

AMAZING

STORIES

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Illustrating a scene from "Winged Planet"

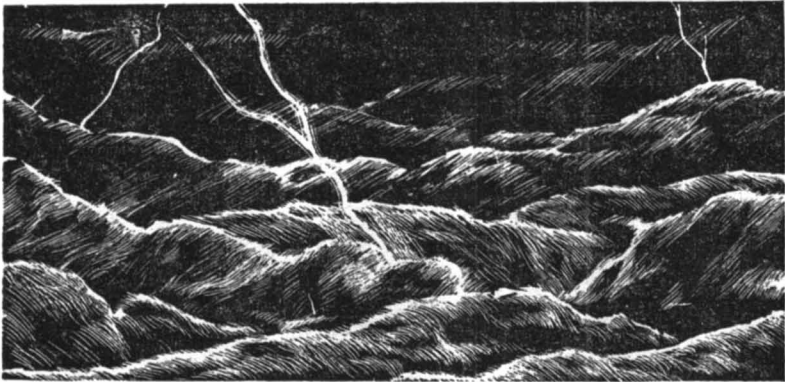
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No World for the Timid

By CHARLES E. FRITCH

This is a story for readers who like their meat raw, their facts plain and unvarnished, their fiction tough and realistic. If you want the full effect, read it at midnight during a cyclone.

ALL afternoon I've been sitting here at the mouth of the cave looking down into the valley at the empty riverbed and the lumps of rubble that gravemark what was once a city. In my memory the river is full and the city is tall, and people wander through neon streets. But then I blink my eyes and the river is dry and the people are dead and the city is no more. One of the children was down there today playing in the ruins. He brought back the symbol of death, a human skull that somehow had not disintegrated.

It gave me a shock at first,

but I wasn't angry. I got over being angry a long time ago. I thought I'd gotten over shocks, too, but the thought of death startled me. I had never forgotten that there used to be others alive in the world, but there had been no bodies left behind to remind me that life is a fleeting, tenuous thing. And now, suddenly, I was reminded. I thought: how long will it be before I am no longer living, I the last man alive.

I looked at the ivory skull, balancing it in my hand, gazing without compassion into the empty eyesockets, trying

to feature it with a nose, with lips, with hair. I got to thinking of Marla, and the skull became her skull. I had never loved her, really, but now I began to miss her very much. So very, very much that it hurt to think about it. I buried the skull in a pile of ashes near the cave and tried to bury my thoughts along with it.

When I got back to the cave, the children were all there fighting over a scrawny corpse of rabbit. I walked into their midst and snatched the body from them. When the oldest made a move to grab it from me, I struck him; he fell against the wall, whimpering, and looked up at me with cold eyes.

"We'll share this," I said slowly. "First, we'll make a fire and then we'll cook it. Then we share it." I looked at each one in turn. "We'll act like human beings."

They were like animals. They fought over scraps of meat with tooth and nail; they'd just as soon eat the animal raw, alive if need be.

I'd eaten worse things to survive, but now I felt sick thinking about it. Now, we're above ground and things should be different. I've tried to civilize them, God knows, but there's a limit to a mor-

tal's power. Four children, one male and three females, born in the utter blackness of a cavern miles beneath the surface of an Earth ravaged by atomic winds. I should kill them all, all of them, before they get too large for me to handle.

I've thought about that. Why bother starting over? Except for us, the world is dead. Why not leave it that way? End it now, forget it, and let nature try again in a few billion years if she wants to.

I keep thinking about it. I hold the future in my hand, to caress it and make it live, or to crush it and make it die with a simple closing of my hand. Sometimes I wish it weren't so. Sometimes when I'm alone here with only the wind to whisper forgotten melodies and the trees to wave skeleton limbs against the night, and the children are prowling like animals in search of food— But I won't kill them. I should, probably, but I won't.

We five are the last, the culmination of an evolution that took a million years. Where next, I wonder? Will my children or my children's children or *their* children touch another radioactive match to the world and watch

it go up in flames, watch it explode once more like some cosmic firecracker?

That's what happened this time. I saw only the beginning of it, but that was enough. Rockets shrieking across the sky like flaming banshees; great blossoms of smoke and flame that shook whole cities apart at the seams; noises like the gates of Hell rumbling open (and perhaps they were); the air beginning to glow like it was on fire, the ground starting to rumble and shake and crack open in great sores.

I remember it well. I was trying to get away from the cities, not realizing that there was no escape anyplace. Scared? I was terrified. I ran into a cave to get away—and the mouth of the cave closed up like a healed wound. I was trapped . . . but I was safe, too.

It was there I met Marla, and that's why I sometimes think that maybe Fate meant it this way. That's one of the reasons I hesitate to kill the children. I've never believed in Fate before, but—well, you never know.

There, in a system of tunnel - connected caverns, safe from the radioactive winds and the fiery blasts, we

stayed together and tried not to listen to the death rattles of the outside world. Marla was not pretty, but the pale glow of torchlight and the dying world made her the most desirable woman alive. After awhile, our wood supply gave out, and there came the darkness. And then our food supply was gone, and we went forth into the darkness to find more.

