

PLANET STORIES



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An eerie tale of a boy-God sleeping through eternity on a world he had created with his Stone of Destiny; of the Androids he had created and their diabolic plan for destroying that world—and of two mortals trying vainly to battle for a doomed planet and to stop the immortals' plans.

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QUEST'S END

By **BASIL WELLS**

Thig's quest was not yet finished, for the Hordes of Ortha had sent another ship across the Void. Only he could halt Earth's destruction—with a weapon that was but a thought in his mind.

Illustration by Doolin



“I WAS a fool,” gritted Thig. His eye crowded the eyepiece of the compact metal case on the table before him. The window was open and the

ugly metal snout of the instrument pointed toward the eastern horizon. “I should have expected the men of Ortha to send a second expedition to Earth!”

Thig's compact body stiffened angrily. He came to his feet, his gaze roaming about the familiar disorder of the little boathouse. Here he came daily to write the lusty sagas of the Old West that had made the name of Lewis Terry familiar to millions of readers. Here beside the pot-bellied iron stove with the single cracked lid, he had worked long hours, striving vainly to forget that he was an alien being from another distant world.

Curiosity, a trait that no other Orthans had possessed for many thousands of years, had impelled him to construct a small, but powerful, etherscope, and trace the fate of the space ship he had deserted. It had been built of odds and ends of material at night, but it opened the heavens before him. He saw planets and suns, countless light years distant many of them, and eventually he found Ortha—in time to see the space ship being boarded out in space by patrolling Hordemen, and quickly destroyed. They were taking no chances on the spread of the contagion from Earth among the Orthans.

For the good of the Horde, the alien that was Lewis Terry knew, the patrolmen would transmit the information they received, and then destroy themselves. In their narrow philosophy of life only the Horde mattered. He had been like that when his name was Thig, and the memories of Lewis Terry were not yet part of his life.

And now another space ship was coming to Earth, coming to check on the findings of that earlier ill-fated expedition, and he alone could checkmate them! . . . If he had only kept watch on Ortha!

He had two months, possibly a few days more than that, in which to destroy this second expedition that meant conquest and certain death for all Earth's warring millions! Two months to prepare!

For the good of Ellen and the children, the children of the dead man whose identity he had stolen, he must succeed. The lusty primitives of this rich green world must never be replaced by the disciplined robot race that was the Horde.

He covered his typewriter. The lock snapped with finality as he turned the key. He flexed the muscles of great arms, much too powerful for the meek appear-

ance of the writer they were, and the blood beat hot through his squat body.

"You're staying locked," he said slowly, "until the last Hordeman is wiped from the face of Earth." He smiled grimly as he reflected that his hero was trapped atop a waterless butte with a horde of Apaches howling below.

"Hope you can stick it out for eight or nine weeks without water, Brazos," he said to the typed pages he was leaving.

THE LIFE BOAT lifted sluggishly from the sands that had covered it for two years. Thig cleared each jet carefully, and then, finding them unharmed, he bored high into the stratosphere. Behind him the submarine patrol and the air-raid posts went mildly insane. They knew that some strange craft had roared up from the beach on Long Island, but they were never to know what it was.

Ellen, Lewis Terry's wife, clenched the short letter that her husband had pressed into her hand as he kissed her earlier that evening. She did not know that he was really Thig, nor did the letter reveal that fact. If he was to die, he would die Lewis Terry. The letter told her simply that he must go away on a secret mission for several months. She understood now why the unshed tears had been bright in his eyes.

Over the United States Thig blasted the life boat, and across the Pacific. He was getting as far from Long Island as he could, and one of his plans to destroy the Orthans called for many tons of explosives. Explosives, he told himself grimly, that the yellow men would furnish.

He landed at last on a rocky strip of island that was outside the combat zone, and there commenced to lay out his trap. It would take many tons of explosives to penetrate the tough hull of the space ship he knew, but the ship must be destroyed. He had considered building a huge heat blaster, but the time was too limited and he knew how powerful were the protective shells of a space ship's skin.

Gadgets he had considered; tricks that might gain for him entry into the ship where he could turn his own decomposition blaster on his brothers—all the tricks of the writing trade had passed muster before his mind's eye—but inevitably he

returned to the decision that explosives gave the only certain means of destruction.

