

10¢
ASTONISHING
STORIES

VOL. 2

FEBRUARY, 1941

NO. 3

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Magnus' Disintegrator

By Ray Cummings

John Magnus was a conscientious man. Even the act of leaving the world, he thought, should serve some altruistic purpose.

THE two men faced each other in the weird, eerie glow of light. Their glances crossed like sliding rapiers as they glared with hatred. For an instant the lurid room was silent. Outside the oval, metal-framed windows, beyond a little patch of private woods, the glow of the great city of New York of the year 2000 radiated up to paint the clouds with a spectrum of prismatic color.

"Funny we should wind up here like this, eh Rance?" the older man rasped. His slight figure was drawn erect as he stood in the center of the room where the

big disintegrator already was throbbing, whining with the current turned into it—whining like a monster on a leash, eager to get at its prey.

The younger man was backed against the wall where a big fluorescent globe on each side of him painted him with their glare. He was a stalwart, handsome, dark-haired fellow in the uniform of a private aircar operator. Terror was on his face as he stared into the muzzle of the older man's gun.

"Have you gone crazy, Mr. Magnus?" he gasped.

"Crazy? Oh no, I've just come to my senses." John Magnus shook his leonine head with its mass of iron-grey hair; and then he laughed sardonically. "Funny thing, Rance. Just an hour ago I had decided to kill myself. Then I found out about you and Carole and I forgot to do it. And now you and I wind up here. Stand still, you fool—want me to drill you? I will if you try to jump me."

"Mr. Magnus, listen—you're just excited. You've got me and Carole all wrong. You—"

Again the older man laughed. "We've finished with that, haven't we? I thought we had. And you don't want to die, do you? Well, that's where we differ. I don't mind it."

"What are you—are we going to do here?" young Rance muttered. His dark eyes were alert despite their terror as he gazed into the muzzle of the little heat-gun in Magnus' hand.

"Do? Why, we're going to die—for the advancement of science! What could be a more worthy death? We're going to operate this disintegrator until it explodes and kills us. You've heard about it, Rance? So dangerous an experiment—after the last two explosions—that the Federal Safety Bureau frowned upon any more such trials. Well, we're going to do it anyhow, you and I. We'll die, but the recording dials here, telling what happened up to the

instant of explosion, will make the next experimenter successful. Cheap power, Rance! Power almost without cost—that will be our donation to the world, though we won't live to see it."

He rasped out the words with vehement irony. "That's worth dying for, isn't it? The year 2,000—we'll make it a momentous year in the development of science. Carole will find us both dead, but she'll be proud of us."

"You—you're mad," Rance gasped.

"Oh no I'm not. Just amused at the way things came out between you and me."

THERE was a touch of hysteria in the older man's laugh. Through the windows to the east he could see that the stars were paling with the coming dawn. This dawn that he had never expected to see. John Magnus, the failure. He had failed at everything, even the disintegrator. But dying like this wasn't failure. He could envisage the final success somebody else would have, using this knowledge that now would be gained. The industry of the world revolutionized. Life made easier for millions of people. It was worth dying for that.

"Come on now, Rance," he was saying grimly. "I'll tell you what to do—your part's simple enough. We're martyrs to science. You'll have done at least one worthy thing in your rotten life."

The prodding muzzle of his gun shoved Rance to the seat at the disintegrator's spectroscopic eye-piece. "I'll explain what you do in a minute," Magnus said grimly. "Just sit quiet now."

With the gun in his left hand he kept the cowering Rance covered. And then slowly he moved the levers that controlled the current flow. The big disintegrator throbbed more audibly; its whine went up a notch in pitch—monster unleashed, eager now that its opportunity had come.

John Magnus' mind was a chaos of des-

perate excitement as he held his gun on the frightened Rance. Just a few minutes now and they would both be dead. Martyrs to science.

Queer, turgid circumstances which had brought John Magnus and Peter Rance now to the end of their lives .

EARLIER that night John Magnus had decided to kill himself. Not by an experimentation with the disintegrator. That needed two operators. When he had built the big apparatus after two previous failures, he still had not realized quite how dangerous it would be to make a third attempt. But when the Safety Bureau investigated and decided against it, Magnus had not been willing to search for two suicide volunteers. He could probably have gotten them, of course—two poor devils willing to kill themselves for money which their families needed. He had decided against it. For nearly a year now the big disintegrator had been standing ready, but untouched.

