

WONDER Stories

NEXT MONTH

The Planet of Youth

by STANTON A. COBLENTZ

is a distinctly original story written in the realistic, satirical, and vivid style of that popular author. With the remembrance of the "Florida Boom" of 1925-26 fresh in our minds, we know how the human race swallows so easily the bait of perpetual health and great riches, thrown out by unscrupulous men. Suppose that a planet were discovered that yielded both of those sought-for things? What would happen on our poor little earth? The answer is given here with a surprising ending that will leave you breathless.

Chicago, 2042 A. D.

by PAUL BOLTON

is this new author's answer to the challenge of the gangster. The author is a newspaper man and has been close to the rise of racketeering and what it signifies. What will happen if the racketeer remains unchallenged and digs his fingers deeper and deeper into our lives? If racketeering continues to grow and prosper WHAT WILL HAPPEN ONE HUNDRED YEARS HENCE? "Chicago, 2042 A.D." is the answer.

Outcasts of Mars

by ARTHUR G. STANGLAND

carries on this versatile author's exciting stories of the far reaches of the solar system. Suppose a race of people were disinherited from their world and forced to seek refuge on another world? And suppose on that other world they were treated as outcasts and denied even a bare living? What would they do? Would they calmly accept it, or would an explosion occur that would reach across space to other worlds? Mr. Stangland's story gives one unusual possibility.

The Death of Iron

by S. S. HELD

grows in power as we see the ravages of *siderosis* sweep across France. We have just begun to perceive what would occur to civilization should our metals fail us. Now M. Held with vivid strokes draws his pictures more and more and more finely. We see how the disease of metals effects all parts of the population, and the new civil wars that will arise for control of the decaying civilization. The story rises and rises in power as this installment sweeps along.

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we see another of Paul's scientific mysteries for our readers to puzzle out. Full directions for this contest, repeating that of the July issue, are found on Page 319. Again we offer a mental exercise and a test of imagination and scientific ingenuity to our readers with cash prizes as the reward.

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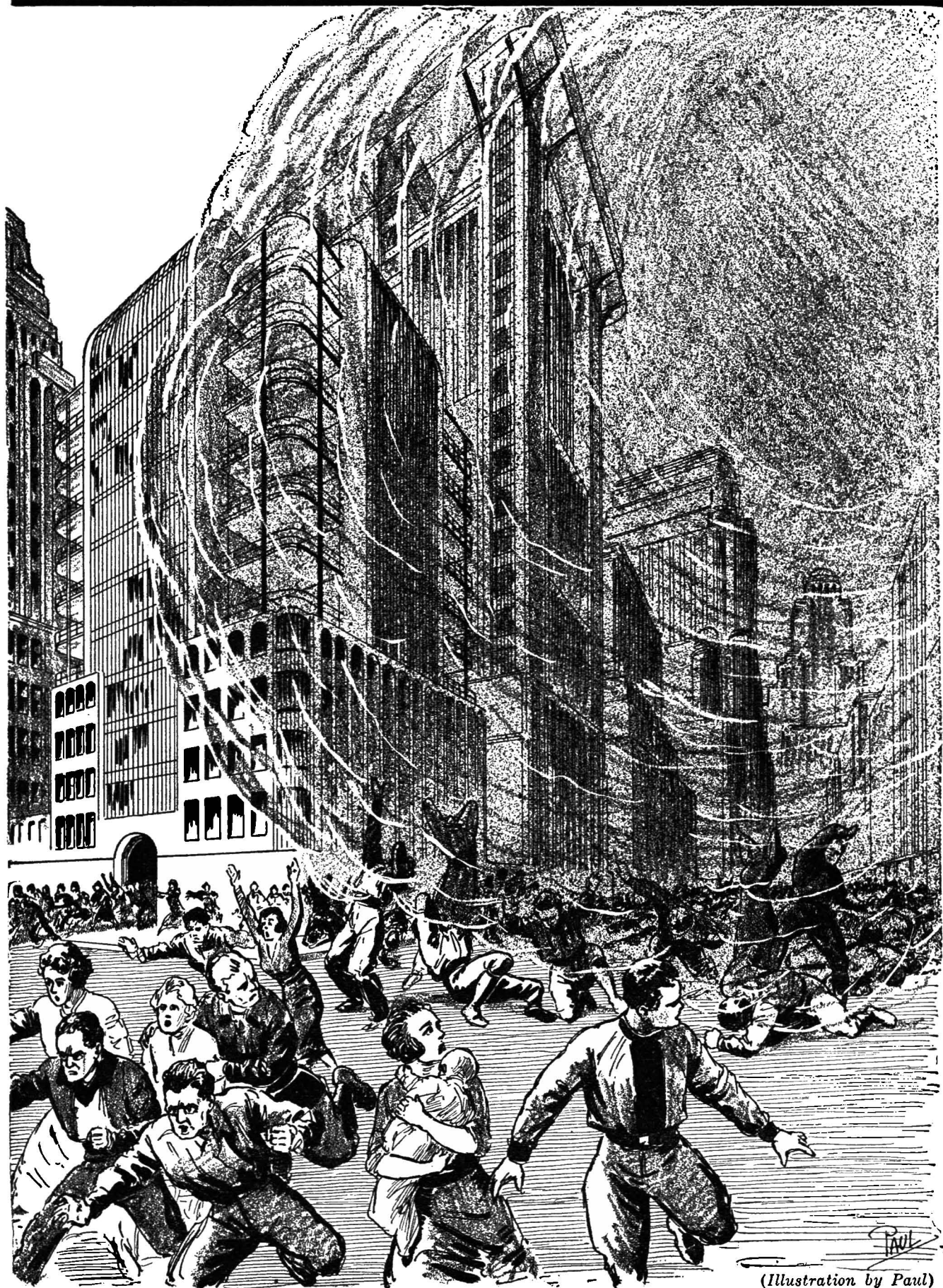
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(Illustration by Paul)

