



FANTASY



The Magazine of Science Fiction

No. 1



1 1/4

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Title: Last Conflict

Date of first publication: 1946

Author: John Russell Fearn (1908-1960)

Date first posted: Nov. 25, 2022

Date last updated: Nov. 25, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221147

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



Last Conflict

By
John Russell Fearn

First published *Fantasy: The Magazine of Science Fiction*, December 1946.

To men of ruthless ambition, Science can be a very powerful ally. But too much power is dangerous for those who can't control it . . .

To the uninitiated youth from Paradise Acres, London was a monstrous giant that awed and overwhelmed him, yet that fired within him a reckless desire to master its hugeness. He stood at the corner surveying it all, an untidy boy of seventeen whose clothes bespoke the neediness of his upbringing. Passersby glanced at him curiously, but did not speak.

He had heard that the city was divided into two great circles, the inner one containing all the wealth and brains it possessed, the outer relegated to the Workers, the humdrum wage-earners with little ambition beyond their daily bread. The tremendous advance of science and social welfare had laid their impress upon this new London of 1980, but in the process of the change had come a sharp cleavage between its citizens. Now, one was either very rich or very poor, very intelligent or very dense, the sole key to power being either exceptional ability or wealth.

Young Melvin Read, at the street corner, had very little money. But he was more than assured of his abilities.

“Looking for something, sonny?” a voice asked at his elbow. He glanced up at the burly figure of a city police officer.

“Yes,” he nodded, entirely confident. “I’m looking for the Scientific Institute. I have an appointment there.”

“That’s the Institute down there.” The constable pointed, then looked at the boy doubtfully. “You know, by rights I ought to detain you at the station while your circumstances are looked into.”

Melvin frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Which shows you don’t belong to this city. Everybody here, Intellectual or Worker, knows the regulations.”

“I’m from Paradise Acres,” Melvin explained. “I came here first thing this morning, by monobus.”

The officer reflected, as though uncertain where his duty lay. Paradise Acres was a garden suburb beyond the outskirts of the city proper, a backwater of the Workers, despised by its neighbours.

“Well?” asked the boy, challengingly. “Are you going to run me in or not?”

“No—but I should. Better be on your way before I change my mind.” The officer’s eyes twinkled.

Melvin nodded, murmured his thanks, and hurried through the crowds of shoppers and strollers in the afternoon sunshine. He was grateful for the shade of the Institute’s great hall, and paused for a moment to get his bearings. At length he saw the door of the reception office.

He opened it quietly, closed it carefully behind him, and found himself in a deserted, well-furnished room with a fan whirring softly in the ornate ceiling.

“State your business, please!”

He gave a start and cast a bewildered look round. On a screen set in the wall he saw the stern visage of a woman, and below the screen a loudspeaker.

“Name, please, and nature of business,” the image insisted. “Speak plainly. The pick-ups will carry your voice.”

Melvin cleared his throat. “I’m—I’m Melvin Read, from Paradise Acres. I’ve got an appointment with Mr. Colin Melbridge. He works here. He’s a scientist.”

“When was this appointment made?” the woman asked, acidly.

The boy hesitated before he replied. “Five years ago.”

“Five years ago! Hmm—just as I thought! A cheap trick to try to gain admission to the Institute. Rebellious young men like you have tried it before, and I’m here to prevent it. For your information, Mr. Melbridge has been dead these two years as a result of a laboratory accident.”

“Dead!” Melvin gasped. “But—but he can’t be! I mean—Well, he told me to come here in five years’ time and ask for him. I’ve witnesses to prove it—my brother Levison, and Lalia Melbridge. They were there when I asked Mr. Melbridge if I could get a job in the Institute and he told me to come and see him when I was seventeen.”

The woman’s expression softened a little. “You mean *Miss* Melbridge?”

“Yes, Mr. Melbridge’s daughter. She was about thirteen then. . .”

The boy waited breathlessly as the receptionist considered. Then she said, tersely: “Your statement can be verified. Sit down, please.”

The screen blanked and Melvin waited, anxious, but still hopeful. Presently an inner door opened and a slender, fair-haired girl in a white smock came in. He leapt to his feet, returning her stare. She hesitated a moment, then came forward with outstretched hand.

“Melvin Read! I couldn’t believe it when they told me. I’m a student employee here. Do sit down.”

She drew him on to a settee beside her, searched his serious, firm features with her clear blue eyes.

“I’m glad you remember me,” he said, awkwardly. “I didn’t get a very warm reception from the old battleaxe—”

“Miss Hart?” She laughed. “Oh, don’t take any notice of her! But you—you came to look for Dad?”

“I’ve heard about him being killed, from Miss Hart. I’m sorry—for you, I mean, not because he can’t help me. But I’m still in earnest, Miss Melbridge. I love scientific things, and I want a job in this city. I’m only a Worker’s son, but—”

“Call me Lalia,” she encouraged. “Like you used to. You know, you really deserve a job here as reward for your patience and determination. I owe it to you, anyway, if I’m to keep Dad’s promise. Just think how it all started when you and your brother saved me from drowning in that brook at Paradise Acres five years ago. I was trying to fish—remember?”

The boy nodded, his grey eyes reflective. “I’ve often wondered what your father must have thought of us and whether he remembered. He asked us what we wanted as a reward for saving you. Levison didn’t want anything, and I asked for a job in the city when I grew up.

Your father told me to come and see him in five years' time and to study some special science until then. And I've done that, Lalia."

"You have? What subject?"

"Electricity, the same as Levison. He wants to be a scientist too, only he hasn't the ambition that I have. He's got some idea about helping other people with his knowledge, no matter what it costs him. Silly, really—he'll never get anywhere. I want to help myself, to make enough money to stand on my own feet like my father did. He was clever; he would have been an Intellectual by now if— Oh, Levison's a fool!" he finished, irritably.

Lalia looked puzzled. "Rather strange to find twins with such different temperaments, isn't it? You are twins, aren't you?"

He nodded, sullenly. "We're identical in looks, but in nothing else," he assured her. He was silent for a moment, then went on urgently: "I need a job, Lalia—badly. Science is the only thing that interests me, and I need money to help Mother at home. Levison's started to make a little money, but one of us has got to make lots of it, and I'm the one. I've studied hard these past five years, hoping your father would keep his promise to me. He isn't here now, but if you could help me—"

She pondered. "Dad was a senior Chemist, and I'm only a student at the moment, with no influence whatever. All I can do is put your case before the Chief, Mernas Steele, and see if he can let you sit for an examination for the Electrical Department. Dad was a great friend of his; he helped him in his early days. If I told him about Dad's promise—"

"You'd really do that?" The boy's eyes widened.

"You saved my life, didn't you? Come along with me," she said.

Lalia Melbridge had taken a big risk on behalf of Melvin Read, and it was only later that he realised it. Had he not proved himself unusually promising when it came to the examination, the girl might have been discharged for allowing such a rank outsider to seek admission to the hallowed precincts of the city's Intellectual Circle. But as it happened, Melvin more than justified himself, and his untiring application to the post which automatically followed soon established him firmly.

Indeed, though she had inherited much of her father's ability, Lalia found it hard to keep pace with Melvin's brilliance. He began as a very ordinary electrician, remained so for a year; then his uncommon skill earned him the position of overseer of a small student section. From then on there was no stopping him. Spurred by the streak of ruthless ambition in his nature, in five years he had become third in importance in the Electrical Department; and in ten years, though still but twenty-seven, he was answerable only to the Chief Scientist for his decisions.

To Lalia, watching his meteoric progress with quiet interest, he was a man to admire. His general brusqueness she dismissed as the natural manner of a busy, astute thinker, and she accepted his orders without question. Pride, admiration, love—she experienced all these emotions in turn, and wondered if any feelings other than his passion for science and his driving ambition ever stirred beneath his hard exterior. Finally, she set herself to find out.

Melvin found her at the door of his home one summer evening, almost ten years to the day since he had entered the city as an immature youth. He lived on his own in a special residential quarter of the Intellectuals on the rim of the city's inner circle, which was carefully separated from the outer ring of humble Workers' dwellings by a broad belt of green parkland segmented by great highways radiating like spokes from the towering central hub.

“Why, Lalia!” He was obviously surprised to see her at the door, her neat little runabout just outside the gate. “Come in—if you’ll forgive the general untidiness. A bachelor home, you know. . . .”

“You need a wife,” she smiled, as he took her coat. But he seemed not to notice the remark and motioned her to his study across the hall.

“Make yourself at home,” he invited, reaching for a silver box. “Cigarette?”

His grey eyes met hers over the flame of the lighter. She asked: “You don’t mind my coming here? Your neighbours may question the ethics, since this is the house of the Vice-Chief Electrician. It might start gossip, though I didn’t think of it until I’d almost got here.”

“Then it does no good to think of it now,” he said briefly, as she sat down. “I’m sure you have a perfectly good reason for coming. As for the narrow minds and prattling tongues of my neighbours, one day they’ll be proud of having lived within a mile of here.”

Lalia only smiled. She was used to his egotism.

“I suppose,” he went on, “you did come for some special reason?”

Her upturned gaze was steady as she replied, softly: “I came to see if you are the lonely man I think you are in private life.”

“Lonely!” He gave her a keen look. “The busy man is never lonely, Lalia. I have plenty to occupy me.”

She hesitated. “Don’t you think I might share your interests—help you? I’ve a good scientific knowledge, have worked beside you for ten years. Doesn’t it all count for something?”

He looked down at her pensively, then smiled tautly as he sat down beside her. “You sound like a woman in love!”

“All right, I am. You’d have seen that long ago if you hadn’t been so wrapped up in your work. Not that I blame you; you’ve done very well. But surely you can afford to relax now and again? There are other things—”

He shook his head impatiently. “I can’t relax, Lalia, until I’ve achieved the objective I set myself as a boy—nothing less than absolute control of this city.”

She was silent for a moment, her fair head bowed. Then, suddenly, she said: “You’re aiming high, aren’t you, trying to attain the Mastership? It will take you another twenty years. We won’t be young any more then, Melvin.”

“You believe in taking things into your own hands, don’t you?” he remarked dryly. “Of course, I can see your point of view. Womanlike, you think our ten years of friendship and your help in the beginning give you the right to own me.”

“Nothing so unpleasant,” she objected quietly. “I am suggesting, since you seem too occupied to consider it yourself, that we get married. Why not? We have the same interests, the same ambitions, and you must know I would never have done so much for you if—I hadn’t loved you from the start.”

“Marriage,” he answered slowly, “is an emotional distraction I can’t afford at this moment. With a beautiful woman like you for my wife, I might lose my grip on essentials. But—”

She sat waiting for him to continue. For a while he seemed to be weighing something in his mind. Finally, he nodded in decision.

“There’s no point in attaining my objective entirely alone. In fact, your help is just what I need at this stage. Let me show you something.”

He moved to a wall safe and took out a roll of blueprints, laid them flat on his desk, and switched on the reading lamp so that the light fell across them. She rose and stood beside him.

“Something electrical?” she asked presently.

His grey eyes narrowed. “I believe this will give me the Mastership. The idea has absorbed my mind this past ten years. With this machine I can control the weather. Think what that means in a climate like ours.”

“But that’s wonderful!” Her admiring gaze was on him. “But,” she added, dubiously, “Rufus Latimer will never give up the Mastership. He’s too popular, anyway.”

“Popular!” His tone was contemptuous. “Popularity isn’t power. He may have earned his position by his contribution to science, but he can’t keep it for ever and he’s had it long enough. I have here something greater than Latimer ever conceived. Once the Intellectuals know of it—and they will, very soon—they will have to depose him in my favour. If they don’t—”

She almost recoiled from the glare he gave her, the fierce determination in his voice. He saw her startled look, recovered himself quickly, and said in even tones: “Produce something better than the Master and you become the Master. That’s the rule, isn’t it?”

