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REBIRTH OF MAN

The green planet of Earth was only a laboratory for the knowledgeable Great Ones. But they doomed themselves by the success of their own experiment. . . .



Hammond Bob

By **BASIL E. WELLS**

HAMMOND clamped a warped hand to his shoulder. Blood spurted from a tiny puncture there. Above him he saw the shining metal of an instrument swiftly withdrawn; then a flooding surge of the injected serum sent him reeling.

Convulsions wracked his bony frame. His puny fist threatened those omnipotent beings peering down at him through vast lenses. Then a ghastly blueness swept across his face and terrible spasms tore his body.

Through clouding eyes Hammond

scemed to see his wife and little Hammond crouched fearfully in the vast village pen. Then his memory flashed pictures—rapid, tragically clear—of a dead world, untamed by the Great Ones, a green world where men ruled supreme.

Then had come the Great Ones out of the airless void about the planet. Men's weapons failed them. Swiftly they were eradicated, a mere handful being retained as laboratory creatures.

Hammond screamed shrilly. . . . He had been a doctor in those other days, working and experimenting with white

rats and guinea pigs. Ironic to die as they had died. . . . Light streaked and seared his brain. His muscles convulsed and life gasped out with his breath. . . .

THE Great One shook his mighty hairless head. Carefully he lifted the small carcass that had been Hammond and dropped it into a vat of acid.

"A thousand hairless inats have died," his fellow scientist, Kov, said. "It is useless. Let us destroy the inats and return. The secret of immortality has eluded us."

"No," the Great One answered, "we dare not return.

"This distant planet was chosen by the Lords. We work in secret that they alone may become immortal. It is death to return without success."

HAMGAR, great grandson of Hammond, slipped back into his hut of woven branches and grass. Three Great Ones, their vast bald skulls touching the clouds, loomed above his tribe's walled pen. Always they chose mature healthy humans—only the crippled and weak lived to grow old.

Hamgar stuffed a fish, speared in the nearby stream, into his mouth, crunching the bones between firm teeth. When he had eaten his fill he tossed the remnants to his mate and their three sons. He could hear the rumbling of the Great Ones overhead, a booming thunder of conversation.

He wiped his hands on a mat of woven grasses and was reaching for the water dish when a hurricane seemed to strike the hut. The frail shelter toppled as an enormous eight-fingered hand groped inside. Hamgar felt his body crushed between two of the massive digits.

The hand swept upward so swiftly that Hamgar choked. His eyes flashed across a vast gulf to the noseless face of the Great One. This then was the great moment that his tribal priests made medicine and prayed for.

Hamgar had none of the priestly desires, or faith. He wanted his mate, Una, and his little brush hut. He loved the forests and grasslands that covered the ten square miles of their great pen. He squirmed in the Great One's grip.

"Odd little beasts, these inats," the Great One boomed, but incomprehensibly to Hamgar. "The clever way they construct their nests and live together seems almost intelligent.

"When we first came," he went on, "the inats built tiny winged ships and wheeled vehicles. Those instinctive actions seem to have failed since their domestication."

"Luckyly for our experiments," the other laughed, "they cannot fly over even these low walls. They seem most tractable."

Hamgar felt the loathsome flood of serum released beneath his skin. His body began to waste away. Great sores burst from his body, dripping foul matter and blood.

Seven days later Hamgar smashed his head against a metal wall and died.

"We are learning," the Great Ones said eagerly. "Another hundred revolutions of the planet about its sun and. . . ."

HARG the Hunter writhed in agony. Like his remote ancestors he had been inoculated with an improved serum. The science of the Great Ones had won a partial victory. Harg had lived two years.

An arm had wasted away. His giant frame was warped and twisted. His eyes were dull, a somber glow of unquenchable hate burning far back in them.

He had seen others from his pen inoculated and die. Hairy inats and black-skinned inats from the steaming southern jungles were penned with him for a time—only to become fuel for incinerator or limp helpless flesh.

"Let us return this inat to his pen," one of the scientists suggested. "Young

inats bearing his blood might respond fully to our treatment. We cannot lose anything by such an act and may learn much."

HARG shook his aching head and sullenly faced the snarling priests of his tribe. His mate crouched at his side, her soft body tense against his leg.

"The Great Ones are not gods," Harg growled. "They are demons. They torture and maim. There is no joy and peace. Men turn blue. Their bones rattle. The Great Ones are evil!"

"Silence," snapped Rolt, the priest. "Go to your hut with your mate. You have blasphemed; so, for your sin, you must die."

The next sacred day Harg was dragged from his rude hut, bound to the top of a dead tree, and the tree fired. Harg lived until his body crumbled into ashes—tribute to the genius of the Great Ones.

But the appetite of the penned inats for blood was now aroused and they cried out for the mate of Harg. A kindly woman saw the path their minds were taking and hurried to Avot.

Avot snatched up a spear and slipped away into the matted forest. Not a moment too soon had she fled for the thudding of many bare feet reached her ears as she fled. Roars of foiled rage warned her that she was fair prey for that crazed mob.

Avot sent her lithe-limbed body racing along at a greater speed. If she could but conceal herself for a moon she could return safely. Their memories were short. . . . Thorns tore at her bare shoulders; branches snagged her fur-clad hips, but Avot ran on.