It was the fog-balls that completed the demoralization. Driven by the winds, they carried within themselves lethal death.

AFTER ARMAGEDDON

By FRANCIS FLAGG

● I try to tell them of the days before, of the days when what we called civilization covered the face of the earth, and even reached hands of trade and greed into the savage spots of jungle and desert. But to them it is all unreal, a wonderful tale of times when gods walked the earth.

But you, Bilembo, whom I have reared in my extreme old age, to whom I have showed the hidden things which the ignorant ones can but worship—you will believe somewhat.

The books I have taught you to read bear witness to the story I tell.

Soon I die. But through you the record of what has been shall live on; you shall be the custodian of the hidden things; and you shall appoint another to take your place before you pass on—your son if you have one—and he in turn shall do likewise. To what purpose? I know not; save that when in time to come man again evolves socially to civilized stature, he shall be warned to shun the blind greed and stupid mistakes of those who preceded him on that path.

Once, Bilembo, a great city stood where our log huts and skin tents now stand. Nothing of that city remains. But further south you may find crumbling ruins still persisting, ruins that the fog-balls have missed or touched but lightly. This great city was called Los Angeles. You have seen its name on the maps I have shown you, and in the books; but the maps and books can give you no conception of its size and wonder.

For fifty miles (what are now called "walks", Bilembo) it stretched from the hills to the sea, and almost as many down the coast. Formerly there had been many cities—Pasadena, Long Beach, Hollywood; but in the year 1960 they were all engulfed by Los Angeles, though their names persisted unchanged as designations of suburbs.

And on the eastern seaboard lay another mighty city, New York, extending for miles.

See, I show it to you on this map.

And here by those great lakes still a third huge metropolis, Chicago—gone; all gone!

I weep. I am an old man; and despite the many years I have dwelt thus, alien to the savagery into which my race has sunk. But see; I have conquered my tears. Yes, I know that only babes weep, and old women. Forgive me, Bilembo, I shall not do it again.

The skyscrapers went up towards the clouds a thousand feet, and airships darkened the sky and men walked on air. Those pictures the people persist in worshipping as

● Many of our writers, notably Carl W. Spohr in his "The Final War," have pictured the horror of future scientific warfare; and perhaps the ultimate collapse of our civilization.

Curiosity naturally asks, "what would happen to the survivors were our present civilization destroyed and man were thrown back upon the none-too-gentle arms of nature for survival?" Who would then be the leaders in the race? How would they meet the onslaughts of the elements and of wild beasts?

These fascinating and adventurous thoughts are dealt with by Mr. Flagg in this short but entertaining story.

gods coming down from heaven, they are nothing more nor less than the pictures of people of my day striding through the atmosphere as easily as you pace the trail to the watercourse.

And more than that: there were rocket ships which hurtled from coast to coast, rising at first thirty, fifty miles above earth (yes, thirty long walks, Bilembo), so that the friction of the air would not impede nor burn them up.

