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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 18, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

November, 1948

A Complete Novel



Against the Fall of Night

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "Against the Fall of Night"

STARTLING STORIES. Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 4800 Diversay Ave., Chicago 39, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 22, 1946, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In correspondence with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

HUMPTY DUMPTY had

When Kenneth Wayne, Ruth Stevens and Dr. Bryce are thrust into Mother Goose land by the strange Orban boy, they discover that it's no place for kiddies!

KENNETH Wayne was dressing for dinner when he heard the tapping. It was loud, insistent and seemed to be saying: "No use pretending you're not at home, old man! I can hear you moving around in there!"

Wayne groaned. He had no desire to discuss vasomotor psychology with young Graham or polytonal music with the long-haired Dr. Reydel. He was dining out with a charming girl, and he wanted to stay alive, vital, every nerve alert to her beauty.

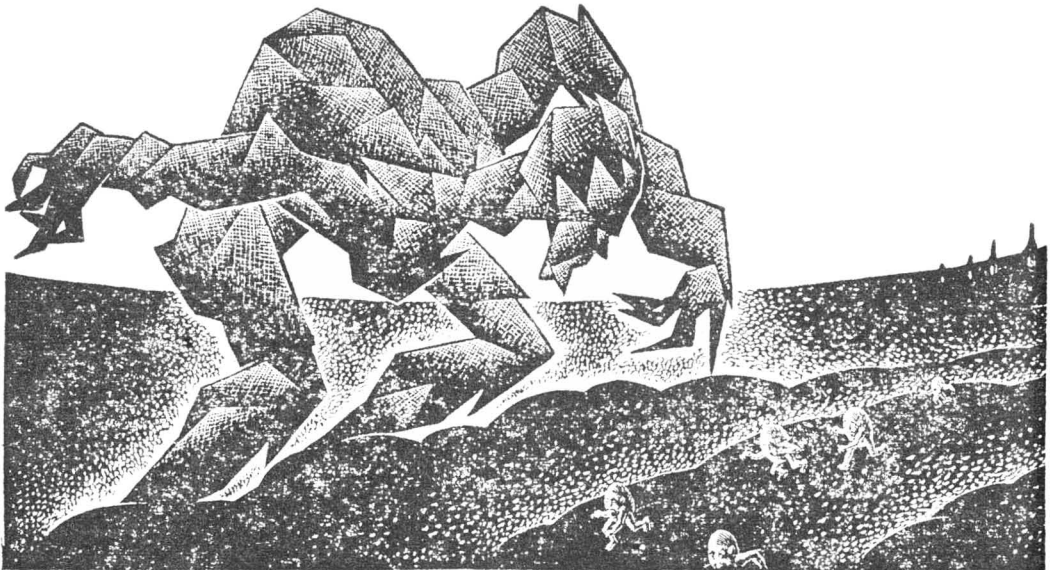
Wayne was one of those imaginative young men who attract ideas to themselves in the fashion of a baby specialist. Instead of babies, people brought him their budding ideas to admire.

Wayne told himself that he was a fool to be annoyed. The mere sight of his tux draped

across a chair should discourage a talkative visitor. With an angry shrug he turned and crossed the room in three long strides. He threw the door wide.

The boy who stood in the doorway was a stranger to him. Boy? Well, it was hard not to think of the youngster as a man, for he was heavily bearded and he carried himself with an air of maturity. But Wayne could see that he wasn't more than eighteen or nineteen years old. His clear blue eyes held the tortured look of the very young, and there was a newness about him which contrasted sharply with Wayne's aspect of world weariness and cynicism. Wayne was only twenty-seven, but his age rested heavily upon him. His eyes were shadowed and the planes of his face craggy with thought.

"I'm Phillip Orban," the boy said. "I ran



a great fall

by

FRANK

BELKNAP LONG

away. They were torturing me with their questions."

The Orban boy! Wayne shut his eyes while the universe reeled. Young Orban was carrying an enormous, glowing loop of hollow metal. Before Wayne could cry out in protest the trembling lad stepped into the room and set the loop down on the floor.

"Shut the door," Orban pleaded. "Lock it tight! If they try to get in, tell them I'm not in this room."

Mechanically Wayne locked the door. When he turned, his lips were white.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded. "Do you realize I never saw you before in my life?"

The Orban boy nodded.



"I hid in a cellar under an empty house. But I was cold and hungry. I had to come out. A policeman saw me and I had to run for it. I never saw you before, but I like you. You will tell them I'm not here?"

WAYNE made a despairing gesture. "All right!" he cried. "Did I say I wouldn't? Just take it easy now. Relax!" It seemed to Wayne that standing before him was an impossible little gnome with a conical cap on his head, made visible by a dimensional vortex that was about to dissolve in a blaze of light.

That was absurd, of course! The Orban boy wasn't one of those mutant supermen 'freaks science fiction writers were always speculating about. He was a quite normal youngster who had been trapped from infancy in the mind-numbing blackness of space.

But what would be the penalty for sheltering a boy with a price on his head, a boy about whom five million words had been written? Young Orban had committed a serious crime. An ugly crime! To get rid of a man by making him disappear was not a whit less ugly than cold-blooded murder!

Wayne stared down at the shining loop of metal, his eyes wide and incredulous. "Is that the machine you built?" he demanded, and was astonished that he could speak at all.

"It's the door I built!" Orban said. "I didn't push Dr. Bryce into it. He stumbled and fell."

"But how did you build it?" Wayne prodded. "You never saw a tool."

"There were tools in my father's workshop," Orban said, quickly. "I knew how to build it. Dr. Bryce isn't dead. He's alive in the blue world."

Structurally the machine was an incredibly simple thing. It consisted of a single loop of hollow metal, twisted into a perfect arch like a gigantic croquet wicket. It was easy to see that the loop was hollow, for it was riddled with holes and an eerie radiance was spilling out of it.

"You've got to help me hide it," Orban pleaded. "If I don't get Dr. Bryce out the blue, bowmen will kill him!"

