

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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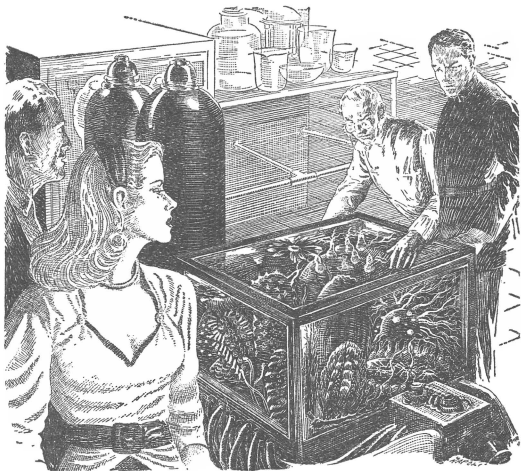
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The sealed glass case was a tangle of swift-moving vegetation

BLUFF PLAY

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

When an enemy nation reaches the planets ahead of the United States, does it mean the curtain will ring down on freedom?

WE'D seen some photographs. Now we saw the reality. Out there to the north—north of Alaska and across the pole in Asia—was where the little darts of incandescence came from. They

streaked upward like inverted meteors, going out into space instead of falling from it. Two of them now . . .

Young Copeland was at the theodolite. After the specks of fire had vanished

into the sunset glow of midnight in mid-summer we waited tensely for his answer—though we knew just about what it would be. . . .

"I make out their rate of climb at approximately nine miles per second," he drawled. "Two miles per second above the velocity of escape from the Earth. Considering that their takeoff point is probably about two thousand miles away. . . ."

I guess it was pretty corny for me, Joe Palmetier, to say, "Space-ship," then.

But it was almost as corny for Ted Brand, our leader, to retort in his hard tones, "What did you expect? This is nineteen hundred fifty-five, man!"

"Only nineteen hundred fifty-five," somebody else put in.

There were no doubters among us. Certainly not on the basis of reasoning. Nobody knew better than we that our own Air Force labs had done the job too. And we knew just how far advanced the actual secret construction work was back there in the underground assembling rooms in Colorado. Twenty big space-ships with nuclear power—better than these—theirs—must be.

But emotion is less flexible and more primitive than reason—sometimes it doesn't quite keep up with the swift advancement of science. "Space-ship" was a word that had been in the language, long before there was a reality for it to name. It had been with us all as a dream, as a glamorous unattainable, since we could read.

It was natural for a few such interplanetary bugs as ourselves to inherit the job of making the dream true, wasn't it? Because each man should go into the line of work that interests him most. But now the truth was a little awesome and tough to grasp and accept, deep down, even for us.

This was a trivial point, mentionable only as the dawn of a new time. Like a certain dawn, just ten years ago, over a Japanese city called Hiroshima. And that was where the pleasurable awe of it was converted instantly into a dark and poisonous murk.

We'd been sent flying north to Alaska to get the facts about the rumors—about the nearly proven certainty. Well, now we had those facts beyond dispute.

I stuck out my neck again, putting the main and obvious idea into words. "For once," I said, "*they're* a little ahead of us in technical achievement. Maybe a month ahead. We're building our first space fleet. *They've* already got *theirs* in action.

"Ever since World War Two they've been hoping to be a little ahead of us so that they could knock us silly, swiftly, and without fear of serious reprisal. Well, now's their short-term chance."

I think Ted Brand hated me some just then for saying it. He glared at me briefly, almost with contempt. Then, saying nothing, he looked toward the northern sky. Everybody else except young Copeland did the same. Young Copeland was a strange cool likable sort. He just went on making calculations on a little pad, computing what he already knew in round numbers. None of us spoke.

THE northern sky of the midsummer sub-arctic was a beautiful soft green, above the orange streak of the sun gliding just beneath the rocky horizon. Nothing could have seemed more peaceful—not even a painting. But it was the pendent peace of waiting for the axe to fall.

A feeling of helplessness brought a furious lump to my throat. Memories of history that I had known, came to my mind. Most of our leaders had really tried. Some people had made mistakes. Maybe we should have struck with all our might, long ago. Who knew?

Relations hadn't yet been broken off. Maybe it was sad farce comedy, like a lot of comedy that had gone before. . . . But what did that mean to our cities, bombed from space by ships that, in a month's time, we could never strike back at? We'd never get caught up soon enough.

And now the barrier of fear of us, that had kept us safe, was down. We were gone geese. We were like a few

cancer patients that find out about themselves. Let the hundred and eighty million others keep as much of their blessed ignorance as possible, even when the population dispersal—of limited value—was ordered for city and town.

