath to ensure a perpendicular position no matter how the plane rolled. Evidently it suited Dake for he smiled grimly as he nodded to it.

“The first atomic force detector in the world,” he murmured.

“You mean it will even detect atomic force from the air?” asked Carson in surprise.

“Its range is thirty thousand feet in any direction, and we shan't get that high up. It'll find Van Rutter as sure as if he signaled his presence.”

Dake turned away, looked round on Sheila, Carson, and Jerry the pilot, seated at the control board.

“Guess we're all set,” Dake said briefly, giving the door a final twist on the screws. “Sure you know how to handle this atomic power properly, Jerry?”

“A cinch,” the burly aeronaut retorted. “With this new streamlining outside we'll do seven hundred an hour with ease.”

“O.K., let's get started. First, the Brant Building!”

CHAPTER V

Universal Energy

Within a few minutes the plane was sweeping over the vast, evening lit mass of the metropolis. The city lay below in all its compact huddle of mighty edifices, most of them already streaming with lights and night sky-signs. The sunset reflected pale pink in the waters round Manhattan Island.

Gaining altitude at length the machine turned eastward, made a beeline for the rearing mammoth of steel and masonry that was the Brant Building.

"Notice!" Dake said suddenly, as they came nearer, and he jerked his head toward the compass. The needle had steadied and was pointing directly at the building.

"We know that there must be some play of atomic forces going on in those buried laboratories there," Dake resumed. "Even if we did not know you see how infallibly the compass reveals it. The moment that needle is dead vertical we know that atomic force lies right below us. That's going to be useful for Van Rutter. First, though, we have this to attend to."

He turned and gripped the handles of his queer projector, swung it round until the sights were on the massive edifice with its multitude of lighted windows. It swept nearer—then Sheila gave a sudden exclamation as she stared through the transparent floor beneath her feet.

"Dake, what exactly are you going to do?"

"Reduce that building to primal space, blast a hole a mile deep under its foundations. There will be a free emptiness and air, with the buildings on either side untouched. I can measure this power to a hair's breadth—"

"But Dake . . ." The girl turned and seized his arm. "Dake, do you realize there are thousands of employees in that building? You can't destroy them too! They're innocent—"

Dake's face set implacably. "If I don't destroy them and the building I don't destroy Elfrod and the laboratories. I leave a source of deadly munitions untouched. In the end thousands, even millions, will die instead of the few hundred in that edifice. Out of the way, Sheila, please!"

She looked her horror even though she obeyed. The streak of ruthlessness in Dake's nature secretly appalled her. She looked below her again, for a moment caught something of the tenseness of the situation as the giant building became the sole focal point through the floor. The street in front of it yawned like a light dotted chasm. Sheila clutched her father to steady herself.

"Now!" breathed Dake suddenly.

He closed the power switches. The effect of projector's strange vibration was not immediately evident.

From top to bottom the Brant Building became insubstantial, like the illusion of a dream world. It hung transparent, incredible, for a moment with the figures of people momentarily visible through the suddenly glassified walls—then with staggering abruptness the whole 1,000-foot mass snapped into black extinction! Its very foundations changed to cavernous darkness. Where there had been the Brant Building there was nothing but an abysmal crater, sheerly cut. A yawning emptiness divided the two buildings on each side, both of them quite untouched.

“Stupendous!” whispered Carson. “No disturbance. Not a sound.”

“Instant straightening of space warp, not a resolution of matter into energy,” Dake said quietly. “That is why there is no noise.”

“And thousands, or at least hundreds of lives wiped out,” Sheila muttered. “People who had their lives to live, who had other people depending on them.”

But her secret hope that Dake would show compassion was not realized. Instead he said gravely, “Hundreds against millions,” and patted the projector lovingly. Then he glanced at Jerry.

“Head toward Russia!”

Sheila stood looking back at that yawning hole amidst the other buildings. Deep, unplumbed thoughts stirred through her mind.

It was midnight, after a seeming eternity of flying, before the compass reacted over a vast, deserted stretch of land on the western frontiers of Russia. In silence the party stared down on bleak, unlighted darkness stretching as far as their view could encompass.

“Down there,” Dake said slowly, “is Van Rutter’s hidden retreat, obviously underground. Planes and atomic force which he thought he could conceal, eh?”