There was an island not far from his landing place where the men with yellow skins had stored a great quantity of munitions and supplies. The fighting front was far to the East and at night no great precautions were taken. Any approaching fleet of bombers or surface ships would be detected long before they could reach this island. Nothing but submarines.

Thig's space ship moved almost silently through the water offshore. The design of the ship that permitted no air to escape now permitted no water to enter. For many of the planets that Ortha claimed for her own possessed gaseous envelopes that were denser than water, and the Horde's ships were equipped to meet those conditions.

Softly the bow of the little craft nosed up on the beach inside the harbor, and from its single lock stepped Thig. Naked he was now, as were all Hordemen, and from the harness of flexible plastic about his body there depended a decomposition blaster and an old butcher knife that he had whetted to razor sharpness.

"You hear something?" asked one of the two guards.

"It was the waves," his comrade said, listening for a moment.

"In the darkness I can see nothing," grumbled the first Jap. "Perhaps the Marines are landing."

"Ho," laughed the other guard, "the Marines are thousands of miles away. They cannot stand against the power of our Emperor."

"It has been more than a year," said the fearful one, "and we have not yet conquered all of California. I have heard that a few Marines are still hiding in the Solomons."

"The radio does not tell you that," scoffed the guard. "We have sunk every American boat. There are no more American airplanes in the Pacific. Soon we will all move to America and have the white barbarians to wait upon us."

"Was that a Japanese bomber yesterday?" The man's rifle thunked lightly against wood. "There were circles on its wings."

"There may be a few left," was the excuse of the other guard. "Now we

must cease talking and walk our posts."

Now Thig could make out the shapes of the guards as they went their way. One of them, the short, thick yellow man was coming slowly toward the tree that sheltered Thig. Perhaps he was dreaming of the fertile valleys of America, where the white-skinned men and women would be his servants, as he walked along.

Abruptly great fingers clamped around his throat, and he felt the sting of something that slammed against his chest. His feet scuffed at the soil, and then a great roaring filled his ears.

Thig eased the limp body to the earth. The other slim guard had halted, his nervously acute ears picking up some vague sound.

"What—what was that?" he called to his comrade.

Thig eased his blaster from its holster. In a moment the guard would arouse the other members of the garrison. The distance was too great for the knife—the man would be able to fire his rifle before he reached him.

The weapon's invisible rays slammed the Jap's body backward. Even as he fell the flesh was falling, rotted by the blaster's swift decomposing action, from the man's bones. A moment later only the crumbling bones of a skeleton remained of what had been a soldier.

He loaded the little ship to its capacity with explosives from the stores on the island, and before he left he touched a match to the buildings. Then he blasted off, with the water clearing explosively from his spacer's overloaded jets to arouse the sleeping warriors of the Mikado.

AFTER that first foray Thig raided many an outlying island, and looted the sunken transports that lay in the shallow water between some of the captured islands. He mounted a heavy machine gun in the nose of his agile little craft, and many a yellow man never returned to his home landing field. By days he hid near his objectives, in the jungle or the shallow water in the shadows of a jutting coral reef, and by night he moved like a giant crab, in his space suit, among the sunken ships.

His stores of explosives he concealed in a great ring around the heart of the island

—the only practical landing spot for the space cruiser, already slackening its terrific drive as it passed Pluto. How many tons of the deadly material he had collected he could not tell, but there was already sufficient to blow the island and everything upon it into oblivion.

Time was growing short. Less than a day remained in which to bait the trap with his own ship for bait. The cruiser's detectors would pick up the *trylerium's* characteristic radiations from the pitted walls of his rocket jets—the blasting jets of all space ships were made of *trylerium*—and they would land nearby.

That he would be blown up, too, in the explosion did not matter greatly, thought Thig. Ellen, the wife of the man he had helped kill, and the children, would be safe. Earth could go on in its own bloody blundering way to a glorious future.

But first he must bring back another load, the final link in the deadly ring about the landing place. Morning was at hand. He would have to work fast. He left the load where it lay and blasted off.

The great bomber, with the circles painted on its wings, passed over the little island. It returned. The pilot shouted and bombs intended for a target several hundred miles to the south took their final plunge earthward.