Suddenly he seized her hands in his own, looked into her face in desperate earnest. “Listen, Lalia. Wouldn’t it be better to build this machine before we turn to more personal matters. It’s a great bargaining weapon, and Master and Mistress of London is better than plain Mr. and Mrs. Read, isn’t it?”

She was smiling now. “Perhaps,” she said. “Though I haven’t got your all-consuming ambition, remember. Still, if you want it that way—”

“Good!” His smile was broader than she had seen it for many years. “You’ve solved something of a problem for me. I’d been wondering how I was going to get this machine built quickly and secretly, without assistance. I want the help of someone I can trust. If we work together at the Institute at night we can finish the machine in three months. Nobody can question what we’re doing if I have authorised it—except Steele, of course, and I can satisfy him all right. And it really needs two people to construct a machine as intricate as this one.”

“How does it work?” she asked, frowning over the blueprints.

“Quite simply, it will produce reactions in the atmospheric layers and vary the pressures normally controlled by wind action, thereby achieving climatic stability.”

The girl’s frown deepened. “You’re not too generous with the details, are you?” she said. “In these plans—” She stopped, and her brows lifted slightly. “But perhaps you don’t want to tell me too much about it?”

He regarded her steadily as he rolled up the prints.

“I ask you to co-operate with me, Lalia, without my having to explain more than is necessary for your part in the actual construction. It isn’t that I don’t trust you, but what you don’t know you cannot repeat, even in an unguarded moment.”

She sighed and gave a little shrug. “You’re a queer fellow, Melvin. But geniuses usually are, of course, so I must make allowances.”

She turned away from the table, and for a fleeting moment the frown returned as a faint, half-formed suspicion crossed her mind. But she banished the thought as quickly as it came, turned to face him again.

“When do we start?” she asked.

The building of the Elements Controller was a slow and arduous task for Lalia and Melvin, since the time they spent on it was always dependent on their freedom from official duties. But gradually, by unremitting devotion to their labours, they progressed.

The girl found her own part in the work limited to the assembly of various electrical components with which she was familiar, though their functions in Melvin's complicated apparatus she comprehended but dimly. The more intricate construction Melvin insisted on doing himself, usually when she was unable to be present. Noticing this, and his continued reluctance to discuss any but the most innocuous details with her, she more than once found herself considering if the Elements Controller was all it seemed to be, from what she had been able to grasp of its underlying principles. But each time she dismissed the suspicion as imaginary.

The summer passed as they went on working in a deserted wing of the great Institute, where Melvin had seen to it that no curious technician could pry without his knowledge and they could proceed without interference or interruption. Autumn came, and winter, and still they worked almost every night under the shadowless glare of cold-light globes.

More and more, as they made headway, Melvin was consumed by an obvious impatience for the day when the machine would be complete. By the spring they had begun the final assembly of its several parts, and with the return of summer it was built—a great, glittering mass of crystalline bars, vacuum tubes, transformers and radial fans. In all it covered a hundred square feet of floor space and stood eight feet high, connected by numbered cables to a master switchboard.

“Finished at last!” Melvin breathed, as he completed his final inspection of its more delicate intricacies. “The hand that operates that switchboard will wield power greater than any amount of money can give. What do you say, Lalia?”

The girl appraised the massive machine critically as she stood aside, hands thrust in the pockets of her work-worn smock.

“You speak of power,” she said. “I’ve noticed, though, that you don’t seem to have made any provision for power with which to run this machine. You have meters on the switchboard going up to ten million volts, yet I see no sign of any contacts for power cables. Odd, isn’t it? Or is the question out of order?”

Melvin smiled patronisingly. “I have taken that into account, believe me. I shall produce all the power I need myself, by a special process. When I make the first test tomorrow, you will see for yourself. Naturally, I don’t want to excite suspicion by putting a sudden load on the city’s power resources.”

He paused, glanced at the electric clock. “There’s time enough to have a little celebration over at my place, if you’d care?”

Twenty minutes later they were settling down to a meal produced by the kitchen automat, when the doorbell buzzed. Melvin threw down his serviette, got up and went out into the hall. Lalia waited expectantly, heard the sound of voices that were curiously similar; then Melvin came back into the room followed by a man who was the exact double of himself—except that he was smiling.

“Lalia, this is my brother Levison. You’ve met before, of course, but it’s a long way back.”

“So this is Lalia the woman!” Levison took her hand warmly. “Just as beautiful as I’d imagined from Melvin’s letters. Well, I am glad to see you—it’s been a long time.”

“And I, too,” she responded. “We’ve often talked about you, but you never seem to come to the city.”

“Too much to do elsewhere. Besides, city life doesn’t attract me—” He broke off. “I hope I haven’t interrupted a little tete-a-tete?”

“As a matter of fact, you have,” Melvin told him, “but you must stay and have supper with us and tell us what you’ve been doing.”

“That’s just what I came to see you about, Melvin,” said Levison, as he sat down. “I felt I couldn’t put it off any longer—I’ve been itching to tell you all along. You see, Lalia, I’ve lived out at Paradise Acres alone since Mother died, and I’ve nobody to talk to when I’ve something big to say.”

“Well, we’re listening,” Melvin encouraged. “What’s happened?”

“To put it briefly, I’ve found a way to amplify thought.”

Melvin stared at him fixedly for a moment. “You’ve—*what?*”

“Thought I’d surprise you,” Levison laughed. “I’ve done a lot of experimenting in the past few years, but it never amounted to much until now. So far, I’ve only got the idea worked out, but I know I’m on the right track. It goes deep into the science of vibrations—the sort of stuff you love, Melvin.”

Melvin nodded slowly, a blank look on his face. His meal lay neglected before him. Levison went on talking in between his eating.

“I don’t have to tell you that the brain gives off minute vibrations. The Harvard Institute of Science found that out long ago and even measured the length of a thought wave, which is about the same as ultra-short radio waves. Of recent years the British Telepathy Association have substantiated the fact, and have proved that these tiny vibrations can pass from brain to brain if there exists what might be called a telepathic sympathy between them. The brain can both transmit and receive these minute impulses, but they are so weak that they are undetectable except in cases of deliberate telepathic transmission under the right conditions. For that reason we use speech or actions to convey our thoughts. The centre of thought remains sealed—nobody can really tell what another person is thinking.”

“You mean you’ve broken the seal—made it possible for thoughts to be read?” Melvin asked eagerly.

“No, not that,” Levison replied gravely. “I might be able to do even that, but personal thoughts were never intended to become public property. That kind of probing might wreck civilisation—”

“But, man, think of the power it would give anyone possessing such a secret! Power to read the minds of rulers, to divine your enemy’s plans—” Melvin was passionately interested, now.

Levison sighed heavily. “Same old Melvin! If you conquered the universe, you still wouldn’t be satisfied. This craving for power runs deep in your blood, doesn’t it? If you don’t—” He glanced at Lalia, checked himself: “But to get back to my invention.

“I set myself to find a way to *amplify* thought, to devise a machine capable of intensifying the normal thought impulses of the brain a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand times if need be. These amplified thoughts, if properly directed, might then overwhelm and influence the minds of every living being within an area depending only on the amount of power used.”

“A kind of mass hypnosis?” Lalia suggested.

“You might call it that, but what I have in mind is rather different. The actual amplifying of thought does not present much difficulty, since it is identical with the principle of the

amplification of radio impulses. The trouble was to find a way of intercepting and directing thought waves, which emanate from the brain in concentric circles of gradually diminishing intensity, like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pond.

“The solution lies in an insulated helmet—and an insulator of the short waves of thought took some finding. But I managed it; and this helmet will prevent the thought waves radiating away in circles. Instead they are trapped and directed by an electro-magnetic beam in front of the helmet. This beam strikes directly on a magnetic plate, which in turn absorbs the vibrations and passes them on through a step-up transformer into the amplifier, whence they are radiated from the transmitting antenna with vastly increased power.

“Of course,” he elaborated, “what I call the helmet is actually a big inverted dome and will be a permanent fixture of the apparatus. The operator will sit underneath it with the brain area of the head inside it. You understand?”

Melvin nodded, his brow lined with deep furrows, grey eyes fixed immovably on his brother’s flushed face. Then, as though with an effort, he resumed his eating while Lalia watched him curiously. Suddenly he put the inevitable question:

“And what do you propose to do with this machine? You said you had some special use for it in mind.”

Levison was silent for a moment. When he answered it was in a quiet, serious tone.

“I am going to try to destroy all the evil, disease and disharmony in the world.”

With a start Melvin straightened up, laid down his knife and fork. His twisted features, as he stared at his brother, reflected a mixture of surprise, impatience and utter incredulity.

“But—but what a fantastic idea! Do you really mean what you’re saying?”

“I do,” Levison assured him without looking up.

“But such a thing isn’t reasonable!” Melvin protested heatedly. “I don’t doubt your ability to build this machine and use it to amplify thought as you say you can. But the object! Why get such sanctimonious ideas, when you have it in your power to control the world if you go about it the right way? You could force millions of people to do as you wished! You’ve a glorious chance to attain a position of supreme power!”

Levison sat back in his chair and calmly returned his brother’s glare.

“I am only too aware of the vast potentialities for good or evil that lie in such an instrument,” he said deliberately. “And I hope I have a full sense of the responsibility it places in me to ensure that it is used only for good. I intend to work according to the scientific thesis that good or evil, illness or health, beauty or ugliness, are all conditions of thought as expressed through ourselves. Remember how Jeans put it in his *Mysterious Universe*? ‘All that we see are thoughts expressed. The rest is remote inference.’”

With a gesture of annoyance, Melvin rose abruptly from the table. Ignoring Lalia’s appealing look, he rapped out:

“Yes, yes, I grant you all that. But you could bend men to your will—for good, if you like. Think of the good you could do once you’d established yourself as top dog. Why, you could hold the world in the hollow of your hand!”

Levison laughed. “But I don’t want the world. Only the chance to make things a little better. No man can hope to do more than that. Dictatorship brings its own downfall, and I’d do more harm than good that way.”

“You two certainly are very different in your outlook,” said Lalia, rising. “But you mustn’t quarrel about it. Personally, I can see something in both points of view.”

She took Melvin's hand in hers, drew him towards a soft settee, beckoned his brother to sit down beside her.

"Sorry," Levison apologised, "but I must go—lots of work still to do. I really came along to ask Mel to come over and see my designs for the apparatus. He may have some ideas for further improvements or spot some flaw I've overlooked. If you could come too, Lalia, I'm sure you'd be interested. How about tomorrow night?"

"I'd like to come very much. How about you, Mel?"

He seemed too immersed in his own thoughts to reply for several seconds. Finally he nodded. "All right, Levison. We'll be along about eight."

"Good! Well, until tomorrow, then."

The girl took it upon herself to see him to the door. On the step he paused, turned to look down into her bright blue eyes.

"Tell me, Lalia, how do you two get along?"

She hesitated, averted her gaze for a moment, considering. "He's a little difficult at times," she admitted, a faint smile trembling on her lips. "If only he wasn't quite so ambitious. . ."

"I think he's already got as much as any man deserves," he said gently. "I'm sure he'll find that out, in time."

She watched him go on his way, closed the door slowly, and turned to see Melvin standing in the doorway of the dining room, a cynical smirk on his face.

"What a pity," he observed, "that such a brilliant mind should have such a strange kink."

