

ORBIT

THE BEST IN

Science Fiction

Volume 1, No. 4

EVERY STORY ORIGINAL:

LAST NIGHT OF SUMMER	
<i>by Alfred Coppel</i>	8
BEAST IN THE HOUSE	
<i>by Michael Shaara</i>	17
DANGER PAST	
<i>by James E. Gunn</i>	27
ME FEEL GOOD	
<i>by Max Dancey</i>	36
NO MORE THE STARS	
<i>by Irving E. Cox, Jr.</i>	39
THE THINKER AND THE THOUGHT	
<i>by August Derleth</i>	56
THE IMAGE OF THE GODS	
<i>by Alan E. Nourse</i>	66
ADJUSTMENT TEAM	
<i>by Philip K. Dick</i>	81
INTRUDER ON THE RIM	
<i>by Milton Lesser</i>	101
SCIENCE NOTES	
	6

MORRIS S. LATZEN
Publisher

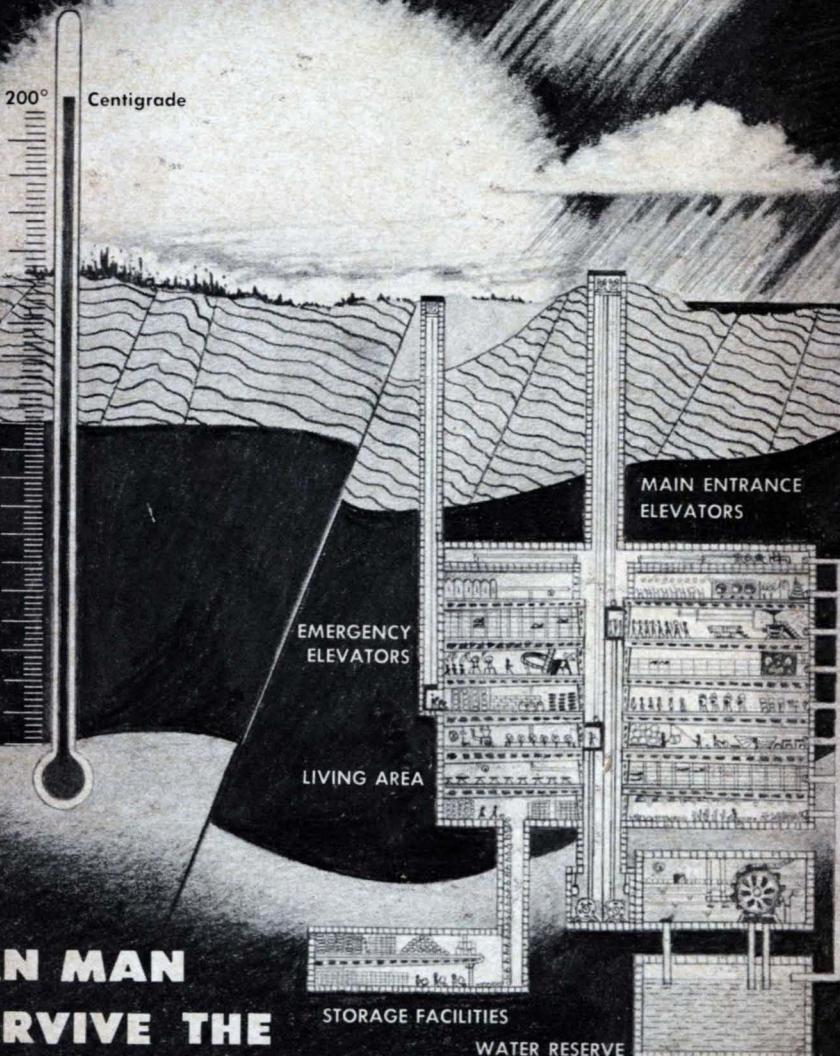
JULES SALTMAN, Editor

BERNARD GORDON, Art Director

ORBIT is published bimonthly by Hanro Corp. Office of publication: 441 Lexington Ave., New York 17, N. Y. Application for second-class entry pending at post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Silver Spring, Md. Copyright 1954 by Hanro Corp. Volume 1, Number 4. Sept.-Oct., 1954. 35¢ per copy. Subscriptions: \$2.00 per year. Canada \$2.50, foreign \$3.00. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts. Printed in the U. S. A. Nationally distributed by the American News Company.