Wayne turned and gripped the lad's shoulder. "You said you were hungry. Perhaps we can do something about that."

"I am hungry," the lad admitted. "But there's food in the blue world."

Wayne thought that over for a minute;

then found himself propelling his guest toward the kitchen.

He left him devouring a glass of milk. No, you didn't devour milk. But the Orban boy was dipping crackers in the milk and eating the crackers. It amounted to the same thing.

Wayne felt that he needed the support of cold print. Actual confirmation of the Orban story in black type. He found the clipping by turning out all the drawers of his desk and then looking under the blotter. It was crumpled and stained, as though someone had wept bitter tears over it. It read:

THE ORBAN STORY

By Ruth Stevens

An infant rocked from birth in a cradle two hundred feet long! A little boy lost in a high-test rocket-ship, seesawing through space! Around and around he whirled, obeying instructions from the age of eight, eating just enough to keep the spark of life from going out.

No disease germs bothered him out there in space! There was no measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, just instructions in his head—and a long forgetting!

What did he think about all those years? What did he dream about?

Phillip Orban was born on that ship. His father invented the Orban drive and built the first rocket ship with an outer hull of sufficient hardness to withstand the stresses of a billion-mile journey through space.

But the power drive gave out and the ship never completed its journey. It went into a circular orbit in the Asteroid Belt and for seventeen years it drifted through space.

The boy's mother died when he was three, mercifully from a heart attack. The boy's father kept a log. We know that he climbed out on the naked hull when the boy was eight, to tighten a loosened gravity plate. A minor repair job—but he put off coming back. Put it off forever!

The boy remembered to remember. Food concentrates should be taken sparingly, twice a day. "You're seven now, son! No—eight tomorrow! Old enough to look after yourself!"

He hadn't one bitter-sweet, earthy memory to cling to. He'd never played pranks on other kids, or dressed up on Hallow'een, or gone fishing in a creek. He'd never watched the dawn redden a haystack or the moon silver the sea.

There were books on that ship. An odd assortment of books. The Old English Nursery Rhymes, Mother Goose, the Brothers Grimm, Lewis Carroll. And "How to Build It" books. How to build it if you were Michael Faraday, or Edison or Steinmetz or Nullson. But Phillip Orban read every book on that ship. The psychologists who are in charge of him now won't tell us why they're so excited about his marginal notes.

They found the ship and Orban at last, sank magnetic grappling irons in the hull and towed it back to earth. They returned Orban to his home in North Dakota, the family home, within a dozen

yards of his father's dust-choked workshop.

A boy of seventeen, watched night and day by three trained psychologists. A robust boy, physically almost a man, would have to be terribly warped not to resent that! They're studying him like a guinea pig in a cage. And here's one unladylike journalist who raises her voice in protest! If the Orban boy—

WAYNE shuddered, folded the clipping and crammed it in his vest pocket.

Kenneth Wayne began remembering things: About a machine in an open field, spilling an eerie radiance! And Dr. Bryce struggling with the Orban boy in front of the machine, and plunging backwards into the light. What shocking, incredible event had taken the famed psychologist from the sunlight before he could regain his balance?

Wayne also remembered that the Orban boy had fled, taking the machine with him! A hue and cry had been raised in the nation's press. A shrill screaming, journalism raised to high C. Had Orban deliberately pushed Dr. Bryce into the machine?

If an individual were the sum total of his experiences from birth would not the whole outlook of Orban depart from the human norm! It was a terrifying thought! Was Orban a malicious monster with an inhuman capacity for deceit? Was he—

Twang!

Wayne wheeled with a gasp of horror.

A barbed and deadly looking arrow was quivering in the wall directly opposite the machine! It was an arrow two feet in length—fitted with metallic feathers to give it steadiness of flight, and tipped with a point of jeweled brightness, visible through the translucent plastic of the wall.

Stark terror twisted Wayne's features into a glazed, unnatural mask. That the arrow had come out of the machine he could not doubt. It was directly in line with the "croquet wicket" and there was a spattering of blood on the still quivering shaft.

There was blood on the wall too! Yet Wayne was quite sure that the arrow hadn't grazed his flesh. Automatically he raised one hand to his cheek, and then stared at his palm. His hand gleamed whitely in the cold light. That dripping redness had come out of the machine along with the arrow! The arrow had missed him completely.

Whom had it wounded?

Wayne was swaying in sick horror when a knock sounded on the door and a familiar

voice said:

"Ken! For heaven's sake, why did you lock the door?"

Wayne turned, unlocked the door and threw it open, his face white.

The girl who came into the room was vividly alive. Coppery hair she had, cut in a bang, and her lips were slightly parted, her cheeks flushed. She was plainly out of breath and a little angry to be barred by a locked door, after climbing two flights of stairs.

Ruth Stevens did not look like a newspaperwoman. She was striking in a challenging, vibrant way—the kind of girl who could change a man's center of gravity with a look, a quick smile.

She wasn't smiling now. Her eyes darted to the machine and then to the arrow.

"The Orban boy," Wayne said. His voice was thick and it trembled a little, as though he were just about to lose control of it. "He's here. You wrote an article about him, remember? Would you like to meet him?"

Ruth swayed.

Wayne thought perhaps she was going to faint. It was a crazy thing to do, but he leaped toward her without realizing that he was standing a yard from the machine.

As he caught her in his arms something caught him. It was like a fierce rush of wind. It was cyclonic. It whirled him around and started pulling him backwards, straight toward the machine. He held on to the girl without realizing that he was pulling her inexorably in the same direction.

Ruth screamed.

The room seemed to pinwheel. It was much easier for Wayne not to let go of the girl. He did not realize that she was in deadly danger. He thought only of protecting her. There was a howling in the room as light blazed out from the croquet wicket to envelop them.

Far off as though in an inverted lens Wayne saw the Orban boy rushing out of the kitchen, his bearded face twitching in terror. Then everything in the room seemed to whip away into emptiness. . . .

