

Turner

Science-Fantasy

WINTER 1950

ONE & SIXPENCE



THE ARK
by **F. G. RAYE**

COSMIC COLLISION — MYTH OR MENACE?

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Black-out

Date of first publication: 1950

Author: John Russell Fearn (1908-1960)

Date first posted: October 8, 2022

Date last updated: October 8, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221015

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries).

Black-out

By

John Russell Fearn

First published *Science-Fantasy*, Winter 1950.

A variant of this story was published under the title *Black Saturday*.

If one fine day, you saw the Sun fall out of the sky and all was dark but for the stars—stars you'd never seen before—would YOU know what might have happened?

There was something wrong out there in the depths of space; something so incredibly strange that the scientists who tried to examine the mystery found their accumulated centuries of knowledge faltering. It had begun with the amazing antics of the stars neighbouring on the Milky Way. Fixed apparently for eternities of time in their courses, arranged much as the ancients had seen them when they stared up at them uncomprehending, they had now completely changed position—and in some cases disappeared entirely. Sagittarius, Hercules, Antares, Cepheus—they were visibly shifting across the wastes of heaven, moving at such an unthinkable velocity that the minds of the watching astronomers reeled, used though they were to cosmic speeds. And the Milky Way itself was shifting, bearing towards the westernmost limb of the sky.

The amazing part of the phenomenon, apart from its very occurrence, was the suddenness with which it developed. On the night of July 7th the world's observatories had noticed nothing unusual. But on the 8th, between the hours of midnight and dawn, these fantastic perambulations of the stars were only too evident. Though it just couldn't be, because it shattered every basic law of astronomy. Yet it *was* . . . And from the space which the stars had deserted gleamed new and unknown constellations, hosts of heaven that made complete chaos of the world's star-maps.

The astronomers immediately got in touch with one another and discussed the problem. All had to admit themselves baffled. But, hesitating to make the same admission to their respective governments, they agreed to make no announcement of their startling observations until they had been able to study the phenomenon further and consider the enigma in the light of additional data. Given time, they agreed, they might find something to account for it. And that is where they made their great mistake.

Earth, in her majestic million-miles-a-minute sweep through the universe, was moving irresistibly towards that part of the heavens whose aspects had changed so mysteriously. And, although at that time the fact could not be detected, the disturbance—the Fault—was also moving towards Earth at a similar speed . . .

So the whole of Earth's peoples were caught unaware by the Fault, the real nature of which is now common knowledge. The individual experiences of many thousands of people on that Black Saturday, as it has since become known, have likewise been retailed throughout the world. But there is one random experience, that of Robert Maitland and Irene Carr, which has not yet been recorded. In many ways it is typical of millions, and is therefore undistinguished. It is, however, notable in that these two ordinary people, caught in circumstances very similar to millions of others and equally mystified by them, were yet able

to deduce for themselves the simple explanation of what had occurred—the explanation which eluded most of us until the astronomers, with all the data they needed, presented it to the wondering world.

Think back. Recall your own bafflement, your sense of utter helplessness, your *fear*, and you may grant the noteworthiness of this particular experience of two people who were no better equipped than millions of their kind to realise the nature of the apparent catastrophe which had overtaken them. Yet, amid all the acclamation we have accorded the astronomers, we have entirely overlooked the perseverance and good sense of those few who, like these two, refused to give way to despair until they had tried to work out the problem for themselves.

Dr. Robert Maitland lived, at that time, in a small house in Windermere. His practice was small but full of promise: he was making a name for himself among the villagers and the rustic community of the Lake District. On the morning of July 8th he was awakened early by a telephone call. One of his patients, badly injured in a farming accident the day before, had taken a turn for the worse. In the chill of the summer dawn, Maitland listened to the high, tremulous voice of the stricken man's wife over the wire. He promised to be over right away, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and set about dressing hastily.

Robert Maitland was not the type that is addicted to nervous fancies. He stood five feet ten, was solidly built, and his lean, swarthy face had strength and responsibility in every line. And yet—he was seeing things. Things that, in the urgency of his dressing and with the purpose of his errand uppermost in his thoughts, did not immediately absorb his attention, yet which vaguely puzzled him.

