

PLANET STORIES



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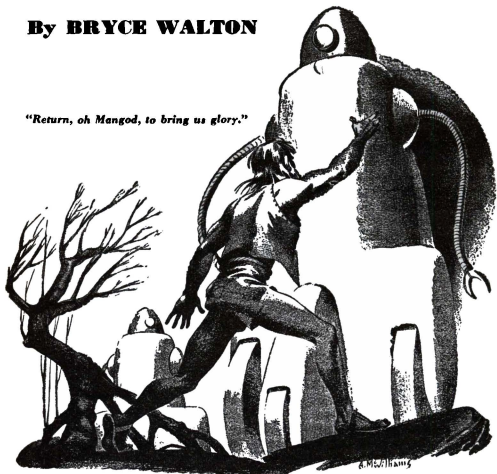
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IN HIS IMAGE

By **BRYCE WALTON**

"Return, oh Mangod, to bring us glory."



Towering and invulnerable, they stood on the hills, patiently awaiting their master. Meanwhile, they slew the vermin crawling below . . .

JON RAN DOWN THE LONG corridor and into the Old Man's room. He was breathless as he threw himself on his face beneath the Old Man's chair made from gypsum. A kind of savage eagerness lighted his face, but the Old Man's face, a frozen pallid ball crinkled into a million lines, was sad and hopelessly resigned.

"I seen 'em," Jon cried. "I seen 'em." His unhealthy pallid body, though big and rawboned, was slender and writhed with a leathery strength that comes with constant effort and exercise rather than diet and sun.

The Old Man shrugged. His voice was a hoarse whisper in that one cavern among the hundred and fifty miles of corridors, interlocking levels and rivers that made up the underground hideaway.

"So you seen 'em, Jon. Many have seen the Mechs. The Mechs might have seen you too. If they ever find us here—well, they'd probe us out, like we were grubs. And they'd burn us with those red-ray eyes. Why'd you go up on top? You know it's against the rules."

Jon got up. His chest heaved. His eyes were polished beads in a thick nest of reddish beard.

"'Cause I don't like livin' in this cave like a grub. I been up twice, and now I can't stay down here anymore. Nobody else's got guts enough to go up. So let 'em stay down here and rot! But I'm going back up on top, Chief. And I'm staying up there."

The Old Man leaned back. He couldn't hide the gleam of gruff respect in his eyes. "Go ahead, Jon, but don't come back down. Once they get on your tail, you can't shake 'em and you'd lead 'em right back here, and then they'd get the rest of us. As far as I know, Jon, we're the only humans left."

Jon's hands clenched. "And so might all of us be dead too. Livin' down here in this cave where they ain't never no sun, eatin' lizards and snakes, and dyin' off one by one anyway. We're all gonna be dead in another year. What's so great about spendin' that year crawlin' and grubbin' down here? Scared to even take one last look at the sun? It's not for me, Chief. I'm leavin'."

THE Old Man shrugged again. "Go ahead, I said. Just promise not to ever come back and lead them down here. You'll promise that, Jon?"

Something thickened in his throat, but he managed to say yes. He turned, then twisted back toward the Old Man. "You're smart," he said. "You're supposed to know about when they took over. I've asked others. No one seems to know, and they care less. Would you tell me, Chief. What are *they*—the Mechs?"

The Old Man's voice echoed strangely against the surrounding grotesque bars of limestone stalactites and stalagmites in multicolored hues of fusing reds and orange, purple and browns. A pinched face peered at them from between the ancient bars, then withdrew its tired eyes.

"Maybe there's fifty humans left down here in Mammoth Hole," the Old Man said softly. "Maybe there ain't nobody else left in the world. Just them with their silent machinery drivin' over the wastes, and their red death eyes sweeping the dark, grubbin' for us. The big war went on and on, nobody knows how long. But humans couldn't fight it. Too much deadly radiation, so they made machines to fight for 'em. The sky and the land

were just masses of machines, throwing out clouds and streamers and explosions. The land became nothing but pools and seas of deadly dust, and fire. The sky was clouded with it. And people went underground. They had to go down deep, and they couldn't come back up, what was left of 'em, for hundreds of years and more."