Then had come the failure of all Magnus' gigantic business enterprises; and tonight he had planned to end it all by shooting himself. Vaguely he had thought of the disintegrator. But there was no time now to get anyone to work it with him—even if he had been willing to let someone else kill himself, which he was not.

So he had decided that he would drill himself, in his rest-room at three A.M. At two-thirty he was sitting slumped in his chair, with his back to the door of the room. The big oval which he was facing admitted a yellow-blue sheen from the great city outside. It painted his slight sprawled figure, glowed in his mass of iron-grey hair. He could see, through the window, the distant shining terraces of the metal city. Carole's car, with Rance the family operator at the controls, would be a little oncoming dot, widening to seem a squat-winged insect until all in a moment it would drone past the window and

land on the roof stage. But it wasn't in sight yet.

Half an hour, and then he would drill through his heart. There would not be another dawn for John Magnus, only the dawn of the Unknown. He could picture the stir it would cause, the blaring of newscasters' voices in millions of homes tomorrow morning:

John Magnus commits suicide. Head of the International Sub-sea Freighters succumbs to depressive mania worrying over the loss of the Nautilus. Drills himself at the trineight hour alone in his library. His personal affairs in chaos. International Freighters probably will cease operations. The sailing of the Nemo, sister vessel of the ill-fated Nautilus, scheduled for today, has been cancelled.

The end of John Magnus. The world would ring with it, for a few minutes, and then forget. But Carole would not forget. He was sorry for Carole. Her mother had died so many years ago—and John Magnus had been so very busy. Too busy to be much of a father to Carole—too busy of late even to realize that she was now eighteen, and very beautiful. Old Mrs. Thompson, his housekeeper, had reminded him of that, just a few days ago. . .

He shifted uneasily in his chair as he waited for Carole to arrive. Queer that she hadn't returned yet. She had gone up into Westchester, to a dance at the Livingstons; had told Mrs. Thompson she would be home by two. He wanted now, so much to say goodnight to her. It would be good-bye, though she wouldn't know it—until afterward.

TEN minutes passed, and still Carole hadn't come. Magnus' fumbling hand slid open his desk's front compartment; and his fingers gripped the little heat-gun which presently would drill its tiny searing blast through his heart. The metal grip-end was chill to his touch. Chill and rigid—like death.

John Magnus, the failure. How easy now, so near the end, to look back upon his mistakes. If he had not mushroomed International Freighters beyond his capital. If he had not quarreled with Lloyds, refusing insurance for the Nautilus, underwriting the ship and cargo himself which now were irrevocably lost in the bottom of the Nero Deep. Perhaps he was fated. Too many irons in the fire. Maybe his work on the disintegrator last year had been a mistake. If it had succeeded, it would have brought back his failing fortunes. But it had not. Or maybe, after that second little model had, like the first one, exploded and killed two men—maybe Magnus should have dropped the idea, saved his time, thought and money, instead of building the big model on the new principle. It was housed in a lonely laboratory building, near the end of Long Island.

Just another of John Magnus' failures. Oh well, a little shot from this gun—and that would be the end of all his troubles. His life insurance was all that Carole would need. But he must say goodbye to Carole now. Hold her—his little daughter who so surprisingly had suddenly become a woman—hold her just one last time in his arms.

It was too bad now that he had had so little time to be with Carole, these last good many years.

From where he slumped in his chair, pondering the wreck of his career, summoning his courage to end it, John Magnus could see across the blur of his desk and out the window beyond. The city spires and the skeleton legs of the landing stages were white as bleached bones in the moonlight.

And suddenly he tensed, sat up, peering through the window. To the left, one of the out-jutting terraces of the big building was visible. Carole's aircar had just landed there; its helicopter vanes were still slowly circling. And beside it, on the

terrace in the moonlight two figures were standing—the slender, white-robed Carole with the tall, dark-uniformed outline of Rance at her elbow. He should have been standing there respectfully receiving her orders for tomorrow; or guiding her along the cat-walk which led down into the living room. But he wasn't. One of his hands was on her slim shoulder as he stood looking down at her. They were talking; and suddenly Magnus saw her arms go up around his neck as Rance held her in a close embrace.

