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The
**VENGEANCE OF
MARTIN BRAND**

By G.H. IRWIN

AUGUST 25c

VOLUME 10
NUMBER 8

AUGUST
1943

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Title: The Last Hours

Date of first publication: 1942

Author: John Russell Fearn (1908-1960)

Illustrator: Robert Fuqua (1905-1959)

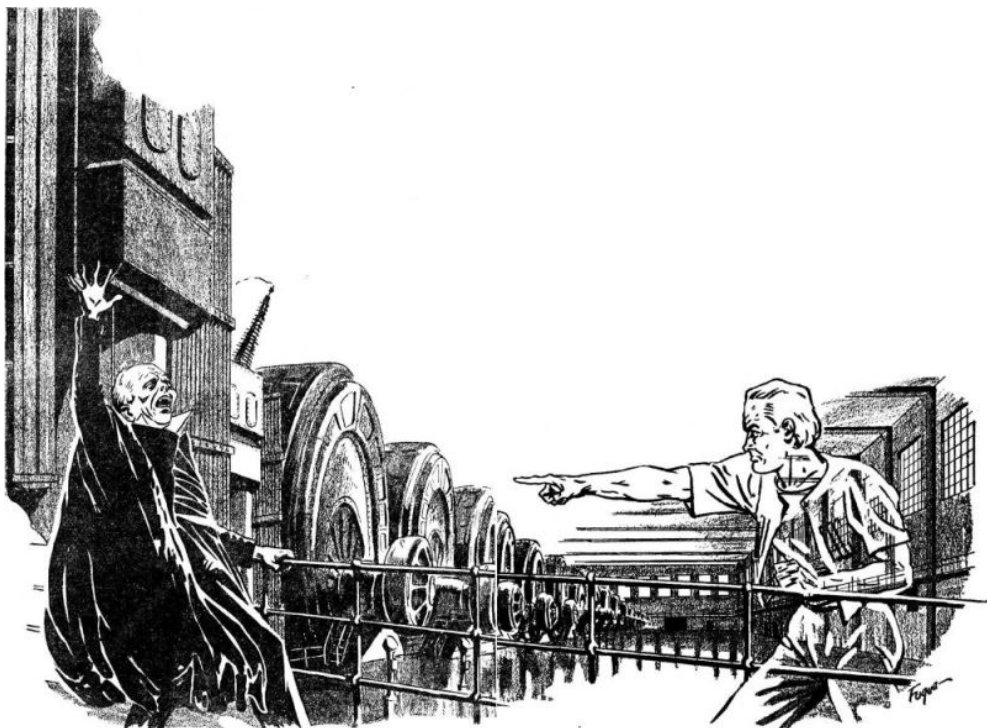
Date first posted: Nov. 21, 2022

Date last updated: Nov. 21, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221139

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"It's the end, Konda, the end! Now what has power brought you?"

The LAST HOURS

By
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

First published *Amazing Stories*, August 1942.

This new powerhouse controlled the energy of the sun—but it could not control its own power to destroy . . .

CHAPTER I

The world council edifice was packed to the doors. In every quarter of its acres of floor space, packed tight against every ebonoid pillar, were seated the representatives of every nation in the world. Hither had come the scientists, engineers, social workers, mathematicians—the whole living, breathing network of mentalities responsible for cohesion in this despot controlled world of 2240.

Bruce Lanning arrived late. The aerobus ways had been choked with craft all heading to the center of Governopolis. He pushed his way in at last between the mighty black doors, and his permit gave him immediate admission to his reserved seat. Astronomer Lanning was a valued member of the Governopolis Council . . . and Drayton Konda, the Master, knew it well. Perhaps—too well.

Lanning's keen gray eyes went over the sea of faces—white, yellow, and black. Men and women of every clime. Some rustled papers, others held silent electric recorders for personal use, others just sat and waited. It was the most impressive gathering Lanning had ever seen in his ten years as chief astronomer. Some knew why the meeting had been convened: others did not.

Lanning was one of those who did—and he had come to make a stand. The Master *dare* not . . . Then a hush fell and the muttering died like a subsiding storm. A loudspeaker in the black cupola of roof gave forth the harsh impartial announcement so often heard throughout the world—

“Silence for the Master! Silence for He Who Rules!”

Automatically opened doors back of the immense rear dais permitted a figure to appear. There was not a soul in the Solar System who did not recognize him— Massive, well over six feet, ox-shouldered, heavy-necked, with a truly remarkable and almost perfectly round bald head. His brow went up in a straight line, curved over the top of his bald skull, then went down in a straight line at the back. Intellectual, unsentimental, stubborn . . .

As usual he was quietly dressed in the lounge suit of the time. In two strides he reached the main desk, flicked the microphone switch, and waited. The silence now was as of the void.

Far overhead winked the eyes of silent television cameras. Unseen rays were picking up his image and hurling it to the furthest reaches of the cosmos . . . Bruce Lanning smiled a little twistedly. Though from here he could not see the face clearly he knew it well enough. Hook-nosed, tight-lipped, square-jawed. Eyes as blue and cold as a glacier.

Drayton Konda had set himself out to master the world and the Solar System, and what was more important, he had done it. Whether for ill or for good nobody seemed to know: perhaps because nobody was permitted to say . . .

Then Konda spoke. His voice was hard-etched, biting, purposeful. He used no appellations such as “Friends” or “Ladies and Gentlemen—” Those false trimmings were in the limbo. He went straight to his subject . . .

“I have decided we need more power! Vast power! Endless power!”

Momentarily he looked around, lips tightly outthrust as though challenging a denial. None came. He went on talking icily.

“When I gained control of the Earth and Solar System I promised it should be for a definite purpose. It was. We cannot be confined to a mere Solar System with its boundaries

ending at Pluto. All the neighbor planets are under the control of Earth—therefore I shall reach further. Outward, to Alpha Centauri, then to the furthest stars! But here on Earth there is not enough power for the construction of machines of war: not enough power to feed endless chains of factories. We have atomic force, we have the natural power of the Earth itself generated at the north magnetic pole— But more is needed! There remains only one more powerhouse to be tapped, the greatest of them all! The sun!”

There was a murmur at that, but the loudspeaker killed it.

“Silence while the Master speaks!”

Silence came. Bruce Lanning’s gray eyes narrowed. Now it was coming, just as he had expected.