The Old Man was gazing with a distant, haunted expression at the small blind lizard crawling up the painted wall. Jon listened, his skin was cold. A shiver ran down his back.

"Then *they* started grubbing the humans out, and killing 'em. I don't suppose anyone knows how long it's been since *they* took over. That's wrong. I wasn't around then. Nor my father, nor my father's father's father. It was long, long before that. It was so long ago that—" The Old Man's eyes widened. His voice choked off with a cloud of unconscious fear that had slipped through.

"They're godly," he whispered. "You seen 'em. They're all shapes and angles, eubes, and small smooth running things. They all shine like metal. And I guess they are metal. Nobody knows what they are. I heard tell when I was a boy that they were just machines. Machines built by humans a long time before. And that somehow or other the hard radiation had put a spark in 'em that made 'em able to think, and move around and organize like humans used to do. But I reckon they're more intelligent than any humans ever were."

Jon backed away. Sweat popped out coldly on his face and chest. "I seen 'em," he choked. "I sneaked on top. I went down to the river. It took me hours to get used to the sun. I waited until the sun started going down, then I sneaked out and looked down the big hill that goes into the valley. I seen two of 'em. They must have been a hundred foot high. They was smooth. They had long snaking arms and single eyes that shot out red beams like fire. They stood on top of the hill against the sun. The sun was red all around 'em. They looked like they were made of metal, all right, Chief. But how can they move by themselves, and—*and think*, if they're metal?"

The Old Man sighed. "How?" He peered at Jon with tired retreating eyes.

"What is thought," he said then. "What was life, ever? Floods of gamma rays bathed them for centuries, and then they were living, and they had thoughts of their own. Humans never got a chance to find out what life was before he took it away from himself. Took it and gave it—to them."

The Old Man dropped his face in his shaking hands. Jon had never heard a man crying before. He backed away slowly, then turned and ran out of the great cavern.

A GREY dusky afternoon was dying when Jon crawled out of the small hall between rocks and started writhing down the hill. His eyes stayed open in fearful wonderment until tears rolled down his cheeks. The soft greens and browns of the great forest that thinned up into the hills. There was not the slightest hint that beneath this vast silent beauty, stretched the enormous grotesque underworld of Mammoth Hole.

Nor that in those nameless caverns and corridors along the cold and rushing and naked rivers a few unkempt savages clung to dim memories of centuries-lost power and surface civilization.

Jon stopped. An intangible yet powerful emotion surged in him. "I'm crawlin'," he gritted as he sat up. "I said I was sick a' crawlin'. I ain't a grub. I'm not crawlin' anymore. Not for them damn machines, not for anything. They can't do nothing but kill me, an' what's life down in that hole?"

He stood up. He stood up straight and started walking down the rocky trail, and finally along the smooth greenness beside the river. His strides were long and unhesitating, but inside him was a deep growing horror, as he remembered those shiny silver giants that had stood so silently on the hill against the red sunset. The huge attentive waiting stillness, and the sudden terrible sweep of the red beamed eye and the reaching of the metal arms.

He stopped and looked down at his thin white legs, starved of the sun, knotted and scarred from crawling over the harsh underground paths. He looked at his gnarled pallid fingers quivering in the cold.

He looked up at the sky. A few stars

were showing dimly, palely. "Oh God, give me a quick ending when my time comes, that's all I ask. Don't let me crawl anymore on my belly. Give me the guts to keep walkin', straight up, like I'm walkin' now."

There was no answer. There was no sound except the cry of birds in the forest, the drone of insects and other louder noises from the river. He was alone. He walked faster.

But he soon tired, because he had never walked far at a time. Underground, people crawled a lot of the time through narrow holes. And under there no one could walk far unless they went in circles.