John Magnus in that moment sat bolt upright, stricken, with his breath stopped. The two figures presently broke apart; then Rance got into the car, its vanes whirred, slowly lifting it up until it disappeared in the direction of the roof-stage. Carole, with her cloak held around her, came down the catwalk. The moonlight gleamed with platinum tints in her mass of pale-gold hair piled on her head—hair which was disheveled from Rance's embrace. In a moment an angle of the building hid her.

AT HIS desk in the library, Magnus sat motionless. The little tilted mirror on the desk showed him that the corridor door behind him was open. He reached; lighted a small hooded desk light. It cast a pale circle of illumination upon his head and shoulders. His thin, square-jawed face was set and grim.

He heard her step in the corridor as she went toward her bedroom. She had to pass here; she would see his light.

"Oh, is that you, Father? Up so late?"

He turned in his chair as she came into the room. Yes, she was indeed beautiful. How she had grown, these last years—tall, slender graceful as a lily; refined, sensitive little face, framed by the tendrils of her pale-gold hair. She cast aside her rustling cloak as he rose to kiss her.

"You shouldn't be working so late, Father," she said. "You look tired."

"I haven't been working. Sit down, Carole. I want to talk to you a moment."

She sat obediently facing him. "Yes, Father?"

"Did you have a nice time at the Livingston dance?"

"Why, yes. Just fine. How did you know I was going to the dance?"

"I—I asked the help," he said. "Old Mrs. Thompson told me."

"Oh. I see."

He sat with his big-knuckled hands clasped between his knees. He was staring down at them. "Meet any nice young men there, Carole?"

"Why, yes. Of course, I guess so."

"Why I ask," Magnus said abruptly, "you can see the northwest terrace from here where I was sitting. I saw you say goodnight to Rance."

That startled her. He had been aware that she was puzzled by his questions; surprised at his interest. Now she stiffened and her eyes narrowed.

"Oh, you did?" she murmured.

"Yes, I did. Rather unusual good night for one of my employees and my daughter, don't you think, Carole? Seems like it might need explaining."

"Oh—yes—"

He said grimly into a little silence, "Well, go on."

Their gazes crossed. Adversaries. It wasn't what he wanted at all, so that he added, "Carole, dear—"

At once she melted. "Oh, Father—" Her dress rustled and glinted with the moonlight and hooded desk lamp as she rose, sat on the arm of his chair and slid her white arm over his shoulders. "I—we—we were going to tell you tomorrow. Oh, we knew you'd be surprised. But you see, it's so wonderful—"

"What's wonderful?"

"Our love. Us going to be married."

Neither of them were aware that out in the dim, padded corridor behind them, a tall dark-uniformed figure had come and

was standing by the door, watching and listening.

"**MARRIED?**" Magnus echoed sardonically. "So that's his plan? To marry you for the Trust Fund I made inviolate for you. Half of it when you marry—all of it when I die, plus my insurance."

"We—he doesn't want your money, Father. Oh, you don't know Peter. You can't realize—our love—you don't know—"

"I know him all right. I've employed him two years and he's a good flyer." He put his cold hand on top of hers. "I'm a judge of men, Carole. And I've heard—well a lot of things about him—about his private life, with women."

"Don't you dare talk like that," she gasped. "I won't listen. I—"

"What a fool I've been not to have taken better care of you, Carole." She tried to struggle away from him, but he held her. "Maybe it's nothing I could legally prove against Rance," he asserted, "but I can tell you, I'm not going to let you marry him. It would wreck your life—"

She got her hands loose and stood up, confronting him. Her little chin was up; her rouged lips quivered. Out in the hall, the clock chimed three. The hour beyond which Magnus had decided he would not live. But he had forgotten that now.

"I didn't know Rance ever flew your car," he was saying. "I just heard that tonight from Mrs. Thompson. I thought old Thompson always flew you, unless you went alone."

"There's a lot of things you haven't known about me," she retorted.

That cut him; it was so true. He could feel his face flushing. "Well, you can't marry him—"

"I'm of legal age—"

"Without your money? You think he'd marry you? I'll take it away from you."

Would he marry her, trusting that Magnus later would relent rather than see her in want? Perhaps he would.

"What—what are you going to do, Father?"

He was reaching for his buzzer. "Have him in here. We'll see how much he wants you, how much your money." Then a sudden thought checked Magnus. "Not tonight," he said grimly. Then he laughed strangely, a little wildly so that Carole stared at him, puzzled. "Not tonight," he repeated. "Rance will have to fly me over to the dock. Ought to start right now—conference with the Captain of the Nemo. Hadn't realized it was so late. We'll talk about this tomorrow, Carole, dear."