STABILITY came back in slow stages. Wayne was aware first of warmth in his arms, a cry quavering from human lips. Then of a firm surface taking shape beneath him.

He was sitting on the ground holding Ruth in his arms. She was struggling to free herself, one hand pushing against his chin, her

face a blob of whiteness.

He was sitting with his back against a firm stone surface, staring down at her. He could see her face clearly now, distinct and white in a blue glimmering light.

"Ken, where are we?" she choked.

It wasn't an easy question to answer. It was a world of rugged contours. They seemed to be resting on a plain that sloped away into glowing blue mist. There was a curious, dynamic quality about the landscape. Its very emptiness thrust itself on Wayne like chords of music struck wildly on a piano.

Certainly he was resting with his back against a wall of some sort, rising sheer behind him. When he turned his head he could see the wall clearly.

With a little groan Ruth disentangled herself and slipped to the ground at his side, making it easier for him to take note of his surroundings.

There wasn't very much to take note of. Just the wall and the bleak, desolate landscape. A few pebbles were scattered about, and—something small and globular and blubbery that was stirring in a cuplike hollow directly in front of Wayne.

Ruth cried out suddenly and plucked at his sleeve.

"Ken, look! That little egg thing is alive!"

An egg thing! Of course. It did resemble an egg. It was veined and oddly cracked and something wet was spilling out of it. Something projected from it too—the long shaft of an arrow.

Wayne's neck hairs rose. He got up and staggered toward the "egg" and as he did so the whole surface of the wall swept into view. It bore an unmistakable resemblance to the Great Wall of China reduced to fairy tale dimensions.

Rugged and battlemented it was, but small—not more than thirty feet in height at the tower sections and much lower in between. It curved in and out over the plain, under a sky of fiery blueness, to lose itself at the horizon's rim with a kind of downsweeping rush that conveyed an illusion of motion.

The egg-shaped object had stopped moving when Wayne dropped to one knee beside it. The arrow had pierced it cruelly and Wayne could not doubt that it had ceased to feel pain. The little white tadpole arms which sprouted from it were limp now, completely inert in the blue glare. Equally limp was its puckered, little old man face, the mouth

hanging open, the heavily lidded eyes drained of all expression.

Wayne did not attempt to withdraw the arrow. Obviously the egg thing was dead. He was glad that it could not return his stare. He arose and turned to Ruth.

"It was alive!" he said. "A ghastly little animal with an almost human face, shaped like an egg. I can't believe—"

Twang!

As the arrow sped past Wayne he leaped back with a startled cry. Something huge and blue had come out from behind a bend in the wall to aim a bow at him. He caught a brief terrifying glimpse of it as it darted back into shadows.

Wayne turned abruptly, and gripped his companion's arm.

"We've got to get away from here as quickly as possible!" he whispered, with hoarse urgency.

"Away?" Ruth stared. "How can we? The machine has disappeared."

"We must get away from this wall. There's something deadly here that shoots to kill!"

"Human beings?"

"Man-shaped beings. Angular, flattish. They don't seem to have any heads."

Ruth swayed toward him. "Are you sure they're shooting at us?"

"We can't wait to find out. We've got to run for it."

"Where do you think we are?" Ruth breathed in sick horror. "Another dimension?"

Before Wayne could reply another arrow sped past them with a vibrant twang.

They broke into a run, keeping close to the wall, their shadows preceding them in the blue glimmering. Panting, terrified, they came to a brief halt beneath a darkly looming tower that seemed to bulge out over the plain.

At right angles to the wall, a hundred feet from where they were standing, a vast circular mound bisected the plain, its edges misty in the strange light.

"Come on!" Wayne urged. "That mound may be hollow. We've got to chance it."

They were in motion again, racing toward the mound, when they heard a fluttering sound. It seemed to beat out from the mound in tangible waves, like the stirring of migratory birds gathering in great numbers in a tree and shaking the air with their flutterings.

Then up from the mound twenty or thirty winged black shapes soared, spiraling up into

the sky in a wild, soaring ecstasy of flight. Almost instantly the arrows started flying.

One by one the birds dropped like dead sticks to the ground, amidst a flurry of deadly arrows. With hoarse cawings they dropped, their feathers flying, their long, lizardlike bodies pierced by the cruel shafts.

Back into the mound they dropped, straight down with their flutterings stilled.

For a moment there was complete stillness on the plain, unearthly, terrifying.

Then Wayne said in a choked voice: "Does all this remind you of something? In a vague, distorted, nightmarish way, I mean? Does it?"

RUTH stared across the plain before replying. It seemed to her that she saw shadows, angular, menacing, moving in the distance, on the rim of her vision. It seemed to her that she saw the shadows of bows, blue on the blue plain. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall!" she said. "Six and twenty blackbirds—baked into a pie!"

"You thought of that too, did you?" Wayne's lips were white. "We didn't see Humpty Dumpty fall, but it was a great fall he had. It smashed him, and not all the King's horses and all the King's men—"

"Stop it!" Ruth's voice was almost a scream. "There are no horses, no King's men here. That egg was a hideous little animal with the face of an ape. And blackbirds don't have lizardlike bodies."

A procession came around the mound with a far off beating of tiny drums. It could not be said that they were King's horses or King's men. They were something not quite rational.

It was a winding procession of egg-things, tottering on little stumpy legs, and prancing green shapes that bore a startling resemblance to walking stick insects. The eggs were linked together by dangling wisps of filmy stuff. When they came closer the filmy stuff resolved itself into a net, glimmering, metallic.

They're going to catch Humpty Dumpty when he falls, Wayne thought wildly.

Suddenly the long wall stirred with activity. A dozen little egg-shapes were running along it, dodging and weaving, their tadpole forelimbs quivering.

A shadow, dark, ominous, moved on the plain.

Twang!

The running eggs splintered as they fell. A

wailing went up from the advancing procession, long-drawn, shrill. The "King's horses" swerved in closer to the wall, the net floating free.