So we all just stood there, looking at the northern sky where the darts of fire had vanished. And we were waiting too for Fred Nichols' return in his tiny scout plane. He had gone across the Pole for a closer look. He was due back now—if he was ever coming.

Now we saw the spark of flame from his jets. There was really no reason why this should make me hope but it did. And I could see the grim hope too in Ted Brand's face. I guess the prospect of more news in adversity is always like that. Things couldn't be much worse—so they might get better.

Nichols landed crazily in our little glade. He was smeared with dirt and a bullet had gone through his left arm.

"Well, what gives?" Brand snapped at him as he lay on the stretcher.

"Not much," Nichols answered. "I landed near their base. I sneaked close. But they shot up my camera and I had to beat it. All I brought back was this."

We all stared at the thing. Just a lump of bluish mud, wrapped in a bit of cellophane that Nichols must have torn from a pack of cigarettes. It was smaller than a man's hand. One side of it showed the tread-impression of a vast tire.

"Picked it up on their runway," Nichols said. "Their space-ships land like planes—on rubber. I saw. You can see for yourselves that this mud must have been stuck to a wheel—after a landing somewhere else. I'll bet—on another planet."

I guess that what Nichols said made all of us see pictures—even though bluish mud isn't too uncommon on Earth. It was probable. It made my spine tingle for a moment.

But Ted Brand's expression quickly showed his disgusted bitter disappointment. He was a practical hardheaded sort, trying to face a terrible situation with a practical hope. All he got was—this.

The reaction of Nils Narvaard, our chemist, was quite different. Nils Narvaard was old and bookish and dreamy—absolutely different from Ted Brand, our chief. There was something exasperatingly vague about him.

He was one of those deeply academic guys, who, right in the middle of desperation, can ramble right off into a poem or the color of a flower—as if such matters were the important ones. Not life and death or justice to a brutal enemy. It was as if, like a child, he didn't understand facts.

Now Nils' eyes fairly bugged out with unbelieving pleasure and awe. "All I have to do is reach out my hand," he said wonderingly, "to touch a piece of another world."

We might have tittered a little if circumstances hadn't been so tough. We might have kidded Nils. But the way he could drift off on a pink cloud was too pathetic somehow.

Brand breathed one word, "Nuts!" It plumbed the depths of tired fury. He tossed the lump of mud to Nils, whose hands closed around it more lovingly than the hands of a miser clutching the crown jewels of some vanished empire.

I could guess that Ted Brand was thinking of Rhoda Huzarski, one of our lab assistants back in Colorado. Blond, pleasant, pretty, cool—she was an Iowan of Polish extraction, the book said. Right now Brand would be trying to think of ways to keep Rhoda safe.

FOR a moment I watched young Copeland patching up Nichols' wounded arm. Copeland was expert and gentle—a real nice chap. I was thinking then that he was of English and Swedish origin and that he came from Minnesota. Funny how those questions of origin seemed so important now.

We all got into our big plane—one of the very newest. In two hours of fission-driven flight we were back in Colorado.

Life didn't change much there. The construction in the assembling rooms wasn't stopped as a futile thing. It was hurried along at top speed—even if it was futile. It had to be like that. What

would you expect—quitting?

We weren't back an hour before young Copeland was quietly picked up by the F.B.I. I didn't even hear about it for several days. How they'd nailed him for snooping didn't matter. You just kept wondering if he had accomplices still at large.

Yeah, life went on. Same regular duties—testing metals was my part. Same pistol drill, same drilling in rough and tumble commando stuff—which even us civilian personnel got in minor doses. If it was going to be good for anything now. Same food in the underground mess hall. Same eternal hum of low-flying planes patrolling the barbed-wire barriers. But the waiting was different. Just when would the axe fall?

Ted Brand found himself a new argument for hope—or a new defense-mechanism. "How do we know that our government hasn't already got a space-fleet?" he kept telling everybody. "Everything in this world is bluff and secrecy—and hang the cost. Our project could be just a blind. If anybody's got a space-fleet our country must have!"

Ummmm-m—but that kind of optimism did sound a bit wild—even when Rhoda Huzarski informed me fervently, "Ted's a believer. It's good to be a believer. They're never licked, Joe."

Me—I found something, too. I'd been slightly friendly with old Nils Narvaard—so now I was in his quarters for several evenings, watching him do things to that lump of blue mud.

"First I heat a piece slowly, Joe—in a sealed flask," he said. "The heat drives out the moisture and the gases—which it contains like a sponge holding liquid. I do not heat it very hot—it would spoil the experiment. And half of the mud I save—with no heating at all except by room temperature.