For instance, as he brushed his thick, dark hair hurriedly before the mirror, he could have sworn that his reflection moved very slightly from side to side. A measure might have shown at least an inch of movement, as if he were swaying on his feet, though he was certain he was standing perfectly still. Then, through his bedroom window, he could see across the rolling pastureland to the distant mountains grouped about Helvellyn; and as he looked it seemed that the mountains glided slowly sideways, then drifted back into their normal position.

There were no warps in the window glass; he was sure of that. The mirror, too, was a good one. Maitland closed his eyes tightly, opened them again, and decided that he felt well enough. It must be some slight liverishness, or perhaps it was just tiredness—he wasn't as completely awake yet as he'd thought. It would soon pass . . .

He was, of course, unaware that millions of people all over the world were trying to account for similar manifestations at that precise moment. Nor did he realise that the world's astronomers were even then busily communicating by cable and radio, seeking among themselves some clue to the peculiar phenomena they had observed. For it was then that the first tendrils of the Fault were creeping into Earth's boundaries while she swept on resistless with her load of puzzling humans.

Maitland left the house after scribbling a note to his housekeeper that he had gone on an urgent call. He hurried outside to the garage. It was getting warmer now. The Sun was struggling through the fast dispersing mists from the valleys and there was every sign that the day would be a perfect one. Then, on his way down the narrow drive leading to the garage, Maitland paused and rubbed his forehead as he stared bewildered before him.

The garage building straight ahead, with its bright green doors, was moving over to the right—soundlessly. The fence alongside it was moving, too! This time there was no mistake

about it. The garage shifted at least two feet and came to a halt. At the same time the gravel drive *bent* suddenly, at a spot immediately in front of Maitland, so that he had to take a distinct, sharp corner to continue towards the garage doors.

Uncertain, he went forward slowly, turning sharply to the right even though he knew it was an idiotic thing to do. How foolish it was he discovered when he felt himself stumbling over the edge of the drive on to the flower bed at the side—yet apparently he was still on the gravel pathway. Abruptly he realised that he was faced with the impossible. He seemed to be treading on something he could see only two feet away from him, yet he couldn't *feel* the thing his eyes told him he *was* treading on. Then, even as he wrestled silently with the riddle, the garage and the drive moved back without a sound into their accustomed position—and Maitland stared open-mouthed, conscious of the fact that he was actually standing in the soil of the flower bed two feet away from the drive.

Delusions? Incipient insanity? He considered both possibilities with a cold, professional detachment, but neither seemed to fit. This was something new, vitally different—and as yet beyond explanation. He stepped back gingerly on to the drive, found it solid enough, and went on to open the garage doors. To his relief, everything remained apparently normal as he backed the car out. He left it with the engine ticking over as he closed the doors. Then he clambered back into the driving seat and swerved out on to the road.

To the home of his patient was some twenty miles journey along valley roads, between lofty hills and through quaint old villages. He drove swiftly, but not so swiftly that he could not admire the beauty of the countryside as he went. The Sun now was high above the hills, blazing down with gathering heat, picturing itself in a myriad microscopic reflections from the dew-soaked grass and flowers bordering the road. As he drove on, Maitland forgot his strange visual aberration—until he was cruelly reminded of it.

He had climbed out of the depths of the valley where his home lay. To his right were towering hills with scrubby fields nestling at their bases; to his left was a smooth panorama stretching for fifteen miles across pastureland, tarns, and lush valley sides. Such was the aspect when the narrow road he was traversing bent suddenly, directly ahead of him—not normally, but as he approached it. Simultaneously, the grass bank at the side of the road shifted to accommodate the bend.

Maitland put on the brakes and came to a stop. He knew perfectly well that this road did *not* bend ahead of him: it went straight on towards Wilmington village. The only curve in it at all was a slight one about half a mile further on, where stood a lonely telephone box. If he went round this pseudo-curve now, he might run over the edge of the road and down the grass slope. No sense in risking that.

“Something's up!” he muttered, convinced at last that it was not his eyes nor his health that was at fault, but that something in the nature of a mirage—or a series of them—must have occurred in this locality; though what could have caused such a thing was beyond him. Finally, he got out of the car with the intention of studying this particular mirage more closely. But he took only three strides forward before he stopped, tottering dizzily in the middle of the road.