He smiled twistedly, watched the compass needle tensely as it swung slowly to the vertical. Gently he turned the projector’s nose downward. Then he slammed home the switches.

It was impossible to see what happened, but moments later the blaze of searchlights revealed a landscape riven like the Grand Canyon, the sides of the chasm sheer and smooth. From the remote depths came steamy bubblings of inner discharge. Whatever had lain there, whatever vast enterprise Van Rutter had controlled, had gone forever. Without a sound or light, extinction had caught up with him.

Dake laughed slightly, a hard bitter laugh that made the others in the control room glance at one another.

“Never before did I realize how sweet a thing vengeance can be,” Dake muttered, serious again. “They showed me no mercy, and I in return showed them none.”

“Well, the threat of war is destroyed anyway,” Carson said thankfully. “What comes next?”

Dake glanced at him. “I shall make war instead.”

“What!”

“Not exactly in the way you think. You’ll see what I am aiming at before long. First, I have a radio broadcast to transmit to the world, hence our high-powered instrument.”

Dake switched on atomic force-driven transmitter and waited a moment as the power surged through it.

“Enough power to swamp every other broadcast in existence,” he commented in satisfaction. “Just as Van Rutter did. And since for all practical purposes I am going to broadcast from the approximate spot he used I shall *be* him, with a change of plan.”

Carson and Sheila said nothing, but like Jerry at the controls they frowned in some mystification as Dake pulled the microphone to him and spoke in a passable imitation of Van Rutter’s voice.

“Governments of the world! Your ultimatum would have expired at midnight tomorrow night. But due to your continued silence I have decided on certain amendments, and I have given yet another proof of my powers by destroying the Brant Building in New York more

completely than anything was ever destroyed before. Again I say I do not want actual bloodshed. But I shall cripple your power to attack me! Your secret armament factories, your hidden zones of destruction, will avail you nothing. Your one alternative to save yourselves from me is to destroy your weapons of war voluntarily and relinquish control to me. I shall expect a radio response within thirty minutes. If you refuse, then prepare for the worse! If you accept, I will advise you further. That is all.”

Dake, switched off, stood reflecting.

“Just what is the idea?” Carson demanded. “Seems to me you might as well have let Van Rutter get on with the job! You’re just as bad!”

“You do me an injustice,” Dake said quietly. “Van Rutter intended to launch ruthless massacre against the peoples of the world in the hope of frightening the rest of them into submission, over which, with the help of atomic power, he could have become self-appointed king. I have no such ideas.”

“Then why imitate Van Rutter?”

“Because the blame for what is going to happen may as well be laid at the door of the man whom people call the Unknown, otherwise Van Rutter. He had already made himself the target, so people may as well go on thinking they’re shooting at him.” Dake stopped and then asked a surprising question. “In the old days, what did one do to get a fox out of his lair when all else failed?”

“Smoke him out, I guess,” said Sheila. “So what?”

“Humanity collectively is the fox this time, which I am smoking out. How else can one find out where different nations’ armament centers are without actual recourse to threat of war? Think of the countless secret hiding places which only possible war can reveal. The expectation of attack will make every nation tear down its camouflage. But for the advent of Van Rutter humanity would have thrown itself at each other in time in any case, from sheer necessity of economic pressure and the need to *use* the vast weight of arms before they became white elephants. The arms would *have* to be used in order to get the money from another country—if beaten in war—to pay for them. One vast, vicious circle strangling progress which only a strong man with infinite power can break down. I am that man!”

“Go on.” Carson was listening attentively.

“Well, don’t you see that Van Rutter changed the situation? Instead of nations preparing to hurl themselves at each other they would have banded together against him. And, had he lived, he would have triumphed because of superior power. But if we still let the world believe he is in action we can draw them into the open, let them waste their activities on us—for they can’t possibly harm us—and at the same time we will destroy their arms without actually injuring anybody, beyond those few we cannot avoid. In other words we’ll draw the fangs and roots of war right out of the planet!”