The normal routine of the following day was so heavy for Melvin and Lalia that they had no opportunity to make a test of the Elements Controller. In the evening they drove out to Paradise Acres, where Melvin drew the car up at the gate of a little bungalow surrounded by trim flower beds.

Here on the verge of the unspoiled countryside, away from the endless throb of the city's heart, Lalia found an atmosphere of quiet contentment such as she scarcely knew existed, it was so long since she had been able to relax in such a setting. Though he tried not to reveal it, even Melvin seemed to find in the comfortable home an air of peace and well-being which to Levison was obviously the ideal state of existence.

After supper he led them out to a small but well-equipped workshop at the rear of the bungalow, where they inspected several pieces of apparatus in various stages of assembly, the purpose of which he explained to them. Melvin listened attentively, asking questions only when he seemed not to grasp some particular point he wanted to absorb, and then very cautiously, almost apologetically.

At length, finding it difficult to convey an exact impression, Levison went to a drawer, took out a sheaf of small diagrams and spread them out on a workbench.

"Here, look them over carefully and see what you think of them. They explain the whole process from start to finish."

Melvin glanced at his brother strangely before he moved to the bench. He stood there for a moment, his back to the drawings, before he asked:

"Are you sure, Levison, that you're not being too trusting with your secrets? I want to help you, of course, but—"

Levison smiled, glanced through the skylight at the darkening summer sky, and switched on the light above the bench, flooding it with brilliance.

“What kind of man would I be if I couldn’t trust my own brother?” he countered, quietly. Then, leaving Melvin to his inspection, he turned to occupy Lalia with further discussion of his experiments.

For some time Melvin pored over the drawings, examining each in turn. Finally he fixed his attention on one of them, and stood motionless above it for a full minute before he straightened up.

“Looks all right to me, Levison,” he announced. “I can’t see any reason why it shouldn’t work out, though you can’t tell for certain until you’ve made a more comprehensive test than you’ve been able to do so far. You say your experiments to date have confirmed all your theories?”

“Absolutely,” Levison declared, gathering up the drawings and returning them to the drawer. “As I was saying last night, I believe that thought rather than mere matter is the true basis of our universe; that matter is the medium through which thought expresses itself. In the case of human beings and other organisms which we call living entities, the body is the medium. Whatever our mind wills the body must obey; and disease and all evil conditions and motives, if not the expression of our own thoughts, are due to the influence of other thought vibrations more powerful than ours which are always present. I believe that my Amplifier, by enlarging the power of thoughts which will produce only the best possible conditions, will overcome those which result in undesirable states of being and exert a considerable influence for good.”

There was the slightest suggestion of a sneer in Melvin’s smile. “And if the operator willed otherwise?”

Levison waved the question impatiently aside as though it was not worthy of consideration.

“It will be some time before I complete the apparatus,” he observed. “But I’ve made quite good progress in the last few months. Of course, I’ll let you know how things turn out. Shall we go back into the house now? I’m sure Lalia’s had enough of this.”



They sat and talked of other things, recalling their childhood days, as they relaxed once more in the bungalow. Lalia had expected Melvin to tell his brother of his own work on the Elements Controller which had been his ruling passion for so long, but he did not so much as hint at it. She marvelled at the contrasting characters of these twin brothers, one so ingenuously frank with his inmost thoughts, the other so cautious and secretive. But she found herself excusing Melvin his reticence on the score of his natural affection for his brother despite his lack of sympathy with Levinson's idealism. Perhaps he did not want to overshadow his yet uncertain researches with his own accomplishments.

At the same time she seemed to sense in Melvin's attitude towards his brother something which suggested an infinite respect for his attainments, and something almost of envy, as though what he had already achieved was worth more than the finished, if untested, product of his own devising. Though his assessment of its value was very different from Levinson's.

He was silent as they drove homeward, gazing steadfastly ahead through the windscreen at the myriad lights of London spread out before them like an array of jewels. Full of her

thoughts, Lalia lay back in her seat beside Melvin and did not attempt to draw him out. Not until they were engulfed in the city's effulgence, its floodlit buildings rearing up on either side of them, did he reveal his feelings. They were much as she suspected.

"Brother Levison seems to have something in that Thought Amplifier of his. If only he weren't such a fool as to think he can reform the world by gentle persuasion! What it wants is force. Think what a power such an instrument would be in the hands of one man—one master!"

"You, for instance?" She could not resist the sally.

He shot a quick glance at her but did not reply. He said no more until he took his leave of her when they drew up at her flat in the centre of the city, and then it was only a perfunctory "Goodnight. See you tomorrow." Almost before she had closed the car door he was on his way again.

As soon as he arrived at his own home he went down to his private laboratory in the basement, and removed the jewelled collar-pin he had been wearing all the evening. Switching on a red lamp, he laid the pin carefully down on a bench, produced a delicate instrument from his pocket, and with it unscrewed the massive diamond from its gold setting. It was evident now that this was no ordinary jewel, or even an ordinary imitation. The centremost, biggest facet was, in fact, a finely graded minimising lens with a minute iris-diaphragm behind it, actuated by the pressure of light-wave photons. The flood of radiance above the bench in Levison's workshop, when he had turned towards it, had been just what he required to make the shutter open and close two hundred times faster than a blinking eyelid. And his brother had switched it on for him, leaving him only to take up a position which would ensure a correct focussing of the tiny camera upon the drawings spread out on the bench. Just in case there were a few details he could not memorise exactly. . .

Smiling to himself, he fished inside the hollow setting of the jewel with his slender tweezers, extracting a microscopic strip of film. To develop and enlarge the image was the work of a few minutes. Switching on the normal lighting, he examined the perfect copy of Levison's designs which it presented.

"Yes, my misguided brother," he mused, aloud. "You can trust me—to see that your patient efforts are not wasted as *you* would waste them. If you don't want the world, I can use it!"

It was another three days before Melvin found himself free to undertake the first test of the Elements Controller. At seven o'clock, answering his call over the visiphone, Lalia presented herself in his office. She found him in the act of donning a heavily-proofed suit equipped with a dark-goggled helmet and lead-soled boots. She regarded him quizzically.

"Heavens, Mel! What's all this for?"

"Simply taking precautions," he told her. "It's likely there may be some pretty powerful radiations from that machine, and I want to be sure I don't get hurt until I know for certain what they are. They may be quite harmless, but—"

"Radiation? But why should there be? I don't understand. You've never mentioned anything of the sort before."

"We're playing with elemental forces, Lalia, and no precaution can be too great. But there's no need to fuss; everything will be all right. I just don't want to leave anything to chance, that's all. Since I haven't got another suit like this you won't be able to come in the lab with me, but you can watch through the glass panel in the door."

She shrugged her slim shoulders, followed him along the corridor to the laboratory. He unlocked the door and went inside. She heard the click of the lock and stood watching him through the thick glass. She saw him fasten the helmet over his head, draw on the huge gloves. Then he crossed to the switchboard, threw in the master switch.

The dynamos began to hum, stepping up swiftly to a steady, high-pitched whine. From her position outside the door Lalia could not see the meter readings, but the delicate needles were visible, jumping along their graduated scales. There was power there—vast power such as she had never expected; and soon she saw the manifestation of it as the normal lighting of the laboratory began to dim before the flashing lightnings of the machine's own creation. From the two anode and cathode globes at either end darted livid membranes of high-voltage electricity. Then, as the power mounted still further, they became violet-tinted chains leaping from globe to globe with crackling impact, hurling their energies into the transformers.

Lalia stood awed by the sight while Melvin, looking like some grotesque demon, worked over the switchboard, adjusting potentiometers and studying dials. Gradually, out of this wild chaos of unleashed forces was born a pale, lavender beam which rose from the centre of the machine, growing in strength and colour until it appeared like a massive amethyst column supporting the roof. Amid the flashes of his surging power Melvin stood watching it, supreme exultancy in his attitude; while the girl could only stare, shielding her eyes against the incessant bursts of glaring light which gushed from the potential globes.

Minutes passed with that strange, transparent beam stabbing upwards to the roof of the laboratory, which, she assured herself, formed not the slightest barrier to its matter-penetrating substance. Though how high it reached she could only wonder, until a sudden draught from the ventilator shafts came sweeping along the polished corridor, bringing her to the realisation that other things were happening outside. The big windows close to where she stood had lost their summer evening brightness and become dark rectangles of gloomy grey. With every second the external scene was changing.

Then, turning back to the glass panel, she caught her breath as she saw Melvin straighten up from the switchboard, pass a gloved hand slowly across his dark goggles, stagger slightly and fall headlong to the floor.

"Melvin!" she screamed, beating frantically on the door with her fists, though she knew there was little chance of his hearing her even if he were conscious. He lay there unmoving while she watched in growing panic. He had locked the door behind him. Had he thought this might happen? But to deny himself her aid— She could only stand there, bewildered, trying desperately to think.

Startlingly, from outside came a vivid flash of lightning that lit up the corridor, followed almost immediately by the violent crash of thunder. The draught was sweeping along the passage now in chilly gusts. There were splashes of rain on the windows—

In sudden decision she swung round, raced down the corridor to Melvin's office. She paused in the doorway for a moment as a terrific flash of lightning dazzled her. Then she dived for the desk, whipped up a heavy paperweight and dashed back to the laboratory.

One—twice—three times she struck at the glass panel before it went sharding inwards. Hot, foul air wafted full in her face and set her coughing for a moment; then she thrust her arm through the opening, reached down until she could just touch, and turn, the key. As the door opened she hesitated, appalled at the crackling electrical hell before her. But the greater fear of

what would happen if the machine was not stopped and Melvin rescued drove her forward, straight towards the master switch.

She seized the massive handle, tore the great blades out of contact. Instantly the lavender column vanished, the livid lightnings from the great globes ceased, meter needles flicked back to zero. Sickened with the smell of ozone, her head swimming in the stifling heat, she grasped the belt round Melvin's waist with both her hands and dragged him across the floor towards the door. The cool air sweeping along the corridor soon revived her, gave her added strength. Struggling with the dead weight of Melvin's limp form, she managed to reach the nearest window. Flinging it open, she saw with relief that the rain and the wind had almost stopped, the clouds already dispersing.

Quickly she unscrewed the heavy helmet and pushed it back over Melvin's head, revealing his deathly pale face, drenched with perspiration. His eyes were closed; he was still breathing, but shallowly, like one in a coma. A sudden fear clutched at her heart. Leaving him, she hurried back to his office and called the Medical Department, where there was always someone on duty. In a few minutes a doctor came, followed by two attendants with a stretcher.

The doctor made a brief examination, then Melvin was lifted on to the stretcher and carried away down the corridor.

"Is—is it serious?" Lalia asked anxiously.

"No—but it might have been. Exposure to some kind of radiation, I fancy. At the same time, something went wrong with the air supply in his suit. What was it—some sort of experiment?"

She nodded. "I was watching outside—he said it might be dangerous. I saw him fall, so I went in and dragged him out into the corridor. I had to smash the door panel to do it."

The doctor glanced towards the open door of the laboratory. "I see. You scientists take too many risks. Better come along yourself—you've had a nasty shock. Lucky you didn't get burned. . . ."

Too weak to argue, she went with him to the hospital bay where a nurse ministered to her. She had just drained a glass of sparkling restorative when the doctor returned from examining Melvin.

"He had better stay with us for a day or two," he told her. "He has recovered consciousness—"

"Can I see him?"

"Not for the moment, Miss Melbridge. He needs perfect quiet for the next few hours. He tells me you are his assistant in his research work. You'd better take these things of his—keys, identitygraph, and so on. You may need the keys, since he will be absent for a while."