Humanity is persevering. We drank from an underground pool whose water seeped from above through layers and layers of rock. There was no way of testing it for radioactivity, but without water we could not survive so we drank it. Food we found crawling through the dark tunnels or hanging like damp moss on the sides of the caves. There were rabbits and squirrels and rats that had escaped into the tunnels, become imprisoned, and these we ate; and there were other things native to caves that we ate, too. You can get used to anything after awhile, if you have to.

"But what will happen when there is nothing more to be eaten?" Marla wondered.

"We'll worry about that when it happens," I told her.

"Would we turn cannibal?" she insisted.

"What do you mean?"

"It's happened," she said quietly. "Would we draw straws to see who would be eaten? Or would it happen sometime when one of us was asleep—"

"Marla, for God's sake, don't talk like that even as a joke! We'll find food, and we'll live, and we'll get back to the surface. But don't joke about something like that!"

"Yes," she said slowly in the darkness, "yes, I was only joking."

I felt relief flood me at that, but later I wondered despite myself if she had been even remotely serious. Darkness and lack of food can do unhealthy things to a person. Besides, the water might easily be contaminated, and anything might result. I knew one thing, though—we had to get out or become animals, or worse than animals.

"We could always eat the children," she said, not too long afterwards, when we were searching for food.

"We could," I admitted, knowing she could not be serious this time, "if we had any."

"We will have," she promised. . . .

It seemed much sooner

than the conventional nine months—but then in the darkness you couldn't gauge the passage of time. How long we were down there I don't know, but it must have been years and years. Somehow we managed to exist. We were both thin to the point of emaciation, but we lived; I think we even adapted to the environment. I wondered what the children would look like.

I wanted children, of course, as did Marla; when we got back to the surface—never once did I doubt that!—a family would get the re-birth of Earth started again. It was a pleasant thought being a new Adam, and I dreamt often of the day I would lead my children into the sunlight.

The day came years later.

One of the children found the opening and the sunlight, a shaft of pure gold falling to the cave floor. My eyes burned at the glare, but the children ran to it, chattering excitedly, and felt of the column of light as though it were something solid. I could feel my heart beating wildly for the first time in many long years; it was as though it had been stopped all this time and only just started again.

"The outside," I breathed. "Marla, the *outside!*"

I took her hand in mine and led her toward the opening. She trembled and grew stiff as we approached the light.

"No," she screamed suddenly, pulling away, "it'll burn me, it'll burn me! I'll die."

"You'll be all right," I said, squinting impatiently to see, and half-pulled her to the opening.

"No!" she screamed again and fainted.

Puzzled, I carried her back down into the cavern, down to the damp, dark cavern, and slowly, slowly, she came alive again.

"The light," she moaned, "the light."

"We've got to get used to it again," I said, though my own eyes were on fire from it. "We can't go on like this forever, staying underground like animals. We've just got to get used to it again, that's all."

But it terrified me just the same. The thought of going up there, out of the cooling darkness, facing that bright, hot glare that seemed capable of peeling the flesh from me. . . .

I tried not to think of it. I tried to remember the days

before the world took fire and burned. We must go up again and rebuild the world, I told myself; human beings were meant for a destiny greater than rotting underground.

"No," Marla cried, shrinking back. "I'm not going out. I'm staying here where I belong, where we *both* belong."

I grew angry with her. "We're human beings," I told her. "We belong in the sunlight."

She began to cry. Disgusted, I took her hands and dragged her screaming along the stone corridor toward the shaft of light and into it and out into the light of day. The blinding light came, and with it a great warmth that made my skin burn. She beat against me with frail fists, and I struck her and she fell in the sunlight and lay still.

"Marla," I said, not looking at her. There was no answer.

Eyes closed, I felt the warm glow that flamed against my eyelids. I felt my body tingle with the rays of sun stabbing me with bright shiny needles. Then slowly, slowly, I worked my eyes open again. Colors came—green, black, yellow, brown, green, black, black—sickly mats of grass trying vainly to cover layers and layers of

ashes. Below me, the world fell away into a valley of utter, dismal silence. But the sunlight was beautiful.

At the mouth of the cave, the children looking down at her, Marla lay in the golden sunlight; she was thin, incredibly ugly, with skin as colorless as paste and oozing sores welting her body.

I vomited then, and didn't turn back. It would be a big job, rebuilding the world. . . .

I haven't done very well at it, I'm afraid. The world is in as much ruin as ever, and there's so little time left. The children will have to carry on. No, I won't kill them.

They're getting big now, growing fast, and pretty soon they'll be pushing *me* around. The male will be the leader, of course. He's oldest, strongest, smartest, and very clever for his age. It's still pretty difficult to find food, but our son will manage all right. He said something today that reminded me of a thing his mother said long ago.

He gnashed his teeth and made tearing motions with his claws and shook his hairy body and rustled his wings.

"Someday I'm going to eat you," he said.

And you know, someday I believe he will. **THE END**