The ship was bullet-scarred—off its course—and since this was Japanese-dominated water his mistake was only natural. He took the caches of munitions for enemy supply dumps.

It was his last mistake. The island dissolved into splintered fragments, and with it went the bomber and its brave crew.

THIG awaited the coming of the ship from Ortha on another island. He had accepted the destruction of his long weeks of planning with the fatalism that the Horde had taught him. Since one plan had fallen through he must use another. He would persuade the Orthans that he wanted to return to his own people, and once inside, with a little good fortune, he might be able to destroy them. He had killed his two fellows on the first expedition, but already his fertile imagination had invented a logical explanation of his presence on Earth.

As the great ship swung down past Luna his radiophone came into play. Their detectors might pick up his weak signals at this distance even though they would have no reason to expect an Orthan ship here on Earth. His whole plan was based on the strategy of luring them here before they could start a thorough exploration of Earth.

Time went by swiftly, too swiftly, for there was no answer from the ship. He thought of taking off to meet them, but already the ship must be screaming down through the upper atmosphere. He shouted into the transmitter.

A grating sound came from the receiver. A hollow sound of contact that he sensed rather than heard. A cold emotionless voice spoke in the strangely unfamiliar language of the Horde.

"Who is calling the ship from Planet 72-P-3?" it demanded.

"A fellow Hordeman from Ortha," replied Thig hurriedly. "I escaped from the space cruiser commanded by Torp, after madness claimed him. He struck down Kam first, and then attacked me. After he left me for dead, I took a lifeboat and escaped."

"You are Thig?" said the even voice of the man from Ortha.

"That is right," acknowledged the other.

"Urol, commanding the second expeditionary flight to Sector 5-Z," the Hordeman identified himself. "With me are three others: Brud, Zolg, and Turb."

"Zolg and Turb I know," said Thig. "We trained together."

"Our detectors show that your location is in the largest body of water, near the eastern shore of the principal land mass of Planet 72-P-3. Is that correct?"

"Right. There is room to berth five like yours upon this uninhabited island. Here we will be safe from the Mad Ones."

Thig could almost see the Hordeman's smooth brow furrow with the unaccustomed task of thinking. The majority of the Horde's thinking was automatic, seldom did an alien thought intrude upon their formulized system of life. He smiled tautly—another gift from the dead man whose memories he had robbed was that of humor—as he listened for Urol's answer. There could be only one logical explana-

tion for Thig's words. And Urol, like all the Hordemen, was a coldly logical being.

"There is madness on this world then?" Urol asked.

"That is right." Thig drew upon the story-telling genius of Terry as he related the carefully plotted story that would permit him entrance to the Orthan ship. They must believe him. . . .

"There is madness on this world, indeed," he went on, after a moment, "but it did not originate here. Kam and Torp, when they returned from the watery planet, Planet 72-P-2, brought back the virus of madness with them. Both of them were infected, and their brief stay on this planet served to spread the disease here also.

"All over Earth, or as we call it, 72-P-3, the madness is spreading. Where there was peace and plenty there is now war and starvation. Most of this sub-human animal race will be wiped out before this madness has run its course."

"Yet you escaped its ravages," Urol said. "Have you discovered how to control this madness?"

"But I did not escape," Thig told him. "For many days after I returned to Earth I was insane. Torp and Kam had infected me as well. But I am strong, and I threw off the disease. At intervals it recurs but I strap myself down so I cannot harm myself before the madness passes."

"By the Law of the Horde," said Urol slowly, "you should be destroyed if the disease is incurable."

"I know. I feared that another expedition would come and carry the madness back to the Harde. I kept myself alive to warn you. I will show you the ravages of the disease, and then destroy myself."

"It is good," agreed Urol. "We are preparing to land now."

The communication link snapped between them. Above the island a tiny black speck swelled until it became a vast grubby bulk of metal supported by flaring jets of gaseous fuel. The thick ship slowed its sheer drop, and with a final burst of fire from blackened jets, came to rest.

Thig looked to his decomposition blaster to see that it was thoroughly charged. This was perhaps the hundredth time he had examined his weapon. He chuckled at the ease with which the leader of the mother

planet's ship had been tricked into believing his fantastic tale. All that remained now was to gain admission into the space ship.