"Umm-m—now let us see what we have. From one piece of soil, Joe, I can learn more about another planet than other people can with all the telescopes ever made."

Slowly he went through the test of the gaseous contents of the flask. "Plenty of water-vapor," he said at last.

Then, a little later, "Some sulphur-dioxide as if from volcanoes. Quite a lot of carbon-dioxide—more than on Earth. Hmmm—less oxygen than on Earth. Nitrogen? About the same amount. Let's figure it out, Joe.

"What planet would that be? Not the big outer ones, certainly, with their atmospheres of ammonia and methane. Not Mercury or Mars—they're both too dry for one thing. Venus is all that is left. But didn't someone say that the atmosphere of Venus is waterless and oxygenless and full of wind-blown dust? That is a theory of recent years, which some claim to have proven.

"But does it make sense, Joe? Relative proportions of the various chemical elements are more or less the same throughout the universe. Is it reasonable to believe that a planet, almost the twin of Earth in size and mass, should be without water when the hydrogen and oxygen that compose water are so plentiful even in the farthest stars?

"Could it be that the spectroscopic tests of our theorists have gone not deep enough into the dense cloud-blanket of Venus for an honest answer?"

Nils Narvaard rattled on—and for minutes at a time he almost carried me with him, out of grim reality into the still-nameless distance, where other life might live.

This effect was even stronger on the following evening when I took Ted Brand with me to Nils' quarters and we watched him crush a bit of dried blue mud to powder and spread it out thin on a sheet of glass, then examine it carefully with a powerful lens.

Meanwhile Nils lectured absently. "I do not think that the mud froze very hard in crossing space in spite of the cold," he said. "The sun's rays are very strong there and would warm it some. I have analyzed a sample of this soil. So much of silicates, so much of iron compounds—and so forth. Ar 1, yes—there are organic substances present.

"Now—what else is there? See! Little threads. Shall we consider them root-fibres of some kind? And is this leathery fragment part of a leaf? Or are there

leaves on other worlds? And is this bead-like thing perhaps a little tiny seashell? Furthermore, what are these shiny black specs? Fellas—do you know what I'm going to try, next?"

Ted Brand and I had bent close to Nils as he fussed over that glass plate. The effect of this weird kind of detective work was a crawling sensation—half thrill with a little of fear thrown in—puckering my hide.

Ted Brand, for his part, still looked disgusted with Nils for his academic pattering at a time like this. But into his face had crept a kind of harassed intensity. Maybe it was hope again—the kind of hope that clutches at straws. You know how it goes. Maybe here—somewhere, somehow—there was an answer to something.

I FELT it, too. And I thought, arguing silently with myself: *People are deep. Never trust what you see. Look at young Copeland. Swell guy—at least on the surface. Probably an idealist. But idealists make the best fanatics and martyrs. There's a blind spot in their brains. Wrong or right they can take a belief and stick to it.*

Other men can be the leaders, the stinkers, the megalomaniacs. But the idealists are best at the tougher, more thankless jobs. They make the best spies for instance—because nobody can pervert or divert them.

They have the conscientiousness to memorize a past that isn't their own and live it until they almost believe it themselves. They can worm their way patiently—waiting their chance for years if necessary. Young Copeland was like that. And I'll bet anything he wasn't born in Minnesota.

To me all this was just a buildup for judging Nils Narvaard—who frankly claimed to be a Finn. But this didn't count with me now. Rather I kept thinking, with a wild sort of hope, of that old story-book plot wherein the apparent muddlehead turns out to be the smart one and saves the day.

It was desperate wishful thinking—nothing more. I realized it by degrees

when Nils pointed to a glass cabinet in the corner and said, "I'm going to seal up that cabinet, attach an air-conditioning unit, give the inside of it a climate.

"High humidity, warmth and an atmosphere with a composition that matches what I found out. And a soil like the mud. I'm going to grind up all the mud and mix it with the soil. Then I'll wait to see if anything happens."

Sure—as if he had all the time in the world! As if we weren't waiting for catastrophe that would be like pieces of the sun dropped, exploding, on the Earth, killing our citizens by the millions. Nils Narvaard's face was as guileless as a baby's. Nils was a pure student of "higher" knowledge. He belonged in another gentler era.

Once and forever the hope vanished within me—that he could be, maybe, the shrewd and devious saver-of-the-day underneath. Knowing this was like the loss of a last chance. It was a hard lump for me to swallow.

Ted Brand didn't even get sore. He sighed, sounding weary. He even grinned a little. Maybe that meant, in him, the dignity of man accepting his fate. "Sure, Nils," he said, more gently than was his way. "You're doing fine work. Keep it up."