Lalia nodded, signed for the belongings and put them in the pocket of her smock. Slowly she made her way back towards the laboratory, her thoughts curiously muddled. Things had not gone at all as she had expected. There was something about Melvin's machine that mystified her more than ever—and about its creator. Did he intend that it should produce the effects it seemed to have done? Was he even more aware than he pretended of the devastating forces he sought to control, and which had only recoiled upon him in spite of his precautions? Why had he concealed so much from her? Was it to allay her fears for his safety, or—?

Suddenly she remembered that the laboratory door had been left unlocked. Whatever his motives, she had vowed to keep his secret. It was unlikely that anybody remained in that part of the building at this hour, but if some unsuspected prowler had been waiting the opportunity

— She quickened her pace until she reached the corridor where the door stood open, to find that her fears were groundless. All was deserted as before.

She stood for a time in the doorway, gazing meditatively at the great machine. But at last, thrusting her doubts aside, she turned to lower the steel shutter over the broken glass panel of the door, which Melvin had always kept in position to prevent even a glimpse of the machine from outside. She was just about to leave when she caught sight of a switch and wiring diagram which Melvin had brought with him from his office lying on a bench near the control board. She folded it and took it with her, locking the door as she left.

Returning to the office, she went to the safe and, after trying several keys, opened it and put the diagram inside. She had almost closed the heavy door when an inscription on the back of a rolled sheet of cartridge paper caught her eye. It was in Melvin's bold handwriting:

Thought Amplifier.

She stared, unbelieving. Surely Levison had not given him any of his designs? Then how had Melvin come by this one, if such it was? Unable to resist the temptation, she took out the roll of paper, slipped off the rubber band. The merest glance at the sheet, as she opened it out, was enough to assure her. It was undoubtedly a photostatic copy of the diagrams Levison had spread out on the bench in his workshop for his brother to inspect. They were all there. One or two of them were not very clear towards the bottom of the sheet, but on the whole the details were perfect, though the photographs seemed to have been taken at an angle which prevented a proper focus.

The conclusion was obvious—and unpleasant. As she rolled up the paper and replaced it in the safe, Lalia's face reflected the uneasy thoughts which, this time, she could not banish. She stood there staring with unseeing eyes in which were only regret and misgiving. Then, with a sudden effort, she turned and ran from the office.

Two days later, Melvin was back at his desk. His curt summons for her to come to his office was the first intimation Lalia had of the fact. He looked up as she entered, his face expressionless.

"I believe Dr. Martin handed over to you several of my belongings, including my keys," he said shortly. "I would like them. It is a little—er—embarrassing having to rely on the commissionaire to let me into my own office."

She put the things on the desk. "I would have given them to you if I had known you were back," she remarked. "I called to see you, but they said—"

"I told them to tell you I was all right. I thought it better that we should not appear on too intimate terms. After all, you are one of my staff. Still, I'm none the less grateful for the way you rescued me. Undoubtedly, you saved my life."

She smiled faintly. "Something went wrong—"

"It was only my suit. You saw yourself how successful the test was. That's why I wanted you outside. I heard about it later, of course."

"You mean—the storm?"

"Precisely. I set out to produce those conditions through the machine. I succeeded—perhaps almost too well, after the suit went wrong and I lost control. A good job you had the sense to stop the machine—and to make things secure afterwards. However, we can take no more risks. I have decided to dismantle the machine and move it to my private laboratory, right away from the Institute. We shall then be sure of perfect secrecy until we are ready to come out openly with a demonstration for the Master's benefit."

He paused as though waiting for her to say something, but she remained silent. He flashed a quick glance at her.

“You’re sure that nobody saw into that laboratory? Dr. Martin, for instance?”

“Nobody. I locked up myself, and put the diagram you had out back in your safe.”

She thought she saw a startled look pass swiftly across his features before he glared at her in sudden annoyance.

“You had no right to go to my safe, Lalia, even if Dr. Martin thought you were entitled to hold my keys! The diagram would have been quite secure where it was. Must I have you prying into all my secrets when my back is turned?”

She regarded him intently, ignoring the insult. He seemed uncomfortable beneath her cool, searching gaze. His indignation passed as quickly as it had come.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I have too much to thank you for. But, really, I don’t like you taking such liberties, even if you are in my confidence.”

She smiled, though her blue eyes were sad. “I understand,” she murmured softly. “Now may I go back to my work?”

Long after she had gone he sat staring after her, drumming nervous fingers on the desk-top. Finally he got up and went to the safe.

Within a fortnight the Elements Controller had been installed in Melvin’s own laboratory, having been removed in sections and reassembled with Lalia’s assistance. The underground compartment had been slightly enlarged to receive it, and the walls and ceiling so thickly reinforced by the workmen Melvin had engaged that Lalia was prompted to question the necessity for this added construction.

“Just to protect the machine, that’s all,” he told her in that casual manner with which he dismissed all her questions. “By the way,” he went on, “I’ve seen the Master about a demonstration. He wants to see what we can do—tonight. I’ve promised to produce rain, hail, thunder, snow, and then a fine sunny evening, in that order.”

“Indeed?” She tried to conceal her surprise. He had obviously left it to the last minute before he took her into his confidence. They were just completing the final stage of the machine’s assembly.

He strolled to a corner cabinet, opened it to disclose two protective suits like the one he had worn the first time he tested the machine.

“You will be able to watch from inside this time. There will be no danger. I have seen to that.”

He moved to the opposite wall, switched on the television periscope which gave them visual contact with the surface. As he swept the light-photon magnetiser around at the turn of a dial, the whole landscape became visible in a panorama of distant green fields dotted with little dwellings, with part of the more densely packed outer ring of London looming in the foreground. At length they saw the great towered bulk of the city’s centre rearing solid against the evening sky. The scanner turned full circle, and once more the screen showed a vista of peaceful fields and hollows huddling into the distance beyond the fringe of the city.

“We’ll see if we can change all that,” Melvin said, with one of his rare smiles.

Yet to Lalia, as she gazed in fascination at the screen, there was a lurking menace in his voice. She felt a little thrill of apprehension, if not actual fear, and glanced nervously about the laboratory, almost certain now that all was not as it should be. That great, shining machine which held the key to the mastery of the elements, and to much more than that for the cold,

ruthless genius who had conceived its deadly power—it seemed to her a thing of latent evil, a grinning monster which had ensnared them both in its lair. And Melvin, the boy grown from ragged obscurity to the man she loved for his dogged perseverance and masterful nature, even if at times she doubted his motives; the man she had helped in his struggle, yet who regarded her as he might regard a piece of machinery— Here, deep beneath the surface, alone with him and his deadly powers, she was afraid—not of him but of those powers he strove to control. She was afraid as much for him as for herself; perhaps a great deal more. . . .

He seemed almost to sense her mood and tried to console her, not with comforting words or caresses, which were of no concern to him, but with the promise of rewards which were his only criterion of value.

“You remember, Lalia, that when a little while ago we discussed the question of marriage I told you it would be better for us to wait until we had built this machine? But I said I would make you Mistress of Britain beside me once I had the power I had set out to get—to share that power with you in return for your help. If I succeed tonight in demonstrating that power—and I shall—you can hold me to that promise just as soon as you wish.”

She forced herself to smile, to murmur her thanks, though she felt no enthusiasm at the prospect which had attracted her a year ago. She remained silent, staring into the screen and trying to stifle the qualms which tormented her, those fears which she had to convince herself were pure imagination. Until at length Melvin went to the cabinet and lugged out the two suits, began to clamber into one of them.

“It’s nearly time,” he told her. “Come on, get into this. These suits are equipped with audiphones, so we can talk to each other.”

Mastering her uneasiness, Lalia obeyed. They checked their air supply carefully, then dropped the helmets in position. Melvin lumbered to the control board, threw in the main switch. The dynamos began to hum, meter needles jumped, and as he pulled another switch there was a sudden violent crackle of released energy and brilliant electric membranes leapt the gap between the globes.

From behind her tinted goggles, Lalia watched the mounting violence of that interchange of titanic energies. Even through her thick suit she felt the wafts of disturbed, heated air which eddied about her. But her timid fears were gone now. The deliberate efficiency with which Melvin operated the switchboard, as though to demonstrate to her his absolute mastery over the machine, reassured her completely, leaving her in rapt admiration of his superb confidence.

“Now!” he cried, and closed the big plunger switch connected with the distributor plant, into which the sizzling bolts of electric power had been hurling their terrific voltages. In a few seconds more the lavender beam came dimly into view, ascending to the concrete roof, and gradually deepening in colour and solidity. Enthralled, Lalia stood staring at it while Melvin waited, keeping careful watch on his meters. Eventually he looked up, and brought her out of her trance with a gesture towards the televisor behind her.

Lifting her goggles, she turned to look at the screen, to find the view strangely dimmed. Fifteen minutes before, it had been bright and sunny outside. Now it was dull and gloomy, the landscape barely discernible, overhung by thick black clouds. She turned the view control slowly, and the all-seeing eye traversed the surrounding vistas. Everywhere, in and outside the city, it was the same. Not a single ray of evening sun penetrated those darkly ominous masses of thundercloud floating above.

Again she felt that brooding fear and turned to find Melvin gazing over her shoulder at the screen, his helmet pushed back over his head, eyes half-closed in a leer of smug satisfaction. Behind him that stabbing beam of lavender light was steady, unwavering.

“The—the storm!” she said uncertainly.

He nodded slowly, confidently. “It won’t break yet,” he assured her. “Meanwhile, perhaps I can satisfy your curiosity as to how this machine works. You know that the Sun is constantly throwing off streams of electrons which enter the Earth’s atmosphere and, under certain conditions, bring about electric storms. When an area of the atmosphere becomes impregnated with them a positive electric field is built up, which finally discharges to earth.

“In just the same way, I can produce such storms with this machine by capturing and storing up those streams of electrons from the Sun and releasing them at will. This store of potential energy is the source of the vast power I use, of which I told you. When I have a potential of twenty billion solar volts the energy is released from the storage globes and passed into the converters, thence to the distributor plant. It manifests itself in that violet beam and passes through to the outside just as easily as radio waves pass through solid substance. It reaches into the atmosphere, and there forms an intense positive field extending over a large area. Hence the dense thunderclouds produced by the change in atmospheric conditions. Eventually the charge breaks down, and we get our storm.”

Lalia’s doubts were not relieved by the knowledge of the machine’s functioning. In fact, she was all the more certain that its purpose was merely to destroy.

“And what about the other conditions?” she ventured. “Or are you only interested in storms?”

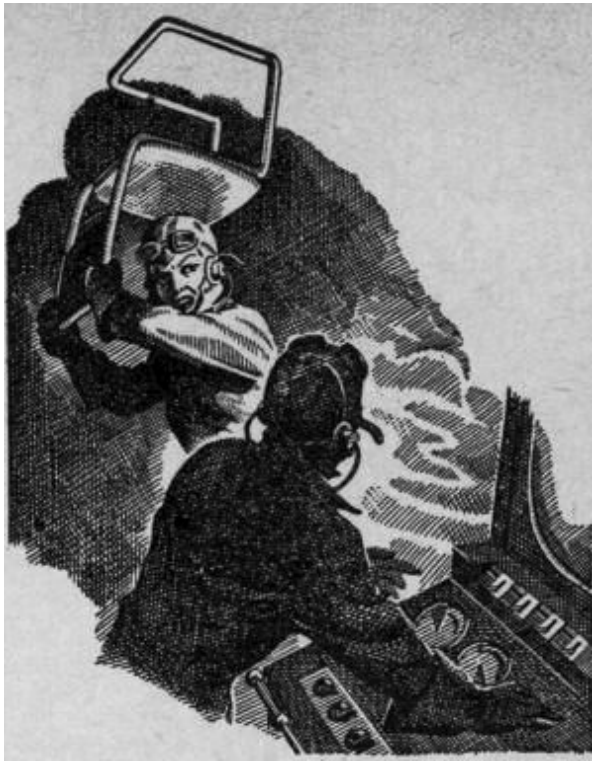
He permitted himself a smile which was almost genuine. “At the moment, yes.” Then his face hardened, his grey eyes grew cold, and his gloved hands clenched in grim determination. “I am going to produce a storm of such violence as has never been known in all history—a storm that will lay London, and all around it for a hundred miles, in the dust!”