He left his own little life boat and walked toward the space cruiser. He reached the outer lock and attempted to open it. It was stuck. He tugged futilely at the pitted metal of the controls, and after a moment hammered at the door with a lump of volcanic rock.

A speaker from just inside the door broke in upon his labor. He dropped the rock and listened.

"Why do you attack the door?" it asked.

"The lock is stuck," answered Thig.

"No," the Hordeman's voice said, "the lock is not stuck. It is sealed against the possibility of contamination from the atmosphere of 72-P-3."

"I cannot join you?" asked Thig as calmly as he could. Despair contracted his vitals as he saw this latest plan go glimmering.

"Naturally not!" The speaker's voice showed as much surprise as it was possible for an Orthan to display. "We can take no chances on the madness infecting any of us before we carry this information back to Ortha."

"I will tell you as much as I know," said Thig. "It is fortunate that I am outside the ship."

"Yes," agreed the voice. "Better that one die instead of four. The resources of the Horde must be conserved."

ALL through that first night after the space ship landed beside his little life boat, Thig lay on his sleeping deck trying to work out another method to overcome the four Hordemen inside their sturdy cruiser.

Explosives were out; he had lost his opportunity to blast the great ship into shards when the Allied bomber had mistaken them for Japanese supplies. Trickery that would permit him to gain entrance was negated by the sealed ports and locks of the space cruiser. He could not blast an opening through the ship's skin with his decomposition blaster—it was designed to destroy only flesh or vegetable matter.

Nor could he lure a Japanese or Allied force of bombers to attack the Orthan ship. The weapons of the space cruiser would

destroy such crude-winged mechanisms as might be thrown against them, and her own hull could not be damaged save by the most concentrated surprise attack. He knew how the Earthmen would work—a cautious bomber or two could attack first, and then, too late, a swarm of fighting planes and bombers would follow.

He could not lure brave Allied fliers to their death in any such fashion, nor did he think that the yellow airmen could cause any worth-while damage—not that he cared how many of them were destroyed! He might be an alien being from another world, but there was now no more loyal American than Thig. He had permitted the identity of Lewis Terry to overcome his own entirely.

No, he would have to solve this problem by himself. Upon Thig, and Thig alone, rested the future of the two billions of mankind. If the Horde saw through his fanciful story about the disease that was carried from Venus in the bodies of Kam and Torp, Earth would soon be overrun by the Horde. The Horde was unimaginative and logical in all that it did, a robot race of super ant-beings—and they would destroy all the human race to prevent any future revolt.

But if he could somehow thwart them; destroy this expedition, or send back another mute shipload of dead bodies as he had already done, Earth might not be visited again for several centuries. And she would be ready then, with a fully developed science of her own, to beat off any invasion from Ortha.

He would have to play out the game as he had started it, until an opportunity came to strike, and then he would strike hard. He went over the story he had already told the Orthans, testing it for weak points that might give him the lie, and at last he was satisfied. In no way he had offended logic—the Great War that had spread across Earth since he first arrived would but serve to corroborate his story.

With morning the explosion of bombs brought Thig to his feet. He cursed as he saw three airplanes circling overhead. They had come to investigate the mighty explosion that had sent a tidal wave rolling over the nearby atolls probably, but this was going to make

it awkward for Thig to finish his task.

The ships were Japanese light bombers he saw. They must have seen the circles that he had painted upon his tiny space ship, and mistaken the space cruiser for a larger Allied ship of some new design.

His receiver crackled as he answered the curt demands of Urol.

"They are the Mad Ones," Thig said. "Their madness causes them to fight among themselves. They drop their puny explosives foolishly upon the homes of other human cattle, taking great pleasure in wanton slaughter."

"But why do they attack us?" asked Urol. "Our ship cannot be harmed by their containers of expanding gases!"

"It is because they are insane, their minds diseased hopelessly." Thig smiled to himself. "I will go up to meet them, and destroy them with one of their own weapons."

"That is unnecessary," said Urol, "our own armament. . . ."

THIG snapped off the receiver. He sprang to the controls, and sent the little ship rocketing skyward. He patted the heavy machine-gun that had been part of his loot from one of the sunken transports. It was mounted in the nose of his craft, and already it had knocked a score of Zeros and other Jap planes from the skies.