A STERLING PUBLICATION

In This ISSUE!



**CAN MAN
SURVIVE THE
LAST DAY
OF SUMMER?**

See Page 8

g.repp

LAST NIGHT

by Alfred Coppel

**WHEN THE END COMES,
IT WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM
ANYTHING MAN HAS
IMAGINED—AND
IT WILL ALSO BE DIFFERENT
FOR EACH OF US
WHO MUST FACE IT ALONE.**

THERE were fires burning in the city. With the house dark—the power station was deserted by this time—Tom Henderson could see the fires clearly. They reflected like bonfires against the pall of smoke.

He sat in the dark, smoking and listening to the reedy voice of the announcer that came out of the battery-powered portable radio.

“—mean temperatures are rising to abnormal heights all over the world. Paris reports a high yesterday of 110 degrees . . . Naples was 115 . . . astronomers predict . . . the government requests that the civil population remain calm. Martial law has been declared in Los Angeles—”

The voice was faint. The batteries were low. Not that it mattered. *With all our bickering, Henderson thought, this is the finish. And we haven't got what it takes to face it.* It was so simple, really. No war of the worlds, no collision with another planet. A slight rise in temperature. Just that. The astronomers had discovered it first, of course. And there had been reassuring statements

of SUMMER



to the press. The rise in temperature would be small. Ten percent, give or take a few million degrees. They spoke of surface-tensions, internal stresses and used all the astrophysical terms not one man in two million had ever taken the trouble to understand. And what they said to the world was that on the last night of summer it would die.

It would be gradual at first. Temperatures had been high all summer. Then on September 22nd, there would be a sudden surge of heat from that familiar red ball in the sky. The surface temperature of the earth would be raised to 200° centigrade for seventeen hours. Then everything would be back to normal.

Henderson grinned vacuously at the empty air. *Back to normal.* The seas, which would have boiled away, would condense and fall as hot rain for a month or so, flooding the land, washing away all traces of man's occupation—those that hadn't burned. And in two months, the temperature would be down to where a man could walk on the surface without protective clothing.

Only there would not be very many men left. There would only be the lucky ones with the talismans of survivals, the metal disks that gave access to the Burrows. Out of a population of two billions, less than a million would survive.

The announcer sounded bone-weary. *He should,* Henderson thought. *He's been on the air for ten*

hours or more without relief. We all do what we can. But it isn't much.

"no more applicants are being taken for the Burrows—"

I should hope not, Henderson thought. There had been so little time. Three months. That they had been able to build the ten Burrows was tribute enough. But then money hadn't mattered, had it? He had to keep reminding himself that the old values didn't apply. Not money, or materials, or even labor—that standby of commerce. Only time. And there hadn't been any of that.

"population of Las Vegas has been evacuated into several mines in the area—"

Nice try, but it wouldn't work, Henderson thought languidly. If the heat didn't kill, the overcrowding would. And if that failed, then the floods would succeed. And of course there would be earthquakes. *We can't accept catastrophe on this scale,* he told himself. *We aren't equipped mentally for it any better than we are physically.* The only thing a man could understand were his own problems. And this last night of summer made them seem petty, small, as though they were being viewed through the wrong end of a telescope.

I'm sorry for the girls, he thought. Lorrie and Pam. They should have had a chance to grow up. He felt a tightness in his throat as he thought of his daughters. Eight and ten are sad ages to die.

But he hadn't thought of them before, why should the end of the world make it any different? He had left them and Laura, too. For what? For Kay and money and a kind of life that would go out in a bright flash with the coming of dawn. They all danced their minuscule ballet on the rim of the world while he sat, drained of purpose or feeling, watching them through that reversed telescope.

He wondered where Kay was now. All over the city there were Star Parties going on. The sky the limit tonight! Anything you want. Tomorrow—*bang!* Nothing denied, nothing forbidden. This is the last night of the world, kiddo!