But out in the corridor, talking to me, he sounded different. "People might get mad at Nils for wasting time, Joe—if we tell them what he's doing. But what's the difference? We might as well keep still, Joe."

After that for quite awhile I didn't see much of Brand. I was kept busy testing metals. I guess Brand was pretty busy too. I know now that he sent a lot of wild-sounding wires and phone calls, struggling to get permission to communicate outside of our secret area.

A couple of times I glimpsed him in the halls of our underground lab with you-know-who—Rhoda Huzarski. Remembering young Copeland I wondered if it ever occurred to Brand that she was supposed to be a Polish American, born in Iowa, that her blond prettiness and her high cheekbones might still make all this a lie.

She could be another kind of Slav, not American at all. Yeah—strange how important nationalities appeared now—when the ideal said that all peoples should be alike. As for Brand, what was there to say about him, except that maybe he was an idealist and a fanatic and a believer with a blind spot in his brain too? But that's common. Men in love are like that—blind.

For two weeks I didn't get back into Nils Narvaard's quarters. I was busy. I was a little disgusted with him. And things happened. Not the final thing—but things. International diplomatic wrangling went on.

High over our big cities space-ships appeared out of reach of our loftiest defenses. They did not attack. It was just sabre-rattling, the cat playing with the mouse, the old war of nerves, the grim promise. A matter of hours, maybe—

Within our area there were rumors that another snooper was going to be grabbed soon—that identity had long been known.

And the President of the United States spoke over the newscast. "The disaster that it seems must come can no longer be given the outmoded name of war," he said quietly. "It has gone beyond that. We have been too wise ever to want it.

"But let our would-be attackers know that we have not needed to brag or to flaunt our weapons. We have them. So let the leaders of this other nation think carefully before they are rash. We have our space-fleet too. And for any harm we receive we can give fivefold in return."

It was obvious brave bluff, a last-ditch trick, something that could be true in another fortnight—that might as well have been a thousand years hence. Oh, sure, the fleet was almost ready—even the crews had long been in training, working carefully inside wooden mockups of ships—with real instruments, engines and weapons. But what good could it ever do?

Even out in the sunlight, where the sky was blue and unflawed by the presence of any enemy ships from rim to

rim, you could feel your muscles and your skin tighten as if to receive a blow. Any time, now—any moment.

BUT other incidents were still to happen. One early morning, in the same corridor where Nils Narvaard's and my quarters were, a young guard approached me and whispered, "You're fast enough, Mr. Palmetier. Do me a favor? A man in a uniform like mine may pass here at any moment. He has been a guard here for a long time too, in fact.

"He'll probably be hurrying a little, and maybe carrying a camera—a guy about thirty with a flattish nose. You won't know him by name but that doesn't matter. He mustn't see me. I'll be waiting to cover you and to jump him, there in the broom-closet, as soon as you slow him up. Okay?"

I only nodded—and then hung around, absentmindedly looking at the bulletin board. In less than a minute the bird showed up and I nailed him—fair. The young guard helped. It was a swift clean job. But there was a bitter payoff.

While we were still all sprawled on the floor a girl appeared—Rhoda Huzarski. She was deliberate but quick in what she did. A hammer swung in her hand. I heard the dull chunk of it as it bit into the young guard's skull.

But it really didn't stop moving. I saw it swinging toward me—hard. But what could I do? Rhoda Huzarski's Slavic face was grim and cool. I blacked out without feeling any pain.

What I awoke to was the blabbing of nurses in the infirmary. Little Miss Huzarski, of course, was in the jug. So was Ted Brand—on suspicion—because he had been so friendly to her. The other guy—the fake guard who was a snooper—got away. He'd had all his papers—needed for departure—ready beforehand. He hadn't tried to smuggle the contraband camera out—just the films. Enough . . .

Yeah—I could guess what was going on, now. Somehow, maybe by secret plane-pickup, he was hurrying back to his homeland to deliver the final word

to his bosses—the word that was the result of months of prying by young Copeland, the Huzarski creature and himself. That our nation was almost hopelessly weak. I realized that all the records of the development and progress of armaments must be here at our lab and workshop. *They* would know now, for sure, that it was safe to strike. . . .

Yes—let the cold sweat run down your back and into your shoes. It was really all over now except the fact itself. The final curtain, with the bums and their concentration camps on top, winning out. I felt sick of myself and of everybody. Everybody felt sick of everybody else.