No, I can't explain that to you—we laymen never quite understood the marvelousness of it ourselves. There were many things in the latter days of our civilization which the average citizen never fully understood.

I was walking peacefully from my office in the *Times* building at the three thousand foot level, one of the heights devoted exclusively to air-foot traffic, when it occurred to me to press the news-broadcasting button on my power rod and pick up the latest dispatches. There were, I remember, some items about food riots in Boston, hostile demonstrations against the American consul in Cuba, and then suddenly this:

"International Peace Conference in Paris breaks down. Attitude of England threatens ultimate success of world outlawry of war."

I listened to this news, like millions of others, without in the least realizing its seriousness.

At home—I owned an *Ultriray* cottage on the slopes of Mount Lowe—my wife informed me that Stanley Brownson wanted me at once on the photo-phone. Still carelessly walking on air (most well-to-do homes in those days were carpeted by a pneumatic device), I went to the aluminum booth, twisted the necessary dials, and saw the long, serious face of Brownson form in the receiving mirror.

Brownson was more important in the field of science

than I was in the realm of super-business, though at that I was prominent enough. I was secretary to Justus Ebert, a money king, Bilembo, and head of the radio-transportation and photophone trust, with subsidiary holdings in rocket, food and oil companies. My salary was a hundred thousand a year. Brownson was the only intimate friend I possessed.

● "John," he asked quickly, "have you heard of the breakdown of the peace conference in Paris?"

"Yes," I said, "it was being broadcasted among the late dispatches.

He shook his head gravely.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that this means war."

I jeered at him for being an alarmist. It was the thing to do those days, ridicule any suggestion of world disaster.

"Not at all," I said confidently. "We've got Grimes over there, and Brewster; they'll keep things peaceful."

He said warningly: "You're putting too much trust in Grimes and Brewster—all of us are. Isn't it true they own the *alamite* process, with interests in . . ."

"Good God, Stanley!" I said, "you're not suggesting they'd deliberately . . ."

"Why not? Wasn't Grimes hand-in-glove with Smiley of England in that poison-smoke affair that put France under in '45?"

"But that was different," I protested. "It was they or us."

"And won't it be they or us this time too?"

Before I could answer, my wife threw open the booth door and cried out agitatedly: "John! come quickly; something queer is happening."

With a muttered apology to Brownson, and a promise to be back in a minute—a promise destined never to be kept—I hurried from the booth and joined her on the large observation porch. Several of the servants were standing there with her, an unprecedented thing. But though I looked at them severely they did not retire.

Only Williams the butler preserved some sense of decorum by hovering in the background. A big, burly man was Williams with a beefy English face and the imposing manner of an archbishop or a duke. For ten years he had been in my employ—ever since my marriage at the age of thirty—and looking at him that evening standing impassively and respectfully to the rear, I never for a moment suspected our altered relations of the future. My wife clung to my arm.

"Look!" she said, "what does that mean?"

It was still daylight, about six o'clock of a July evening. From Pasadena at the foot of the mountain the great city swept away on every side. My wife had already turned the mechanism which focussed the glass, housing the observation porch, so that the central part of the city, dominated by the magnificent and but newly constructed billion-dollar aerodrome and aerial-landing field, was plainly visible.

Even the coast environs stood out in stark relief, for we were looking down on the lower parts of the city from an elevation of thirty-five hundred feet, an elevation which dwarfed the thousand-foot buildings.

At first I saw nothing amiss, and then—with a leap of the heart—realized what she meant. Though the sun was but sinking in the west, though the sky was crimson with its departing glory, an ominous darkness lowered there, a

darkness so strange and weird and rapidly deepening, so alien to cloud or storm, that I could only stare in astonishment and fear.

"I noticed it," said my wife, "just after something seemed to burst. At first it appeared no bigger than the palm of my hand; but look how it is increasing."

And not only was it increasing, but advancing.

One of the kitchen girls—a forlorn little thing in a mesh-metal apron—began to sob softly. (Everybody, it seemed, save myself in the sound-proof photo-phone booth, had heard the dull noise of the explosion accompanying the initial phenomenon). "Oh," she whispered, "I'm afraid, afraid."

At that moment the automatic news-dispenser in the large hall beyond the porch coughed raucously, while a red light flashed high up in its dome. Ordinarily one turned the contrivance on or off at will, but the emergency shift was a matter of civic and national control, and news coming in this manner was sent out as a measure of public safety and warning. Only under the gravest circumstances was the emergency broadcaster ever used.

