

PLANET STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, Pres.

MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr.

PAUL L. PAYNE, Ed.

A New Writer's Gripping Novel of Future Cave-Men

THE DEAD-STAR ROVER . . . by Robert Abernathy 2

Only savage engines roamed that arid world, charging one another with snarling guns. And two puny machine-less humans like Torred and Ladna should die quickly beneath those grinding treads. That they suddenly could instead become the most dangerous things alive must surely be some dead god's joke.

McDowell Returns with Another Flaming Out-World Novel!

SWORD OF FIRE by Emmett McDowell 70

Jupiter Jones, naked and helpless in the slime of that vile world, cursed the space warp that had flung him down among its groveling mutants. For their rising excited whispers proclaimed him a knight in shining armor—the bright weapon in his hand their only hope against the vicious octopods who enslaved them!

Five Thrilling Stories

TUBEMONKEY by Jerome Bixby 29

Radiations had shorted his brilliant pilot's brain, left him an aimless, childish hulk. Yet Rhiannon had his moments—when he needed them.

FLIGHT FROM TIME by Alfred Coppel 36

The meteor-smashed clock at first meant nothing. Malenson had all the time in the cosmos. Too late, he discovered there can be such a thing as too much time.

THE NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES by John and Dorothy de Courcy 42

It was one thing to heave an unwanted girl out into the great black grave of space. But tough old pirate Captain Brace balked at making his own soul walk the plank with her!

THE GREEN DREAM by Bryce Walton 55

Owen Barslaag had brought terror to the swamp people. Joha, the little Venusian maid, was determined that he should not leave without it.

LET THE ANTS TRY by James MacCreigh 63

Dr. Salva Gordy looked at the radioactive smear that had been Detroit. Then he looked down at the boiling ant-hill. Why not, he thought excitedly, why not? . . .

And Planet's Regular Feature

THE VIZIGRAPH by The Readers 104

Winter Issue, 1949



Vol. IV, No. 5
20c per copy

PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1949, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1944, at the Post Office at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Yearly subscription rate \$9c in advance. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.

Let The Ants Try

By JAMES MacCREIGH



He filled his lungs for one last scream.

Dr. Salva Gordy looked at the radioactive smear that had been Detroit. Then he looked down at the boiling anthill. Why not, he thought excitedly, why not? . . .

GORDY SURVIVED THE Three-Hour War, even though Detroit didn't; he was on his way to Washington, with his blueprints and models in his bag, when the bombs struck.

He had left his wife behind in the city, and not even a trace of her body was ever found. The children, of course, weren't as lucky as that. Their summer camp was less than twenty miles away, and unfortunately in the direction of the prevailing wind. But they were not in any pain until the last few days of the month they had left to live. Gordy managed to fight his

way back through the snarled, frantic airline controls to them. Even though he knew they would certainly die of radiation sickness, and they suspected it, there was still a whole blessed week of companionship before the pain got too bad.

That was about all the companionship Gordy had for the whole year of 1960.

He came back to Detroit, as soon as the radioactivity had died down: he had nowhere else to go. He found a house on the outskirts of the city, and tried to locate someone to buy it from. But the Emergency Administration laughed at him.

"Move in, if you're crazy enough to stay."

When Gordy thought about it all, it occurred to him that he was in a sort of state of shock. His fine, trained mind almost stopped functioning. He ate and slept, and when it grew cold he shivered and built fires, and that was all. The War Department wrote him two or three times, and finally a government man came around to ask what had happened to the things that Gordy had promised to bring to Washington. But he looked queerly at the pink, hairless mice that fed unmolested in the filthy kitchen, and he stood a careful distance away from Gordy's hairy face and torn clothes.

He said, "The Secretary sent me here, Mr. Gordy. He takes a personal interest in your discovery."

Gordy shook his head. "The Secretary is dead," he said. "They were all killed when Washington went."

"There's a new Secretary," the man explained. He puffed on his cigarette and tossed it into the patch Gordy was scrambling into a truck garden. "Arnold Cavanagh. He knows a great deal about you, and he told me, 'If Salva Gordy has a weapon, we must have it. Our strength has been shattered. Tell Gordy we need his help.'"

Gordy crossed his hands like a lean Buddha.

"I haven't got a weapon," he said.

"You have something that can be used as a weapon. You wrote to Washington, before the War came, and said——"

"The War is over," said Salva Gordy. The government man sighed, and tried again, but in the end he went away. He never came back. The thing, Gordy thought, was undoubtedly written off as a crackpot idea after the man made his report; it was exactly that kind of a discovery, anyhow.