In that moment he was frightened, really scared, as he had never been before. For all of a sudden everything about him seemed to have gone completely crazy. The whole landscape as far as he could see was shifting violently. The fifteen-miles stretch of country before him was

sweeping sideways at diabolical speed—shearing off to the west as a towering wall of blackness appeared to race in from the east, moving everything before it!

Maitland just stood and stared, petrified. There was no sound as the amazing thing occurred; only the titanic shadow which raced towards him with the speed of a total eclipse. Within a few seconds it passed over him, and the bent road ahead was blotted from sight. He stood, now, drenched in darkness, feeling no other sensation but a supreme dread.

It was several seconds before he could recover himself sufficiently to move, and then he began to retrace his steps slowly and cautiously towards the car, hands outstretched gropingly before him. Not a thing was visible—except the Sun, shining high in a sky still strangely blue! Shining, yet failing to light anything . . .

Feeling his way forward, he came up against the bonnet of the car and clung to it gratefully. He couldn't see even the dimmest outline of the car itself. He stood and gazed up at the Sun, thankful that it, at least, held to normalcy . . . but this relief was soon denied. The Fault into which the Earth had plunged enveloped the Sun, too, within a few minutes. One moment it was there in the dark blue sky; the next, it had started to sink towards the western horizon with incredible speed. It dropped like a meteor, vanished in the all-enveloping blackness that formed the limits of the landscape, and was gone.

Now it was utterly dark. Dreadfully, horribly dark . . .

The human mind, psychologists tell us, can absorb the most violent of shocks and still function. But it was a long time before Maitland found he could think intelligently, without letting blind panic scatter his half-formed thoughts. As he struggled to banish his primitive fears he searched the blackness around him, still clinging to the car bonnet, his only link with reality.

Here on the ground the darkness was absolute, and he could not discern the slightest hint of anything. But up in the sky from which the Sun had streaked, minutes before, there were now myriads of stars! To Maitland, who had no precise astronomical knowledge, these stars looked normal enough, but an expert would have noticed at once that not many of them were familiar and that the few recognisable constellations were far away from their customary positions.

Night, when it should be 9 a.m.? A Sun that disappeared from the sky in a flash? This was a problem beyond all understanding. Yet Maitland knew the elementary fact that the sudden shifting of such a vast body as the Sun should cause cataclysmic disturbances, perhaps throw Earth right out of its orbit. And yet everything was quite steady, without even the suggestion of a tremor. This point resolved, he felt a little better. He was still alive, with his feet on solid ground. But he was submerged in the inexplicable—

He stopped suddenly, listening. There were sounds ahead of him. Uneasy feet shambling over the gravel of the road.

“Hullo there!” he called.

“Hullo!” It was a girl's voice that answered. It was shaken, yet somehow filled with unquenchable courage.

“I'm here,” Maitland shouted. “Come towards my voice.”

The halting steps advanced again, but nothing came out of the darkness. That was the queer thing. Though there were stars overhead, Earth lay in an abyss from which every spark of light had gone. Maitland groped with both hands as the footsteps came nearer.

“Thank heaven I’ve—found somebody,” the girl faltered, close by his ear. “I was just wondering what to do. What’s—what’s *happened?*”

“You’re asking me!” he laughed. “I’m as bewildered—and probably as scared—as you. I—er—I’m Dr. Maitland, of Windermere,” he said as the girl’s outstretched hand gripped his arm.

“I’m Irene Carr.” They clasped hands in the darkness. “This is the last day of my holiday—Last Day, indeed! I was on a hike to Rydal Water when—it—happened. The—the Sun’s gone out, hasn’t it? That’s what it must mean! I know scientists have said something like this would happen one day.”

“Yes, but not like this!” Maitland protested. “That must be a slow process, over millions of years. This is something different—and quite sudden! We had no warning . . .”

They were silent, oppressed by the unfathomable. Maitland found himself collected enough, now, to wonder with intense curiosity what the girl looked like. He was intrigued by her voice: it was slow and mellow with a slight Midlands accent, and he knew instinctively that she was young and possibly attractive. If only he could *see*.

“I know!” he said suddenly, and felt in his pocket for his cigarette lighter. He flicked it, but the flint made no sparks. Then he gave a yelp as, in feeling round the wick, he burned his fingers in invisible flame.

“It *is* working, then?” Irene Carr whispered in wonder. “Yet we can’t see it . . . Do you suppose we’ve—gone blind?”

