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The woman was known as the "glowing girl" because of the visible aura surrounding her.

Battle of the Unborn

by James Blish

There was a hidden war going on, war between the mutants and "normal" men. But only a few of the mutants could be recognized, and no "normal" man could be sure about his neighbor . . .

DR. BARNES stood reflectively before the heavy oak door, his hand resting lightly upon the handle. In a way, he was reluctant to go inside and face what was to come; and yet, at the same time, he was fiercely eager to have it over and done with.

This was the show-down meeting.

If it did not evolve into that, Barnes was ready to force it. His left hand carried a briefcase full of aces.

A hand touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Dr. Barnes—"

"Eh? Oh, it's you, Ling. What have you found?"

The Chinese technician, only very lately discovered among the long-scattered children of the labor gangs the Japanese had imported, made a curious gesture, as of a woman working a crude loom. "Everywhere. It is as we suspected, Dr. Barnes. I have tapped walls on every floor, and—in each one, I find the web."

"Have you tried cutting it?" Barnes asked.

"Certainly," Han Ling said. "But it will not cut. Anything powerful enough to sever the strands would doubtless destroy the girders of the building as well."

Barnes frowned. Han stood silently, waiting for orders, stroking one lobeless ear absent-mindedly.

"And no current flowing in it? But Ling, that's hardly likely. It can't be putting out all that radiation from nothing. See if the power's being broadcast in. As a last resort, try an Ehrenhaft test."

"Enrenhaft? But—very well, Dr. Barnes." The young Chinese padded away. Barnes watched him until he disappeared into the polite maw of an elevator. Then, with a sudden, decisive gesture, he turned the handle and went in.

It was rather an anticlimax to find the big conference room still deserted. Barnes put his briefcase carefully upon the table before his usual seat, made sure the panel cut by Han Ling in the far wall was closed, and walked over to the window.

It was an interesting vista, if not perhaps an inspiring one. The big white granite office building of the U. N. Atomic Energy Control Commission stood squarely in the center of what had been "old" Nagasaki, almost directly over the spot where the Bomb had fallen so long ago. Barnes could not remember that day, for he had been unborn then; but he was here by a sort of scientific legacy, for his father had been a pile engineer at Hanford.

There was now little trace of the vast bowl of desolation that the Bomb had made—Nagasaki had rebuilt quite rapidly even before the U. N. had become a real world power—but Barnes was still of the opinion that the location of the building was bad psychology. The Japanese did not think in terms of skyscrapers, and this one was an irresistible reminder of that mushroom of destruction that had risen here once. In effect, it froze the smoky column into perdurable stone, a constant reminder.

No wonder that an occasional rattle of gunfire still drifted up to disturb the Mutation Control Board's deliberations.

"Hullo, Barnesy. City-planning again?"

Barnes turned. "Hello, Doull. You might call it that."

Doull thumped his stocky body into a chair and chucked a brown portfolio onto the table with an impatient gesture. "Hope this is quick," he said. "Too damn nice a day to be squabbling over freaks. One thing that Bomb did, Barnesy, it cleaned off the nicest golf course in the whole of Asia."

Barnes returned to his seat, not bothering to conceal his loathing. A moment later Georg Brecht came in with his usual companion, Henry Flecknoe. The two were reported to be engaged in some kind of private physiological research, extraneous to their U. N. studies; Barnes reminded himself to inquire about the project some time.

"The Franciscan not here yet?" Flecknoe said.

"Is he ever on time?" Doull said testily. "The Franciscan" was their usual name for the Board's chairman, Sebastian Xavier Nakamura, D. Sc., F. S. F. In accordance with its usual policy, the U. N. Commission had picked a localite to head local activities; Nakamura they had dredged from a monastery on the edge of the city. Inarguably the man was a top-notch geneticist, his brilliance reminiscent of that other famous monk-

It was almost as if the terrible mushroom of the Bomb were still there in the sky, its deadly radiations streaming down on all.

geneticist, Gregor Mendel. But he was an intolerable person as Barnes meant to establish today.

THE DOOR flew open and Nakamura marched across the soft carpet to a nearly audible blare of trumpets. He oozed humility and rectitude. He planted his small frame at the head of the table like a Japanese maple, and said, "Where is Malinov?"