Kay had dressed—if that was the word—and gone out at seven. "I'm not going to sit here and just wait!" He remembered the hysteria in her voice, the drugged stupor in her eyes. And then Trina and those others coming in, some drunk, others merely giddy with terror. Trina wrapped in her mink coat, and dancing around the room singing in a shrill, cracked voice. And the other girl—Henderson never could remember her name, but he'd remember her now for all the time there was left—naked except for her jewels. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds—all glittering and sparkling in the last rays on the swollen sun. And the tears streamed down her cheeks as she begged him to make love to her—

It was a nightmare. But it was

real. The red sun that slipped into the Pacific was real. The fires and looting in the city were not dreams. This was the way the world was ending. Star Parties and murder in the streets, and women dressed in gems, and tears—a million gallons of tears.

Outside there was the squeal of tires and a crash, then the tinkling of broken glass and silence. A shot came from down the street. There was a cry that was part laughter and part scream.

I'm without purpose, Henderson thought. I sit and watch and wait for nothing. And the radio's voice grew fainter still.

—"those in the Burrows will survive . . . in mines and caves . . . geologists promise a forty percent survival behind the iron curtain—"

Behind the iron curtain, surely nothing. Or perhaps it would be instantaneous, not sweeping across the world with dawn. Of course, it would be instantaneous. The sun would swell—oh, so slightly—and eight minutes later, rivers, lakes, streams, the oceans—everything wet—would boil up into the sky

From the street came a rasping repetitive cry. Not a woman. A man. He was burning. A street gang had soaked him with gasoline and touched him with a match. They followed him shrieking: *preview, preview!* Henderson watched him through the window as he ran with that *uuuh uuuh uuuh* noise seeming-

ingly ripped from his throat. He vanished around the corner of the next house, closely pursued by his tormentors.

I hope the girls and Laura are safe, Henderson thought. And then he almost laughed aloud. Safe. What was safety now? *Maybe*, he thought, *I should have gone with Kay*. Was there anything left he wanted to do that he had never done? Kill? Rape? Any sensation left untasted? The night before, at the Gilmans', there had been a ludicrous Black Mass full of horror and asininity: pretty Louise Gilman taking the guests one after another amid the broken china and sterling silver on the dining table while her husband lay half-dead of self-administered morphine.

Our set, Henderson thought. *Brokers, bankers, people who matter*. God, it was bad enough to die. But to die without dignity was worse yet. And to die without purpose was abysmal.

Someone was banging at the door, scratching at it, shrieking. He sat still.

"Tom—Tom—it's Kay! Let me in, for God's sake!"

Maybe it was Kay. Maybe it was and he should let her stay outside. *I should keep what shreds of dignity, I have, he thought, and die alone, at least*. How would it have been to face this thing with Laura? Any different? Or was there anything to choose? *I married Laura*, he thought. *And I married Kay, too*. It was easy.

If a man could get a divorce every two years, say, and he lived to be sixty-five, say—then how many women could he marry? And if you assumed there were a billion women in the world, what percentage would it be?

"Let me in, Tom, damn you! I know you're there!"

Eight and ten isn't very old, he thought. *Not very old, really*. They might have been wonderful women . . . to lay amid the crockery and cohabit like animals while the sun got ready to blow up?"

"Tom . . .!"

He shook his head sharply and snapped off the radio. The fires in the city were brighter and bigger. Not sunfires, those. Someone had set them. He got up and went to the door. He opened it. Kay stumbled in, sobbing. "Shut the door, oh, God, shut it!"

He stood looking at her torn clothes—what there was of them—and her hands. They were sticky red with blood. He felt no horror, no curiosity. He experienced nothing but a dead feeling of loss. *I never loved her*, he thought suddenly. *That's why*.

She reeked of liquor and her lipstick was smeared all over her face. "I gave him what he wanted," she said shrilly. "The filthy swine coming to mix with the dead ones and then run back to the Burrow—" Suddenly she laughed. "Look, Tom—look!" She held out one bloody hand.

Two disks gleamed dully in her palm.

"We're safe, safe—" She said it again and again, bending over the disks and crooning to them.