Too late! The ground was littered with writhing and dying egg shapes, shattered, spilling their yolks. One was not writhing. It was completely bashed in, a flattish horror swimming in its yolk.

Suddenly Ruth screamed. "Look over there! It's one of those angular, headless things. It's aiming at us!"

The blue Bowman had stepped out from the shadow of the wall, and was sharply limned in the downslanting radiance. His arms and legs were metallic zigzags, his body an angular shaft. He was slim-waisted, broad-shouldered, a Zeus lightning bolt aping the human form, a cut-out shape like a figure on a lampshade, standing poised and vibrant as he raised his bow.

Wayne swung about, took hold of Ruth and dragged her to the ground. The arrow twanged horribly as it left the bow. They could feel death brushing them as the ghastly, headless figure sprang back into shadows.

Then they were in motion again. They headed straight for the mound, past the procession of toddling ovoids and prancing walking sticks, their faces livid with terror. Another arrow sped past them, raising a flurry of dust as it thudded into the base of the mound.

Then they were climbing up over a tumbled rampart of thrown-up earth, and down into a hollow rimmed with blue shadows that seemed to leap toward them out of the gloom.

"That took courage," a quiet voice said.

The man was sitting on a boulder with a Seral hand blaster cradled in his arms. He was a big man, with massive shoulders and a gaunt-featured face. He had torn off his shirt and made a bandage of it. He sat blinking against the light, his right arm wrapped in the bandage, his eyes deep pools of torment. Empty cartridges lay scattered about at his feet.

He smiled wryly and started to rise—then thought better of it.

"I'm James Bryce!" he said. "How did you get here?"

He gestured toward another boulder as he spoke. "Sit down, man. You're safe for the moment. I've been holding them off with carefully timed blasts."

Wayne helped Ruth to the boulder, and stood for an instant with his back to Bryce,

breathing heavily as he stared across the plain. Then he swung about. Words poured from him, a torrent of words.

When he had finished Bryce nodded grimly. "I see! Pretty gruesome from start to finish. We're trapped in a world we never dreamed existed, and—we've the Orban boy to thank for it!"

Ruth spoke then. "Mother Goose," she whispered. "The Old English Nursery Rhymes. A world that exists only in the Orban boy's mind. Somehow he's made it real, three-dimensional."

Bryce smiled oddly. "You've been thinking that? It's not true, but it does you credit. It means you have at least a toe-hold on reality. You know that reality can't be reshaped to any kind of preconceived mental pattern."

Bryce forced a crooked smile. "What would another dimension be like, logically? Peopled with men and women like ourselves? A mathematician's pipe dream?"

"Rubbish, don't you think? Why should intelligence in another world function on a plane that's comprehensible to us? Take the dreams that have found their way into the literature of childhood. What is the literature of childhood? Isn't it, in its purest essence, a world of nightmare fantasy and diffuse cruelty, without rhyme or reason?"

He looked up quickly. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. What made him fall? Poor old Humpty Dumpty! Weep for him—rush to the wall and watch the poor, pitiful attempts that will be made to put him together again.

"Nothing cruel about poor old Humpty Dumpty. He'd tear your heart out. A lovely goofy old egg. Where's the cruelty then? I'll tell you. The picture that devilish fantasy conjures up is the essence of cruelty. A smashed, quivering, alive egg, in torment, scattered, spilling its yolk."

"But—"

Bryce waived a muscular hand. "The world of a child's reading is like a pack of Tarot cards. You know the old stories of children bewitched and tormented by cruel goblins. There's a grotesquerie in it like nothing on earth.

"A child's mind is wide open to it—receptive. A child really sees into that world, in its dreams. Do you know why? That world really exists—as a sober scientific reality. When we grow up we forget to remember."

Bryce's lips tightened. "A child's mental receptivity isn't blunted by the world around it. It grows up in two worlds at once, until it adjusts to our reality. But the author of the Mother Goose rhymes remembered his dreams of childhood more vividly than most men."

Bryce made a deprecatory gesture. "The real Humpty Dumpties are quite a bit different. Living ovoids who are always the victims of a cruel sport, destined to be shot down, and rescued too late by their little stricken fellows.

"There's a doom on all of them. What a weird, wild shooting gallery world this is! Sport, archery. The headless archers. They're cocks of the walk here, I think, swaggering, slim-waisted bullies. But there's something automatic about them. I don't think they're prime movers."

"I'm glad to know that," Wayne grunted grimly.

"The prime movers who created this world may be a kind of puppet master without visible substance. What impressed me from the instant I arrived here was the automatic, clockwork aspect of everything. It's intangible, hard to pin down. But a sensitive man can hardly fail to be aware of it."

"I know what you mean," Ruth whispered.

"Everything's cyclic. Those blackbirds ascend like clay pigeons released in swarms at intervals, and when the eggs fall others take their places on the wall. We haven't penetrated very deeply into this world. Old Mother Hubbard may be here too, with a ravenous dog that isn't a dog, really.

"It may be a dog that keeps going to an empty hole in a cliff wall. He rushes in, barking furiously, and comes out without a bone. The cupboard is bare. Then an arrow pierces him, and he's a dead dog for awhile. Jack and Jill go up a hill, a target for the headless archers.

"They're Jack and Jill in the Nursery Rhymes. Here they may be angular, metallic figures, but horribly vulnerable. The pail of water is shattered, spills and runs like quicksilver into the ground. Jack and Jill pick themselves up, pluck out the arrows and go staggering back up the hill to get some more water, their faces writhing in agony. Or maybe there are Jack and Jill replacements and the first pair die!"

Bryce's gaunt face was deathly pale now in the chill blue light. "It's a hellish clock set

in motion and staying in motion." he added. "The Orban boy knew what this world was like," Wayne said, slowly. "He called the archers 'blue bowmen.' How does he fit into it?"