“The sun,” Konda went on didactically, slamming the desk with his fist. “My solar engineers inform me that it is possible to erect a vast powerhouse for the sole purpose of utilizing the sun’s surplus power. We all know that seventy-five percent of the sun’s power is wasted: drawn to a focus by magnetism it can be used, transformed to feed our chains of factories. Our output can be tripled. In five years we shall be ready to launch the greatest attempt to conquer the universe within the great history of Mankind. War? No—conquest! For this purpose of erecting a giant magnetic power plant I have convened this meeting, so that you can make the dispositions for the necessary labor. Engineers, you will submit plans of the intended powerhouse: labor chiefs, you will estimate the labor required: social workers, you will broadcast statements on the benefits that can accrue: mathematicians, you will work out the calculations: astronomers, you will determine the effects of this process—”

“I have done!”

Bruce Lanning jumped up, his clear voice cutting across the Master’s and echoing through the hall’s vast reaches. There was dumbfounded silence. That one man should *dare* to interrupt He Who Rules . . . ! There was something awesome about it. The sight of the Master of the System standing perfectly still at his desk, domed spot of bald head turned to the solitary man in the wilderness of humanity, was unbelievably impressive.

Suddenly the automatic analyser gave forth a harsh announcement.

“The Interrupter is Bruce Lanning, First Astronomer to the Council of Governopolis. Guards, remove him!”

“Remove me if you will,” Lanning cried, standing his ground, “but I am determined certain facts shall be known—”

“You have dared to interrupt He Who Rules,” stated the Voice.

“And I will again when it is in the common interest!”

Gathering uproar, amazement, a desperate pulling at Lanning’s coat tails by his nearest neighbors— Then the Master spoke.

“You may speak, Astronomer Lanning, provided it is in the interests of Governopolis . . . Continue.”

“I submit, sir, that your scheme for harnessing solar power will bring more destruction than benefit. In my position as Astronomer to the Council I have known for some time of your intention to utilize the Sun’s surplus power. Your scheme, as I see it, involves a system of magnetism between Earth and Sun, by which process you intend to draw—as indeed Earth itself draws already in a more diffuse form—the electrons and energy streams which would otherwise scatter in space. This vast surplus you intend to convert in your powerhouse and so supply your chains of lesser normal powerhouses. . . .”

“You are correct, Astronomer Lanning,” the Master conceded calmly.

Lanning took a grip on himself. “Do this, and you will destroy the world! Firstly, your magnetism system will not only draw electronic streams, but also the brickbats and flying fragments forever hurtling about in space. On this earth will descend an incessant bombardment of incendiary material. Fires will break out! Hundreds of people will be killed. The extra amount of power gained will be counterbalanced by losses in labor and material.”

Silence. That silence chilling to the nerves. The silence that came while the Master meditated.

“That will not be all!” Lanning shouted, and with a certain touch of desperation. “It is a well known fact that electrical storms and radio interference are entirely brought about by electronic activity from the Sun, worse at some periods than others. Increase the stream of electronic energy and the world will be blanketed by radio static: storms beyond imagination will lash the Earth . . . I repeat, Master, there are limits beyond which a man may not go. Do this one more thing to get a little extra power and— But I have said enough.”

Lanning remained standing, strained and white-faced. The battering watchfulness of thousands of eyes was a tremendous ordeal.

Then presently Drayton Konda spoke again.

“Your statement has been interesting, Astronomer Lanning, despite its variance with truth. You have overlooked that all the cities of the world, and Governopolis in particular, are fireproof and invasion proof. We need fear no attack from death rays or implements of war: therefore even less need we fear a pseudo-invasion in the form of brickbats and meteorites. Storms are possible, but of trifling consequence. Radio we can control by giant static eliminators . . . Taken in all, Astronomer Lanning, your comments may be summed up as a reactionary attempt to disturb this meeting.”

Konda turned his head slightly. “You are instructed to strike out Astronomer Lanning’s statements. No summary of them shall reach the outside world . . . And Lanning,” the bald head moved back, “you will report to my office immediately after the convention.”

“But sir, please listen—”

“Leave us,” Konda said tonelessly.

“Astronomer Lanning, you are ordered to leave!” thundered the loudspeaker. “Guards, open the door . . .”

Lanning’s shoulders drooped with the hopelessness of it. He knew—yes, and Drayton Konda *knew*—he was right. But if one man rules, and the one man is determined to have extra power no matter what the cost . . . ?

Lanning went out through the sea of people without another word, set-faced. The black doors closed soundlessly behind him . . .

On the vast colonnaded terrace outside the doors there was a scattering of people, mainly radio and press representatives. Gloomily, Lanning glanced at them seated against the black and gleaming walls, then he wandered to the balcony and gazed out over the city from this high elevation.

Preposterous city, Governopolis, with its mile-high towers of black ebonoid metal, its lacy bridges, its beacon towers, its streets infinities of distance below and picked out like serpents of smooth flickerless light. The quiet of the summer evening was upon Governopolis: there was no sound save the lazy hum of eternal power. The stars were sprinkling the serene and

purpling heavens— Far away the Earth-Mars space liner nosed silently to rest . . . Peaceful. A Paradise . . .

No, a mask! A mask for ground out humanity under the heel of infinite science. Science in the hands of a man convinced of his own godlike power, a man to whom pity and human kindness were unknown. Drayton Konda was the living blight that had destroyed, perhaps forever, all chance of a Golden Age . . .

“And so shall this insubstantial pageant fade,” Lanning murmured, eyes on the crazy expanse.

“And leave not a wrack behind,” whispered a soft voice close to his ear.

Lanning twirled, gazed into the eyes of a slender woman in a light Grecian-style gown. Her eyes were dark, human and warm, eyes that still had not become clouded by the eternal heel of oppression. The soft wind at these heights blew back the dark hair from her serene oval face.

“Eleanor, dearest, whatever are you doing here?” Lanning caught her slim hands. “You know the wives of representatives are not really allowed. . . .”

“No?” Her gaze slanted down the file of waiting people. “There are women there—wives too. They wait.”

“But they are the wives of the Council members. I am only an astronomer . . .”

“The First—and the greatest in the world,” she said gently. “Konda or no Konda, that is the truth.”