Henderson stood in the dim hallway, slowly letting his mind understand what he was seeing. Kay had killed a man for those tickets into the Burrow.

"Give them to me," he said.

She snatched them away. "No."

"I want them, Kay."

"No, nononono—" She thrust them into the torn bosom of her dress. "I came back. I came back for you. That's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," Henderson said. And it was also true that she couldn't have hoped to reach a Burrow alone. She would need a car and a man with a gun. "I understand, Kay," he said softly, hating her.

"If I gave them to you, you'd take Laura," she said. "Wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? Oh, I know you, Tom, I know you so well. You'd never gotten free of her or those two sniveling brats of yours—"

He struck her sharply across the face, surprised at the rage that shook him.

"Don't do that again," she said, glaring hatred at him. "I need you right now, but you need me more. You don't know where the Burrow is. I do."

It was true, of course. The entrances to the Burrows would have to be secret, known only to those chosen to survive. Mobs would storm

them otherwise. And Kay had found out from the man—that man who had paid with his life for forgetting that there were only potential survivors now and animals.

"All right, Kay," Henderson said. "I'll make a bargain with you."

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'll tell you in the car. Get ready. Take light things." He went into the bedroom and took his Luger from the bedside table drawer. Kay was busy stuffing her jewelry into a handbag. "Come on," he said. "That's enough. Plenty. There isn't much time."

They went down into the garage and got into the car. "Roll up the windows," he said. "And lock the doors."

"All right."

He started the engine and backed onto the street.

"What's the bargain?" Kay asked.

"Later," he said.

He put the car in gear and started down out of the residential district, going through the winding, wooded drives. There were dark shapes running in the shadows. A man appeared in the headlights' beam and Henderson swerved swiftly by him. He heard shots behind. "Keep down," he said.

"Where are we going? This isn't the way."

"I'm taking the girls with me," he said. "With us."

"They won't let them in."

"We can try."

"You fool, Tom! They won't let them in, I say!"

He stopped the car and twisted around to look at her. "Would you rather try to make it on foot?"

Her face grew ugly with a renaissance of fear. She could see her escape misting away. "All right. But I tell you they won't let them in. No one gets into a Burrow without a disk."

"We can try." He started the car again, driving fast along the littered streets toward Laura's apartment.

At several points the street was blocked with burning debris, and once a gang of men and women almost surrounded them, throwing rocks and bits of wreckage at the car as he backed it around.

"You'll get us both killed for nothing," Kay said wildly.

Tom Henderson looked at his wife and felt sick for the wasted years. "We'll be all right," he said.

He stopped the car in front of Laura's. There were two overturned cars on the sidewalk. He unlocked the door and got out, taking the keys with him. "I won't be long," he said.

"Say good-by to Laura for me," Kay said, her eyes glittering.

"Yes," he said. "I will."

A shadow moved menacingly out of the dark doorway. Without hesitation, Tom Henderson lifted the Luger and fired. The man fell and did not move. *I've just killed a man*, Henderson thought. And then: *But what*

does it matter on the last night of summer?

He shot away the lock and walked swiftly up the dark hallway, up the two flights of stairs he remembered so well. At Laura's door he knocked. There was movement within. The door opened slowly.

"I've come for the girls," he said.

Laura stepped back. "Come in," she said.

The scent she wore began to prod memories. His eyes felt unaccountably hot and wet. "There's very little time," he said.

Laura's hand was on his in the dark. "You can get them into a Burrow?" she asked. And then faintly. "I put them to bed. I didn't know what else to do."

He couldn't see her, but he knew how she would look: the close-cropped sandy hair; the eyes the color of rich chocolates; her so familiar body supple and warm under the wrapper; the smell and taste of her. It didn't matter now, nothing mattered on this last crazy night of the world.

"Get them," he said. "Quickly."

She did as she was told. Pam and Lorrie—he could hear them complaining softly about being awakened in the middle of the night—soft little bodies, with the musty-childish odor of sleep and safety. Then Laura was kneeling, holding them against her, each in turn. And he knew the tears must be wet on her cheeks. He thought: *say good-by and make it*

quick. Kiss your children good-by and watch them go out while you remain alone in the dark that isn't ever going to end. Ah, Laura, Laura—

"Take them quickly, Tom," Laura said. And then she pressed herself against him just for an instant. "I love you, Tom. I never stopped."