He held her to him and kissed her. His last farewell. He was still smiling that queer, twisted smile as he kissed her again and sent her to bed.

"NICE night for flying, eh, Rance?"
"Yes, sir. It is."

With its helicopters whirring, the small aircar lifted vertically, with the rooftop of Magnus' home dropping away beneath it. Then they slanted up into the starlight. The night was clear, glistening with moonlight. Magnus grimly sat beside his operator, covertly studying him. Handsome damn fellow. Queer how Magnus, intent only upon the vortex of his giant business enterprises, had scarcely given a thought to the talk he had heard about the fellow's private life.

"Nice flying on a night like this, Rance?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir."

Magnus' breath sucked in. He laughed. "Dammit, man, can't you add anything? I'm trying to make conversation. And you might drop the sir. It isn't—exactly necessary now, between us."

Oh, Rance knew what he meant all right. He started; and then he murmured, "I don't understand that, sir."

"Oh, yes, you do. About Carole. She

told me, just a few minutes ago, that she loves you. Wants to marry you."

Rance turned now and his dark eyes were narrowed. "Did she?"

"And I'm not going to let you marry her. You want her money, don't you?"

"Well—do I?" Then Rance suddenly showed his cards. He grinned insolently. "We're alone here—let's talk plainly. I heard you trying to blacken me with her. You can't prove anything that she'll believe. So we'll be married. She's a handsome little thing—worth any man's interest. So in a few days we'll—"

"You damned—" Magnus' hand slid toward his jacket pocket where his little gun lay cool and sleek. But he relaxed.

"Suppose she has no money?"

That made Rance laugh. "Oh, I guess you wouldn't let her starve as my wife. That's a chance I'll have to take. Her beauty is worth it—for a while, anyway." He seemed eager to taunt Magnus; he slumped back at ease behind the controls, chuckling to himself. And then he added, "Don't get so charged up. I just thought we ought to show each other where we really stand. You're an intelligent man—you know when you're licked."

"Yes, I guess I do," Magnus muttered. "So that's where we stand?" His breath was almost choking him. His hand came suddenly out of his pocket. He was panting, and he laughed unsteadily. "You're all wrong, Rance. That isn't just where we stand."

"Why—why, what the devil—" Rance's jaw dropped; the color faded from his face as he gazed at the leveled gun.

"We're not flying for the Brooklyn dock," Magnus said grimly. "Head us northeast. Damn it, do what you're told." He prodded with the gun.

The aircar swung. "Where—where are we going?" Rance muttered. Oh, he was a coward all right. Terrified, trembling as he gazed from the gun-muzzle to Magnus' grim set face. But he was alert; like a

trapped rat, trying to find an escape. "You're not going to—kill me, Mr. Magnus? Now, listen, about Carole—"

"We've talked enough about that," Magnus rasped. "You fly us—and I don't think you'd better try anything queer—"

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see. Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you. We're going to do something important for science. I'll give you directions. My Montauk work-shops. You've never been there, Rance? Well, you'll be interested."

THE north shore slid beneath them. Rance sat stiffened tense, with Magnus' gun at his ribs. Then at last they landed at the edge of the lonely patch of woods on Magnus' deserted little stage.

"Nice set-down, Rance. As I told Carole, that's one thing about you—you're a good flyer."

He pushed Rance ahead of him along the woodland path. The big metal and concrete laboratory building was dark and silent in the starlight. Magnus unlocked its door. Then they were in the laboratory room. The preliminary warming current went into the intricate apparatus of the disintegrator; the fluorescent globes

beside it bubbled with their lurid greenish saffron glare.

And the big disintegrator was throbbing and whining. Nearly a year it had waited, set and ready; and now its chance had come.

"Are you—have you gone crazy, Mr. Magnus?" Rance was gasping. Magnus had backed him over against the wall; the greenish glare made him look ghastly as a dead man. And then Magnus forced him to the disintegrator, where he sat on the stool, cringing, with the spectroscopic eye-piece beside him. He gasped,

"I'll do what you tell me. This—damned thing, will it kill us?"

Magnus chuckled.