“Eleanor . . .” Lanning smiled a little ruefully: then his expression changed. “And take care what you say about Konda. The city is worm-eaten with pickup cells. One word against him and—”

The girl locked her arm in his and they returned to viewing the city.

“You said your piece?” she asked seriously.

“Yes, I said it.” Lanning’s jaws tightened. “I was told to leave.”

“I expected it,” she sighed. “One cannot expect a man like Konda, drunk with power, to care two hoots about warnings. That is one reason why the world is despot-controlled today. But you are right, Bruce: I know you are. If he dares do this thing—”

“Hush, dearest, hush!” Lanning put a gentle hand on her lips. “I beg of you to be careful!” he insisted anxiously. “If such words as yours should ever reach him it would be . . . the end.”

“I wonder if that would matter . . . ?”

Lanning was silent for a moment, then he said, “As long as we still have each other and I still have a moderately good position with the Council we can perhaps make out. At least we can *hope* for better things even if they never come.”

“Until one man or woman has the courage to stand up to Konda they will never come,” the girl answered seriously. “Konda is an inhuman devil, but none dare tell him so. Once such a person arises it will be the end of despotism—”

She paused and straightened up as the black doors of the convention hall suddenly swung wide open and the delegates began to emerge with somber faces. Lanning moved to the nearest one and caught his arm.

“What was the final decision?” he asked quickly.

“As we expected,” the man shrugged.

“The power of the sun will be harnessed at the earliest moment. Frankly, Lanning, I thought you were magnifi—”

The man stopped, looked furtively around him, then went on his way. And on each man and woman that passed there was the brand of the Master—the market stamp of Drayton Konda. It was maddening. Pitiabile.

Lanning turned away with a set face, caught Eleanor's arm.

"I have to see the Master, dearest—his orders. See you later at the apartment."

She nodded silent assent and he hurried off. He walked the distance, thinking as he went, pushed his way through the crowd along the galleries, through the immense ebonoid tunnel that linked up the buildings, up a gently rising staircase, and so at last to the mighty sealed doors behind which was the sacrosanct territory of the Master of the System.

CHAPTER II

Law Without Mercy

Lanning waited while a miscellany of instruments identified him, checked him for weapons, registered him—then the three invincible doors opened one by one and he was in Konda's presence. Slowly he walked to the massive desk and waited . . .

Konda's bald head was a white patch where the desk light shone upon it—the remainder of the giant office was thickly shadowed. Then he looked up suddenly and the white patch was replaced with the friendless glacier-blue eyes.

"What I have to say will not take long, Astronomer Lanning. You are suspended from duty for a period of eight weeks."

Lanning gasped. "What! For my stating those truths at the—"

"What you said was calculated to cast a reflection on my knowledge, Lanning, and that I cannot allow. It was finally decided that the solar powerhouse shall be erected almost immediately. And if you remain in your position it will be considered that I am secretly in agreement with you. Therefore, for the period of time occupied in building the powerhouse—eight weeks—you will be absent."

"But, sir, without work, in a city like this means—means— It means starvation!" Lanning clutched at the desk. "You are taking away my only means of livelihood. You are tearing up my privilege ticket for food, my voucher for money, my permit as an honored Council member—"

"You should have thought of these things before you dared question my judgment at the convention, Lanning." The words came without rancor, without bitterness. They were mercilessly impartial. Then the voice finished, "You may go."

Lanning turned stupidly, back towards the first mighty door. Half aware he heard the buzz of the Master's deskphone. Then suddenly,

"Lanning!"

He swung round eagerly, marched back to the desk. But there was no sign of recanting in the pale, cruel eyes.

"Lanning, you and your wife discussed matters beyond your province on the colonnade tonight. . . . That was most unwise!"

Lanning's face tautened. He burst out abruptly,

"It was nothing important! Only small talk—"

"I know exactly what you said, and your wife too. The electric ear recorded every word of it. I have just heard it from headquarters. Among other things I learn that I am an inhuman devil and that I am drunk with power. That you are right: that I am wrong! Your wife shall learn to regret this, Lanning!"

"By God, Konda, if you even dare to touch her I'll—I'll—"

Lanning stopped dead, gulping down his surging fury as the black shadows suddenly sprouted the grim muzzles of ray guns. He remembered. Robot guards, controlled from the desk. They were everywhere, all over the city, prying, peeping, protecting this baleful genius who was Master of the System.

"Sit down!" Konda's icy voice commanded: then he snapped a switch. "Find Eleanor Lanning and bring her here instantly!"

During the leaden silence which followed there was no sound save the scratch of the Master's electric pen as he went on with his work. Lanning sat and sweated, inwardly scalded with murderous anger— There was a click and a concealed door opened. A man in black entered, a man with a pickax face, dark sunken eyes, and a pinched forehead . . .

Melicot! The most hated man in the System outside Konda—legal wizard in whose hands rested the absolute enforcement of law. All infractions, however small, were examined by Melicot with ruthless thoroughness and sparse scatterings of mercy . . .

He sat down beside Konda and relaxed, his mouth a tight scratch and the rest of his face in shadow . . .

Then Eleanor came in by the main door, calmly showing no trace of fear though she must have known only an ominous reason could have needed her presence here. The city guards released her arms.

"Eleanor!" Bruce cried, leaping up to seize her hand. "Dearest—"

She smiled, that slow confident smile that never seemed eclipsed. Then the rasp of the Master's voice broke across Bruce's further words.

"Eleanor Lanning, I understand you disapprove of my rulership of this planet?"

"Decidedly!" She turned and faced Konda with a steady gaze.

"Eleanor!" Bruce choked, aghast.

"The Master has asked my opinion, and I am giving it," she said simply. "In fact, Konda, I loathe everything you stand for, and you yourself are the vilest human that ever walked the earth. One day you will learn to regret the things you have done, and when the last hours come you—"

"You will be silent, Eleanor Lanning," Konda broke in tonelessly. Then he snapped another switch and the conversation on the terrace outside the convention hall played back from the shadowy gloom.

"Well?" the girl asked calmly. "I said all that, certainly."

"You realize just how far you have broken the law?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I do. But I would sooner die a lone speaker of the truth than an eternally timid liar! If there were only one man or woman with character and courage in this despot-crushed world, you, Drayton Konda, would no longer rule multimillions of lives from this desk!"

"Eleanor!" Bruce groaned.