"Attention!" screamed the loud-speaker, "attention! All citizens, attention! Washington, D.C. talking! War! war! America is at war! Paris is burning; *alamite* aerial squadrons blow up London; Berlin in ruins. Everywhere our forces have been successful. Super-mustard gas blankets English Isles. Rumored French Chemical Corps fired automatic controlled rocket ships at the United States nearly six hours before our forces attacked and wiped them out. How many ships is unknown. Shells filled with deadly mystery gas explosive. Attention! Attention! Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Boston: citizens will be in readiness to take to under-city subway shelters in case of necessity. Time of arrival of ships; Los Angeles six, Denver . . ."

CHAPTER II

The Catastrophe

● I heard no more. The servants were now screaming, rushing about. Only Williams stood stolidly to attention. I looked fearfully westward and at what I saw recoiled in horror. For the weird darkness was slowly but surely spreading, advancing, and as it did so I saw great buildings disintegrate, collapse. Oh, it was horrible, horrible!

The darkness was something into which one could see with startling clarity. Only its base churned and shot forth streamers of intense light, eating, consuming. Suddenly the house rocked to the quake of a dull explosion, another and another, spaced monotonously at minute intervals; and in between the explosions came to our ears, even on that heavily glass-encompassed porch, such a concentrated cry of agony and fear from the doomed city that it beggars description. Out of the massive aerodrome and off the aerial field, untouched as yet by the creeping darkness, airships rose like flocks of startled birds. Tiny figures could be discerned running this way and that on aerial shoes.

"My God!" I whispered, half-stunned, "A French rocket ship has dropped its deadly shells on Los Angeles! Williams, Williams . . ."

"Steady, sir," said Williams. Even then I wondered at his colossal calmness.

"What are we to do?" I gasped.

"Take to the air, sir. The subway shelters are useless, being blown up."

He was right, of course. Between us we supported my half-swooning wife to the roof. Again I looked westward. The great white bulk of the aerdrome was gone, blotted out, and the immense mooring tower of the auditorium tottered and crashed even as I gazed. Down from the sky, like birds stricken in flight, aerial walkers were falling in thousands. With a thrill of unutterable horror I realized that the power stations from which they picked up the energy to compress air on which to walk were being destroyed.

I stared, appalled. Under the sable folds of weird darkness half Los Angeles was a swirling mist. Out of this mist, at every sullen detonation, lurid flames leapt heavenward and then sank back into smoldering quiescence. Is it any wonder that I stood there like a man in a nightmare. But a half hour ago everything had been safe, normal, and now, now . . .

The pilot of my twelve-passenger Damler stepped forward and saluted briefly. "The ship is ready, sir."

Williams was herding the half dozen servants aboard. The house shook as if a quake were continuously rocking it, and a low subterranean rumble began to intermingle with the more even series of explosions.

"Let us be off!" I cried frantically.

Latham pushed the control-stick over, twirled a dial, and lifted by her mills the Damler rose. At an elevation of six thousand feet she straightened out and, with nose pointed east, sped into the coming dusk.

Never shall I forget that panic-stricken flight. Overhead the brighter stars began to show. Below, the lofty ridges of the Sierras slid by. In the folds of deep mountain valleys it was already night and the lights of small towns and villages glimmered like fireflies. With trembling fingers I manipulated the receiving-set the Damler carried. A voice spoke—a human voice—not the mechanically prepared voice of the machine—caught in the midst of broadcasting a message.

". . . fails to answer. Last word through said city was being destroyed. Government aerial beacon depot number twenty-two reports explosion twenty miles south of it in vicinity of Denver. U. S. rocket ships expect to meet enemy rockets on fifty-mile altitude level and shoot them down. All citizens requested to remain calm. The president is at his desk. He . . ."

The voice ceased abruptly. From the receiving-set came a medley of sounds, a faint roar like the shrieking of many people. Then suddenly the noise was cut off as if by the closing of a door and the voice began to speak again, no longer in cool, collected tones, but tensely, fraught with excitement.

"Washington is being attacked. A bomb has burst in the suburbs."

The distant roar rose again.

"What's that?" came the voice of the broadcaster, as if he addressed a messenger newly arrived. "The Capitol? My God! . . ." His exclamation trailed away. Then dominating the mounting roar of shrieking people was heard a dull, ominous noise, and another, and another. Through it the voice of the broadcaster shouted hoarsely:

"Washington is burning, blowing up! New York . . ."