“With the stars visible up there?”

“I hadn’t noticed——” She gave a little gasp of surprise. “Yes, there *are* stars—billions of them. But no Sun——”

“And yet . . .” Maitland drew a deep breath and considered. “And yet,” he went on, awed, “I can feel the Sun’s heat on the back of my neck. Just as though it’s still there.”

The girl was silent as she evidently checked up on his extraordinary finding. He didn’t know whether to believe it himself until she said simply:

“You’re right. There *is* heat. I can feel it, too, on the backs of my hands. Yet there’s no Sun!”

It struck Maitland what an impossible conversation they were keeping up. At the back of his mind, too, was the remembrance of a man who lay on a bed in the dark some ten miles away.

“I wonder if I can drive the car?” he said abruptly. “Let’s see what we can do. There *is* a car here, you know!” He thumped the bonnet with his fist.

“I’ll take your word for it,” the girl answered, still trying to sound calm.

Maitland took her arm and they moved cautiously together over the rough surface of the roadway, felt their way round to the car door and clambered inside. Here, with the roof of the car shutting out the stars above, the darkness was crushing; it wasn’t even possible to see the outlines of the windows. But by stooping they could see part of the starry sky through the glass, and Maitland thought he caught a brief glimpse of the girl’s head silhouetted against the stars, though the outline was blurred and unreal. He pressed the self-starter, and the engine throbbed immediately—a good, wholesome sound in a world that no longer made sense. Then he switched on the headlamp, but not the remotest suggestion of light appeared.

“No good.” He switched off. “Can’t drive in this.”

They both sat in silence for a while, listening to each other’s breathing.

"You know," the girl said presently, "it's funny. I've read stories where this sort of thing happens, and everything turns out all right. But when it happens to *you*, when everything you've known and trusted lets you down and leaves you blind and bewildered, you just don't know what to do. I suppose," she went on musingly, her voice steadier as she got to grips with the problem, "that there *is* an answer?"

"A scientist might have one," Maitland suggested. "I'm not a scientist; I'm a doctor."

"I'm a school teacher . . . But, look, we've both got a fair degree of intelligence. We can reason this thing out, can't we?"

Maitland didn't answer. Thoughts were hurrying through his mind. Memory was at work, piecing together the incredible events of the morning. The mirror reflection that trembled; the garage that shifted position; the landscape that had been swept sideways by an advancing wall of darkness . . .

"All right, Miss Carr. We——"

"I'd rather you called me Irene. After all, we're in this together."

"Irene it is, then—and mine's Bob. As you say, here we are, two people without any specialised knowledge, but familiar with rudimentary facts. You will be especially, as a teacher. Now, if the Sun had really plunged into the deeper universe as it appeared to do, the Earth and all neighbouring planets would have been wiped out in the terrific gravitational change. But that hasn't happened. We are quite safe and undisturbed; the world still moves in its proper orbit. And that means that the Sun's dive into obscurity was a—a delusion."

"Yes," the girl said, pondering. "Yes, that's right."

"On top of that," he went on, "we can feel the heat of the Sun just as if it were still there. In fact, in this car it is getting uncomfortably warm, and only sunshine—or, rather, heat—can explain it. That shows that the Sun *is* still there, although we cannot see it. If it were something that had destroyed the Sun utterly, its light *and* heat would be gone and the Earth would grow cold as its stored warmth leaked out into space. That, again, is not happening. It is night, but as hot as any July day should be."

"And down here, on the Earth's surface," Irene supplemented, "no light whatever will function. And the Sun went out of sight *after* light failed down here."

They considered this aspect of the problem for a while in silence. Then Maitland spoke again, his voice vibrant with discovery.

"Doesn't that seem to suggest something which first involved the Earth, and the Sun afterwards? Supposing that idea is right: what can we deduce from it? We know that what will bend visible light will not bend heat. Remember the old college experiment? A prism of glass will bend light out of its normally straight path, but that same prism is opaque to heat, involving a totally different set of circumstances. To refract heat waves we would use a prism of rock salt, or something like that."

"Refraction," the girl repeated slowly. Her voice sharpened. "Refraction! Dr. Maitland—Bob—do you think that could be the answer? You know, like a spoon in a tumbler of water? It looks sharply bent, but really it's not. Or like a mirage, which makes things appear miles away from where they really are!"