"I mean it for you too, Bruce," she said seriously, turning. "It is said one cannot overthrow this despotism. One man *can* because *one* man became ruler. If it comes to a choice of characters, the Master is the stronger because he got what he intended. Somewhere, someday, there must rise one strong enough to break him—"

Melicot's acid voice broke in.

"Schedule 19: Law 22—anybody who speaks in condemnation of the supreme mastership exercised by He Who Rules shall suffer the full penalty of the law. The penalty is . . . death!"

Konda stood up. "You have heard the sentence, Eleanor Lanning, and it will be exacted at dawn tomorrow!" He motioned to the guards.

"You can't do this thing!" Bruce screamed. "You can't condemn my wife to death like this just to satisfy your damned stinking laws! By God, no! I'll break you, Konda: I'll tear this blasted city apart—"

“Bruce . . .” It was Eleanor’s quiet voice. She laid a hand on his arm. Konda did not stop her. Deep down in his cast iron soul was a latent admiration for her serene calm.

“Bruce,” she repeated gently. “I knew after what I had said that it would be the end. But I would rather die than live any longer in the hell Konda has made of this world. Even Konda cannot forever separate us. There is always somewhere else, way beyond here. I shall be waiting.”

“No! No!” Bruce flung out a protecting arm but the blow of a guard sent him reeling back. Dazed, he shook himself, watched the girl led unresisting from the office . . . Then like a tiger he swung back on Konda. Melicot had already melted into the shadows.

“I’m going to stop this, Konda! My wife shall not die, you hear! You can’t get away with it!”

Konda gazed at him like a snake. “Eight weeks suspension, Astronomer Lanning, then you may return to your post. You tried to prevent your wife’s foolish utterances on the terrace and that weighs in your favor. Your life shall be spared. You may go!”

“You bet I’ll go! And I’ll give you all-fired hell before I’m through!”

Lanning swung to the doorway, blundered out into the immensity of corridor . . . but even as he went he knew he had spoken idle words . . .

Cooling from anger, grief descended upon Lanning. Grief and helpless fury. He wandered the pedestrian ways instead of going back to his apartment. And he knew that all the time he was watched. Sometimes the watcher was human: at other times he could feel the faint static bristling through his scalp that denoted a television beam was fixed upon him from headquarters, watching and recording every move and spoken thought.

Once he pondered committing suicide as he gazed down from the mile-high ramparts into the bowels of light below. But even that would not have proven effectual. Before he could have fallen any distance automatic nets would have thrust out from the building face to save him. Suicides were almost unknown in Governopolis. Konda took good care of his workers. He needed them. Suicide was hopeless. Surgery, too, could rapidly put them right in case of a self-inflicted wound . . .

So Lanning wandered again, stunned nearly into amnesia by the horror that had so suddenly descended. Every time he paused he found he was in another part of the city, never quite realizing how he’d gotten there. As before, his wandering was not interfered with. As long as he made no attempt to end his life he was safe. Safe! Hollow mockery!

And each time he paused he seemed to see one of the giant city clocks slicing off more of the night hours. Slowly the summer dawn began to creep over the eternally wakeful city and he was drawn by irresistible impulse to the vast gray facades of the city prison, there to wait, dispirited, hag-ridden, outside the walls.

Upon the stroke of 4 a. m. he saw the telltale light signal wink and expire on the prison roof, the sole broadcast to the unheeding, striving millions of the enslaved that one of their number was dead.

“Eleanor . . .” Lanning whispered, his eyes unashamedly blurred with tears. “Eleanor . . .!”

The City, merciless and unfeeling, absorbed Bruce Lanning into its matrix thereafter. It assimilated him completely, threw him out afterwards as indigestible, branded its brutal machine stamp upon him as he moved from place to place in a half-waking nightmare.

Deprived of his work, without any amenities, he became one of the drifters that must always lie back of a titanic monster of power like Governopolis.

He did not know why he tried to keep himself alive—and yet he did. He drifted down without realizing it to the lowest regions where the scum of outcast workers survived, those for whom the city had no longer any use and who were left to die or starve as circumstance dictated. Konda had his reasons for this, too. To let them rot and starve there just beyond the city was a good example to other workers if they thought of rebellion. Even enslavement was better than the pitiless struggle against death waged in the dark, sombre alleys of the city's backwaters . . .

Then one night light came back into Lanning's hammered brain. It was rekindled by a few words from the man who had trailed round with him in the past weeks—a shoddy, old, bitter man with cavernous eyes and consumptive cough.

"They finished the solar power plant today, Lanning."

"They—finished—the—plant?" Lanning said the words haltingly, through dry lips. "Finished the—" He stopped. The words had penetrated his brain. It suddenly linked him up with the past. The Solar Power Plant! Eleanor . . .

"How long did it take?" he breathed.

"Eight weeks. But it's finished . . . More power—more despotism—more death!"

"Perhaps," Lanning said slowly. He looked down at his hands as though he had never seen them before, inspected his torn and ragged clothing. Then he felt his bristling stubble.

"Crawford," he said slowly, "my punishment is over. I am entitled to go back there—There!" He jerked his head to the infinite blaze of light and power. "I was suspended—"

"I know. I heard," Crawford said, coughing thickly. "You can go back, take orders, do as you're damn well told."

"But at least I can live," Lanning breathed. "Not rot in this stinking backwater. Isn't that worth something?"

Crawford spat. "I'd sooner die than work anymore for Konda. He threw me out, so I stay out. Rotting maybe— But *out!* And you still are willing to obey him after he had your wife executed? I just cannot believe that."

"She died because she spoke the truth," Lanning said, getting up. "Yes, because she dared to stand alone in all this godless emptiness and call Konda a fiend to his face. There was courage, Crawford—courage such as this world has never seen for generations. I was not worthy of her: it was right that she was taken from me. But now I am changed . . . Deeply, unimaginably changed!"

"You're going to try and get revenge, eh? You can't do it!"

"She said one man . . ." Lanning spoke half to himself. "One man—and she meant it for me! One man to free the world! Yes, Crawford, I am going back to take up my old job, praying God I shall not be such a coward as I once was. Then one day . . ."

He straightened up. "I have to get myself in order," he said quietly. "The past died in these eight weeks of hell. For me there is only the future . . ."