"Sick in quarters," Flecknoe said. "A touch of radiation disease; he has been in the labs too much. He'll be all right."

"Very well," the Franciscan said. "Dr. Doull, you were speaking yesterday of segregating known single-dominant types. Will you proceed, please?"

"Not today," Doull said lazily.

"Dr. Barnes, you are next in order. Have you something to contribute on the subject?"

Barnes looked around the table. If anyone else had urgent business he would be willing to yield. The glances he encountered, however, were merely attentive, except for Brecht's; he had something on his mind, probably something to do with the observation-camps, but evidently it wasn't of compelling importance.

"I do," Barnes said. "Segregation I regard as impractical and inhumane; I suggest immediate sterilization of all detected mutants, right down to the double-recessives."

There was a terrible, thunderous silence. Flecknoe slowly turned purple. Doull gaped, apparently convinced that he had lost a word somewhere that would have changed the meaning. Brecht glared. Nakamura blinked politely.

"Eggsplain," Brecht said.

"Gladly. I have evidence to show that the mutation-pattern in Nagasaki now shows a majority group; about 40% of the mutants which have been going through our clinics lately have shown the same pattern of physical differences. I will list them for you later."

They all remembered vividly one of the most recent mutations to gain public attention, a woman called the "glowing girl" because of a visible, almost phosphorescence aura that surrounded her. And her body frame was light—so light that it seemed most of the time as if she were walking on air. . . .It was as if the terrible mushroom of the Bomb were still there in the sky, its deadly radiations streaming down on all.

"Ve are nod empowered," Brecht said, "To eggsercize force against any mutants juzd because he has twelf fingers, or zome udder zuch abnormalidy."

"We are empowered to sterilize if the mutation is dangerous."

"Of course," Flecknoe said. "But we don't get very many mutants who report to us voluntarily, and it's hard to judge by consignments of criminals. What's the point, Barnesy?"

"This, Flecknoe. One: nearly every mutant we have examined in the past eight months has been accused of one of only two crimes: murder, or infanticide. Two: those who killed their own children were for the most part of widely varying types. Three: most of those who committed murder were of the same type."

"And the victims?" the Franciscan said.

"Varying types again. However, the children who were killed *were of the same type as the murderers.*"

"I don't get it," Doull complained. "You confuse me, Barnsey. Tell me what you make of all this."

Barnes said, "This mutation type, which I have named *Homo chaos*, is a new, true-breeding, stable species of mankind, quite distinct from *Homo sapiens*. It is now engaged in rubbing out its competition among the more randomized mutations; the murderers are *Homo chaos* and the citizens of Nagasaki who still belong to *Homo sapiens* or some variant of *Homo sapiens* are, here and there, giving birth to *Homo chaos* babies—and killing them in self-defense!"

Nakamura regarded Barnes with fatherly patience. "Proof?" he said.

"Here." Barnes took a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and tossed them to the center of the table. "Complete reports of the examination section. *Homo chaos* looks like any ordinary human on the outside; but inside, there are easily recognizable signs. No vermiform appendix; a pineal body that shows up coal-black on the X-rays, even when the pictures are taken through the foramen magnum; a type of nervous tissue impervious to silver nitrate; Golgi bodies in the brain do not take silver-line stain. And haemotological signs: very fast clotting time and sedimentation rate; a high white count with a predominance of young forms that you would call mononucleosis in a normal human. And a few other signs."

"That's more than enough for me," Doull declared. "Why bother to have reports typed if you're going to recite 'em aloud anyhow?"

"Bud sderilization?" Brecht said heavily. "Zo eggstreme, Herr Doktor Barnes. Vy? Surely you overeztimade the danger?"

"Do I?" Barnes laughed shortly. "I doubt it. They're fore-planning your children for you right now. I venture to say that any children we have from now on will be *Homo chaos!*"

IF BARNES' first demand had caused a sensation, this new assertion was equivalent to the dropping of a Bomb. After a moment Flecknoe got to his feet.

"I move that we ask Dr. Barnes to submit his resignation, effective immediately," he said. "It is obvious that he needs a long rest."

For answer, Barnes strode over to the newly-cut panel in the wall and jerked it open. The golden radiance streamed out; in the aperature, the fine webwork glowed softly.