He lifted Pam into his arms and took Lorrie's hand. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"Good-by, Tom," Laura said, and closed the door behind him.

"Isn't Mommy coming?" Pam asked sleepily.

"Another time, baby," Tom said softly.

He took them out to the waiting car and Kay.

"They won't take them," she said. "You'll see."

"Where is it, Kay?"

She remained sullenly silent and Henderson felt his nerves cracking. "Kay—"

"All right." She gave him directions grudgingly, as though she hated to share her survival with him. She wouldn't look at the girls, already asleep in the back of the car.

They drove through the city, the looted, tortured city that burned and echoed to the shrill gaiety of Star Parties and already stank of death.

Twice, they were almost struck by careening cars, filled with drunken, naked, insane people, all with the desperate desire to make this last night more vivid than all the others back to the very beginning of time.

The headlights illuminated tabuleaus from some wild inferno as the car swung around through the concrete cemetery the city had become:

A woman hung by the ankles, her skirt shrouding her face and upper body, her legs and buttocks flayed . . .

Psalm singers kneeling in the street, not moving as a truck cut a swath through their midst. And the hymn, thin and weak, heard over the moans of the dying: *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me bide myself in thee . . .*

Sudden sun-worshippers and troglodytes dancing round a fire of burning books . . .

The death throes of a world, Henderson thought. *What survives the fire and flood will have to be better.*

And then they had reached the silent hill that was the entrance to the Burrow, the miles-deep warren clothed in refrigerator pipes and cooling earth. "There," Kay said. "Where you see the light. There'll be a guard."

Behind them, the fires burned in the city. The night was growing lighter, lit by a rising moon, a moon too red, too large. *Four hours left, perhaps*, Tom thought. *Or less.*

"You can't take them," Kay was whispering harshly. "If you try they might not let us in. It's kinder to let them stay here—asleep. They'll never know."

"That's right," Tom said.

Kay got out of the car and started up the grassy slope. "Then come on!"

Halfway up the hill, Henderson could make out the pacing figure of the guard: death watch on a world. "Wait a minute," he said.

"What is it?"

"Are you sure we can get in?"

"Of course."

"No questions asked?"

"All we need are the disks. They can't know everybody who belongs."

"No," Tom said quietly. "Of course not." He stood looking at Kay under the light of the red moon.

"Tom—"

He took Kay's hand. "We weren't worth much, were we, Kay."

Her eyes were bright, wide, staring.

"You didn't really expect anything else, did you?"

"Tom—Tom!"

The pistol felt light in his hand.

"I'm your wife—" she said hoarsely.

"Let's pretend you're not. Let's pretend it's a Star Party."

"My God—please—nonono—"

The Luger bucked in his hand. Kay sank to the grass awkwardly and lay there, eyes glazed and open in horrified surprise. Henderson opened her dress and took the two disks from between her breasts. Then he covered her carefully and shut her eyes with his forefinger. "You didn't miss much, Kay," he said looking down at her. "Just more of the same."

He went back to the car and woke up the girls.

"Where are we going now, Daddy?" Pam asked.

"Up there on the hill, dear. Where the light is."

"Carry me?"

"Both of you," he said, and dropped the Luger into the grass. He picked them up and carried them up the hill to within a hundred feet of the bunker entrance. Then he put them down and gave them each a disk. "Go to the light and give the man there these," he said, and kissed them both.

"You're not coming?"

"No, babies."

Lorrie looked as though she might start crying.

"I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Tom said.

"Nothing at all," Pam said.

Tom watched them go. He saw the guard kneel and hug them both. *There is some kindness in this stripping of inhibitions*, Henderson thought, *something is left after all*. They disappeared into the Burrow and the guard stood up saluting the darkness with a wave. Henderson turned and walked back down the hill, skirting the place where Kay lay face to the sky. *A warm dry wind touched his face. Time running out quickly now*, he thought. He got into the car and started back toward the city. There were still a few hours left of this last night of summer, and Laura and he could watch the red dawn together. * * *