“Destroy armaments for ever, tear down the barriers to reason and progress,” Sheila whispered. “Oh, Dake dearest, that’s wonderful— But just why do you keep up the pretense of Van Rutter? Why not reveal that—”

“Do you think any nation would feel kindly toward a power bent on destroying its arms, even if it knew it *was* the Science Association? No, Sheila—definitely no! We don’t intend any harm, but we cannot make anybody believe that. It is better that fury be directed at a now extinct Van Rutter while the Science Association remains unsuspected. Of course, my

ultimatum will be refused. I only gave it at all to keep up the illusion. Strange, but Van Rutter did far more for the peace of the future world than he ever intended.”

“And afterward?” Carson glanced up morosely. “More arms, more build up, more conflict. It will take even more than you to destroy warlike notions in the minds of men, Dake.”

Dake smiled, that same superior smile that seemed to make him like a god. “I have the knowledge of the dead, Doc, and with that so many, many things are possible.” He pondered. “It all depends on whether I have the time,” he ended slowly.

That oft repeated ambiguity was not questioned this time. Dake stood looking at the radio receiver, waiting. And his judgment was correct. Before the thirty minutes had expired the first answer came through.

Refusal! America would fight to the death! So would Great Britain, all Europe, the East
...

Dake smiled. “O.K., Jerry. Home!”

Once more in the safety of the Association’s laboratories, there was not a little grim amusement among the inmates, all of them in the know, as they watched the preparations of the world for battle with a still unknown and merciless attacker. The rumble of defensive movements spread across the earth in all directions. America too, mobilized all her forces. All unaware of the trick, the President called on the Science Association for assistance in this time of grave crisis. Carson gravely promised to do all he could.

Dake waited for a week, surveying through television and news reports the revelation of different nations’ armament centers and fortresses. For his own part, in between times, he had a new plant installed in the plane which, using atomic force as usual, surrounded the flyer with an impenetrable shell of energy. The plane was black, resembling those of the Van Rutter fleet. The glass center, though transparent from within was opaque from outside.

Beyond loading the plane up with ample provisions there was nothing more to be done. Dake gave the world four days to bring its toys into view, then as before, with Sheila, Carson, and Jerry he entered the plane at ten in the morning of October 29, 1980.

When Jerry had forced the plane to a considerable height Dake stood looking down on New York far below, surveying the centers of defense that had been contrived for the safety of the civilian population. He smiled, lowered the projector downward, sighted it on an anti-aircraft unit near Times Square. He closed the switches.

That action was the spark that lighted the whole powder magazine. The swift, resistless changing of the Times Square unit into a bottomless pit started the American air fleet on the warpath. From north, south, east, and west they came in their droning, vengeful hundreds to do battle with this audacious individual who fancied he could rule the world.

Dake took no notice of them! He did not attack them. They either smashed their planes in pieces against the defensive energy shell or else, baffled by the mysterious powers of their adversary, turned tail with a view to conference with the higher-ups before going any further.

And Dake went on with his task calmly and steadily, flying at three thousand feet, tearing every armament and defensive dump out of the earth as he came over it, destroying people too where the margin was too fine for his selective instruments to avoid them.

In between the attacks he radioed warnings to the battle fleet gathered round the coast of the Americas. Either evacuate the ships within an hour, or be destroyed with them! Commanders hesitated, glanced up at that black speck in the blue, and wondered. They knew

already they were tackling an invincible foe, yet one with a curious streak of mercy. They decided to evacuate.

Sure enough, within the hour the black speck returned. One by one, completely and mysteriously, thousands of millions of dollars' worth of steel and defensive equipment vanished from the water. The men in the little bobbing boats watched in dazed amazement, clung tightly to their seats as tumbling water came surging toward them. But they were unhurt.

Throughout the day Dake went on steadily, flying back and forth with stupendous speed across the continent, constantly shattering everything of a warlike nature he came across. Time and again fleets of bombers harried him futilely. Their bombs bounced away harmlessly: some of the planes were sent crashing to earth or disappeared in mid air. This soundless primal power, the sudden straightening out of etheric folds, was something no man could tackle.

It was evening by the time they left American shores—left it a continent without a weapon, a continent filled with baffled millions who could not believe that the Unknown was content to leave them thus, disarmed but unhurt.

So Dake went on, on the most incredible conquest in history.