"A mirage—on a colossal scale—— Yes, I'd thought of something like that." Maitland began a meticulous searching of his mind, trying to remember all he had learned about light. "We know that we see objects because of the light emitted or reflected from them. Then, if by some fluke the light waves no longer travelled in straight lines, we would not see the object at which we looked."

“Right!” the girl agreed. “I know a few things about light, too. I’ve taught it in physics class. The first law of refraction is that the incident ray—the normal, straight one, that is—and the refracted ray both lie in one plane; and the second law is that a ray of light passing obliquely from a less dense to a more dense medium is bent towards the perpendicular at the point of incidence. Good heavens!” she went on rapidly. “It’s beginning to make sense. Before this happened did it seem to you that things kept jumping out of place and back again?”

“No doubt of it,” Maitland declared, rather overcome by her growing control of the situation.

“Then doesn’t it suggest that the Earth has come into contact with something—some region of space—that is a denser medium than usual, and because of it all light waves are bent to one side? Something so enormous in extent that it involves the Sun and, maybe, the whole Solar System? So, light waves don’t move straight any more, but heat waves remain unaffected.”

A scientist might have been very proud—or very jealous—of Irene Carr at that moment. Without any special qualifications, reasoning out the problem solely from elementary principles derived from her school-teaching, she had arrived at the amazing solution. Refraction—a gigantic mirage! This was the theory which was being discussed at that very moment by scientists all over the world, by long distance telephone and radio. Light alone was affected: that was the cardinal point. Every other kind of radiation was normal. Something, somehow, was bending light waves out of the straight line.

“But—but the stars!” Maitland exclaimed. “We can see them perfectly!”

They lowered the car windows and looked outside. The darkness was so intense that it made their eyes ache. It was a relief to gaze up to where the sky was still dusted with the multi-millions of stars that had sprung into being at the start of the mystery. Maitland and the girl were quiet for a long time, two puny mortals grappling with an infinite problem in a lightless world. Then Irene spoke again.

“Where,” she asked, “is the Milky Way? My astronomy isn’t so good, but I do know that smudgy band like curdled milk. And it just isn’t there any more.”

She was right. That swirling galaxy from which the Earth itself had been born was not visible. Neither, if it came to that, were Sirius, Procyon, Pollux or Betelgeuse, though neither she nor Maitland knew enough to be aware of it. And the Pole Star, famous since time began

“No Pole Star!” Maitland said, astounded.

Impressed by this new discovery, they clambered out of the car and stood holding on to it as though it were their last material support in a world doomed to everlasting dark. Soft wind, warm and summery, stirred the invisible grass at the side of the road.

“Do you suppose,” Irene said, stumbling round to where Maitland was standing, “that the thing which is warping light waves is causing us to see stars which ordinarily we wouldn’t see? That mirage again?”

“You mean stars beyond our normal range of vision?”

“Yes. Why not? Space is a big place. There are countless trillions of stars we never see in the ordinary way. But if the light from them were bent enormously out of focus we would see them—*are* seeing them now. By the same token, at some distant point from Earth our Sun is probably visible—and the Milky Way. Maybe the inhabitants of an unknown world are

wondering at this moment how the unknown sun and galaxy got into their sky and where *their* usual stars have gone!”

“Yes,” Maitland whispered. “By heaven—yes! A huge light-wave warp, bending everything light-years out of its usual track. I don’t know how you worked it out, but it’s the only possible explanation. It just *has* to be right!”

“After all,” she went on, more confidently, “refraction has no definite limits: a mirage can take place within a few feet of the observer or cover dozens of miles. In this case, light waves may be bent millions of miles out of——” She gave a little gasp as a new thought struck her. “Of course! Remember how the Sun appeared to streak towards the west, and then disappeared? That must have been when the thing came between us and the Sun. It wasn’t the Sun itself that skidded sideways; it was his lightwaves. He’s still there!” She stared blindly upwards.

“At least,” Maitland said uneasily, “we won’t freeze! But this is all so impossible—a world where no light will operate. I wonder what’s going on in the cities—out on the oceans—in the air? I never stopped to think about it until now.”

Neither of them dared to voice the thoughts that were in both their minds. In any case, the rest of the world was far away, remote. Maitland reached out and caught the girl’s arm.