"Remember his strange destiny!" Bryce answered. "That's the crux of it, man! He—"

Bryce stiffened in sudden wariness, tightening his grip on the blaster. "Here they come," he warned. "Keep your shoulders down. They converge, shooting with ugly defiberation. But blasting scatters them."

As he spoke three blue archers came into view between the wall and the mound. They emerged from shadows to stand motionless for an instant on the plain.

Sweat ran cold on Wayne's back. The up-raised bows were trained on the mound, taut and glittering arcs of metal bisected by gleaming arrow-heads. The shanks of the arrows were drawn back by hands like mailed fists, the bowstrings beaded with light.

THE archers released their bows simultaneously. There was a single sound, like the crack of a whiplash in utter stillness.

It was followed by dull roar. Smoke swirled from the mound as Bryce blasted, blotting the archers from view. When it cleared two of the original archers were lying prostrate, but their numbers had been augmented fivefold.

Bryce was cursing softly and holding on to his bandaged arm. "Caught an arrow when I came through," he muttered. "That concussion opened up the wound. Why did it have to be my right arm?"

"Here, let me take that!" Wayne said, wrenching at the blaster.

"I can handle it!" Bryce grunted, in angry protest. But Wayne had the blaster now and was aiming it at the headless figures, his lips a bowstring line.

Twang!

One arrow for an instant that seemed a lifetime, cleaving the air. Then came a dozen arrows, a hundred, in a swirl of brightness above Ruth's terror-wrenched face.

Wayne blasted not once, but four times in hot anger, his throat a throbbing ache. The energy flare blotted out the plain. A blinding pulse beat seemed to throb in the heart of the blast, amidst an expanding whiteness.

When the smoke thinned out the plain was littered with recumbent archers. A few were shattered. It was incredible nerve-

torturing to watch metallic zigzags twitch and, pick themselves up, and whip away into shadows like seared leaves.

"That was reckless!" Bryce grunted. "A single blast would have stopped them just as effectively. They can't stand the shattering repercussions!"

Wayne sucked in his breath. For an instant he remained in a crouching attitude, his eyes bright with horror. Then he stood up. "I asked you how the Orban boy fitted into this," he said, grimly. "Let's have the rest of it."

Bryce shrugged. "Consider, man. For generations kids have been brought up on a diet of fantasy and reality. One offsets the other. Children don't know how real the fantasy world is, and the reality around them quickly blots out Humpty Dumpty."

"Well?"

"The Orban boy knew how to read and the fantasy world took on an unnatural brilliance for him. It became his own intimate, private world. He had just the stars of space to look at and that inward vision. Don't you see? He had to get to it. He had to break through the dimensional barrier. It became an obsession with him."

"But how?"

"There were technical, scientific books on that ship. The Orban boy knew how to read and he wasn't a little animal. He was whip-lash smart. Even at eight, he had a working grasp of applied physics. He'd talked a lot with his father, knew how to tinker."

Bryce kicked at a loose stone with his toe. "Perfectly normal boys of eight have had I.Q.'s of one-fifty. Mozart was an accomplished musician at six—a great one at nine. Boy chess wizards crop up in every generation and chess is a three-way game. You've got to peg your naked intelligence into a background of semantics and applied psychology. But some kids get monumental backgrounds just by keeping their eyes and ears open.

"What do we know about human intelligence anyway? Illiterate rustics have mastered atomic theory, using hit and miss techniques. The Orban boy was precocious, granted. But we know even less about precocity than we do about adult intelligence."

Bryce looked at Wayne with a torturing surmise. "That kid slipped away from us for a couple of hours, got to his father's workshop. Sheer carelessness on our part. When I saw him with the machine, I rushed out of

the house, and tried to reason with him. We got into an argument and I started tugging at him.

"Luckily I'd strapped a Seral blaster to my hip, just in case. But it was the blaster that got in my way. It weighed me down—in the wrong direction. When I tripped I didn't have a chance of regaining my balance."

Bryce shrugged grimly. "I've been holding the archers at bay ever since. Funny thing about that machine. It's light—weighs about eight pounds. Orban can carry it, but if you stand directly in front of it your goose is cooked. After I came through I didn't see the machine. It must be invisible from this side!"

Wayne nodded. "We didn't see it either!"

"It's still around, I imagine. When I came through an archer saw me. I caught an arrow in my shoulder. I ripped it out and hurled it from me, and it vanished in a flash of light. You say you saw an arrow come out. Probably it was the same arrow."

Wayne started to speak, but Bryce stopped him. "Listen!" he warned.

From the purple-hollowed middle of the mound there arose a strange, mournful, dirgelike sound. Then up from the mound came a dozen "blackbirds," their lizardlike bodies quivering as they went spiraling into the sky.

No arrows pursued them. There was utter silence on the plain.

"Looks as though we've thrown a scare into the archers for the time being," Wayne muttered, but there was no exaltation in his voice.

Bryce shook his head. "They'll attack again," he said, with grim conviction. "Those birds were simply lucky this time. I wonder if they realize how lucky—or care!"

Ruth whispered: "Six and twenty blackbirds, baked into a pie! When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing! My, what a dainty dish, to set before a king!"

Her voice rose sharply. "Ken, who do you suppose the king was? We haven't seen him! Is there a king?"

"A symbolic embellishment," Bryce snapped. "I'll say it again: Mother Goose is simply this world seen through the distorted mirror of a child's imagination. The author of Mother Goose transformed what he saw here into a medieval fairy tale. We'll never see the king because we have nothing in common with him."

The sky seemed to darken as Bryce spoke. Wayne looked up in chill apprehension, a shudder coursing up his spine.

"Oh, no!" Ruth choked.

But there *was* something high in the sky, swinging slowly down toward the mound. Something globular that wore what looked like a shining crown and shook like a mound of jelly.

Nearer it came and nearer, swinging lower with each vibration of its circular bulk.

It blazed suddenly into sharp visibility. It wasn't a king, and it wore no crown. It was a floating spheroid, veined and translucent, filled with an intricate assortment of moving parts that gave off a continuous whirring sound.

