

FUTURE FICTION

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AS IN THE BEGINNING

by JACK WILLIAMSON

Man had done his best to destroy all life, but the world was not quite dead.

THE world was not dead. . . .

Adams knelt in the red, caked mud that the tidal waves had left everywhere. Tears stung his eyes. Reverently, his trembling fingers touched the three translucent spears.

Life still endured. . . .

His misty eyes looked across the red barren flats, toward lonely sea and lifeless sky. Their terror had suddenly fled. These tiny blades of green had banished his despair, and laid the stark horror that had haunted him back from the moon.

They flooded his heart with a quick pity for his prisoner, that dissolved grief and hate and madness. Abruptly he was sorry for the sentence he had passed.

After that vain and frantic search across a world crushed and overwhelmed, when at last he had brought the *Victory* down upon this flat red isle of mud, beside a sea that would never bear ship again, Adams had gone back to his prisoner.

In the rocket's dark interior, hot and stifling with motor fumes, Dr. Everin lay bound in a cramped fuel compartment. He was still in the bulky, insulated suit he had worn on the moon; his features were still concealed behind his grotesque oxygen mask, for the tank was not ventilated.

"Dr. Everin, do you hear?"

The reply was muffled, weary:

"Yes, Adams. We are back on Earth?"

"We are." Hatred turned his voice to steel. "Are you ready to stand trial for what you have done?"

"I'm ready." The tone was serene. "My only crime is duty to my country. No just court will condemn me—"

"I am the court," said Adams, hoarsely. "You are charged before me with the murder of mankind. What have you to say?"

Silence. A faint whisper:

"Murder . . . ?"

"I searched the whole Earth," rasped Adams, "before I brought the rocket down. Both Americas are drowned. There is a chain of desolate islands, where the Rockies and the Andes stand above the sea. . . . Africa was swept clean by the tidal waves. . . . Your own Europe is cleft, shattered, lifeless. . . . Asia is a desert of smoking lava: the seas explode upon it into mountains of steam. . . . A new continent has risen east of where Australia sank, a continent of lifeless mud. . . .

"Your atomic weapon did well, Doctor. Murderously well. The radio is still; the seas are empty; I found no sign of man on all the planet.

"We two are the only men alive. And I alone am the court to try you for the murder of your race.—You may speak."

Silence, in the dark tank.

A whisper, faint, incredulous:

"I didn't know. . . . Dead! . . . And we're alone. . . ."

At last, a stricken voice:

"Adams, if you are my sole judge, spare my life. For your sake! Remember, my death will leave you quite alone."

But vengeance had frozen his heart.

"Don't ask for mercy. You have destroyed the humanity in me." His voice rang hard. "I will grant you one hour, Doctor. Then I will unbind you and shoot you through the heart."

Then he had left Everin, and come out through the air-valve upon the plain of mud.

Three blades of grass.

MIRACULOUS life, in the seeds, had endured the hate and fury of war, survived acrid gas and shattering explosive and ray of flame, escaped the final atomic beam from the moon that uprooted mountains and thrust riven continents beneath maddened seas.

War is death, he whispered. And there is ever war of life and death. And life is ever victor.

Three blades. . . . But there would be others; the miracle must happen again. Trees, Adams thought, would grow from the seed of the fruit in his supplies. Somehow, he himself would live. . . .

He was staring at the green mirror of the sea. Its agony had overwhelmed the land; but still it was alive, and the eternal mother of life. A fish leapt, a white shard flashing against the morning sun. Adams's lean face smiled. The world was not dead. . . .

He went striding back toward the *Victory*.

It was a long bright shell, fallen in the mud. Its silver was darkly stained with red oxides.

It was well named, this last desperate achievement of American engineers, that had carried him triumphantly out to capture Everin upon the stark central peaks of Tycho's crater. But what a victory, when one man alone survived it!

The hour was nearly gone. But Adams had warmed to the eternal miracle of life. If the world were not dead, had he been too severe?

A treaty—no better than most treaties—had outlawed atomic force from war. But should Everin be held for his government's crime?

Adams stopped and shut his eyes. Could he himself forgive the loss of home, country, all his world? . . .

The bullet stung his shoulder. Falling, he heard the brittle *spang* from the rocket's air-lock. His eyes flew open to glimpse the bulky figure crouching there.

He was prostrate when the pain came, like a slow red flood. Gasping, he pressed it back from his brain, and sought a way to strike back.

His left hand still lived. It found his gun, dragged it under his coat. He lay still, watching through his eyelashes. Everin would come to him, for he had the keys to controls and stores. If he could hold off death, feigning death, until the man bent to search him. . . .

The oldest game of mankind, he thought dimly, played to the last man. And madder, now, more meaningless, than ever. In the lonely horror of the solitary years to come, the survivor would need the other. But war was ever blind to human need. . . .

He gripped the gun harder. The mounting tropic sun smote him with a giddy violence. Red baked mud and green shimmering sea began to waver and spin. He thirsted for the cool of the sea. The throb of pain was growing dull, but he could feel the trickling blood, hot and sticky, across his throat.

His enemy could stop that blood. . . .

His finger nestled against the trigger. He must be quick. Everin was clever, to have worked out the atomic weapon. Clever, to have escaped. . . .

Adams heard cautious footfalls. Red dust flew abruptly against his eyelids; a gun crashed close behind. But his schooled nerves repressed any start.

He could hear the man's breathing.

Now he will bend over me. When he looks into my face, his heart will be in line. And one flick of my finger will repay me for home, country, my own life. . . .

A cool shadow touched him. *Now!*

But abruptly, instead, he was laughing at the madness of it, at the monstrous jest of all war. Blood couldn't wash out the past. His arm relaxed, and the hidden

gun slid down into the mud.

"Well," his faint voice whispered, "I won't kill you, Everin. Too bad if the last man died by violence. Let's finish . . . at peace. . . ."

A low voice said:

"I am glad. . . . I know now what my father meant. . . ."

ADAMS had closed his eyes; he relaxed in the shadow. He felt deft hands baring the wound. The voice said:

"My father invented the atomic beam to turn the machinery of a peaceful world. When he was commanded to take it to the moon, for a weapon, he drank cyanide. In a note he said: *War is death, and peace is the life of the world.*

"The War Office sent for me. I had been Father's assistant; I thought I understood the beam. For love of my country, I carried it to the moon.

"I know now that I didn't understand it—or father's note. The force escaped my control. And father was right. Peace

means union, common effort. And the life of the world is more than my country—any country—"

The tremulous softness of the voice drew open Adams's eyes.

The oxygen mask was gone, and for the first time he saw Everin's face. It was an oval of pale beauty, framing serene eyes deep as the sky.

He whispered, "A—a woman?"

"I am Dr. Everin's daughter. You might call me—Eve."

When again at last he emerged light-headed from the chaos of pain, there seemed no strangeness in the question:

"Then perhaps this isn't the end—of man?"

Fastening the bandage, she softly breathed:

"No, Adams—or Adam."

And she said:

"We were mad to fight. Nothing is changed, really, since we are alone. But it's so clear, now, what my father meant."

"Peace," he sighed. "And the world lives on. . . ."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

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State of New York | ss

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abner J. Sundell, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of the *Future Fiction* and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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ABNER J. SUNDELL
(Signature of Business Manager)

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