Lalia’s gnawing anxieties crystallised at last into a chilling panic which stopped her breath and clutched agonisingly at her heart. For an eternity she could only stand there staring, sick with horror, while she strove to find words with which to reply once she had recovered her power of speech.

“You—you don’t mean—” Her tongue was still incapable of conveying her chaotic thoughts. Her lips trembled in sympathy with her shaking fingers. Melvin watched her stonily. There was deadly venom in his voice as he went on relentlessly.

“I mean that I am going to take my revenge on this proud city before I take its destinies into my hands. It needs a lesson—badly. When first I tried to gain a foothold in it, it despised me because of my lowly origin. I knew the ultimate power I sought, the Mastership of the city, would never be mine through ability alone. All through the years I have been constantly reminded that I was not born into the Intellectual Circle. So, to overcome that handicap, I produced this.”

He waved a gloved hand towards the machine. There was a wild exultancy in his manner now, and his voice rose to a higher pitch. To Lalia, as she stood there transfixed, it sounded almost a shriek.



“A destroyer—that’s what it is, a destroyer of prejudices! And yet a creator—the builder of a new order of things. When I am Master, the city will see many changes. There will be plenty for us to do, Lalia!”

“You—you seem very sure—that you *will* be Master.” The girl found the words a terrible effort. “If you’re—found out—”

He laughed, hideously. “Oh, I’ve taken care of that! Rufus Latimer is in his office tonight—on the top floor of the highest building in the city. This storm will have no respect for tall buildings or for men of high office. It will be ruthless, devastating! In another ten minutes—”

Suddenly, to Lalia, this man she had cared for and encouraged stood revealed as a dangerous fiend armed with a dreadful weapon; a warped genius, drunk with ambition, who would stop at nothing to achieve his selfish ends. The realisation brought her back to her senses, filled her with bitter anger which flowed through her veins in a flood of furious energy. Seized by a desperate impulse, she wheeled, snatched up a light steel chair and flung it with all her strength at the posturing figure of Melvin.

He sensed her intention, but too late to do more than jerk his head aside. One of the tubular legs of the chair caught him full in the face, striking his forehead before it crashed to the floor. He raised a hand to his eyes, gave a little moan, swayed and crumpled up over the switchboard.

Lalia did not wait to see the result of her sudden burst of violence. She was obsessed by one thought—to escape from this crackling, stinking, blinding machine and the madman who

had created it. As soon as she had flung the chair she turned to the door, pulled back the heavy bolts, swung it open and fled down the passage towards the steps which led up into the rear of the house. There she stopped only long enough to throw off her protective suit and snatch up her hat and coat. Then she ran to the front door and out into the roadway to her car parked on the side.

Gasping for breath, heart thumping wildly, she scrambled into it and drove off, snapping on the headlights as she pressed her foot hard on the accelerator. Though it was still early evening, the darkness was now almost as black as night itself; the rows of houses on either side were dotted lines of light, the road a shining ribbon of floodlit plastic stretching out ahead of her. The still air was warm and clammy; she was grateful for the gentle draught which came through the lowered windows as the car gathered speed. A deathly silence, broken only by the soft purr of the wheels on the roadway, seemed to overhang the darkened world as though with a threat.

Now that she had escaped, she scarcely knew what to do or even where to go. She began to wonder if she should not go back to turn off the machine before it could do the damage Melvin intended. But she had not injured him seriously; he had probably recovered by now and would certainly prevent her interfering with his plans. In any case, the storm would break in a few minutes if what he had said was true. There was nothing she could do except try to save herself in the short time that remained.

If she tried to warn the people, who would heed her? And what could they do but await the storm they were already anticipating, without any suspicion of its unnatural origin, its catastrophic menace? Except, perhaps, Rufus Latimer. But by the time she reached the heart of London— She could only clutch at the hope that Melvin was exaggerating the potential violence of the storm. And yet. . . .

Levison Read! The thought came to her as she realised that she was approaching a junction where the road to Paradise Acres led off on her left. She would go to him—he would understand. She would tell him the whole story of his brother's treachery, of her own foolish encouragement of his crazy lust for power. And if she could only get there in time she might be able to warn him, to save him from the storm.

She drove madly until she reached the crossroads, turned and urged the car on at full speed. The road was clear, stretching out in a straight line of light towards the open country beyond the city's limits. The miles vanished beneath her racing wheels, until at last she topped the rise overlooking the little collection of bungalows lying in a green hollow. Then, abruptly, the storm broke.

A brilliant flash of lightning snaked across the black sky, piercing the gloom with a blinding intensity. Almost immediately a shattering crash of thunder shook the earth beneath with its terrific concussion. Dazzled, Lalia clung to the steering wheel as the car dropped swiftly down the slope. The lightning came again, stabbing down from two directions in a shower of purple strands upon the road ahead. Even as she recoiled from the impact of the flash the thunder beat at her eardrums, making her wince with pain; nor had she recovered from the shock of it before the road directly in front of her was again drenched with violet flame and the thunder rolled over her with mounting fury.

Another vivid flash forced her to lower her eyes from the windscreen for a fleeting instant. She raised them just in time to see a giant elm tree at one side of the road, fifty yards ahead, split itself in half and come toppling down across her path. She jammed on the brakes, came to a stop within two yards of its spreading branches which completely blocked the roadway.

She clambered out of the car and stumbled forward through a lilac-tinted haze, reached the fallen tree as another blinding flash high above her was followed by a swishing roar as of a deadly projectile descending from the tortured skies. Startled, she looked up to see a ball of blazing brilliance fall into a distant meadow.

In the steady glare of the headlights and the ceaseless lightnings which dimmed them to pallid beams of yellow, she clawed her way between the branches of the fallen tree. While the thunder crashed on either side in a constant cannonade she paused uncertain on the road beyond, peering into the intermittent gloom. Down there in the valley, dimly visible between the purple flashes, she could pick out the lights of houses in Paradise Acres. She still had the best part of a mile to go before she reached Levison Read's bungalow. A mile of terror, with lightning-swift death striking down at her every second.

She hesitated only a moment before she made up her mind. With sudden resolve, she made for the grass bank at the roadside, crawled between the wires of the fence and started to walk across the field in the direction of the huddling houses. She had hardly taken half a dozen paces when the rain came, falling in huge drops which soon became a solid downpour, drenching her until her light overcoat was soaked, striking at her face and leaving her gasping, battling against its violence.

Then came the wind, sweeping across the field like a tornado, blowing her first to one side, then the other, and at times urging her forward as though in sympathy with her desperate desire for shelter. As she struggled on purposefully the storm seemed only to increase its fury, the lightning descending in a brilliant cascade of violet that enveloped her in a flood of dazzling light which was at one with the torrential rain. Then, through the flaming curtain which hemmed her in, a sudden, streaking flash struck at her like a sword. She staggered, screamed at the shock of the concussion, and fell headlong in the sodden grass.

For several minutes she lay there paralysed, her whole body tingling, eyes staring helplessly at the sky, which presented a picture of awe-inspiring grandeur. Chain lightning rippled in an unholy filigree against a purple background, while here and there great, humped masses of jet-black cloud seemed to dilate and quiver as pent-up energies strained for outlet. When at length the numbness had gone out of her limbs, she got to her feet, stood for a moment gazing towards London. A red glow hung over the city, visible even through the watery haze, while forks of savage brightness stabbed down into it ever and again with merciless insistence.

Set-faced, her heart pounding, she turned and went forward again. How she covered the remaining distance she hardly knew, but when at last the yellow oblongs of light loomed large before her she was filled with a deadly weariness, her head swimming from the incessant tumult of the storm, her eyes smarting from the wind and rain. She halted, breathless, a terrible ache in her side. Then on again, until she half slid, half fell down a muddy, slippery bank to the flooded main road which ran through Paradise Acres.

Up to her knees in surging water, she struggled across towards the road which led to her destination, less than a quarter of a mile away. Again she was forced to stop while she regained sufficient energy to continue, clinging to the railings of a tiny house whose shattered roof testified to the damaging power of the storm. More than once, as she hurried on, she passed a house that had been reduced by a stroke of that incredibly vicious lightning to a heap of smouldering rubble. She breathed a prayer of infinite relief when at last she came to the

little bungalow which was her final objective, to find it stood unharmed, its unshaded windows shining like welcoming beacons.

Thankfully she leaned for a second against the gate, then flung it open and ran up the path to the front door as another of those terrible lightning forks cleaved the sky above her. The earsplitting burst of thunder was an overwhelming accompaniment to her frantic pounding on the door, which she continued as long as she had the strength. Then suddenly an awful weakness overcame her, she sagged helplessly against the door and collapsed in a heap on the step.

When she came to her senses there was the sharp flavour of restorative in her mouth. The dinning chorus of thunder, howling wind and swishing rain still assailed her ears but seemed a little more remote, and the bright light around her shone steady and clear instead of in blinding bursts of violet. Gradually she became aware that she was lying comfortably on a low couch, at the foot of which a man stood smiling down at her.

“Levison!” She struggled up. “I thought I’d never get here—”

He pushed her gently back on her pillow, leaned over to make himself heard above the tumult outside.

“Take it easy for now. You’ve had a pretty rough journey. My housekeeper, Mrs. Dawson, fixed you up and took off your wet things. Just now she’s in the kitchen getting some tea.”

Lalia glanced down at the warm blankets that covered her. “I’m very grateful. I was about all in. I think I fainted.”

She buried her head in the pillow as a tremendous crack of thunder shook the house to its foundations, and opened her eyes to find Levison regarding her coolly as he filled his pipe. She almost screamed at him:

“Don’t you realise this place may be struck at any moment? I’ve passed several smashed houses—and London is in flames. If this terrible storm goes on through the night—”

She paused as the elderly Mrs. Dawson came in with tea on a tray. She smiled at Lalia, set down the tray, and went out again with apparent unconcern. Levison passed the cup to her.

“Now, just drink this and go to sleep—if you can. We can talk later.”

She was too exhausted to protest. Though the storm still raged, there was something about the calm assurance of Levison Read that gave her a sense of security, dissolving her useless fears. She returned the cup, sank back again on her pillow, closed her tired eyes.

When she awoke Levison was standing by the window, through which the first faint rays of the morning sun were shining into the room. The only sounds were the steady drip of water from the choked gutters of the eaves and the tinkle of china in the kitchen.

“The storm—when did it pass?” she asked anxiously.

Levison turned. Despite his smile, there was a look almost of horror in his eyes.

“It lasted nearly six hours. Then it ceased as suddenly as it began. Such fury! It must be unprecedented. I can’t make it out. Unless—”

She sat up. “I came to tell you. It was Melvin’s work—and mine. I feel I’m as much to blame for the havoc it must have caused. I helped him to build the machine. . . .”