“Let’s sit on the grass bank. Too oppressive in the car . . .”

Holding on to each other, they scuffed their feet over the gravel to the side of the lane, groped for the grassy bank and settled down on it, staring into the black void. They gazed anew at the unfamiliar stars which gave no light down here, because once their light waves reached an object they had become so completely refracted that it was not visible at all. Every object on the surface of the Earth was affected in the same way. The area of refraction was so vast that any image-reflection veered right off the Earth itself into surrounding space.

It was quiet, too. Only the wind out of the blackness, gentle, caressing, like a comforting hand in deepest sorrow. No birds, no sounds of country life. No friendly voices of other human beings. . . .

“Suppose,” Irene whispered, “it goes on—and *on*?”

It was the human being in her that was speaking now. Cold logic had given way before natural emotion—before fear.

“It will be the end, I suppose,” Maitland said soberly. “The end of the world. Without the Sun, Man couldn’t survive.”

“But we’ve *got* the Sun,” she insisted. “It’s there—warming us. It’s the absence of light that’s the problem. If we could only get over that—— We might, underground. Maybe this thing the Earth has run into won’t act below the surface. We might live down there, like—like Morlocks.”

“If it goes on,” Maitland said slowly, “it’ll mean the end of vegetation as we know it; the end of staple crops, of everything that relies on photosynthesis. A new species of fungoid plants might come into being——”

“And yet, on the surface, we’ll still get sunburned, because the ultra-violet rays are unaffected.”

The whole crazy paradox quenched their conversation then. Though neither of them would admit it, even to themselves, deep down inside of them they felt a grim fear. The inborn instinct of the primitive, handed down through unguessable ages, was not to be set aside without a struggle. Darkness was ever to be dreaded . . .

"It's odd, in the midst of this," Maitland said at length, "but I keep wondering what you look like."

The girl's laugh sounded soft and ghostly in the blackness. "If this ever goes, you'll see," she murmured. "But you might be disappointed."

Maitland smiled bitterly to himself. If this goes——! She was fearing, even as he was, that it might never go. Earth had, perhaps, plunged for ever into an area of refraction where all light was dead.

"Wish I knew the time," he growled, raising his wrist watch and staring into the blackness. Then an idea struck him. He felt for his penknife and, after a moment's fumbling, prised open the watch and felt gently for the hands.

"Ten to twelve." He whistled. "Nearly noon. Who'd imagine it?"

"Where were you going when this happened?" the girl inquired.

"I was going to see a patient . . . Look, there's a telephone box about half a mile down the road. I think I ought to try and reach it and give his wife a ring. This might go on all day. Do you want to stay here or——"

"Not likely!"

She grasped his hand and he helped her to her feet. Linking arms, they began to walk unsteadily down the lane, feeling before them at every yard. It was hard going, and they could not immediately rid themselves of the impression that they had been suddenly blinded in a world that was normal for everyone but themselves. Instinctively they kept listening for onrushing cars, until gradually they realised how unnecessary it was. Everything was blotted out completely, just as they were. For once Nature had the complete upper hand of her erring, quarrelsome children.

"Half a mile," Irene said as they shuffled along. "That's a long way, in this. How will you know when we get there?"

"It's just in a slight bend of the road. We'll do our best, anyway. It's better than sitting still waiting and wondering how it's all going to end. Sooner or later we should get to Wilmington village. We'll need food—I haven't had my breakfast yet!"

"And I've nothing with me," the girl sighed. "I was planning to eat at roadhouses on the way . . . Well, let's hope it will pass soon."

In truth, nobody knew when it would pass; not even the scientists who were engrossed in the phenomenon. In totally dark observatories the world over, they were still discussing it with each other across land and sea, exchanging reports and impressions. Caught unawares by the terrific speed with which the Fault had developed, they had had no time to estimate its area. It might be untold light-centuries in extent, in which case Earth would not swim clear of it for hundreds of years. If, on the other hand, it was a mere patch as cosmic distances are reckoned, it would soon be left behind.