But what he meant to say about New York was never uttered. For out of the loudspeaker came a rending and a tearing as if all the static of the universe, mingled with shrieks, groans, went up, up, in one terrible crescendo of sound—and then ceased.

We stared at one another with ghastly faces. Even Williams' iron control could not prevent his lips from twitching. The National Broadcasting Station had been wiped out!



Francis Flagg

● Ah, Bilembo, who can tell you the horror of the hours and day following. It was ten o'clock that evening when we landed at Tucson. Not at the old Tucson which used to lie in the desert here (look at the map); but at the new Tucson forty miles away in the Catalina mountains. The place was seething with excitement. Crowds thronged the wide thoroughfares and the great parks listening to the dispensing machines blaring forth sensational items. Old-fashioned extras were being turned out by the thousands and

sold on the streets.

A bomb had fallen in Kansas, another in the wheat fields of Ohio. Only meagre news was coming through from the east. Rumor had it that New York and Boston were totally destroyed. At my Mount Lemon home—I had several such homes scattered throughout the country—we landed, and for the time being were safe and comfortable. Artificial sunlight flooded the rooms, servants went to and fro preparing delicious foods. You, Bilembo, can have no conception of what I mean.

It was on the tele-screen that I viewed the mobs coursing through the streets; via the news-dispenser I listened to the latest tidings from all over the country. Terrible, they were terrible, and yet a feeling of peace and security began to pervade my mind. By this time, I reasoned, the enemy rocket ships must have passed or been met by our own defense rockets and shot down. In any event no more bombs would be dropped, and we who had fled to havens of safety were in no further danger.

Suffering there would continue to be, of course, for a few weeks or months, panic, chaos; but inevitably the government, both state, and federal, would soon control the situation, succor those made homeless, protect property and life, bring order out of disorder. Yes, I thought with a prayer of thanksgiving, the worst was over; only days of reconstruction lay ahead. With these thoughts I comforted my hysterical wife, sent her to bed in the care of a maid, with Williams' help quieted the fears of the servants. In the end I went serenely enough to my own couch, never dreaming, never suspecting . . .

That was a curious characteristic of the average citizen of those days, Bilembo, a child-like faith in the omni-

potence of the powers that were. Though everywhere throughout the civilized world scientists wrote and delivered lectures on the dangers of chemical warfare, though pacifists went around denouncing war and minority groups pointed out the menace national greeds were to world civilization, he let what was said go in one ear and out the other. He was heedless of everything but the day's routine, the little round of business, quite certain that anyone not sharing his stupid optimism was a crass alarmist.

He was confident the heads of government, the responsible men of every nation, would avert disaster, never dare to loose upon mankind the engines of destruction about which talk was bandied. Incredible but true! So I went to bed believing the worst over; still trusting blindly in the strength and leadership of those whose greed and stupidity had sowed the wind and left me and my kind to reap the whirlwind.

It was not until noon of the next day, with the coming of Brownson, that I began to realize the awfulness of what was still to happen. He limped down from the sky, himself and his wife, haggard, gaunt.

"A shell fell into the sea near San Francisco," he said, "and recurrent explosions washed the streets of that town with giant waves from the Pacific. Large buildings withstood the force of the waters, of course, but not the terribleness of explosive gases washed in by them."

He went on to say that from the observation porch of his laboratory in Oakland—that central metropolis of the huge East Bay city of five million people—he had witnessed the overwhelming destruction of the proud warden of the Golden Gate. He had seen buildings vanish like golden vapor, viewed thousands of terrified fugitives take to the air. Then as the churning, exploding waters swept over the doomed city of the peninsula and on into the Bay, bearing their deadly, erupting contents Oakland-wards, he had soared aloft in his modest duplex-eight.

Brownson's laboratory had been an endowed one but he was a poor man. He employed no servant or pilot. The plane damaged itself making a forced landing in the desert, where he had spent the night. Fortunately a passing pilot helped him make temporary repairs.

"I was bewildered," he said, "at a loss where to go; then I remembered this lodge, felt sure you'd make for it yourself—and so here I am."

CHAPTER III

The End of Civilization

● His story plunged us into renewed gloom. ●

"You think Oakland was also destroyed?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But that explosive gas cannot keep spreading forever. There must be limits to its expansion."