A madness seemed to possess Wayne as he stared up at it. He cupped his hands and shouted: "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" came back in a staccato echo.

"Who are you?"

"Who are you!"

"If it says: 'Who am I? I'll die!' Ruth screamed hysterically.

"Who am I?" the spheroid flung out. "I'll die!"

"Wait!" Bryce gripped Ruth's arm, his lips shaking. "It's a tropism—nothing more. A kind of echo response. You soft-pedaled the 'If it says'—then screamed the rest. It only picked up the last part. It didn't change the question. It simply repeats what it picks up!"

"No—it doesn't," Ruth groaned. "Now it's going to say: 'You'll die!'"

"Not unless you scream it first," Bryce said, with a brittle laugh. "Look, I'll show you."

He cupped his hands. "You're going to win through," he shouted.

"You're going to win through!" came back.

"It's a promise," Bryce shouted.

"It's a promise!"

"You see?" Bryce turned with a relieved grimace. "You seldom get a better answer than that. It's a regular politician's answer. What you want to hear comes back in a vibrant echo that means absolutely nothing."

The gear-and-wheel-filled spheroid was swinging back now, straight up into the sky. It dwindled rapidly, vibrating as it swept from view.

"Well, that was your 'king,'" Bryce said. "I've a hunch it's simply a weird regulator."

mechanism that sweeps down at long intervals. A kind of cog in the clockup setup—a stabilizing flying pendulum that's needed here to keep things moving on an even keel."

Ruth sprang back with a gasp of horror. Three tiny metallic shapes had scurried swiftly over the edge of the hollow and were descending into the blackbird pit with the blindly groping movements of terrified moles.

Moles? Why not mice? Blind mice?

WAYNE was the first to say it. "Three blind mice, see how they run—" He stopped, appalled.

"Finish it," Bryce muttered. "They all ran up to the farmer's wife, who cut off their tails with a carving knife."

He gestured eloquently. "I told you cruelty was of the essence here. It's a savage, senseless, last turn-of-the-screw kind of cruelty. Why mutilate blind mice. Isn't that utterly ghastly? And yet it's in Mother Goose.

"There's hardly a Mother Goose rhyme that doesn't shadow forth this world. The hunters and—the hunted. Creatures pursued by blind cruelty, shot down in flight. Who killed Cock Robin?"

A grim puzzlement seemed to grip Bryce. "Cock Robin! That's the cruelest one of all. It's so devilish in its wicked, eerie malice that some editions of Mother Goose omit it entirely, as not for children!"

He frowned. "Just who was Cock Robin anyway? Why was everyone so horrified? Cock Robin with his bleeding breast, the taut and quivering arrow. Why was Cock Robin so different, almost a stranger to this world? Why did the cruelty pause to wonder? Why did everyone answer: 'Not I! Not I.'"

"Why did everyone single out Cock Robin as the one creature in this world who shouldn't have been killed at all?"

Bryce strode back and forth, glancing over the mound as if in chill apprehension.

"A curious thing! Not only the Mother Goose rhymes shadow forth this world. An ancient Chinese vase bears the inscription: 'See how the harsh black birds fly into the bronze sun, pursued by the arrows of darkness!'

"And Lewis Carroll! There are things in Alice in Wonderland that seem to shadow forth this world. Why was Alice so real to generations of children?"

He shrugged. "A few men remembered their childhood visions well, apparently. Too

well for comfort. The Looking Glass was simply a symbol. You step through. The Orban boy got at the scientific reality behind the symbol. He actually constructed a dimension-dissolving looking glass!"

Ruth stared at him. "Are you claiming that all children are dangerous little monsters?"

Bryce shook his head. "No. Only very special children. Children who were cut off from all normal activity, as Orban was. Their visions spur them on. But I think we've always known, subconsciously, that a child with too much knowledge would be dangerous. Why do people like to make up rhymes about the wickedness of children. Remember the Little Willie rhymes:

" 'Little Willie hung his sister
She was dead before we missed her!
Willie's always up to tricks!
Ain't he cute? He's only six.' "

From somewhere on the plain came an answering whisper, as though the cruel words had goaded the blue world to activity again. A low rustling swept across the plain, ominous, mind-chilling.

"Here they come!" Bryce whispered, reaching for the blaster.

Wayne moved quickly to forestall him. He had the weapon and was leveling it before the psychologist could glower in protest.

A shadow fell on the plain, grew larger. The blue archers were stepping out from the wall with a deadly deliberation, their reflections lengthening as they converged, their Zeus-taut bodies wrapped in a translucent glimmering.

Wayne held his fire until a dozen archers released their bows simultaneously. There was a pulsing at his temples as the trigger clicked. A swirl of whiteness followed the click, a silent whiteness for an instant as brief as a dropped heartbeat. Then a thunderous concussion shook the mound, hurling him backwards. . . .

An hour later Wayne sat with his back to the tumbled earth rampart, his face haggard with strain. A thin smoke was swirling over the mound, an acrid haze which obscured the slope directly below him and blotted out the crouching bulk of Bryce. But he could feel the despair which emanated from Bryce—a palpable force. Bryce spoke suddenly. "I'm glad we saved one blast!" he muttered. "We've got to decide how to use it!"

The words fell on a chill, deadly silence.

Then Ruth uttered a sobbing moan. Wayne knew with grim certainty that Bryce would not attempt to spare her. If he thought the blaster should be turned upon the hollow and held in steady hands, he would say so.

They sat silently together for an instant, not daring to voice what was in their minds.

Then Bryce spoke directly to Ruth. "By heaven, you're a pretty woman!"

A sudden, hot anger swept over Wayne like a flood of molten lava.

"If we had any chance at all," Bryce added, heavily, "Ken would have a rival!"

Wayne suddenly realized that Bryce had more delicacy than he had given him credit for. He had chosen an odd way to announce that there was no hope, but Wayne was glad that he had not phrased it brutally. His anger evaporated.

Twang!