CHAPTER III

Miracle in Space

So Lanning reported for duty again, and with the impartial calm of the law his social security was restored to him. He returned to being a cog in the Council machine, but he knew that he was eternally watched. The mark of suspicion was on him—but he did nothing to nurture that suspicion.

That he had returned for vengeance there was no doubt, but to want it and to achieve it were as apart as the galaxies. All he could do was wait for an opportunity and keep his mouth shut. At least he had a better chance in the Council than in being a drifter.

He made his astronomical reports with religious exactness, came and went from and to his coldly empty apartment every day, never made mistakes, and never appeared rebellious. But it was noticed that he never smiled . . . Never.

Then little by little some of the things he had predicted for the solar magnetizer began to occur. At intervals there were showers of brickbats upon the city. In some parts of the world the showers were severe enough to inflict considerable injury and damage. It then became part of his work to predict the paths of the meteor streams. When he had the prediction complete the magnetizer was switched off to allow the meteor fields to stream by unattracted.

To Lanning it simply meant his postulations were correct. Nothing more. He was justified in his warnings—but he was not avenged. Not yet.

Storms came next, stirred up by the onslaught of electronic streams upon the higher planes of the atmosphere. In six nights out of seven, as the hot nights of late summer gave way to the cold of the Fall, there were rolling thunderstorms over the monstrous Governopolis. Lightning flung itself in random bolts at the mile-high towers with their huge insulator caps. Rain roared in a flood from raging, tortured heaven. The world over, radio became impossible at such times, despite the hard work of static-eliminator plants . . .

These were nights that Lanning loved. Perched high in the major observatory he was alone, the rest of the staff being isolated in other parts of the building. Here he could watch the blaze of the storm around the giant dome of warple glass, could feel at one with the fury because it had something in common with his own raging, tortured soul. On such nights as these he could imagine the soul of Eleanor abroad . . . Her name was like a timeless echo now. A bold, magnificent woman who had died that a few words of truth might be spoken.

“Truth,” Lanning whispered, his deep burning eyes fixed on the tumult. “Truth—and vengeance! A bridge between! I am the bridge!”

Lightning crackled violet fire as though assenting.

“If there were only one man—!” screamed the wind.

“Konda! *Konda!* KONDA!” crashed the thunderbolts.

“I shall be waiting. . . .” A faint clear thread of remembrance.

“Vengeance!” Lanning breathed, brow damp with the fury of his emotions. “Vengeance, by all the gods! There shall *be* vengeance! Eleanor. . . .” He tore the safety window open and yelled into the wind and rain. “Eleanor, you hear me! You shall be avenged! I am the bridge—!”

Then he turned away, cold and calm, fastened the window. These moods were common things now: Perhaps he was half mad. He didn’t know. But that he could be at union with the

storm and feel the spirit of his departed loved one in its raging maw did not strike him as unnatural. The storm was battering at Konda's invincible ramparts even as had Eleanor's words of cold-flame truth. . . .

Slowly the storm began to die away and the stars winked out. Lanning calmed with it, settled himself in the chair of the gigantic telescope to make his nightly charts.

It was quite by chance that the mighty instrument was turned on the eastern heaven, and since the Earth had shifted since the last observation the instrument was not trained on the previous night's field, but upon the orbit of Nemesis, the massive meteorite-comet which made a round trip in something like 77 years. First appearing in 1980, it had pursued its journey regularly, always coming near to but never touching Earth. . . .

But *this* time—Lanning stared, and stared. The long sweeping tail of Nemesis was different. It was oddly foreshortened, and it had never been foreshortened before!

Lanning found his hand trembling on the telescope controls. This meant something—something big. He deserted his chair suddenly and hurried over to the files concerning the visitor. Hurriedly, tensely, he waded through spectroheliographs, plates, mathematical computations . . . No doubt about it: Nemesis was off her course! But why? What cosmic accident had caused this thing?

Back of his mind Lanning *knew* what had caused it, but he did not dare then to give his imagination free rein. It seemed impossible that Fate had given him such a supreme chance to prove himself right. . . .

All that night he remained at the telescope, spent the next day making calculations, then when the next night came—clear and calm for a change—he went to work again. Swinging the giant instrument to where the comet should appear, if following its normal orbit, he found no trace of it! Tensely he swung back to the position of the previous night—Nemesis was still there, a trifle larger, deep color of yellow, and the tail had gone.

Stunned, Lanning stared at the unbelievable. It could mean only one thing. Nemesis had turned right off her course and the tail was invisible now because it was streaming right out behind her and was invisible from the Earth. Nemesis was hurtling towards Earth from out of space, drawn inexorably . . . and there was a reason for that too.

With the dispassionate calm of the true astronomer, shelving for the time his personal hates and bitternesses, Lanning went to work. When he had all his notes complete—and it took him a week, during which time Nemesis had swollen horrifyingly—he gathered them up and left the observatory.

Dawn had just broken. He took the quiet routes that led to Drayton Konda's headquarters. The Master always reached his desk at dawn, and when Lanning was shown in to him he had just arrived.

“Well, Astronomer Lanning?”

If the Master was surprised at the early call he did not show it, but his steely eyes looked at Lanning's strained face curiously.

Lanning said, “When you first erected the solar power plant, sir, I warned you of danger. You refused to listen. I forecast the doom of the world. That doom—is coming!”

Konda's face was expressionless. “Explain yourself!”

“Very well. A meteorite-comet, Nemesis by name, has been swung aside from her normal path of seventy-seven years circuit. The reason for that is that the immense force field generated by your power station has reached out into the depths of space. You are using

magnetism. This meteorite is ninety-five percent magnetic oxide of iron, instantly drawn by magnetism—far more so than by gravitation, which is *not* magnetism. It has been caught in the field of your magnet and is heading straight for Earth. Its speed is seven thousand miles a minute; its size, one half that of the Moon. Its gas envelope is highly poisonous. . . . Here are the official records.”

Konda took them, studied them, tightened his thin lips.

“I will give orders for the power station to be cut off instantly and so free this thing while it is still far away,” he said.

“That will avail you nothing,” Lanning said, smiling icily. “It is in a fixed path now and on the opposite side from the sun. It is making a bee-line for Earth and nothing can stop it hitting us. The damage is done. Even if by some scientific genius we could maneuver the comet away it would fall into the sun, thereby probably making the sun a nova after its heat has escaped in one gigantic surge, destroying every planet in the system. Surviving that, we might have worlds in eternal twilight, eternal death!”