"True. But how are we to know what those limits are—and when it will stop exploding?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten? Two years ago the English boasted of inventing an explosive gas which once loosed would continue exploding for twenty years or more. This French stuff shows similar characteristics—probably stolen from the English."

"Good God!" I stared at him, appalled. At that mo-

ment Williams turned on the news-dispensing machine. A mechanical voice coughed, spoke, finished a half-uttered phrase, and we picked up the sense of what was being broadcasted with the beginning of the next sentence.

"There is no need for further alarm. The president and his cabinet have organized the seat of government at Omaha. Army headquarters announce one enemy rocket shot down in Massachusetts. Two others badly injured have veered from their course into Canada. A fourth continued on into the Atlantic. Martial law proclaimed throughout the nation. Regular army units en route to scenes of disaster. All state troops mobilized. Reserve soldiers and army and navy officers recalled to the colors."

More information, there was, of less importance, an announcement that further news would be broadcasted at half-hour intervals during the day, and then silence.

"You see," I said, "the worst is over."

"Alas," answered Brownson, "it has but begun!"

Beyond a curtained doorway I saw the pale faces of the servants, the phlegmatic countenance of Williams, witnessed Latham, forgetful of where he was, nervously light a cigarette and blow out clouds of smoke. My wife's fingers tightened painfully on my arm.

"Germs," said Brownson tensely. "Spanish influenza, bubonic plague, God knows what!"

"Good God, man!" he cried, "don't you understand? Cultures of virulent germs combining the properties of all deadly diseases were prepared for use in warfare, and—" he shook a fateful hand—"the nation that did that was France, her special bombs designed not only to blow up, asphyxiate, have burst over our country, and the germs . . ."

"My God!" he cried, "they will sweep the world!"

Plague! Like a sinister breath it swept the land. All over the country people were dying of a strange malady. What took place in various cities and centers of population is a matter of conjecture; but before the news-exchanges were utterly disrupted enough tidings came through to give an inkling of the terrible things that were happening. There was rioting in Seattle and St. Louis, looting in Chicago; eastward from the Pacific coast and westward from the Atlantic seaboard, panic-stricken mobs were pouring inland. Millions died when the powerhouses ceased to function. But what can I say of those awful days but that workers abandoned the factories, citizens the town, that the dead were left to fester where they fell, and that city was cut off from communication with city, and state from state.

Never will I forget the coming of the plague to Tucson. Men, women and children fell in the streets like flies. The frantic attempts of the medical authorities to organize treatment and relief were swept away in a moment. Doctors succumbed over their patients. The plague was a terrible thing. Nine-tenths of those whom it attacked died—horribly. But here and there were some individuals immune to the disease, and others who actually survived after being stricken. Brownson, his wife, Latham, the three maid-servants and two footmen, died; but my wife and Williams recovered from their attacks, and I was never taken sick at all.

It was impossible to bury the dead. Cities became vast charnel houses. Railroads and aerial freight ships ceased to function, food became scarce, famine, and pestilences other than that of the plague, desolated the land, and

bands of homeless and desperate people roamed the countryside and lived or died miserably.

But it was the fog-balls that completed the demoralization of civilized man. That they emanated from the explosive gas the French rocket ships had loosed was undoubted. Driven this way or that by the prevailing winds, raggedly spherical in shape, their gray and thunderous masses tinged a sulphurous yellow, they carried within themselves lethal death, and hundreds of thousands of fugitives upon whom they settled were overwhelmed and wiped out.

● For months they proved a nightmare; but in time grew less numerous and large, so that it soon became possible to watch out for and avoid them. You have never seen a fog-ball? No, because years ago they disappeared from this part of the country. Pray God that they never come back! But in the days that I am speaking of they finished the work of destruction the plague had begun. Think of it! Less than two hundred years had raised America to the top as the greatest industrial nation of the twentieth century—and in six weeks she was swept away!

Lemuria, Atlantis—all the mythological civilizations—had passed like a dream; and would the story of my day survive but as a myth; would . . .

No, I can't tell you about Lemuria and Atlantis. They were but legendary continents. Perhaps greed and war wiped them out as they wiped out my own civilized era. But I won't dwell on that. Nor will I dwell too much on the horrors immediately following the plague. Suffice it to say that my wife, Williams, and myself, threatened by a fog-ball, fled from Mount Lemon.