He dove upon one of the crawling winged enemy ships. The gun chattered briefly, and smoke and flames curled back from the doomed plane's engine. One!

Another airplane climbed clumsily up to meet this wingless metal arrow. His sights centered on the target. Abruptly the enemy ship was gone, whiffed away by the terrific invisible rays of the space cruiser's atomic batteries. Thig frowned. These Orthans!

Thig climbed. The remaining Jap ship did not attempt escape. Instead it dove straight upon its target. Down it went screaming, its wings ripping away from the fuselage with the battering of the air at this terrific speed, even as the atomic cannons blasted again and again. The space ship's guns handled awkwardly on the ground.

Suddenly, the airplane disintegrated as an atomic bolt hit it squarely. The space ship ceased firing, and Thig slipped his

ship back to earth. He clicked open his transmitter.

"You will be destroyed before we return to Ortha," said Urol. "We cannot permit one of the Horde to live whose body and brain differ from the rest of us."

"That is right," agreed Thig. "I should have killed myself before you came." He paused. "I should not have tried to warn you."

"You are wrong again," Urol told him. "This madness destroys your reason. You were right in living until we came, to warn us. Now we can warn the Horde that 72-P-3 will be unsafe for colonization for many years."

Thig felt his lips twitch into a grin. Fortunate that these ships were not equipped with telescreens. His story had convinced the methodical, robot-like Orthans. If he could keep them from learning that there was actually no madness on Earth until he could contrive to destroy them.

The next words of the commander of the space cruiser sounded thunder-loud in his ears, tumbling his plans into ruin.

"We will return to Ortha with our reports at once," said Urol.

THIG sat frozen in his seat for a long moment staring at the transmitter. If he could only be certain that the Horde would find no flaws in his story; that Earth would never know the destruction that the Horde would bring.

And then he laughed. Fool! The Orthans were unimaginative as domesticated cattle. They were robotized animals, all but devoid of intelligence. He should have remembered sooner, for he had been one of the Horde before he stole the memories of an Earthman, and fell in love with the dead man's woman!

Until he came to Earth, Thig had never known that there was such a thing as a lie. Among the men of Ortha there was no deceit or treachery. If they killed or destroyed, it was necessary. If they related any happening, however unimportant, it was painstakingly accurate. Imagination was a word that was meaningless among the disciplined billions of the Horde. They would not detect a lie for they would not recognize one! Earth was safe.

"That is good," he said. "I will wait until you leave Earth, and then I will destroy the ship and myself."

Over China they knifed, over the ruined cities and bomber fields, and down across Russia where vast armies locked in bloody combat. They saw here again great cities that were ravaged by war. Higher they climbed above the ocean, until, above North America, Thig dropped behind the great cruiser.

He called the commander of the space cruiser then.

"My fuel is almost exhausted," he said.

"Prepare to dive into the Earth," said Urol in his emotionless voice. "We cannot waste the power of our ship to ray you. The senseless assaults of the madmen caused us to waste much of our power."

"I am leaving now," said Thig. "May the Law of the Horde endure forever!" And under his breath: "on Ortha."

Thig let the life boat drop away from the other ship. Slowly it fell at first, and then faster as gravity gripped it. Fifty miles the ship must fall before it smashed into the ground. By that time the cruiser would be already beyond the orbit of the moon, and all they would see would be the moment of impact.

Friction was heating the metal skin of the ship slowly as it fell. Thig locked the controls; set the rocket relays for increasingly powerful thrusts of power, and waddled clumsily out through the lock into the frigid thin air of the stratosphere. He stepped out into emptiness.

Inside the space suit it was warm, and the air was clean. When he had fallen a few miles farther he would open the glider wings, that were built into all Orthan suits instead of parachutes, and land on Long Island. But not until he was sheltered by the clouds from the view of the space cruiser.

He was going back to Ellen and the children with the knowledge that Earth was saved from the Horde—saved by nothing more deadly than a lie!

And the part of Thig's brain that was Lewis Terry was already busying itself with the plotting of a Western novel about the handcart pioneers. . . . Once he had rescued Brazos from that Apache-ringed mesa, he would get to work on it. . . .