“We can burrow underground,” Konda said, thinking. “We can withstand the impact that way.”

“Its speed when it reaches here, will be in the neighborhood of eight thousand miles a second,” Lanning stated implacably. “You have eight days to get below—no more. Even if you could do it, it would not save you. . . . I warned you, Konda, warned you heart and soul that too much power would break you one day. Now it is my turn! I shall tell the people what your blind ambition has brought about— The end of the world! Some of them may still be able to escape to another planet.”

“I think not, my unbalanced friend,” Konda said slowly, looking up. “The people shall know nothing of this. That you have come to me first with the information saves the situation. They shall know nothing!”

“Konda, you can’t do it! When the comet becomes visible in the next night or two they will demand explanations from you, the Master!”

“And if the Master is not here?” Konda inquired softly.

“What!” Lanning started. “You can’t mean you are going to—to desert the Earth?”

“Naturally my life is more valuable than that of the worker! If the planet is doomed I shall move to one that is not. I have mastered every planet in the System: do not forget that! It is better, on second thoughts, that the meteorite hit Earth than fall in the Sun. Better one planet be destroyed than all rendered useless. . . . I owe you a debt, Astronomer Lanning, for bringing this matter to my notice.”

“You skunk,” Lanning whispered. “You dirty, white-livered skunk! You will make good your escape and leave the millions of Earth who’ve sweated and toiled, to destruction. Yeah, so you can start again! By God, Konda, this is one time you won’t get away with it—”

“You’ll continue to do as you are told,” Konda interrupted, a ray gun suddenly in his hand over the desk. “It is definitely time to be rid of you, but not in a way that anybody can know what happened to you. If inquiry is made, you have simply become deranged and removed. Most people know you are more than half mad these days anyway. I shall withdraw all other astronomers from duty before the threat of Nemesis can be fully discovered. I shall not even entrust you to the executioner, because he might talk. . . . You shall go into space, among those beloved stars of yours—there to stop. There to die!”

“Wait a minute!” Lanning snapped. “I’m half mad—okay. I want revenge for the brutal way you murdered—yes, murdered!—my wife! But duty to humanity comes first. There may yet be a way to avert this catastrophe. Fleets of space machines firing neutron guns could perhaps explode this comet before it strikes us—its metallic core, anyway. The gas we would have to provide against. . . . Or you might arrange counter attractors on other planets to draw it aside and neutralize its danger. There are many things—”

“You said eight days, Lanning. There is not the time. Besides, I have never considered it wise to trifle with the cosmos. If I cannot be certain of beating it I allow it full play. . . .”

Konda got up suddenly. “Walk!” he commanded. “It is a favorable time for your departure, before the staff gets here. *Walk!*”

Lanning clenched his fists, wondering which was best—space death as Konda had planned it for him, or the sudden death of the flame gun. Finally he walked. Life is not an easy thing to sell as long as there is a spark of hope left. . . .

The gun in his back he walked the still deserted galleries in the fresh morning air, ascended the spiral stairway, finally reached the private spacedrome on top of the executive building. Konda motioned him to a one-man flyer. He climbed in, sat in the control chair.

Almost before he realized what had happened, manacles snapped into position around wrists and ankles. He raised a startled face.

“You were prepared for this then, Konda? You must have been—”

“No,” Konda contradicted. “But there have been others whom it was necessary to be rid of in the same quiet way as this. The ship is specially constructed for undesirables. . . .”

He leaned over the switchboard and made adjustments to the complicated mechanism, checked the fuel gauge, then turned an expressionless face.

“The time-switch mechanism is set to start in five minutes,” he said. “It will operate, hurtle the ship well clear of the Earth, and will then send it on a straight-line journey. You will travel clear out of the Solar System—will go on and on until the power fails. By then you will be beyond Pluto and will continue going at constant velocity until some cosmic body attracts the ship. If by then you have not starved you will die, ground to powder, and no man will ever know. That is how it should be, Lanning. *I am the master, not you!*”

Lanning could think of nothing to say. The inhuman, merciless workings of Konda’s mind were beyond his gauging. First it had been Eleanor because she had spoken the truth: now it was him for exactly the same reason. And he had thought he had found a perfect lever to bring Konda’s kingdom crashing. Instead—

Then the airlock clicked shut. Lanning stared bleakly at the control board, striving with every effort to break the manacled grip, without avail. He waited through the longest five minutes he had ever known. . . .

Then suddenly the crushing backward pressure of the start was upon him, forcing him tightly into the chair. In his ears was the roar of the rocket motors, and through the port he saw Earth bathed in pallid morning mist as he climbed into the infinite.

Straight as an arrow, perfectly charted, the ship hurtled out into the star pricked immensity of space. Lanning sat immovable, pinned down—but after a while a sensation of deepening alarm settled on him as he felt a distinct pull of the ship out of its charted path!

The nose was turning, slowly and inexorably, into the field of the titanic solar powerhouse magnet, a field that existed between Earth and Sun. Lanning found himself wondering what would happen. So far no spaceship had ever been near that deadly line: paths had been charted

to give it as wide a berth as possible . . . but in his urgency to be rid of his one mightiest enemy Konda had overlooked that this was only a small ship unprotected by giant rockets able to fire it away from the counter pull.

Anyway, it didn't seem to matter much now. He had done his best—and failed. There was even an interest in looking forward to death—

Then, so suddenly it surprised him, he was in that mystery field. What happened to him was something he could not analyze. His body was shot through with mind-numbing pain. He could not move, could not cry out. He was alive and yet dead, caught in a prickling, fiery cramp that felt as though each nerve were exploding separately.

His brain, right out of tune with his body, was slammed and battered with the strangest of notions—as though he were in two places at once. For a second or two he was seized with the illusion that he could see around corners, that his mind was elevated a couple of octaves beyond normalcy . . . then the sensation blasted into a white heat of agony as his body felt to bulge outwards to breaking point. He stared fixedly at his hands and arms swollen like balloons with the narrow neck where the manacle gripped him—

Suddenly a ripping sensation that made him scream with pain. It was like a plaster torn suddenly from a festering wound. It went from head to toe and left him sick, sweating, gasping, white with reaction. But his mind was normal again now and the pain had gone. A sweet languor pervaded his racked being. . . .