IT was May when John de Terry appeared. Gordy was spading his garden. "Give me something to eat," said the voice behind Gordy's back.

Salva Gordy turned around and saw the small, dirty man who spoke. He rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand. "You'll have to work for it," he said.

"All right." The newcomer set down his pack. "My name is John de Terry. I used to live here in Detroit."

Salva Gordy said, "So did I."

Gordy fed the man, and accepted a cigarette from him after they had eaten. The first puffs made him light-headed—and through the smoke he looked at John de Terry amiably enough. Company would be all right, he thought. The pink mice had been company, of a sort—but it turned out that the mutation that made them hairless had also given them an appetite for meat. And after the morning when he had awakened to find tiny toothmarks in his leg, he'd had to destroy them. And there had been no other animal since, nothing but the ants.

"Are you going to stay?" Gordy asked.

De Terry said, "If I can. What's your name?" When Gordy told him, some of the animal look went out of his eyes, and wonder took its place. "Doctor Salva Gordy?" he asked. "Mathematics and physics in Pasadena?"

"Yes, I used to teach at Pasadena."

"And I studied there." John de Terry rubbed absently at his ruined clothes. "That was a long time ago. You didn't know me; I majored in biology. But I knew you."

Gordy stood up and carefully put out the stub of his cigarette. "It was too long ago," he said. "I hardly remember. Shall we work in the garden now?"

Together they sweated in the spring sunlight that afternoon, and Gordy discovered that what had been hard work for one man went quickly enough for two. They worked clear to the edge of the plot before the sun reached the horizon. John de Terry stopped and leaned on his spade, panting.

He gestured to the rank growth beyond Gordy's patch. "We can make a bigger garden," he said. "Clear out that truck, and plant more food. We might even——" He stopped. Gordy was shaking his head.

"You can't clear it out," said Gordy. "It's rank stuff, a sort of crabgrass with a particularly tough root. I can't even cut it. It's all around here, and it's spreading."

De Terry grimaced. "Mutation?"

"I think so. And look." Gordy beckoned to the other man and led him to the very edge of the cleared area. He bent down, picked up something red and wriggling between his thumb and forefinger.

De Terry took it from his hand. "Another mutation?" He brought the thing close to his eyes. "It's almost like an ant," he said. "Except—well, the thorax is all wrong. And it's soft-bodied." He fell silent, examining the thing.

He said something under his breath, and threw the insect from him. "You wouldn't have a microscope, I suppose? No—and yet, that thing is hard to believe. It's an ant, but it doesn't seem to have a tracheal breathing system at all. It's something different."

"Everything's different," Gordy said. He pointed to a couple of abandoned rows. "I had carrots there. At least, I thought they were carrots; when I tried to eat them they made me sick." He sighed heavily. "Humanity has had its chance, John," he said. "The atomic bomb wasn't enough; we had to turn everything into a weapon. Even I, I made a weapon out of something that had nothing to do with war. And our weapons have blown up in our faces."

De Terry grinned. "Maybe the ants will do better. It's their turn now."

"I wish it were." Gordy stirred earth over the boiling entrance to an anthole and watched the insects in their consternation. "They're too small, I'm afraid."

"Why, no. These ants are different, Dr. Gordy. Insects have always been small because their breathing system is so poor. But these are mutated. I think—I think they actually have lungs. They could grow, Dr. Gordy. And if ants were the size of men . . . they'd rule the world."

"Lunged ants!" Gordy's eyes gleamed. "Perhaps they will rule the world, John. Perhaps when the human race finally blows itself up once and for all . . ."

De Terry shook his head, and looked down again at his tattered, filthy clothes. "The next blow-up is the last blow-up," he said. "The ants come too late, by millions and millions of years."

He picked up his spade. "I'm hungry again, Dr. Gordy," he said.

They went back to the house and, without conversation, they ate. Gordy was preoccupied, and de Terry was too new in the household to force him to talk.

It was sundown when they had finished, and Gordy moved slowly to light a lamp. Then he stopped.

"It's your first night, John," he said. "Come down cellar. We'll start the generator and have real electric lights in your honor."

De Terry followed the older man down a flight of stairs, groping in the dark. By candlelight they worked over a gasoline generator; it was stiff from disuse, but once it started it ran cleanly. "I salvaged it from my own," Gordy explained. "The generator—and that."

He swept an arm toward a corner of the basement. "I told you I invented a weapon," he added. "That's it."

De Terry looked. It was as much like a cage as anything, he thought—the height of a man and almost cubical. "What does it do?" he asked.