He listened patiently while she told him, right from the beginning. If he felt any surprise, he did not reveal it. He did not even flinch when she told him how she had found the plans of his Thought Amplifier in Melvin’s safe. She told him of her own constant suspicions and how she had repeatedly dismissed them from her mind; how her admiration for Melvin had proved stronger than her mistrust. Until, now that he had revealed himself as a vindictive ingrate

whose sole object was to satisfy his mad lust for power, her affection for him had turned to bitter hatred and disillusionment.

“He’s a dangerous man, Levison,” she insisted, finally. “A genius, yes, but an utterly unscrupulous one. If he becomes Master of London, it can only end in slavery and misery for the people. He would be a ruthless tyrant, and he won’t rest until he has the whole world in his grip. Unless he can be stopped—”

Levison Read only smiled, though there was still that look of deep concern in his eyes.

“He’s more of a fool than anything,” he said quietly. “I might have known he was responsible for this. But he won’t get very far with his terror and destruction. There have been other fools. . . .”

Slowly Melvin Read turned away from the visi-screen, unfastened the clips of his heavy insulated suit and stepped out of its protecting folds. For a moment he stood regarding the massive machine, now silent and inactive, its deadly work complete. He grimaced as he sniffed the heavy, stale air in the laboratory; then he turned to the door, opened it and went swiftly along the passage. He climbed the steps, passed through the house into the cool atmosphere outside. He noticed that his own dwelling had not escaped the damaging effects of the storm, but it had not fared too badly.

A fresh wind was blowing from the east. The last clouds of the great storm were drifting westwards like a retreating armada, dead black against the grey dawn sky. Keenly he surveyed the landscape, and as his gaze settled on the soft, red glow reflected above the centre of the city a smile came slowly to his lips.

He’d done it. In spite of Lalia’s crazy attack on him, her foolish treachery, he had done what he had set out to do. He had laid there dazed for some time after she had fled, and had come to his senses to find the machine still running, the storm almost at its height. For hours he had watched it through the television periscope, exulting in its terrible abandon, its wild, flashing fury. Until at last, content, he had stopped the machine and the tempest had gradually subsided, leaving him to contemplate the havoc it had caused over the whole area of the city and beyond.

But it was not enough to remain there, concealed, viewing his handiwork from a distance. He could not resist the temptation to go out into the streets to see the devastation he had wrought at close quarters, to see the effect on the city’s inhabitants of this catastrophe whose true nature they had yet to learn. He had given them an abundant demonstration of his power. When he was their Master they would respect him all the more for that. But first he must seize the Mastership; they would not know until later that the storm was not a natural phenomenon, if an unprecedented one.

Lalia, of course, would talk—if she still survived. If she was dead, so much the better. He had been a fool to trust her as far as he did. But she had been useful. Now he could forget her.

He drove the car out of the underground garage and along the road, still flooded from the deluge. Making towards the city’s centre, he soon gained a closer, grimmer perspective of the disaster he had created. Crumpled villas, fallen trees, swirling waters covered with driftwood, presented a picture of widespread destruction in the outer circle of the city.

It grew lighter as he came nearer to the inner section, where he was forced to abandon the car and proceed on foot to observe the utter chaos that revealed itself in the battered streets. Everywhere he looked he saw tangled girders and shattered masonry where tall, stately buildings had stood. Commercial Tower had gone, felled by the merciless lightning. The

Science Institute had suffered, one wing a great pile of broken concrete and twisted steel. The Weather Bureau and the Ambassadors' Building were only two of the blackened, smoking shells left by devouring flames which even the rain had failed to quench. Elsewhere, in many parts of the city, fires were still raging, defying the weary, grimy men who still strove to defeat them.

Through the streets, too, wandered little aimless groups of men, women and children who had been driven from the wreckage of their homes; while others were curious sight-seers, gazing stupefied at scenes of devastation and horror. Rescue squads worked ceaselessly amid tumbling ruins. Ambulances raced, bells ringing wildly, or stood vigilantly by while sullen bulldozers shoved aside debris. As Melvin neared the city's shattered heart the activity increased.

"Terrible, isn't it?"

He turned sharply. A stocky, well-built man with tousled hair and dirty, perspiring face stood at his elbow. There was bitter sorrow in his eyes; his mouth was shut tight as though in an effort to master his emotion. His clothes were torn and he held his left arm in a rude sling beneath his empty sleeve.

"Pretty bad," Melvin admitted almost grudgingly. Somewhere within him was a strange feeling of discomfort which he had been trying to analyse even as he strove to conquer it. It was not remorse—it could only be nausea. He had no regrets. He had set out to accomplish this, and he had succeeded. For him it was triumph, not tragedy. Yet now he could feel none of that splendid satisfaction he had tasted when he first surveyed the landscape from the laboratory. The finer details were a little—distasteful.

"I was in a telecinema with my wife and two kiddies," the man said absently. "We heard thunder, but thought nothing of it. Then the whole place caved in. My wife and kids were crushed under a steel girder. They got me out. I wish they hadn't. . ."

"I'm sorry." Melvin wanted to get away from him, but the man suddenly grasped his arm with his free hand as though anxious to unleash his feelings now that he had found someone who would listen.

"I can't understand it, can you?" he went on. "That storm—it was no ordinary storm, was it? It *couldn't* have been. There's never been another like it. I wonder—"

He broke off, peering into Melvin's face. "I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I? At the Science Institute, perhaps—"

Melvin smiled faintly, threw off his morbid feelings. There was no reason why he should conceal his identity. The whole of London would know him soon enough. His name would be on every lip.

"I'm Melvin Read," he said. "Vice-Chief of the Electrical Department."

"Why, of course!" The man brightened, held out his hand. "I'm Curtis Townsend, engineer. We must have met. I often have business at the Institute. I knew Mernas Steele very well. Latimer, too."

Melvin frowned, feigning surprise. "You *knew* them? You mean—"

"You haven't heard? It was on the radio. All stations broke down when the storm was on, but they've got going again. They're putting out bulletins, they tell me. The death roll's estimated at ten thousand, maybe more. Several big names among the missing, the Master and Chief Scientist included. They're dead for certain—no trace."

Melvin's pulses raced. It was just what he had hoped for. Now was his opportunity.

“Then the city’s without a leader, a central authority. There will have to be an election,” he urged.

Townsend’s face was blank. “In time, I suppose. The administration’s still functioning as best it can, but it will take weeks to clear up this mess. Someone will have to shoulder the responsibility in the meantime. It’s no light task—”

“I’ll take it on.” Melvin’s voice was challenging, though he tried to conceal his eagerness. “I was next to Mernas Steele, have all the qualifications. If things are left to the petty officials they will all be quarrelling among themselves and nothing will be done. The people must have a leader, someone whose word is law and whom they can trust, or they will get out of hand. If I speak to them I’m sure they will put me in that position until we can have a proper election. If you and your friends will give me your support and nominate me I shall not easily forget it.”

Townsend ruminated, his personal grief forgotten in his earnest for the city’s welfare. He had heard of this Melvin Read in the influential circles in which he was privileged to move, even if he did not strictly belong to them. Men spoke his name, he remembered, with something of envy and respect, while treating him as an inferior. Perhaps if he threw in his lot with him. . .

“There’s something in what you say and I admire your public spirit,” he confessed. “Of course, I’m only an engineer—”

“And the very man I want to have charge of the rebuilding of the city,” Melvin encouraged.

“Then you can count on my full support. Come along to my office and we’ll see if we can get you on the radio once we’ve got your nomination through. The people will acclaim you—I’ve no doubt of that. Yes, Melvin Read for Master it shall be!”

The reaction of the people to Melvin’s appointment as temporary Master was enough to show their willingness to accept any leader who could inspire them with the courage and determination that were most needed in the present emergency. The harassed administration welcomed him as one who was prepared to relieve them of the burden of responsibility in a crisis they could not cope with; and those of the Intellectual Circle who were loath to accept him were at least prepared to grant him the extra burdens of his office while they lasted. Later, when he had reorganised affairs sufficiently for an election to be held, he could be easily deposed by a candidate more to their liking.

But Melvin Read, having grasped his opportunity, was quick to exert his new power in a way that would ensure his retention of it. He spared no pains to persuade the people that he alone could give them the betterments they craved by his ruthless domination of the whole community and its resources of capital and labour. Within a few days, the city’s three hundred thousand homeless had been given fresh shelter and the work of repairing the tens of thousands of damaged homes and buildings had begun, under the direction of Townsend. With prospects of such a swift rehabilitation, the people’s hopes rose as they demonstrated their confidence in the new leader.

But he, conscious of the precariousness of his position, knew he could not rely on fickle popularity to defeat the more subtle forces arrayed against him. If his bid for power failed, he must resort once more to the Elements Controller, that master bargaining weapon which would always be more valuable than votes. At the same time it was imperative that the secret of the machine be kept. Beneath the ruins of his home it was safe enough, but he had to have access to its violent strength at all times, against any emergency.

Only he knew the purpose of the complicated switchboard which was promptly installed in his office in the Science Institute, where he made his temporary headquarters until the rebuilding of Commercial Tower. Much less did those few who were aware of its existence realise that behind it was an ingenious remote control apparatus which enabled him to operate the Elements Controller with the same facility as if he were in the underground laboratory where it was concealed.

But the precaution proved unnecessary. When, within two months, he was forced to accede to the demands of those who opposed him and submit himself for election, the people clamoured for him to remain in office rather than accept any of his rival nominees. His forthright methods, coupled with his assurances of continued progress to benefit Intellectuals and Workers alike, had brought him general approval, and he found himself with the Mastership for a further period of two years.

Engineer Townsend was the first to call at his office on the morning after the election.

“You deserve it, Read,” he said warmly. “You’ve done wonders. The people want a man of action.”

“You’ve done well, too,” Melvin acknowledged. “But we still have to move faster. We need more labour. The other cities can’t or won’t co-operate, so what we can’t get from outside we must get from within. We shall have to be ruthless. My first act will be to conscript everybody within a hundred miles radius into the Workers’ Circle, to help with the rebuilding.”

Townsend raised his black brows. “That’s not going to be very popular, is it?”

“Perhaps not. But I want to see this city rebuilt—and quickly. We need more houses for the workers, and until they have them we shall never make progress on the bigger schemes for which we are all impatient. The whole of the city is too crowded. I want to see it expand still further into the countryside. The inner circle will be enlarged to the present limits of the outer circle, which will spread out beyond that. We shall absorb the small towns and the few villages that are left, cover the fields with houses, keep such open spaces as are necessary. London needs more territory—and more Workers. There are too many Intellectuals. You understand?”

The engineer looked doubtful, but he nodded. “You want me to get started on this expansion scheme?” he asked.

“Very soon. Of course, it will take time. But we shall work as fast as we can—keep the people occupied. Meanwhile, I have other plans which do not concern you.”

“I see.” Townsend lowered his gaze. “Well, you can rely on me.”

As the door closed behind the engineer Melvin Read sat back in his chair, musing. His pensive eye lighted on the wall-safe where the plans of Levison’s Thought Amplifier still reposed, neglected but not forgotten. In the two months which had passed he had heard nothing of his brother, nor of Lalia. Perhaps they had both died. She, at least, would surely have come to him in the hour of his triumph, asking his forgiveness, wanting to share his success. He had to make certain, now, that he was rid of her. And of Levison. . .

The man in the dark grey uniform, standing at the door of the bungalow, announced his business in a tone that brooked no argument.

“You are instructed to come with me to London immediately for essential employment in the Workers’ Circle. Here is my authority.”

Levison Read took the paper the officer held out to him.

“You understand,” he emphasised, “you are to come immediately. Accommodation will be provided for you. This house and your belongings will be taken care of by the authorities until your services are dispensed with, but it will be necessary for you to live with the Workers for the time being. Bring with you only the things you need—”

“But what *is* this?” Levison found his voice. “Emergency Order? Recruitment of labour?”