The arrow sped in close, barely missing Wayne. The archers were in motion again. As they drew in toward the mound, their bows thrumming, the air grew thick with deadly arrows in flight.

There was a continuous, deadly twanging, a drumming in the air, a drumming in Wayne's skull—a reeling giddiness. Wayne did not hesitate or swing about to voice agonized doubt. The suddenness of the attack had settled the issue for him.

The last blast would not be guided by another man's caution. His decision was made, and nothing could alter it.

Wayne blasted with a quick intake of his breath.

The spurting radiation struck the plain with a mighty roar. Wayne felt again the shattering recoil, the shoulder-bruising impact of a heavy weapon leaping in his clasp.

For an instant fire and smoke danced on the plain, swirling over the base of the mound and blotting the archers from view.

Then the smoke thinned, and rolled back over a seared expanse of desolation the more awful because it wasn't quite empty. One archer was still advancing, swaying a little as it climbed the slope through the dissolving smoke, its bow upraised.

The archer was almost at the crest of the mound when Wayne sprang straight at it. With a sickening twang the arrow left the bow and thudded into the earth rampart at Wayne's back. Then Wayne was beating with the blaster against the archer's angular body, swinging with it again and again, pounding

with all his strength.

The plain rang with the harsh, strident clang of metal against metal, as though knights in a tourney were colliding headon in a suicidal contest of strength.

With a savageness that amazed him, Wayne fought the archer back down the slope. Eyes wild, lips quivering, he brought the sharp edge of his weapon against the horror's gleaming chest, and slashed downward at the low-slung metal quiver at its waist.

Strange how much courage a man had when his life was forfeit, strange the shining strength, like a shield around the heart, blazing out for all to see!

Arrows were spilling from the archer's quiver and its body was twisting strangely when something seemed to lift it up and hurl it backwards toward the wall. Wayne cried out hoarsely as the writhing horror receded from him, twisting and turning like a gale-lashed leaf. It vanished abruptly, in a blinding flash of light.

And as it vanished a running figure came into view on the plain.

"Orban!"

It was Ruth who shouted it, coming to her feet in wild disbelief. The Orban boy was running straight toward Wayne and waving his arms in urgent appeal.

WAYNE couldn't catch what the Orban boy was shouting. But he could see that the running lad was gesturing him back toward the mound.

In a daze of fevered uncertainty Wayne swung about and started climbing. He heard himself sobbing. His legs threatened to give out, but he managed to gain the crest and fling himself down in the hollow. He lay on his stomach, staring over the rampart, his lungs choked with dust.

Slowly he became aware that Ruth had thrown herself down beside him and was clinging to him in sobbing relief.

The Orban boy came over the crest with his breath coming in choking gasps. He flung himself down directly opposite Wayne, and raised himself on one elbow.

"Had to wait—until I was sure I could get you out," he breathed. "That man—" He gestured toward Bryce. "He's not so important, but you're my friend! Had to save you, Ken!"

Wayne stared, his mouth strangely dry.

"My idea was to hide the machine until I

was equipped right to come into this world, Ken." Orban went on feverishly. "I worked something out, but it wasn't good enough to protect me in here. That's why I asked you to help me hide the machine!"

"Just what did you work out?" Bryce asked. His face was ashen, but his voice was firm enough.

"Just met Ken last night," the Orban boy wheezed, his eyes shining. "But he's the only friend I ever had. He was going to hide me. That's more than you'd do, I bet."

"You're right about that," Bryce said, with a harsh laugh. "I asked you, What did you work out?"

For reply the Orban boy opened his hand. The object which rested on his palm was small, no larger than a jack-knife. It was shaped like a compass. Six tiny glowing knobs projected from it, but otherwise it was unbelievably makeshift in aspect, as though the Orban boy had walked into a toyshop, picked up a compass, and twisted two wires intricately around the floating needle. And now he was displaying his prize with a fierce pride, as though he'd done something remarkable.

"Worked hard at it, in Ken's kitchen," the Orban boy explained. "Took me six hours to get it right."

"You're sure it works now?"

"You bet I'm sure," Orban said, proudly. "The segments which feed that loop have been moved around, see? They pass right under the contact points. All I have to do is draw the second loop into position by the attraction of the needle."

As he spoke the Orban boy pressed one of the little knobs on the rim of the "compass." The "compass" lighted up.

"Now it's ready!" Orban said.

Bryce stared. "Ready for what?"

The Orban boy cupped his palm over the "compass."

"You'll see. Watch!"

Light from the "compass" streamed out between the Orban boy's fingers and haloed his entire hand. Slowly he raised his hand and turned to Wayne with a triumphant cry.

"Look at what is happening!"

It was impossible not to look. The blue world was in sudden, furious activity. Down from the sky the "King" wobbled, to hang directly over the mound. The blind mice ran backwards out of the blackbird pit and six and twenty blackbirds rose into the sky. And

out on the plain stepped a dozen blue archers, their bows upraised.

But the most terrifying thing was the gulf which yawned suddenly on the plain. Out of it stumbled something that looked like a jigsaw giant, bent nearly double. The figure went reeling and stumbling over the plain, as if in unendurable agony.

The figure was metallic, very similar to the archers, but it moved in a dizzily crooked way that brought a tortured reeling to Wayne's mind.

"There was a crooked man and he ran a crooked mile," Ruth heard herself screaming.

Twang!

An arrow pierced the blueness, thudding into the shoulders of the crazily weaving figure. The giant stumbled and fell forward, its loose-jointed arms flailing the air. It dragged itself crookedly backwards toward the trap door in the plain, its movements still geometrically insane.

Suddenly the archers froze. They stood rigid, unmoving, their bows held at grotesque angles. The "King" stopped vibrating. It hung motionless above the mound, congealed into the blueness like an ice-frozen jellyfish.

Every other object within view took on an aspect of rigidity. All movement ceased. There was a stillness so absolute even the stirring of a blind mouse would have set up a din. But the mice were stiff, rigid, impaled in a web of stillness.