For the first time in months, Salva Gordy smiled. "I can't tell you in English," he said. "And I doubt that you speak mathematics. The closest I can come is to say that it displaces temporal co-ordinates. Is that gibberish?"

"It is," said de Terry. "What does it do?"

"Well, the War Department had a name for it—a name they borrowed from H.G. Wells. They called it a Time Machine." He met de Terry's shocked, bewildered stare calmly. "A time machine," he repeated. "You see, John, we can give the ants a chance after all, if you like."

FOURTEEN hours later they stepped into the cage, its batteries charged again and its strange motor whining . . .

And, forty million years earlier, they stepped out onto quaking humid soil.

Gordy felt himself trembling, and with an effort managed to stop. "No dinosaurs or saber-toothed tigers in sight," he reported.

"Not for a long time yet," de Terry agreed. Then, "My Lord!"

He looked around him with his mouth open wide. There was no wind, and the air was warm and wet. Large trees were clustered quite thickly around them—or what looked like trees; de Terry decided they were rather some sort of soft-stemmed ferns or fungi. Overhead was deep cloud.

Gordy shivered. "Give me the ants," he ordered.

Silently de Terry handed them over. Gordy poked a hole in the soft earth with his finger and carefully tilted the flask, dropped one of the ant queens he had unearthed in the back yard. From her belly hung a slimy mass of eggs. A few yards away—it should have been farther, he thought, but he was afraid to get too far from de Terry and the machine—he made another hole and repeated the process.

There were eight queens. When the eighth was buried he flung the bottle away and came back to de Terry.

"That's it," he said.

De Terry exhaled. His solemn face cracked in a sudden embarrassed smile. "I—I guess I feel like God," he said. "Good lord, Dr. Gordy! Talk about your great moments in history—this is all of them! I've been thinking about it, and the only event I can remember that measures up is the Flood. Not even that. We've created a race!"

"If they survive, we have." Gordy wiped a drop of condensed moisture off the side of his time machine and puffed. "I wonder how they'll get along with mankind," he said.

They were silent for a moment, considering. From somewhere in the fern jungle came a raucous animal cry. Both men looked up in quick apprehension, but moments passed and the animal did not appear.

Finally de Terry said, "Maybe we'd better go back."

"All right." Stiffly they climbed into the closet-sized interior of the time machine.

Gordy stood with his hand on the control wheel, thinking about the ants. Assuming that they survived—assuming that in 40,000,000 years they grew larger and

developed brains—what would happen? Would men be able to live in peace with them? Would it—might it not make men brothers, joined against an alien race?

Might this thing prevent human war, and—his thoughts took an insane leap—could it have prevented the war that destroyed Gordy's family!

Beside him, de Terry stirred restlessly. Gordy jumped, and turned the wheel, and was in the dark mathematical vortex which might have been a fourth dimension.

THEY stopped the machine in the middle of a city, but the city was not Detroit. It was not a human city at all.

The machine was at rest in a narrow street, half blocking it. Around them towered conical metal structures, some of them a hundred feet high. There were vehicles moving in the street, one coming toward them and stopping.

"Dr. Gordy!" de Terry whispered. "Do you see them?"

Salva Gordy swallowed. "I see them," he said.

He stepped out of the time machine and stood waiting to greet the race to which he had given life.

For these were the children of ants in the three-wheeled vehicle. Behind a transparent windshield he could see them clearly.

De Terry was standing close behind him now, and Gordy could feel the younger man's body shaking. "They're ugly things." Gordy said mildly.

"Ugly! They're filthy!"

The antlike creatures were as big as a man, but hard-looking and as obnoxious as blackbeetles. Their eyes, Gordy saw with surprise, had mutated more than their bodies. For, instead of faceted insect eyes, they possessed iris, cornea and pupil,—not round, or vertical like a cat's eyes, or horizontal like a horse's eyes, but irregular and blotchy. But they seemed like vertebrate's eyes, and they were strange and unnatural in the parchment blackness of an ant's bulged head.

Gordy stepped forward, and simultaneously the ants came out of their vehicle. For a moment they faced each other, the humans and the ants, silently.

"What do I do now?" Gordy asked de Terry over his shoulder.

De Terry laughed—or gasped. Gordy wasn't sure. "Talk to them," he said. "What else is there to do?"

Gordy swallowed. He resolutely did not attempt to speak in English to these creatures, knowing as surely as he knew his name that English—and probably any other language involving sound—would be incomprehensible to them. But he found himself smiling pacifically to them, and that was of course as bad . . . the things had no expressions of their own, that he could see, and certainly they would have no precedent to help interpret a human smile.

Gordy raised his hand in the semantically sound gesture of peace, and waited to see what the insects would do.