Gradually he began to look around him, then his hands again caught his attention. Something was wrong. Desperately wrong! His hands were glass-like! *He could see through them!* Frightened, he looked down at himself. Everywhere that clothing did not hide the fact, he was transparent! He could see the chair through himself!

Nor was that all, for with a sudden effort he lifted up his hands—and they came through the solid manacles just as though he had pulled his wrists through soft, cloying dough. Even as he got shakily to his feet he noticed he sank into the metal floor a little, found solidity at perhaps a couple of inches.

It took him a long time to master himself; but slowly terror gave way to curiosity; then to scientific thirst. . . .

CHAPTER IV

The Last Hours

Slowly he turned to the switchboard, found he had just sufficient solidity in his fingers to move the levers. He cast aside the automatic devices and put full blast into the rear tubes. Gradually he felt the ship start to pull away from the battering beam of magnetism. He waited tensely through the long minutes, wondering if he would regain his normal appearance once back in free space . . . His amazement was complete when the transparency remained after dragging out of the field.

Puzzled he started to think, going back over each of his sensations. Magnetism? Opposing forces . . . The first dim filterings of the truth made him gasp— The atoms of his body had become coordinated! Yes, that was it! His mind hurried on to the full postulation . . .

Normally the atoms and the molecules of his body, *any* body, should be chasing about hither and yon, the products of unorganized magnetism. Yet each atom and molecule possesses north and south poles. Magnetism. Unorganized. But if a gigantic force, a strange form of magnetism—such as that issuing from Konda's magnetic powerhouse—were to force all those atoms to turn their poles in *one* direction . . .?

"I'd become as a ghost," Lanning whispered. "Semi-transparent, able to walk through matter. The stray atoms still not turned by the magnetism would make for a slight resistance. That is the 'dough' effect, the reason why I don't sink through the floor. Seventy five percent of the atoms and molecules in my body have been turned in one fixed direction, swung by the magnetism from Konda's power plant. His magnetism reacts on human structure evidently. But not on the ship?"

That puzzled him for a moment—but only for a moment, for when he came to look closely he saw the ship too had suffered some slight degree of transparency.

"And of course nothing can put me right except de-magnetization," he mused. "Anymore than an ordinary magnet can lose its attraction without special treatment . . ."

Slowly the possibilities began to filter upon him. He was unkillable, changed by a scientific fluke into a man to whom matter was no barrier, to whom a bullet was no danger, to whom a death ray meant no more than a ray of light! Vengeance was his to exact at last! There remained—Konda!

Lanning swung to the window and gazed out on space. There, clearly visible in the backdrop of stars, was the yellow ball that spelt doom for the Earth. Destruction sweeping ever nearer, until in a few more days . . . There was not the time to save the world even if it could be told.

All of a sudden everything focused into place in Lanning's mind. It was to be his personal revenge after all: revenge for the death of Eleanor, revenge for his own weeks of misery in the back-waters, his mental turmoils in the observatory: revenge for his intended death . . .

Konda had said he would escape into space to another world. Very well! Lanning gave an icy smile. He would wait. Sooner or later the despot would come to him—then there was sufficient substance left in his fingers to seize that gross throat, to crush, and crush. . . .

But two days and nights passed without any sign of space machines leaving Earth—days and nights which Lanning estimated from the Earth's revolutions. He was not over surprised

by this lack of departure for the space perturbations from the fast approaching comet-meteorite were strong enough now to make his own vessel rock up and down like a ship in a stormy sea. It was unsafe for normal flyers: but the riddle was why Konda had not made the trip in a small private machine before now.

Time was slipping by fast. The comet had grown enormously in the forty-eight hours . . . There was no means of finding out anything except by returning to Earth, for the little ship had no radio.

Irritated at the misfiring of his plan Lanning drove the vessel back to Earth as fast as the power could take him. The moment he plunged into the atmosphere he was in the midst of hot vapors rising from the surface of the world. With considerable difficulty, flying by instruments alone through dense fog, he managed at last to make the space-port.

He walked through the airlock without opening it and gazed about him, his feet sinking slightly into the ground as usual. The heat was overpowering: the sky was hidden in a smoky haze of dust brought about by the meteoric streams of cosmic dust preceding the asteroid proper.

Through the ground drifts Lanning saw masses of frightened humans coming and going. Finally he saw a solitary spaceport official struggling through the gloom: he caught him by the arm. The man stared as though his eyes would drop out.

“Bruce Lanning!” he whispered. “The ghost of Astronomer Lanning!”

“Where is Konda?” Lanning demanded. “Tell me! Where is he?”

“Nobody knows . . .” The man’s eyes were still round with horror. “The people got wise to this approaching asteroid and demanded he do something to protect them. He said he couldn’t. Only you could help and you had gone mad and killed yourself. When the people found him he was just going to escape into space. The people attacked him and he fled into the city somewhere. We’ve been trying to get a few people away. But Lanning, what’s happened to you? Are you alive—or dead—?”

But Lanning had gone, striding into the smoke. Nothing mattered now except Konda. He, and he alone, was responsible for all this. He should not escape to some hidden spot and take off into space to have a further chance to exert his inexorable law. Then there was Eleanor—her death to be avenged.

Lanning went first to the main center of the city. The all-pervading heat haze was everywhere. Humans came and went past him. They would glance back, astonished, but before their minds could register the miracle he had gone . . . Workers, the higher social experts, the engineers, the machines-minders, men, women, and children came pouring up from the depths like smoked-out ants. Some were clutching bundles: most of them had their terrified eyes on the smoky sky.

Lanning went on, through galleries and across bridges, through walls, through sealed doors, like an automaton of another world, indeed like a god, for there was nothing to stop him. Everywhere he looked he saw terror: terror because Konda had wanted too much power

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First he examined the administrative building from roof to basement, but as he had expected, Konda was absent. From here he went to the depths of the city where he had spent those anguishing weeks while suspended from duty. Again there was no sign of Konda’s unmistakable form amidst the swirling, eddying scum of humanity trailing to the space port.