At first we traveled in the Damler, but somewhere in the wilderness our fuel gave out and we were forced to land. For months we lived precariously, God knows how, killing stray cattle, rooting in deserted fields and farmhouses, hunting, fishing.

The first winter we passed in an abandoned cabin. I was of little help. If it hadn't been for the ingenuity of Williams we should have perished. The next summer several men joined us—wild, rough-looking fellows, but no wilder or rougher-looking than were we ourselves. One was a bank manager, another a teacher of languages; as for the rest they had been farmers and unskilled workers.

A band of ten men and one woman we roamed from place to place, avoiding towns and villages, for these were filthy with unburied corpses, living a nomadic life. In the course of time our tribe increased to the number of fifty, with several women among the newcomers. Of this tribe Williams was the undisputed leader. Almost imperceptibly his manner towards me altered.

In the first days of our new existence he deferred to me, still the perfect servant; but as our hardships increased, as more and more the comfort and safety of our little group devolved on himself, he assumed the attitude of an equal, indeed of one who gave orders and expected to be obeyed. Only once had his authority been questioned. For some time there was a noticeable sullenness among the men. Lowering looks were cast at myself and other wedded members of the band.

An evening came when one of the disgruntled bachelors caught at my wife and kissed her violently. I flung myself at his throat with a curse, but he had no difficulty in overcoming my attack. When I finally staggered to my

feet, dazed and bleeding, it was to discover Williams confronting my assailant.

"Ho!" the latter was crying, "so you think yourself the high-muck-amuck around here, eh? Well, you can't tell me where to head off at, see, you ex-flunkey! I'm going to be the boss of this show from now on, or I'll know the reason why."

Williams stood with one hand stuck in his ragged jacket.

"You'll do as I say," he said levelly.

They were both big men, nearly of a size, the malcontent perhaps more powerfully built.

"Will I?" he said, laughing contemptuously, and leaped forward, fists swinging. Williams' hand came from under his jacket with something glinting in its grasp. Quite coolly he stepped back; there was a sharp report. With a look of foolish surprise on his slack face the rebel faltered, turned slowly around as if to find a place on which to fall, and then tumbled headlong without a groan. There was a moment of stunned silence.

"If there are any others want to take up his quarrel," said Williams bleakly.

No one stirred, eyes shifted before the deadly menace in his green orbs.

"All right, then," said Williams. "I'm sorry I had to shoot Green; but I'm leader, and I won't stand for lawless violence."

He shoved the gun back into his bosom.

"From now on we're going to do things in orderly and disciplined fashion. You have a grievance? Very well. Select a spokesman and let him step forward and speak for you all."

After some muttered discussion, a truculent fellow advanced.

"It's the women," he said succinctly.

"The women?"

"It ain't fair, under present conditions, that a few men should possess all there are."

Williams looked grave. "I expected something like this." Then he turned and addressed the listening women.

"To all intents and purposes we people represent a whole tribe, a nation, faced with the necessity of adapting ourselves to a new and raw environment, faced with the necessity of evolving new codes of conduct—if we are to survive as a social body and not be destroyed through anarchy and bloodshed. For the old world has passed away forever, and the new . . ."

CHAPTER IV

A New Leader

● He was silent a moment.

"There is justice in what the men say. But the decision remains with the women. Only in making their decision let them not forget that our existence depends on it. Tomorrow we shall have a meeting . . ."

And that, Bilembo, is why our tribe practices polyandry today, though the origin of the custom be forgotten. No, it wasn't always practiced. In the lost civilization I am telling you about monogamy—one man to one woman—was the custom. But I shall not dwell on what must be confusing to your mind. That the women of today select

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Armageddon

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and command their husbands in things pertaining to marriage and the home, that in certain matters they have the power of life and death over their mates—that is well, and perhaps as it should be; but it wasn't always so.

In the fifth year after the destruction of civilization or the sixth, or seventh—I am an old man and my memory unreliable—Williams and I discovered a small duplex eight intact in a hangar, with an ample supply of motor fuel. We had often talked of the possibility of some remnants of the old government having survived in the east; so in this craft we ventured aloft and scoured the surrounding country for a radius of two thousand miles.

But the towns we visited were devoid of human life, and—this is a strange thing and one I have never been able to explain satisfactorily—great buildings were rapidly moldering into dust, stone and steel and brick disintegrating, falling to pieces. Perhaps the explanation of the phenomenon lay with the fog-balls we saw everywhere, seemingly driven by the winds, or by some power of propulsion resident within their gloomy depths.