They did nothing.

Gordy bit his lip and, feeling idiotic, bowed stiffly to the ants.

THE ants did nothing. De Terry said from behind, "Try talking to them, Dr. Gordy."

"That's silly," Gordy said. "They can't hear." But it was no sillier than anything else. Irritably, but making the words very clear, he said, "We . . . are . . . friends."

The ants did nothing. They just stood there, with the unwinking pupiled eyes fixed on Gordy. They didn't shift from foot to foot as a human might, or scratch themselves, or even show the small movement of human breathing. They just stood there.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said de Terry. "Here let me try."

He stepped in front of Gordy and faced the ant-things. He pointed to himself. "I am human," he said. "Mammalian." He pointed to the ants. "You are insects. That—" he pointed to the time machine—"took us to the past, where we made it possible for you to exist." He waited for reaction, but there wasn't any. De Terry clicked his tongue and began again. He pointed to the tapering metal structures. "This is your city," he said.

Gordy, listening to him, felt the hopelessness of the effort. Something disturbed the thin hairs at the back of his skull, and

he reached absently to smooth them down. His hand encountered something hard and inanimate—not cold, but, like spongy wood, without temperature at all. He turned around. Behind them were half a dozen larger ants. Drones, he thought—or did ants have drones? "John," he said softly . . . and the inefficient, fragile-looking pincer that had touched him clamped his shoulder. There was no strength to it, he thought at once. Until he moved, instinctively, to get away, and then a thousand sharp serrations slipped through the cloth of his coat and into the skin. It was like catching oneself on a cluster of tiny fishhooks. He shouted, "John! Watch out!"

De Terry, bending low for the purpose of pointing at the caterpillar treads of the ant vehicle, straightened up, startled: He turned to run, and was caught in a step. Gordy heard him yell, but Gordy had troubles of his own and could spare no further attention for de Terry.

When two of the ants had him, Gordy stopped struggling. He felt warm blood roll down his arm, and the pain was like being flayed. From where he hung between the ants, he could see the first two, still standing before their vehicle, still motionless.

There was a sour reek in his nostrils, and he traced it to the ants that held him, and wondered if he smelled as bad to them. The two smaller ants abruptly stirred and moved forward rapidly on eight thin legs to the time machine. Gordy's captors turned and followed them, and for the first time since the scuffle he saw de Terry. The younger man was hanging limp from the lifted forelegs of a single ant, with two more standing guard beside. There was pulsing blood from a wound on de Terry's neck. Unconscious, Gordy thought mechanically, and turned his head to watch the ants at the machine.

It was a disappointing sight. They merely stood there, and no one moved. Then Gordy heard de Terry grunt and swear weakly. "How are you, John?" he called.

De Terry grimaced. "Not very good. What happened?"

Gordy shook his head, and sought for

words to answer. But the two ants turned in unison from the time machine and glided toward de Terry, and Gordy's words died in his throat. Delicately one of them extended a foreleg to touch de Terry's chest.

Gordy saw it coming. "John!" he shrieked—and then it was all over, and de Terry's scream was harsh in his ear and he turned his head away. Dimly from the corner of his eye he could see the sawlike claws moving up and down, but there was no life left in Terry to protest.

SALVA GORDY sat against a wall and looked at the ants who were looking at him. If it hadn't been for that which was done to de Terry, he thought, there would really be nothing to complain about.

It was true that the ants had given him none of the comforts that humanity lavishes on even its criminals . . . but they had fed him, and allowed him to sleep—when it suited their convenience, of course—and there were small signs that they were interested in his comfort, in their fashion. When the pulpy mush they first offered him came up thirty minutes later, his multi-legged hosts brought him a variety of foods, of which he was able to swallow some fairly palatable fruits. He was housed in a warm room. And, if it had neither chairs or windows, Gordy thought, that was only because ants had no use for these themselves. And he couldn't ask for them.

That was the big drawback, he thought. That . . . and the memory of John de Terry.

He squirmed on the hard floor until his shoulder-blades found a new spot to prop themselves against, and stared again at the committee of ants who had come to see him.

They were working an angular thing that looked like a camera—at least, it had a glittering something that might be a lens. Gordy stared into it sullenly. The sour reek was in his nostrils again . . .

Gordy admitted to himself that things hadn't worked out just as he had planned. Deep under the surface of his mind—just now beginning to come out where he could see it—there had been a furtive hope. He

had hoped that the rise of the ants, with the help he had given them, would aid and speed the rise of mankind. For hatred, Gordy knew, started in the recoil from things that were different. A man's first enemy is his family—for he sees them first—but he sides with them against the families across the way. And still his neighbors are allies against the Ghettos and Harlems of his town—and his town to him is the heart of the nation—and his nation commands life and death in war.