For a week the airplane never touched ground, darting back and forth across the earth, untouched by man's most demoniacal powers. And one by one, in every country, weapons and arms centers and potential battlefields and fleets were transformed into emptiness. Ships sank, planes disappeared. Not a country escaped Dake's ruthless toothcombing. In one week he swept the earth clean of every destructive device man had ever owned or known.

Only then, content that he had not destroyed a single life willingly, did he return unseen to New York under the shadow of night, went back to the Association laboratory. His first act was to get the radio-transmitters to work, cutting out the flow of world news—a world still dazed with wonder and still desperately afraid.

"Peoples of the world!" Dake said quietly into the microphone. "Get your interpreters to work so all may understand me. People, you have been tricked, for your own good! I forced you into the open with your popguns and pistols in order that I could destroy them. Realize one thing—The man who would have dominated you and performed inhuman massacre for his own ends, is dead. I killed him with an infinitely great power. Who I am does not matter: I have already proved to you I do not wish to harm anybody.

"But I *do* intend to bring to this world a peace it has lacked since the world began! I can do it because I know things no man ever knew before. You cannot stop me, not even the most warlike of you. *Nobody* can stop me! But I give you warning here—I am going to give certain orders to the ruling heads of each country, and those orders must be followed to the absolute letter. If they are not, I shall know of it and I shall destroy without hesitation. I will only be merciful if you obey. But your obedience is not because I intend to dominate you but because it is to your eventual advantage that you *should* obey. This is not an ultimatum: a man with infinite power makes no ultimatums. Now listen attentively.

"Marshal together your finest engineers and scientists: you will have two days in which to do this. At the end of that time your engineers will take down the instructions I shall give. In each country of importance there will be installed a vast atomic power generating station. It is a power which can advance civilization two hundred years and more. One man tried to abuse it: none other will ever do that again! You have your orders for now. Obey them or take the

consequences—and if any man dares to try and create a warlike weapon in the interval I shall know of it and destroy him!”

Because nations could do nothing else, and also because most of the responsible heads believed in the Unknown’s honest intentions—Dake’s orders were followed to the letter. There was surprise, even bewilderment, but the thing was done.

The moment it was, Dake, watching every move with anxious diligence, started a fresh radio broadcast, this time with complicated instructions comprehensible only to the engineers, and not always to them. But at least they knew what to do even if they did not entirely know why they did it. They were like men mastering the uses of electricity without knowing what electricity is.

The broadcasts followed at regular intervals when, through television, Dake was assured the work had progressed as far as he had ordered. Simultaneously, through the weeks, there grew up in America, Great Britain, Europe, and the Orient, enormous structures of specially cast metal, with adjacent power houses fixed in uniform formation nearby, from which led power feeds to the different nerve centers of various nearby cities.

The power houses themselves made their very builders gasp in stunned admiration. They could not even guess at the uncanny genius of the being who had devised all this from abstract thinking. But it was perfectly clear to them that here in these mighty power plants, from the mere breakdown of water into its atomic energy, was unlimited power for the development of commerce, railways, air-service, and all the amenities of civilized life.

But what would the price be? It was inconceivable that a man should give the world such power without demanding a heavy reward. World dictatorship, perhaps?

When Dake heard of this he only smiled. But his smile was not enough for Dr. Carson and Sheila. They wanted to know why, particularly Sheila. But when she came to look for him in the Association laboratories one morning he had disappeared, and nobody seemed to know what had become of him. Nor did Dr. Carson seem to deem it wise to investigate too thoroughly in case it happened to be against Dake’s wishes. He would probably return when he was ready.

To Sheila it was an impossible situation. There were still many things she did not understand—or her father either for that matter. But all her searching drew blank—then ten days after Dake had vanished she got a phone call from him.

Would she come to the address he gave, and promise to tell nobody until afterward? She gave her immediate assent, puzzling over the place he named: it mentioned a little spot some five miles from Monterey in California. He would meet her, disguised, at the San Francisco airport.

He did, disguised in dark glasses and sticking plaster as on that first occasion. From the airport he drove in a closed sedan along the Pacific coastline road, passed through Monterey itself, finally stopped at a small, isolated little house on a steep shelf of land sweeping down to the open, sunlit sea.

Only when he had garaged the car and was in the house did he seem ready to talk.