“If you don’t come willingly I shall have to arrest you,” the officer threatened. “The vehicle is waiting just along the road. You won’t be the only one. I’ll expect you there in ten minutes.”

He was about to turn on his heel when he caught sight of the girl coming into the passage. His eyes raked her.

“Your wife?” He leered.

Lalia answered before Levison could speak, giving her name and explaining that she was staying at the bungalow because her own apartments had been destroyed in the Great Storm.

“Lalia Melbridge, eh? Lucky for me. I’ve been looking for you, Miss Melbridge. Two birds with one stone.”

He searched through his papers, handed her a document similar to the one he had given Levison. “You’ll have to come along too.” He winked heavily at Levison. “If you’re good, perhaps they’ll fix you up together. Don’t forget—ten minutes.”

He was gone. Lalia looked up from the paper, her blue eyes puzzled.

“But this is absurd! If this is some of Melvin’s work—”

“He doesn’t waste any time, does he?” said Levison. “So the Intellectuals must become Workers, by order of the Master! He’s running his head into trouble already. But we’d better get ready.”

Lalia’s frown turned to a look of complete bewilderment. “You—you mean you’re going? Under threats? You’re going to let him force you to give up your work on the Amplifier? That’s just what he wants—”

“If we refuse we shall only be playing into his hands, giving him an excuse to put further pressure on us. It won’t hurt us to live in the Workers’ Circle for a while. It will give me a chance to protest against his high-handed actions—to meet him face to face if I can. Yes, I think we’d better go.”

She was still inclined to doubt when they took their seats in the great three-decker motor-bus outside, into which many others like themselves were climbing, carrying suitcases and parcels of intimate belongings. But she knew it was useless to resist. For the moment, Melvin had the whip hand. They would have to bide their time.

The bus stopped once to pick up a little group of people waiting at the roadside with two grey-uniformed men, then continued on its way towards London. The passengers were silent, uneasy; there were a few feeble protests but no more. The officers were grimly uncommunicative. The prospect looked bleak.

The bus reached the outer city traffic levels, entered the drab regions of the Workers’ Circle with its rows of little grey houses. They passed many ugly spaces littered with the debris of those which had been torn down, either by the storm itself or in consequence of its toll of damage. In every street gangs of workmen toiled at the task of reconstruction. Eventually the bus pulled up outside a public building. The officers herded them out, up the wide steps and into a queue which trailed through the great hall to a door labelled “Registrations.”

When at length they reached the table where a flint-faced official sat ready to ply them with questions in their turn, Levison spoke up:

“I wish to appeal against this treatment. I am engaged on important work.”

The official glared. “There is no work more important than the rebuilding of the city. The Master has ordered that you shall be engaged in such work, at least until you can be spared for less urgent matters. No appeals against that decision are permitted. Your name, please!”

“Levison Read. The Master is my brother—”

“That makes no difference. Kindly reply to the questions. . . . Occupation?”

Levison hesitated, seemed as though he would carry his protest further, then gave up the struggle with a shrug. He made his replies mechanically, moved aside to make way for Lalia. The officer ignored the defiance in her voice as she gave her particulars. At the end he looked up and announced to all and sundry:

“If there is anybody who feels inclined to question the Master’s judgment in this matter, may I remind them that the Master has the right under the Act of Mastership to make whatever order he chooses in an emergency, without reference to any other authority. Next, please!”

It was only by degrees that Levison and Lalia came to realise how completely Melvin’s edict had them in its grip. They were given billets fairly close to each other and put to work in the same underground factory; there were ample facilities for recreation, and as long as they were content to adapt themselves to their new mode of life they were not interfered with. But they were under constant surveillance by the grey-uniformed police who patrolled the Workers’ Circle night and day, ensuring that they did not pass the jealously guarded barriers into the city’s inner circle without a special permit. To impress upon them even further their loss of Intellectual status, they were obliged to wear the drab olive-green dress of the Workers at all times.

By patient application to the proper authority, Levison gained permission to retrieve the apparatus and equipment he needed to continue work on the Thought Amplifier in his periods off duty, and the little room which Lalia visited every evening soon had all the appearance of his Paradise Acres workshop, except for its cramped dimensions. Though greatly handicapped, he laboured more diligently than ever, while Lalia helped where she could. But as the days lengthened into weeks and their enforced duties in the factory grew more and more irksome, she grew impatient, resentful.

“We’ve got to do something, Levison,” she told him yet again. “We’re just letting Melvin have all his own way. While he has you chained down here, working only when you’re free from your factory bench, you will never do the job before him. For all we know, he may have this thing practically finished. And when once he starts to use it—”

Levison looked up from the delicate piece of apparatus to which he was making adjustments.

“We’re very lucky to be able to work on it all, Lalia,” he reminded her patiently. “Don’t forget we’re not the only ones to have our work interrupted. At the bench next to me at the factory is a professor of physics—”

“I know!” Lalia had grown tired of his attempts to console her. “But Melvin may not even know we’re alive. Some official must have put our names down on that list of Intellectuals who have been turned into menial Workers—slaves, in fact; for that’s all we are, all we ever shall be. There are thousands of us, all doomed to this existence for the rest of our lives if Melvin gets his way. But if he knew *we* were here, he might have the decency to reinstate us.”

“And let us work on the Amplifier, which he wants to use for his own ends? You know that’s not reasonable, Lalia. We’ve been here two months. If he thought we were alive, he would have sought us out by now. At least, he’d have seen to it that I wasn’t allowed to continue my work here. I’d have been refused permission. No, it’s best to let things stay as they are.”

Lalia’s eyes flashed. “How do you know he isn’t doing it deliberately—letting you get on with the job while all the time he’s got you tied down? When you’ve finished the Amplifier, he’ll step in and confiscate it. We’re helpless either way. If only we could find out how much he knows, how far he’s made progress!”

“I think we should wait, Lalia,” he insisted gently.

But she could wait no longer. She could not bear to see Levison toiling night after night, getting no rest, when all his efforts might be in vain. She had to see Melvin, to find out the truth. He need never know that Levison lived, if he thought him dead. She could delude him; perhaps persuade him, in spite of what had happened, to reinstate her so that she could use her influence to get Levison released from his slavery without Melvin’s knowledge.

Her mind made up, she did not hesitate. Leaving Levison to his labours as early as she could without exciting his suspicions, she made her way through the deserted, ill-lighted streets towards the narrow belt of grassland which separated the inner rim of the Workers’ Circle from the centre of the city. Soon she came to one of the great portals through which all traffic entering the inner section filtered to the various levels, and where a pedestrian was such a rarity that only a single narrow subway on either side of the towering arch had been provided for foot passengers, as though as an afterthought. Beyond the portal, a flood of light from the great city buildings, resplendent with flashing sky-signs, reached into the heavens to put the stars to shame.

As she drew nearer the subway entrance, Lalia searched in vain for some suggestion of shadow in which she might escape the mechanical eyes of the grey-uniformed police who made their vigil here, ever watchful lest some unauthorised Worker attempt to enter the forbidden precincts of the city. But it was impossible to gain the subway without passing their observation posts, smooth domes of shining plastic from whose summits revolving lights swept the footway with their merciless beams. Once she stepped into that light they would see the olive-green uniform that marked her as a Worker, and a Worker had to be questioned. It was unavoidable.

For a moment Lalia stopped, blinking at the whirling rays of light, and wondered if she should not wait until she could obtain a permit to enter the city on some legitimate errand. But the formality would take time; the document would require her Overseer’s signature. It was all designed to discourage Workers from encroaching on the rightful preserves of the Intellectuals. She had to see Melvin now—that night; he would almost certainly be working in his office in the Science Institute. She would get there somehow.

She continued towards the subway, whose dim inner lights seemed poorer still against the bright glare outside. She almost ran, knowing that if the men in the observation post saw she was in a hurry they would keep her waiting longer at the turnstile before they started their interrogation. Just before she reached the viewplate which would present her life-size image to them inside the post, a mechanical voice grated:

“Halt! Stand by for questioning.”

But she did not halt. Instead she plunged forward into the ill-lit subway and, keeping as close to the wall as she could, ran faster than she had ever done in her life before. She had

gone ten yards when the robot voice repeated: "Halt! Stand by—" Then a human voice commanded, "Stop, or I'll shoot!" as she heard the clatter of heavy boots behind her; someone inside the post must have moved as fast as she.

She was almost on the point of staying her headlong progress down the straight, narrow tunnel when something blazed behind her, a fierce burst of pain racked her spine, and she fell into a pit of absolute blackness.

Lalia had been gone less than an hour when Levison Read was startled by a sudden preemptory knocking on the door of the billet. He was alone in the house; the others always spent their evenings at the Recreation Centre. Hurriedly he pushed aside the apparatus on which he was working, and went downstairs to the door. A man in Workers' Hospital uniform stood waiting. There was a car in the road outside.

"Levison Read?" he asked briefly, then went on at the other's nod. "A girl named Melbridge was shot by the police while trying to pass the barrier without permission. She's in hospital, in a pretty bad way—gave your name. You can come with me."

As the car sped through the narrow streets, Levison's mind was an agonizing muddle of hope, fear and regret. The few minutes before he was standing at Lalia's bedside, looking down at her white face, seemed an interminable age.

"Only a moment," the nurse cautioned as she left them.

"Hello, Levison." The girl's whisper was almost inaudible. "I—I tried to see Melvin—but they stopped me—"

Bitter anguish showed in his eyes as he leaned over the bed. "Whatever made you do it, Lalia? I would have gone myself if I'd thought—" The words choked him. He could only gaze at her, tenderly.

"Never mind," she whispered. "You know best. If—if I don't get better, I want you to know that I'm still on your side."

He nodded dumbly. She lay staring up at him until the nurse intervened. A moment later, in the corridor outside, he realised dimly that a doctor was speaking to him.

"We operated the moment she was brought in. We saved her life, but there is a bad spinal injury. She will probably find it difficult to walk again. . . ."

Levison wandered out into the street in a daze. Never to walk again—Involuntarily, his fists clenched. This was another piece of Melvin's hateful work. Lalia was right—they had to throw off these shackles he had put upon them, to prevent him doing them further injury. *He* had to show him that with all his power he could not succeed in his crazy scheme of domination. He had to match that power with his own—*now*.

The numbness passed from his shocked mind, gave place to a burning sense of injustice which flared into a raging fury towards his brother. Spurred to sudden activity, he swung round, hurried back into the hospital forecourt where a small autogyro stood parked. Keeping well in the shadow, his eye on the solitary figure in the light of the main entrance, he opened the door, slipped into the seat, set the vanes revolving as soon as he heard the first soft purr of the engine.

The man in the doorway turned, stared out into the gloom, waved a hand wildly and came running across the forecourt towards the plane. Levison waited until he was three yards away, then opened the throttle wide. With a lurch that turned his stomach, the plane leapt straight up into the air.

He turned on the jets, climbed swiftly up above the hospital roof, and stilled the whirring helicopter as he brought the machine round towards the blaze of light marking the city's centre. Within seconds he hung suspended over its twinkling abysses. He peered down, searching; it was a long time since he had piloted his own 'gyro over London, but at last he made out the expansive roof of the Science Institute. He nosed down towards it, hovered motionless above it for a moment, then let the plane down to a gentle landing on the rooftop where several other tiny machines were parked.

He went down in the lift without encountering a watchman. The corridors were silent, deserted, though lights still burned here and there. He found an indicator, located Melvin's office on the third floor. The glass panel of the door glowed with light. He pushed the door open, went through the outer office to where another door stood ajar. He flung it open.