"That's all through the building," Barnes said. "Our senior engineer, Han Ling, has traced it. It can't be cut, the flow of power in it can't be stopped—and it has nine times the genetic effect of X-rays. God knows how long it's been working on our genes."

He came back to the table, threw another sheat of papers into the center of it. "Reports of the engineering and radiology sections," he said. "We don't know how the web got there; Dr. Han suspects that it was planted like a seed, and grew in the girders, it's my opinion that it isn't matter at all. The radiation acts on exactly nineteen genes, no more. Quite a few of them are on the X-Chromosome."

"Shut the damned door, can't you?" Doull said, beginning to fidget.

"What for? It isn't the *light* that's doing the damage, Doull, I assure you. The stuff that's altering your genes—*has* altered them, probably—comes through that panel like light through glass."

There was a long silence.

"Look," Doull said. "So they're dangerous. But if we try to sterilize them all, they'll fight back—and I don't mean just those whistle-strikes they used to stage. Why can't we segregate them? We've got camps."

"And how would you like to be segregated, Doull?"

"That's different; I'm normal."

"Oh," Barnes said silkily. "But that's what they all say, Doull. *'I'm normal—my father had six fingers on each hand, why shouldn't I?'* But as a matter of fact, Doull, you're not normal any more, genetically. You've been sitting in the range of the web. Are you ready to be segregated along with the natives?"

Barnes put his fingertips on the smooth table top. "Gentlemen," he said, "we should have known about this a long time ago. The reason why we did not is that one of our own group has been re-routing much of the important information to the Inactive Files—"

Fleckmoe began to turn dangerously purple again. "Are you now about to tell us that this radiation makes *somatic* changes, Barnes? We are not idiots—"

He stopped and gaped. It was impossible to see just what had happened. Without the slightest stirring of the air, all the papers in the center of the table had fountained upward, swirling, scattering, as if caught in a sudden tornado. There was no other trace of battle.

Barnes turned green, then grey. He staggered backward, clutching for the arms of his chair. He sat for a while breathing shallowly. His brow was spangled with sweat. Finally he raised his head. Somehow a smile had found its way onto his sick face.

"Proof," he said. "If—I hadn't come—prepared, I'd be dead now. *Homo chaos* is mitogenetic—the Look that Kills, gentlemen. With human beings, it is fatal only to tiny organisms, like yeasts; but *Homo chaos* can kill men. And does."

He struggled to his feet again and swept his papers into his briefcase, looking levelly at the man opposite him. "I suggest," he said, "that Frater Nakamura be asked to submit to a medical examination. *He was born here.*"

With that, he reached the door, jerked it open, and then slammed it behind himself.

INSIDE the room there was dead silence. Then chairs scraped back, s l o w l y, purposefully. Nakamura's v o i c e said, "Gentlemen, if you please—"

"Swine!"

"Gentlemen, please—there is another factor—*Homo epipsychos* we have named it—"

Nakamura's voice choked off. Then he screamed. The door shuddered as if something heavy had been thrown against it.

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(Continued From Page 69)

Barnes smiled and turned away. Han Ling was waiting behind him, fingering his lobeless ear reflectively. "Hello, Han. What luck?"

"There's a leading cable in the sub-basement, Dr. Barnes. I think we can feed a charge back along it and blow up their power-scource, wherever it is." He cocked his head toward the door, through which horrid sounds were coming. "But what of Nakamura? Did you kill him?"

"Kill him?" Barnes said. "No; it was only necessary to provoke him into trying mitogenetic murder on me. I suppose they all think I was wearing some sort of shield, but the important thing is that he can't use it on them now. We should be glad that *Homo epipsychos*—"

"Homo superior," Han Ling said.

"Well, yes, of course. Still the name the *Chaos* group has given us is so poetic. In any event we should be glad we are not so easily detectable as they."

The Chinese abandoned the caressing of his ear and smiled. "I am pleased," he said. "Had he forced you to kill him personally, we might have been in some danger of betrayal. As it is, we can finish our pogrom without revealing ourselves. I was worried."

"No need to have worried," Barnes said. "I knew I wouldn't have to do the job myself. Human beings are so emotional; tell them somebody's been tampering with their parenthood, and—"

Behind them, Nakamura shrieked. The two mutants disappeared into the polite maw of an elevator.

THE END

★ ★ ★