Night fell. Lanning paused awhile, took what food he could find—for he found he still needed it—rested, then set off again. Night was baleful in its terror. Nemesis was fully visible in the sky through the breaks in the heat-fog. Nemesis, filling half the heaven, visibly rolling and swelling, pouring its insufferable heat down on the world. So suddenly had it appeared out of nowhere, so skillfully had Konda suppressed the news of its deadly menace, there was no time left to avoid it. There were perhaps four days and nights left . . . Then—

Lanning's jaws tightened. Something like ninety-six hours left in which to find Konda.

"I must!" he shouted out loud, to the raging sky. "I must! If it is the last thing I ever do I must avenge! Eleanor! Eleanor! If you are anywhere near me: if your spirit is near in this gathering Hell, guide me to avenge these multimillions of souls whom one fiend betrayed to the furnace!"

He felt a new surge of strength at that, went on like an implacable phantom through the night . . .

Night and day again. Night again. Day again. Night— And still he searched, and ate, and rested. Onward, as the heavens were a mass of orange light, as the sky became a convex vortex of boiling death.

His endless searching took him through buildings huddled with people who had come in from the savage, smoldering heat of the canyon-like streets. All light and power had ceased. The people were like animals cowering from a forest fire. One or two had bent, heat-twisted candles: others were in shadows whispering prayers for deliverance.

Lanning passed through their midst, his eyes bloodshot with smoke, staring straight ahead of him. This was the last night— The hour glass sand was running low. The last hours! He searched and searched, the bowels of the city . . .

Konda was not there.

Out across the scorching bridges spanning scalding rivers he went, away to the two neighboring power islands . . . Konda was not there either.

Lanning's feet began to drag. The heat was crushing, exhausting. He glanced up, started. With the extra hours of searching the heavens had changed to flaming scum in which everything else had been swallowed up. Within perhaps two more hours the comet would touch the atmosphere. The air would ignite. All life would vanish like tinder in a furnace.

Lanning stopped, harassed and baffled. He was a little to one side of the surging press of people heading God knew where, for there was no escape now. Snatches of conversation reached him.

"There'd be room for two thousand in that powerhouse—"

"Yeah—deep down too! Might stand a chance!"

"Maybe somebody's hiding inside—"

Lanning sprang. "*Which* powerroom?" he screamed, and the file of people halted in consternation at his unexpected, ghostly appearance.

"The East Sector Powerroom—Number Nineteen!" babbled an answer. "It's locked inside. We could hide there! Can you—?"

The ghost of Lanning had vanished again. He walked fast: he ran, sweat pouring down his body. The metal of the bridge was getting burning hot to the feet. It was like walking on red hot cinders. Despite his atomic change he was still a human being . . . Pain-ridden, he staggered onwards obstinately. Before him, in all directions, men and women were dropping, some of them on their possessions. The possessions smoked, glowed, caught fire. The air was

heavy with the stench of burning flesh . . . In split seconds the length of the bridge became a line of winking flame along which Lanning ran with desperate speed.

The East Sector Power Room! Of course, near the midcity, buried like the rest of the powerrooms at half a mile depth, protected from all possible forms of attack by invasion. Four doors, each one three feet thick! Nothing could penetrate them. Nothing—except Lanning!

Time was running out. Still Lanning pelted onward on feet that were blistered. His shoes had been burned off. He got off the bridge and the crazy mass of the city burst upon his vision again, silhouetted against the orange glare of the asteroid. Parts of the city were in flames: from its vast mass came an incessant wailing, screaming and roaring like a chant of the damned. Some people were trying to get away: rocket spurts traced their lesser sparks against the hell . . .

But Lanning was not looking at this. He was looking right ahead of him. He hurried down a pedestrian way now almost empty of people, raced through a subway, and so reached the first titanic door of Power room 19. He slowed up a little, fighting for breath—then he marched forward, through the first door, through the second, third, fourth . . . Out of the solid reinforced steel he merged into the enormous place and paused, his cold baleful gaze searching the expanse.

The mighty engines were quiet: long since had the workers gone. But amidst the shining giants he presently caught sight of a lone figure pacing up and down—a figure with a bald head who kept regarding his watch anxiously at intervals.

Lanning smiled. It was the smile of a man who realizes his life's ambition— It was cold, merciless, triumphant. Soundlessly he stepped forward and marched down the aisle, stood watching Konda as he came agitatedly round the angle of a giant transformer.

He stopped dead, and for the first time Lanning saw fear spring into those pale, implacable eyes. He stared like one hypnotized. His lips formed the word "Lanning!" but he could not utter it.

"There is not much time left to either of us, Konda," Lanning said slowly. "Even to the last you are rotten, skulking down here away from those you betrayed, afraid to appear and help them for fear you'll get your deserts. But it didn't save you, you see— I'm here!"

"How—? Why—?" Konda babbled. "What's happened to you? How'd you get in here? You're—a ghost!"

"Does it matter?" Lanning's steely voice asked. "All I realize is that we have only a matter of minutes before Nemesis hits the Earth. Our atmosphere will go—untold tons of liquid rock will crash through into this powerroom. This place, mighty though it is, cannot save you. Only space could have saved you, and you were not permitted to get away. I am glad: I have you here—alone. Into my hands has been given the power to exact the human vengeance before the cosmos kills us all. Millions will die because of you, but right now I am thinking of my wife whom you had slain because she dared to tell the truth— Damn your soul, Konda—damn your soul!"

Lanning's semi-transparent hands flashed out, seized Konda's powerful neck in a grip of iron. The fingers sunk further than normal but at last they met resistance. They crushed, harder and harder, until Konda sank to his knees.

"Lanning!" he choked desperately. "Lanning, a chance—!"

Lanning gave no answer. He screwed his fingers until he felt them crack. A faint smile curved his lips as he saw the purpling face and startling eyes—

Then suddenly it came. The Power room shook. Heat rolled suddenly into the place, as though it had been dipped in molten lead. Walls, floor, ceiling, machines, all began to liquefy.

Flames caught the dead Konda's clothes and set them blazing. Lanning too felt the insufferable anguish of heat as the atoms and molecules in his body began to regain their normal haphazard positions under the influence of rising temperature. To what end . . . ?

Hotter—and hotter— He felt himself melting away. But across the tumult of a world destroyed there seemed to come that faint, clear echo—

“I shall be waiting . . .”

“Leave—not—a—wrack—behind . . .” he found himself thinking, oddly enough.

The inhuman truth of it blazed across his dying brain.

THE END

[The end of *The Last Hours* by John Russell Fearn]