Melvin looked up with a start from the desk where he was studying a sheet of diagrams. At his side lay several pieces of apparatus which were not unfamiliar to Levison. The blood drained slowly from the Master's face as he sat there staring at the visitor in the olive-green uniform. At length he spoke.

"I—I thought you must be dead. I hadn't heard—"

"You could have found out easily enough, couldn't you?" Levison put the question calmly. His rage was gone now, leaving only grim determination. "The Master surely should be aware of all his citizens' welfare, Intellectuals and Workers alike. It might interest you to know that Lalia Melbridge also survived the storm—and that she now lies in a Workers' Hospital, paralysed by the shock-ray of one of your henchmen. She was trying to get to you, to plead with you, even though she now realises what a cold-blooded monster you are."

Uneasily Melvin rose from the desk, forced himself to meet the other's challenging gaze. With an obvious effort he made his excuses.

"She attacked me in my laboratory, left me unconscious. If she had only approached me in the proper way I might have overlooked that. If she chooses to defy law and order, I cannot be held responsible."

"Law and order!" Levison's tone was not so cool. "Who are you to speak of such things? You who seek to thrive on violence—yes, and on thievery!" He waved a hand towards the apparatus on the desk. In a renewed burst of uncontrollable anger, he dived forward, swept it to the floor and ground its shining complexities beneath his feet.

Melvin's eyes gleamed hateful enmity. He tensed his body, hurled himself at his brother, fingers crooked like talons. But Levison was quicker. Flinging out an arm, he sent him staggering back on to a low settee where he sat panting, glowering evilly.

"You'll pay for this," he growled. "You can't attack the Master. I'll have you taught a lesson. I have the power—"

"Power!" The word came back like a boomerang. "Power! The power to destroy! Too much of that will bring you down before long, Melvin. You can't control it—"

"But I can!"

Melvin leapt to his feet as he shrieked his defiance. Levison backed away, then stood his ground, awaiting a second plunge. But instead of attacking him again, Melvin stepped aside, round the settee, and ran to the other side of the room where a shiny black panel stood out from the surface of the wall. He touched a button, slid the panel aside to disclose an array of switches and dials.

"You see! I have my power ready to hand—the power that put me here and will keep me here so long as I choose! Unlimited power! You've already seen what the release of that

power can do, Levison. The Great Storm that almost destroyed London—it was I who caused it. And I can do it again!”

He was raving now, drunk with wild exultancy. Levison watched him, half contemptuous, half pitying.

“You shall see!” With a hoarse cry, Melvin slammed down a great switch on the panel, started to turn a dial while he kept a careful eye on Levison. “If you and Lalia try to get me removed, the whole of London will answer for it. Better think again, Levison. If you would only co-operate with me—”

He stopped and stared as he became aware that someone lurked just outside the office door, looking straight at him through the gap where it had been pushed partly open. Levison could see only a vague shadow behind the glass. Then slowly the door swung back, revealing a stocky, muscular figure standing on the threshold.

“Townsend!” Melvin’s face whitened visibly, stark against the blackness of the switchboard. For a moment he struggled in indecision, laid a hand on the panel as though to close it, then let it fall to his side. He stood silent, lips twitching nervously, eyes shifting from Levison to Townsend and back again.

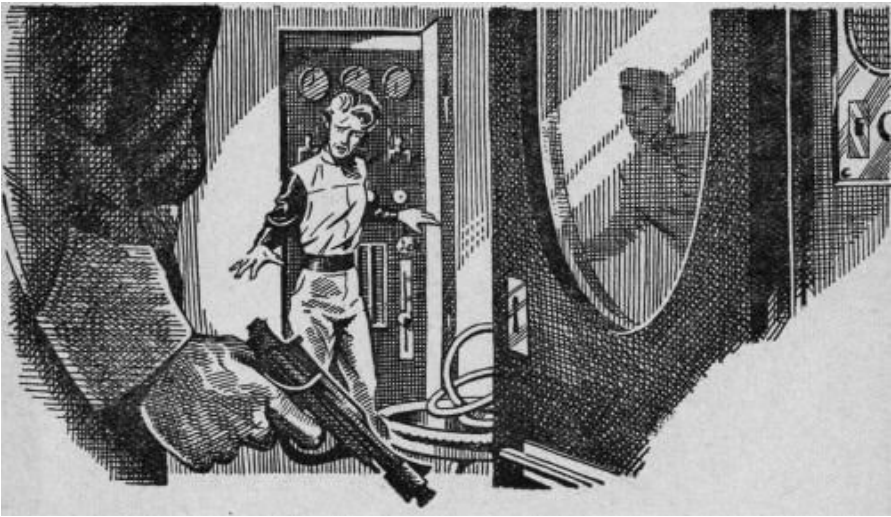
Townsend’s tone was confident, commanding. “Release that switch!” he ordered.

Melvin hesitated again. He made a terrific effort to regain his composure, bunching back his shoulders, head held high.

“Who are you to give orders to the Master?” he demanded. “You had no permission to enter my office.”

The engineer moved forward purposefully. He had reached the switchboard before Levison caught sight of the vibragun in his hand. Brushing Melvin aside, he reached up with the other, opened the switch, and turned to face them both. He gestured with the gun towards Levison, then levelled it straight at Melvin’s breast.

“This man—your brother—didn’t wait for permission either. His errand was too important. So is mine—now. I was coming to see you on a matter that is too trifling to mention—it can wait. I hadn’t long landed in my ’gyro and was digging out some papers when this man touched down on the roof. I saw his Worker’s uniform, followed him down to your office. When I first saw his face I thought it was you, though I couldn’t understand the dress. When I heard you talking, I learned differently. I learned a lot of things—things that have been troubling me for some time but which I couldn’t fit together before.”



His tone was quietly conversational now. Melvin stood glaring at him, his chest heaving rhythmically, while Levison watched impotently. The stocky man went on.

“I always knew there was something funny about that storm. There was that beam of violet light that some were supposed to have seen, which led to talk of invaders from space—absolute nonsense! Lots of people had theories—all sorts of fantastic ideas which they put over the radio. But I never could accept the scientists’ verdict that it couldn’t be anything but a natural phenomenon. It was too restricted, too concentrated. There never was a storm like that, and there never will be again.”

He looked at Melvin with narrowed eyes as he spoke the last few words, slowly and deliberately. He glanced quickly at Levison, then resumed in a voice that trembled slightly.

“I lost my wife and youngsters, all I had, in that storm. Thousands died and suffered through it, and are still suffering—because of you, Melvin Read. I was a fool to let you use me in your climb to power, but I’m not the only one you’ve used for your own ends, it seems. This apparatus—” He nodded towards the broken pieces on the floor, turned to Levison again. “It’s some invention he’s filched from you. It must be important. What is it exactly?”

Levison told him, briefly. Melvin’s face showed dull resentment. Twice he made an effort to speak, but each time Townsend silenced him abruptly.

“The power to influence men’s minds. . . .” The engineer considered, his gaze wandering aimlessly for a moment. Then he smiled grimly at the Master. “To think what you would have done with that! But your reign of terror’s at an end, Melvin Read. You’ll never be able to satisfy your conscience, perhaps, but I’m going to do what I can to quieten mine. We put one Master in power. Now we’ll replace him with another—one with rather different motives, if I’m any judge. And without any formalities or elections, either. What do you say, Levison Read?”

Levison was startled by the sheer audacity of the notion. “You mean that I should take Melvin’s place? I don’t want power—”

“You *have* the power! You can work miracles with that invention. Your brother’s crazy lust for it is enough indication of that. But he wants to destroy—you want to build, to cure. Well, now’s your chance!”

He spoke rapidly, urgently. When I entered this room, I tell you, I did so with the intention of shooting this blackguard down where he stood, not only for what he's done to me but to avenge the thousands he's sinned against. He deserves to die—and I'm still tempted to give him what he deserves, even if you try to stop me. But it will do me no good—I'd have to pay the penalty or blow my own brains out. There'd be a scandal; the people would lose what little faith they have left in the Master, and our enemies would make the most of it.

"You're his twin. He must go—you have all the qualifications that are needed. If you stepped into his shoes, we could go on as if nothing had happened, except that you'd take a different line. The people would accept you; our opponents would never know. You'd have me to stand by you—"

Levison's mind was a turmoil of confused thoughts. "But—but Melvin—"

Townsend waved his gun. Melvin nervously watched his every movement. He was thoroughly frightened now. He clutched at the chance desperately.

"Yes—yes, take my place, Levison! You deserve it. So does Lalia. I know when I'm beaten—I'll go away."

"Take off your clothes," Townsend told him. "Levison, give him your Workers' uniform."

Silently, while the engineer watched, the brothers exchanged clothes. Neither of them saw the peculiar smile which flickered briefly on Townsend's lips.

The Master of London raised his eyes from his desk, gazed through the huge window at the skeleton fingers of metal which pointed upwards, here and there, between the network of girders and the mass of newly-finished buildings below. He nodded approvingly to himself, leaned back in his chair and sat reflecting. The city wasn't such a bad place, after all. And it would be better still. . .

A glow of light suffused the audio-screen on the desk, rousing him from his reverie. A voice announced: "Miss Melbridge." Levison responded briefly, eagerly. In a moment Lalia was in the room.

"I had to see you," she said, her blue eyes shining. "The 'visor is so—impersonal."

"I'm glad you came," he replied. "Did you see—him?"

Her eyes clouded. There was sadness in her voice. "It was all I could do to persuade him, but he finally agreed to place himself in Dr. Seldon's hands. I told him what the Thought Amplifier had done for me, how it had fulfilled all your expectations in curing hundreds of cases of disease by influencing the mind. He tried to convince me that his case was different, said the principle didn't apply where the tissues had been damaged by harmful radiations such as those from his machine. If he had thought at the time, he said, that his exposure to them might have such an effect after three months, he would have taken steps to ward it off. But it was only recently he began to suspect that his brain had been affected while he lay there in the laboratory unconscious, without his helmet, on the day of the Great Storm.

"I pleaded with him, told him I felt I was to blame for having left him there exposed to those deadly radiations. But he insisted it was his own fault for meddling with forces that he couldn't properly control. He was a little hysterical—he's very ill, Levison. He realises, now, in spite of his growing madness, that his craving for power and his misuse of it once he had it in his grasp could only bring about his downfall. He's completely penitent—and wretched."

Levison looked anxious. "But he did agree to submit himself to the Amplifier?"

"He said he would try it, if only for my sake, so that I would have nothing on my conscience. Though he insisted I shouldn't have, and that he didn't deserve to escape—his

penalty, he called it. Since he first realised his illness soon after he went away, he's been resigned to his fate, waiting for it. He thought of killing himself, but he said he hadn't the courage—the courage that you had, Levison.

“He was full of admiration for you and what you have accomplished. The rebuilding, the replanning, the abolition of the Workers' Circle, their equal status—he praised them all. You had a sense of *rightness* he could never have, he said. And your scheme for the universal acceptance of the Amplifier, to rid men's minds of fear and mistrust and to promote the ideals of human progress—he was all in favour of that, too. He's a changed man, if a hopeless one.”

She brightened. “But Melvin will live,” she added confidently. “The Amplifier will heal his brain and restore his mind, just as it will improve the minds of millions, stop all the muddled thinking and prejudice that hold us back. It's a perfect instrument for good, Levison. With it, we can remake the world. Or *you* can—for as you've always said, the responsibility lies with you.”

He got up from the desk, stopped to stare once more through the window at those gleaming fingers pointing towards the sky. He turned to her, smiling.

“Let's try together, shall we?” he said.

THE END

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