“I had to send for you,” he said, in a low voice.

“But Dake, why did you have to go like that?” the girl asked earnestly. “Do you not realize that you are a public figure? The greatest benefactor the world has ever known?”

"I know." He stared through the open French doors toward the sea. "That was one reason why I left when my work was done. If any credit is going about let your father have it, Sheila. I can never have it. I am legally dead."

"But you came back to life!" she insisted. "We can marry now, do all we planned, live in this wonderfully happy world of your creating—"

"No!" His voice was stonily firm. He looked steadily at her flushed, eager young face. "That can never be, my dear," he went on, with a vague semblance of his old tenderness. "God knows, I would that it could, but— I'm only a ghost, a ghost who must die again. Soon."

Sheila paled. "Dake, you don't mean—"

He fell silent, staring out to sea.

"I had the time while in the laboratories to examine the instruments Doc lowered down the mine shaft," he went on presently. "I know now what happened. When that atomic shell dropped to earth it released its energy. That energy mingled with slight radium deposits in pitchblende which were certainly around that spot. The combination of the two energies produced a form of mitogenesis.^[3] Anyhow, enormously powerful waves of mitogenetic radiation were given off. They affected my dead heart like a charge of super-adrenalin. I recovered. My organs were in order: I had died only through insufficient oxygen. I had fallen slackly into mud and was unhurt. So I came back to life. To Mason those radiations brought death. His heart accelerated far beyond normal and he couldn't take it."

[3] The basic radiation which science generally accepts as the key of life.—

Author.

"So that was it," Sheila whispered.

Dake gave a bitter smile. "As I have suspected all along, there is a price. The life-return is not permanent! It is only a superficial thing that burns itself out. All along I have been desperately afraid I would not finish in time. I dare not love you again, my dear, knowing I must die!"

The girl did not speak. Her eyes were chained to him as he sat slumped in the chair by the window.

"The fires of this spurious life are burning low. I have only a few hours left. I know it now. I came here intending to die without anybody ever knowing—but I had to see you again, explain the true facts. I chose this spot where I could gaze out over the beauty of a world I must leave, dragging out a few more hours of happiness given to me by an accident of nature."

He got to his feet suddenly, put an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"Sheila, I found atomic force," he murmured. "It killed me: it gave me life back again: it gave me greater knowledge than man has ever known: it enabled me to give peace to my fellow beings: it showed me beyond death, and now. . . . It is over."

"It hasn't *got* to be!" she shouted frantically "Dake, you belong to me, to the world— It isn't right that this should be your reward."

He was silent, chin on chest.

"You must find a way!" she whispered, clasping his arm.

He still pondered, then said quietly, "Give me ten minutes, Sheila, to make a last experiment. It would be too harrowing for you to witness. I believe there *is* a last chance! Come in here."

He threw open an adjoining door and she passed into a small, sunlit study. She crossed to the armchair moodily and sank down into it, wondering what possible scheme Dake could have in mind. In desperate impatience she waited, tried the door once and found it locked. Not a sound reached her.

At the end of the ten minutes she tried the door again. To her surprise it opened instantly. Immediately her gaze went to the open French doors, the cool wind from the sea blowing back the curtains. Automatically her eyes were caught by a sheet of white notepaper held down with the paperweight. Mechanically she picked it up, read through a blur of tears.

“Dearest: There never was a way! Forgive my deception, but I had to make it as easy as possible for you. All my notes, except the formula for atomic force, which I have destroyed, together with a full account of events to date, are in my bureau in the study. Give them to Dr. Carson.

“I prefer it this way. It is better than waiting for the inevitable end. If my body is ever found it will not matter, because no man ever knew what happened to Dake Bradfield, except our own intimated friends.

“Remember me always, my dearest.

Dake.”

Mechanically Sheila blundered to the window, the wind fanning her hot, tear-scalded cheeks.

“Dake!” she screamed. “Dake—!”

The empty stretch of beach only gave back the echo of her voice. Words died in her throat. Her eyes were following a man’s footprints going down from the windows, across the sand to where the Pacific rollers creamed and foamed in the sunshine.

There was nothing alive in sight, only the lonely, circling gulls.

[The end of *The Man From Hell* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]