He sat down to rest beneath the canopy of stars. He lay back and looked up at them, a feeling of frightful awe pressing down upon him. The night around him was colder now, and the sounds of the night had risen to a hungry song. And then he rolled over with a quick, terrible cry, leaped crouching to his feet.

There were at least a dozen of them. Great shiny angular and cubed monsters sliding noiseless down the hill. A peculiar bluish radiance pushed out around them, bathing the surrounding night in a deadly-seeming pall.

With a pathetic defiance, Jon picked up the heavy stone, stood with legs wide apart, holding the rock in front of him. Every nerve in him shrieked, pulling his muscles away. But he couldn't run. He couldn't run, nor crawl anymore. A kind of dark resigned courage replaced the first impulses of flight, and he hurled the rock. There was a futile thud, and the rock bounded from the great unruffled wall of metal.

Then—for an instant he didn't think the thoughts, the voices, were anything but his own, strange, alien, terrifying, inspired by his own fears.

And then he realized it was the *Mechs!*

"A grub!"

"Yes. I thought they were all gone."

"No. There are some remaining, deep in the soil. Central File says they are no longer of any danger. But File also retains orders to kill all organic things."

Jon moved toward them. He moved stiffly, a strange and intangible bulwark of purpose shielding him from the screaming horror.

Something of the awful indignity of his position shook him, sent a hot rage throbbing blindly past his temples. He heard his breath coming hard from tightened throat. These great nameless things—machines, intelligent metal, it didn't matter what. They had no idea of what he was, that he had a brain, that he could think. And yet, their gigantic thoughts were plain to him.

Some time, some time so very long ago, he—his kind—humans—had made these things. Had built them up from molten stuff, had put intricate interlocking machinery within them so that they could move, think for themselves, repair themselves. And then—humans had launched the Big War, had released seething seas of basic energy, and somehow these gigantic shiny silvery things had begun to—*live*.

But to them, Jon, a human, a descendant of the humans that had made them and had given them life, was less than the dirt under their towering, invulnerable radiance. Less than the dust beneath their sweeping red-death eyes. They had no conception that he was anything but a pale, crawling, cave-worm.

JON walked closer. He was not so much afraid for himself now. There was more of a sweeping terror of the whole situation, the terrible futility and irony. He wasn't afraid to die, and he knew that he had to die now, that there was no escape, no defiance.

He shook his fist at the silent, towering forms. "Damn you! It's me. Man. Man. I'm human. I'm not crawlin'. See, I'm not crawlin', I'm talkin' to you. I'm talkin' and I'm thinkin', too. See."

"It's making noises."

"Yes. All the various species of or-

ganic life make noises peculiar to their type. Have you not seen a grub before?"

"No. Let us kill it now. We must report back to Central File. How long will it take to kill all organic life?"

"Central File says it will take many more years, even though now most organic life has been destroyed. We must complete the task soon, you know. Man will return. Glorious Mangod. Mighty Mangod. Mangod the Creator. Mangod the Eternal!"

"Ah yes. Mighty Mangod. How long will it be before the Mangod's coming?"

Jon shivered, reached out a shaking hand as though to support himself against the air. He tried to speak, but his facial muscles seemed frozen. He wanted to say, "I'm Man. I'm your Creator. I made you, long ago." But he could say nothing. Nothing at all.

"That is not known. Mangod made us in his own image, then departed, promising to return. Return to bring us glory and eternity."

"May the Great Mangod who created us from the lifeless stuff of the dirt return soon, for only then may our destiny be fulfilled."

"Yes. May Mangod return soon. Meanwhile, Central File demands immediate action in preparation for that Day. Kill this grub. Soon all organic life that stands in the way of the Mangod's coming will be eradicated."

The thunderous impact of telepathic power roared in Jon's head as he staggered forward, fists clenched.

"FOR THEE, GREAT MANGOD. FOR WHOM WE WAIT."

Jon laughed. Hot tears scalded his face as he laughed. He was still laughing as the red-death eye brightened, leaped out, and silently swept him away.