The days crawled by. There wasn't any saving medicine for the nerves except backbreaking useless work to finish building a fleet that would never fly. Why should I try to see Ted Brand or that fool, Nils Narvaard? Why trust foolish blundering people with even a gesture of friendship?

Sure—those days crawled by—maybe in more ways than one. I began to wish that *they*, on the other side of the North Pole, would strike and get it over with.

Then I began to see why they were slow about it. Time was on their side now. This nerve-cracking suspense was part of psychological warfare, meant to soften our souls to jelly.

Two weeks passed like that. The crews were coming in to man the now all-but-finished space-ships. But did it matter? Over there, beyond the Pole, they had probably arranged to clock our progress perfectly.

And what could be more perfect a victory for them or more disheartening for us than to knock our new fleet out, ship by ship, as the great doors in the roofs of the underground assembling rooms opened and the craft emerged one by one from below?

I didn't have much purpose any more. I just blundered around like in a dream. I guess that that was how I blundered to Nils Narvaard's door and knocked. There was no real reason for it except maybe a vague wish for companionship.

I was admitted. There were six guards inside—and Nils. And Ted Brand and the Huzarski woman. I suppose it was appropriate for those two to be there at that time—now that I think about it. Everybody looked grim except that Brand gave me an apologetic smile that looked self-conscious, not like him at all. "Hi, Joe," he said. I figured he ought to be ashamed to speak to me. But who am I to be hard-hearted.

"Hi," I answered.

MY attention centered a moment later on the sealed glass case in the corner—air-conditioned inside to match the climate of Venus. Its interior was a tangle of swift-growing vegetation. Pallid—snaky—some of it with delicate fronds.

Here was plant-life more weird than the stuff that had graced the Earth during the Carboniferous Period, two hundred and fifty million years ago. But it was from another world—from Venus.

Was it hard to guess how this had happened when on Earth too all normal soil contains living bacteria, spores, seeds? Even the big insect-like creature that crept feebly on a leaf must have hatched from a tiny egg in that lump of blue mud.

It was the rather dramatic end of a fine useless academic experiment. Yes, I was grudgingly impressed even now. But could anybody blame me for turning my awe around and making it sarcastic?

I spoke directly to Brand. "Coming into this room, Brand," I said, "and seeing what's in this case, a stranger would almost think that it was *our* ships that had ranged to Venus, not *theirs*. You'd almost think that *our* fleet had brought this plantlife back from across space. Not that it hasn't even flown yet and will be snuffed out at any moment now."

Brand smiled again, faintly. "Sure, Joe," he said, sounding almost boyish for once. "That was the impression their snooper got too—the one we allowed, convincingly, to make his escape with a photograph of what's in that case. I guess his bosses got the same idea.

(Concluded on page 154)

BLUFF PLAY

(Concluded from page 119)

"What else could they think—without their young Copeland around to tip them off? How could they ever guess that an imaginary fleet sprouted out of a chunk of blue Venusian soil, brought back to Earth on a tire of one of their own spacecraft?"

A strange dawning glow began to come over me—a thing wonderful to feel. *They* hadn't attacked us because *their* fear of our terrible reprisals had been restored. Somewhere underneath an involved net of bluff and secrecy, as yet beyond the deepest penetration of their agents, *they* had been forced to conclude that we *must* have a fleet—just as our President had said. Probably now they'd never dare to attack.

"Was the President really in on this wild deal?" I blurted.

"He sure was," Brand answered, grinning. "But I had some preliminary trouble contacting him by phone and flying East to see him secretly."

"Then it was all your idea," I growled. "Not entirely, Joe," he answered. "Rhoda, here, did her share." They exchanged glances. You know what kind. Yeah—fond.

I guess I was still stupid. It was too much for me to figure out all at once.

"But she hit me with a hammer," I snapped. "She knocked me and a guard cold!"

"I had to, Joe," she replied for herself. "To let the snooper escape you and take that photograph of his home. And to make his getaway seem more convincing to him—thinking that he had sympathizers here. I'm sorry, Joe—but look what I had to do for the sake of verisimilitude. Sit in the klink for fourteen days!" She chuckled.

I laughed aloud in sheer pleasure. It was good to feel safe and strong again—and the friend of some clever folks. It was good to think about a wedding. It was good, even, to think that people are unpredictable. It was good to see old Nils Narvaard's gentle smirk.

I didn't need the rumors that started an hour later—that on the other side of the Pole a nation long burdened with the burden of armament and cheated of a promise had begun a revolt.

The best part was seeing our ships roar up into the blue on their first test-run. Some of them would be free for Nils Narvaard's kind of interests now. They'd be going out to the Moon and Mars and Venus—out to high romance.

Probably I'd be able to go along.