"By heaven, he's stopped the clock!"

Bryce's stunned cry shattered the human stillness on the mound. But the "King" did not echo back the sound, and nothing on the plain moved.

Orban grinned then, for the first time. "I knew it would work," he exulted. "It had to work. It'll all start up again, in just about three minutes. Can't stop it for long. You've got to get out fast."

"You mean—" Bryce wet his shaking lips. "That little thing—" He waved one arm—"stopped *all that*?"

"Size hasn't a thing to do with power," the Orban boy said, as though he were addressing a child. "Shucks, I could blow up every city on earth—big cities like New York and Chicago—with something half the size of this!"

Ruth swayed.

"I fixed the machine so you can see it from this side," Orban said. "When you go out, I'll break it up from this side. Come on,

Ken. You got to get around that wall before it all starts up again."

All four of them started off, in the direction Orban indicated, running at top speed.

Nerve-torturing thoughts, that fitted no pattern of sanity or logic, were churning about at the back of Wayne's mind, as he dashed after the youth. They rounded the wall in a run, the Orban boy in the lead, Bryce bringing up the rear.

The wall hadn't changed, but the toppled Humpty Dumpties resembled eggs that had dropped from a cold storage crate. Their tadpole arms had ceased to jerk and their spilled yolks were frozen solid.

The Orban boy paused an instant to nudge an egg with his toe. "The poor little thing!" he murmured, shaking his head. Then he was in motion again.

When the machines swept into view, the Orban boy was breathing heavily, his face tight with strain. But he kept on running until he was directly in front of it. Then he turned and waited for the others to come up.

"I can't go with you, Ken," he said, when Wayne reached his side. "I belong here. Always have—always will!"

He shuffled his feet as he spoke and suddenly, he was thrusting out his hand.

Wayne stared at him in stunned horror. "But you can't remain!" he protested. "When those devilish archers start up again—"

Orban shook his head, squinting back at the wall. "I don't dare leave, Ken! Know what would happen if I did? I'd get careless and there'd be more accidents. People would get killed—everybody on earth, maybe. I know so much in some ways—I'm not safe to be trusted!"

The Orban boy was bending as he spoke, but Wayne did not suspect what he was about to do until he saw the shining croquet wicket looming in the air above him.

The Orban boy was behind the machine, and he was rushing straight toward Ken with the machine held out before him.

It was a little like passing into a warm shower. The light was all around Wayne, lashing against him, before he realized that he was no longer on the plain.

"Good-by, Ken!" came in a dwindling echo of sound. "Sure was great to have a friend!"

Wayne picked himself up from the floor and looked around him. He wasn't alone in

the room. Ruth was sitting beside him, Bryce lay on the floor, and the croquet wicket was dwindling to a shapeless lump of metal in a dwindling blaze of light.

Bryce was getting slowly to his feet, and staring about him with fiercely contracted brows, as though he despised Wayne's taste in furnishings and was about to say so.

Bryce went to a chair and sat down. "Nice place you have here, Ken," he said.

SUDDENLY his composure broke. Sweat came out on his face, the back of his hands. He shuddered.

"He'll never come back," he whispered. "We've seen the last of him."

Wayne got up and staggered back against the wall and stared at Bryce.

Bryce made a despairing gesture. "I wish now I'd said a few kind words to him. It was the least I could have done."

"Why?" Wayne was hardly aware that he had spoken.

"Oh, it's a paradox, all right," Bryce murmured. "Just like—the paradox of time travel. Say a man lives now and goes into the past. Doesn't that mean he's always existed in the past. But how can he go back to where he's always been?"

Ruth had gotten up and was staring at Bryce with startled eyes. "What has that to do with Orban boy?" she asked.

"Say you went into another dimension today," Bryce said, slowly. "Say it was a kind of timeless dimension—from our point of view. Wouldn't you in a sense exist in that other world from the very creation of that world? Wouldn't you freeze into that world and become a part of it from the start?"

"If someone from our world saw that other world centuries ago, wouldn't he find you there. I think he would."

Bryce paused an instant to stare out the window of Wayne's living room. The murk of an October morning stretched beyond the pane. He stared at Wayne, then at Ruth, as though challenging them to deny that they had just returned from a quite different world.

"You saw that King-clock horror, swinging down from the sky!" he went on. "A mechanical tropism enabled it to echo back sound. Suppose a boy, who never should have gone into that world, was trapped in it. Suppose he shouted his defiance to the sky as the arrows sped toward him.

"Suppose he shouted his name, in anger and fierce pride, recklessly as a defiant boy might well be tempted to do. His name, now and forever, long before he was born into our world, our time, because he'd made himself a timeless part of that timeless world."

"Well?" Wayne's voice was a puzzled whisper.

"A good many boys have nicknames. Young Orban's given name was Phillip, but his father didn't call him that."

Ruth gave a cry. "No! Oh, no!"

"Suppose the King-clock merely repeated the name," Bryce said, gently. "Suppose the boy lay slain on the plain and the King repeated his name, over and over. And the little lad who was to write Mother Goose saw that world in a dream of childhood and heard the name. The author of Mother Goose must have been an imaginative child.

"Remember—he saw the horror only dimly. It bore the name of a familiar bird. Why

not a bird lying slain on the plain and everyone in that world asking: 'Who killed Cock Robin? Not I? Not I?' Everyone horrified, appalled, because Cock Robin was a stranger in that world."

"You mean—"

"It was an intangible thing, the uniqueness of Cock Robin, but it must have communicated itself to the author of Mother Goose. He imagined the rest, the protesting voices, the shared horror, and remorse. He made a fantastic little nursery rhyme about it."

Bryce looked at Ruth. "Do you know who Cock Robin was now?" he asked.

Ruth drew closer to Wayne before she spoke, as though she dared not remain alone with such a burden of horror and pity resting its cold weight on her heart.

"His father called him Robin!" she whispered. "Robin! Robin! The Orban boy—he was Cock Robin!"