On one thing they were all agreed: something in the ether—they freely admitted they did not know what—was altering the incident rays of light so tremendously that laws presumed immutable had been completely revoked. The *something* must be a medium that was transparent to heat yet highly refractive to light; perhaps a semi-gaseous envelope, non-poisonous, created in the first instance by the explosion of a long extinct sun. This theory was extended tentatively, and for the time being it had to suffice. To a race which does not yet know exactly what the ether is, there is no shame in not understanding the real nature of the Fault. It may be centuries before we shall know the truth . . .

“I think,” Maitland said, “the phone box is just a few yards further on, to our left.”

He and the girl had come to the slight bend in the road: they could sense it with their feet as they advanced. Carefully they edged their way along, groping in the dark as they went. For a while they encountered the wire fence at the side of the road. Then suddenly they blundered into hard glass and steel.

“It’s it!” cried Irene.

Maitland tugged the door open, groped for the instrument and lifted the receiver. He was thankful that this district still did not use the dialling system. Wondering if he would get a reply, he put the receiver to his ear.

“Hello!” came a girl’s voice, quite composed.

“Er—can you get me Wilmington Seven Nine?” Maitland asked.

“I’ll try, sir. I suppose you can’t tell me your number?”

“Impossible. I’m in total darkness. How is it where you are?”

“Well, they tell me it’s blacker than midnight,” the girl answered. “I wouldn’t know, though. I’m one of the war-blinded, trained as a telephone operator. They’ve called me out on emergency duty . . . Wilmington Seven Nine. Just a moment——” Then: “Insert two pennies, please!”

Maitland fumbled with the coins. There was the friendly buzzing of the ringing tone as he waited in the darkness. He could hear Irene Carr breathing gently beside him as she stood wedged invisibly between door and frame.

“Hello!” came a thin voice in the receiver. Maitland pressed Button A.

“That Mrs. Andrew?” he asked quickly. “Dr. Maitland speaking.”

“Oh, thank God to hear another voice, doctor!” cried the woman, fervently. “What in heaven’s name has happened to the world? Is—is it the Judgment Day at last?”

“I wouldn’t know, Mrs. Andrews—but I agree it’s pretty ghastly. I’d like to know how your husband is. I’m stranded some ten miles from your place——”

“You don’t need to rush yourself, doctor.” The voice was strangely calm, now. “Something’s happened to my husband that I don’t rightly understand. When everything went dark he just lay abed and said something about he knew God was everywhere. Then he said he’d never thought about God while life went by, day after day, like clockwork. But now everything’s still and dark and quiet, he says he can feel God near him. That’s the truth, doctor. And he’s goin’ to be all right, I’m sure of it! He’s sleeping quite peaceful, now.”

“Well—that’s fine,” Maitland said. “I’ll come and look at him the moment the darkness passes.”

He put the telephone back, brushed Irene’s shoulder as he grasped the door. She stepped out into the road, and they stood side by side in the stygian gloom.

“Everything all right?” she inquired.

He told her what Mrs. Andrews had said. “He seems to have made a remarkable recovery—at least for the present. I’ll have to see him when I can.”

“I think I can understand it,” she mused. “Normally, when we’re healthy and active, we’re inclined to take a lot for granted, just as we took the smooth working of the universe for granted—until now. It’s only at times like these, when everything goes out of gear, that we have to stop and think about such things. And when we find ourselves out of our depth, unable to make sense of what has happened, there’s nothing left to lean on but the Almighty.”

Maitland remained silent, holding Irene’s arm. Sensing her nearness, he found himself longing more than ever to see what kind of girl this was who had such a simple solution for

everything that baffled him. He turned aside and, just for a moment, he fancied he *could* see her. There was the faintest suggestion of a rounded chin, a straight nose, dimly outlined against the blackness beyond. Yes, and a slender figure . . .

While he stared disbelievingly, the silhouette took on depth. He saw the glint of light creep into hair of copper brown; and then she came out of the abyss like a vision, staring back at him with wide blue eyes that began to narrow beneath the impact of returning sunshine. Around her the landscape came gradually into view, as though floodlights were being turned on, slowly——

“Great God!” he whispered, and jerked his gaze upward. Then they both fell back, hands over their faces, as the stars paled out of the sky before an advancing tide of ever-deepening grey. Grey which merged into white, into blue. Then, blinding in its intensity, the Sun rose suddenly from the west where it had disappeared, and came to a stop at the zenith.

It was high noon. The Earth had swept clear of the Fault.

THE END

[End of Black-out by John Russell Fearn]