"Well, at least it's a worthy death," Magnus told him. "Do you want, even a small chance to live?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Well, then you'd better listen to how you're going to help me." There wasn't even a small chance, of course—but no use of telling him that. Swiftly he explained. The tiny grains of sand already were trickling into the pressure chamber, deep within the big apparatus—grains to be bombarded by the neutronic fluorescence. Rance must closely watch the mag-

nified, prismatic image of them—watch and tell what he saw of the spectroscopic change which would presage the beginning of the disintegration. And Magnus simultaneously would alter the quality and intensity of the current. The dials would record it—dials that no matter what happened, were built to remain intact so that the next experimenter would have the benefit of their records.

“You see,” Magnus was saying, “we want the sand-grains to be prepared by specific gradations for that instant when the molecules will overcome their cohesion and fly apart.”

Ah, there was the trouble—though Magnus saw no need now to say it! The disintegration, no matter how slowly the gradations of preliminary break-down transpired, would come all at once! An explosion which would be the end. . . But he must carry the record of transition as far as possible. . .

“You—you think I can do what you want?” Rance stammered.

But Magnus didn't miss how alert the fellow was—how closely he was watching the gun-muzzle. Damn cowardly rat; and he was still hoping that he could get out of here. But he couldn't. And he didn't deserve to.

“Of course you can do it,” Magnus chuckled. He shoved at the current-levers. Now, only a minute or two. . . The end of everything. But it was worth doing.

HIS life and Rance's—to benefit the world. He could feel his heart racing, thumping. His breath seemed to catch in his throat, and a band seemed squeezing his chest. This damnable excitement. Not so easy to die, bravely with your mind only on the advancement of science. . . . Dear little Carole. This would save her from Rance. At least that he could do for Carole. The whirling current-dials and the levers swam before his gaze, but

he tried to steady himself. Beside him the two big fluorescent globes boiled with the deadly disintegrated chloride and monoxide products with the neutronic current bombarding them. . . .

“Anything yet, Rance?”

“No sir, not yet.”

Then the alert Rance, interested only in saving himself, saw that Magnus' gun-muzzle had wavered. He lunged to his feet, hurled himself upon Magnus. Then they were struggling, swaying as they gripped each other.

“Got you,” Rance panted. “You fool—you can stay here and die—to hell with you—”

They were struggling for possession of the gun, and suddenly it was fired, with its bolt stabbing past them. There was the tinkling of glass mingled with the hissing of the shot as the gun-blast struck one of the big fluorescent globes.

Magnus went over backward, with the younger, more powerful Rance on top of him. Then Rance broke away and leaped to his feet, trying to get to the closed door. But he staggered. The broken globe was flinging acrid luminous fumes around the room—lethal fumes which spread in amazing expansion so that all in that second the entire air was polluted. Rance gasped. Just one gasp. Then the poison, swift and deadly, was absorbed into his blood. He twitched with a horrible paroxysm, unconsciousness coming so swiftly that he was still balanced on his feet. Then his knees buckled. He was dead when he hit the floor.

BUT Magnus was still alive. The volatile fumes were less dense at the floor level. Magnus was choking, his senses reeling, but he had the strength to crawl for one of the windows, holding his breath as he drew himself up.

And he stared numbly at the turgid, fume-choked room. The short-circuited current was out of the big disintegrator.

It stood silent, inert. No, not quite silent! From deep within it now a little rumble was sounding. Magnus stared with the room swimming before his gaze. The big turbine wheels were stirring! Just a trembling quiver; then a little forward hitch. Then slowly revolving. . . Faster. Smooth and fast. . . A whirling turbine, powered only by the slow, progressive disintegration of the sand-stream.

Success at last for John Magnus. He realized it dimly as his senses reeled and he slumped limp on the window-sill. And all his pent-up emotions broke within him—so great a flood that the surge of it flung him off into the abyss of unconsciousness. . .

From a vast, far-away emptiness John

Magnus felt himself struggling back. Then at last he opened his eyes; saw the swimming, blurred vision of Carole's anxious face bending over him, with the white wall of a hospital room behind her.

"Queer thing," he murmured. "That globe got broken just at the right time to make the disintegrator a success. That saved me, Carole—"

"Oh Father dear, you're all right now—"

"Yes, all right now."

He clung to her hand, thinking of how he would guide her in the future—help her build her life firmly even while he was building the great power industry which would revolutionize the world.

Success at last for John Magnus.

THE END