That they were deadly to human life I have already explained. The flesh of bodies discovered after the fog had left them was curiously mottled and bloated, like the flesh of those long drowned. Williams advanced the theory that the fog-balls were the agents responsible for the quick dissolution of mighty skyscrapers, factories, and other structures.

"Settling over a town," he said, "they eat into steel and stone. Look," he said pointing down, "that city is blanketed by one now."

We stared gloomily. The thought that the habitations and works of civilized man were swiftly being reduced to ashes was a depressing thing.

"In a few short years," said Williams sadly, "there will be nothing of them left—nothing. Maybe a ruin here and there." He shook his head.

We had depended on finding fuel on our trip, but only thrice did we do so. For the most part fuel had blown up, evaporated, or containers had sprung a leak. Little we saw was whole or sound; and in all the vast distance covered not a sign of human life was seen. Cattle roaming the plains, herds of what seemed wild dogs or coyotes, flocks of birds, but of man, nothing. Once we did notice smoke rising from a forest, and this may have indicated a campfire. But though we hovered above the spot and fired several shots, our signals were not returned.

As far as I know, this was the last aerial voyage ever made by human beings. Later, many an aircraft was found in the course of our nomadic wanderings, but in a state of decay, and the towns and cities visited held little of value.

Soon our firearms were useless for lack of ammunition, and most of the salvaged tools, knives, hatchets, crumbled under use. Those remaining sound became of increasing value, and scarce. Gradually primitive weapons began to appear: the bow and arrow, the spear, the sling-shot. Years passed, fifteen, twenty of them. How can I tell you of the ever-shifting scenes and customs?

It was in the thirtieth year that Williams decided to lead the tribe to the Pacific coast. There were two reasons for this. One, a homesick feeling to see old scenes

again before he died; and the other, because our hunting grounds were being invaded by copper-colored people (doubtless Indians from Mexico) in increasing numbers.

● It was a toilsome journey, and a slow one. Only heaps of stone and rubble marked the sites of towns passed. The young men and women, and the children, who knew nothing of their origin, who hardly credited as true the absurd tales of their elders, viewed them blithely enough; but the hearts of those of us who had lived before the destruction were heavy.

I will not weary you with a recital of how finally we came to the spot on which Los Angeles once stood. Around the council fire that event is commemorated in song and story. Nothing of the great city remained. Coarse grass was growing in patches; but there were desolated stretches of barren ground, and in the midst of all something rumbled and roared and spouted a blue mist—the aftermath of that mighty explosion which had continued for two decades and was even now not subdued.

The great chief Williams died the day of our arrival. He had been ailing for some time. Ere breathing his last, he raised himself weakly on one hand and looked long and earnestly towards the spouting mist of blue.

"Listen," he cried, addressing his followers. "This is your land, the land I have brought you hither to possess."

I think he was delirious at this time, burning with fever, for he continued: "The blue flame is a devil-god and once swept the earth. But Jee-han," he said wildly, giving me my name in the corrupted tongue and laying a hand on my bowed head, "will guard you against its wrath. Trust in Jee-han."

He died then and we buried him, even within the shadow of the blue flame itself; and that is how I became high-priest of the tribe; for slowly but surely a religion was taking shape in the minds of the people, and here on the dust of a dead city and a dead civilization, it crystallized into the form you now know.

I am old, incredibly old. I have watched our tribe go up against the tribes to the northward, to kill or be killed. Years ago the last one of my contemporaries passed away. While living they formed an hierarchy of priests. But I still live. Perhaps that is because of all men I only dared to breathe the fumes given forth by the blue mist. In the times that once were, in a land called Russia, scientists experimented with ionization of the air. In this spot the air is highly ionized. I breathe it, it prolongs my life. And this also explains the miracles of healing I do for the sick and diseased. I take them blindfolded before the god, for daily prayer, and they are cured . . .

But now my time is at hand. I am tired and would sleep.

Perhaps in that sleep I shall dream again of the mighty ships of iron and steel that plowed yonder sea, of the huge and winged mechanical birds which bore man a conqueror through the air. Perhaps I shall walk again on winged feet and live once more in the glorious cities lust and greed destroyed with such cruelty and violence. For even before the industrial civilization that died, there lived a great scientist and mystic, Swedenborg by name, who enunciated the law of correspondents: As on earth, so it is in heaven.

THE END