For Gordy, there had been a buried hope that a separate race would make a whipping-boy for the passions of humanity. And that, if there were struggle, it would not be between man and man, but between the humans . . . and the ants.

There had been this buried hope, but the hope was denied. For the ants simply had not allowed man to rise.

The ants put up their camera-like machine, and Gordy looked up in expectation. Half a dozen of them left, and two stayed on. One was the smallish creature with a bangle on the foreleg which seemed to be his personal jailer; the other a stranger to Gordy, as far as he could tell.

The two ants stood motionless for a period of time that Gordy found tedious. He changed his position, and lay on the floor, and thought of sleeping. But sleep would not come. There was no evading the knowledge that he had wiped out his own race—annihilated them by preventing them from birth, forty million years before his own time. He was like no other murderer since Cain, Gordy thought, and wondered that he felt no blood on his hands.

There was a signal that he could not perceive, and his guardian ant came forward to him, nudged him outward from the wall. He moved as he was directed—out the low exit-hole (he had to navigate it on hands and knees) and down a corridor to the bright day outside.

The light set Gordy blinking. Half blind, he followed the bangled ant across a square to a conical shed. More ants were waiting there, circled around a litter of metal parts.

Gordy recognized them at once. It was his time machine, stripped piece by piece. After a moment the ant nudged him

again, impatiently, and Gordy understood what they wanted. They had taken the machine apart for study, and they wanted it put together again.

Pleased with the prospect of something to do with his fingers and his brain, Gordy grinned and reached for the curious ant-made tools . . .

He ate four times, and slept once, never moving from the neighborhood of the cone-shaped shed. And then he was finished.

Gordy stepped back. "It's all yours," he said proudly. "It'll take you anywhere. A present from humanity to you."

The ants were very silent. Gordy looked at them and saw that there were drone-ants in the group, all still as statues.

"Hey!" he said in startlement, unthinking. And then the needle-jawed ant claw took him from behind.

Gordy had a moment of nausea—and then terror and hatred swept it away.

Heedless of the needles that laced his skin, he struggled and kicked against the creatures that held him. One arm came free, leaving gobbets of flesh behind, and his heavy shod foot plunged into a pulpy eye. The ant made a whistling, gasping sound and stood erect on four hairy legs.

Gordy felt himself jerked a dozen feet into the air, then flung free in the wild, silent agony of the ant. He crashed into the ground, covering away from the staggering monster. Sobbing, he pushed himself to his feet; the machine was behind him; he turned and blundered into it a step ahead of the other ants, and spun the wheel.

A HOLLOW insect leg, detached from the ant that had been closest to him, was flopping about on the floor of the machine; it had been that close.

Gordy stopped the machine where it had started, on the same quivering, primordial bog, and lay crouched over the controls for a long time before he moved.

He had made a mistake, he and de Terry; there weren't any doubts left at all. And there was . . . there *might* be a way to right it.

He looked out at the Coal Measure forest. The fern trees were not the fern trees he had seen before; the machine had been moved in space. But the time, he knew was identically the same; trust the machine for that. He thought: I gave the world to the ants, right here. I can take it back. I can find the ants I buried and crush them underfoot . . . or intercept myself before I bury them . . .

He got out of the machine, suddenly panicky. Urgency squinted his eyes as he peered around him.

Death had been very close in the ant city; the reaction still left Gordy limp. And was he safe here? He remembered the violent animal scream he had heard before, and shuddered at the thought of furnishing a casual meal to some dinosaur . . . while the ant queens lived safely to produce their horrid young.

A gleam of metal through the fern trees made his heart leap. Burnished metal here could mean but one thing—the machine!

Around a clump of fern trees, their bases covered with thick club mosses, he ran, and saw the machine ahead. He raced toward it—then came to a sudden stop, slipping on the damp ground.

For there were *two* machines in sight.

The farther machine was his own, and through the screening mosses he could see two figures standing in it, his own and de Terry's.

But the nearer was a larger machine, and a strange design.

And from it came a hastening mob—not a mob of men, but of black insect shapes racing toward him.

Of course, thought Gordy, as he turned hopelessly to run—of course, the ants had infinite time to work in. Time enough to build a machine after the pattern of his own—and time to realize what they had to do to him, to insure their own race safety.

Gordy stumbled, and the first of the black things was upon him.

As his panicky lungs filled with air for the last time, Gordy knew what animal had screamed in the depths of the Coal Measure forest.