Once she stopped and melted back into a thorny clump of brush. A shaggy bull, one of a wild herd of cattle, was drinking from the brook. Further back she crouched—and a twig snapped!

The great bull focussed wild eyes upon

the girl's retreat. Avot froze, her breath silent. The great beast wheeled, head dropped and nostrils wide. In a moment he would see her. Frantically she fought the impulse to cry out. The bull rumbled angrily for a moment before he returned to the interrupted quenching of his thirst.

Avot crept silently away then, further into the thicket. The thorns were thick here but she was hidden from the trail. Suddenly, as she parted the bushes, the earth gave way beneath her feet and she plunged downward into blackness.

For a time she lay half-conscious in a muddy pool of water at the bottom of the pit made by her falling body. Then the coolness of the water revived her and she struggled to her feet. Above her, fifteen feet or more, green leaves mocked her. Then the voices of men, excited by the chase, sounded close by.

Wildly Avot searched the narrow pit. Crumbling walls of masonry surrounded her, but in one corner, half-buried by accumulated mud and debris, a half-circle of deeper blackness opened. Into this cavity she crawled and, shortly, was feeling her way along a cement tube, some five feet in diameter.

Beneath her feet a weak trickle of water flowed. Surely, she thought, the water must come out again further along the way. So, cautiously, her crude spear thrust out before her, she made her way along the tube.

Sometimes, as she advanced, the water was about her waist and clammy slime clawed at her ankles. The air was foul with the sour smell of dank, impure earth. Openings in the rounded walls admitted more streams of water until she was wading along a sluggish deep river.

Abruptly the sewer ended in a vastly larger opening, a circular tunnel fifteen feet in diameter.

Here Avot stopped to rest. The water in the larger sewer was gradually growing deeper. She could not swim—none of

the inats had tried to swim for many generations—so she finally retraced her steps to the smaller sewer.

Perhaps, she decided, another opening along the small tube would lead to the surface. She chose the first opening on her left hand and started up this new tunnel, fighting against the crawling current.

HOW long she mechanically slogged along through the sticky mud and water of the tube, she could never have told. When at last weary feet stumbled, and she fell, moist dirt was beneath her arms. The water was left behind!

A faint current of moist air stirred her tangled hair. Avot stretched her body wearily in the darkness and fell into sodden sleep, heedless of the water that beaded and dropped upon her.

Hours later she moved her chilled bare limbs and groaned with misery. To go further was hopeless. She would lie here and die. Harg was dead. It would be good to die. Avot lifted a hand to her face, a muddy and befouled claw, and with the action weariness fled.

She could see her hand! It was moving in the dull grayness! Her eyes sought the tunnel roof and she cried with joy. A great crack lay open above, the roots of crowding trees snaking down through the orifice to the dampness below.

Half an hour later Avot rested on the green sod beneath a mighty tree. Behind her lay the gaping opening from which she had escaped, and beyond that, a mile beyond, towered the mile high walls of the Great Ones' laboratories. For the first time in five centuries a human being walked free upon the continent!

Three hundred miles stretched away behind Avot before she made permanent camp. There, on an island in a wild lake, she raised a warm hut of mud and sticks and rested. For she was grown heavy with child.

Alone in the savage wilderness, once called the Finger Lakes, she gave birth to a son and called his name Harg after his dead father. And Harg grew until he had seen ninety moons pass.

Avot had not taught Harg to fear the Great Ones—only to hate them. In all the world Harg alone feared not the evil spirits and demons. Avot had defied the gods and she taught Harg to be likewise defiant.

So when Avot slipped from the fishing logs and drowned, Harg did not berate the unseen powers. Later, when he had dragged her lifeless body from the lake and covered it with great stones, he ran to the hut and buried his face in her sleeping skins.

He was lonely. . . .

When Harg was twelve he could kill a deer with a thrown stone and with a single arrow cut down a soaring bird. He had learned, by watching the frogs, how to swim in the water. Many times he had tried to make wings, to join the birds in their play, but could not. He floated on two joined logs to fish, pushing them along with a pole.

It was on this frail raft that Harg ventured to a more distant, rocky island, in the long lake. The wind caught at his brown-skinned body and helped his carved short pole at its work. No longer did Harg need bottom to pole his craft—he poled against the water now.

Harg fastened the rawhide thongs of his raft about a sturdy scrub-beech at the water's edge and climbed a rocky slope to the central level expanse—perhaps an acre. A few dwarfed trees had rooted here along the borders of the sinister bald plot, but no grass grew.

Harg strode across the seamed rock strata, his eyes intent on a circle of sunken rock. As he neared it he saw strange letters and figures chiselled into the sunken slab, ringing a central corroded metal ring.

To the men of the village pens this would have been fearful—taboo. Only the priests might examine any strange thing and bless or destroy it. Usually they destroyed what they could not understand. And they understood little.

But Harg knew little of superstition and nothing of fear; so he lifted the heavy stone slab and found a winding concrete runway leading down into the depths.

Further down the ramp a corridor opened and a dozen paces along this passage brought him to the first of several sealed openings. Harg approached the door, felt a quiver beneath his feet, and sprang back.

His knife was in his hand as he watched a thick slab of stone slip silently into the wall. A light flashed on and he heard the murmur of a human voice from the emptiness beyond.

HARG stepped cautiously into a spacious well-lighted room, hewn from the living rock. A vast amount of strange equipment, housed in sealed containers of transparent material, lined the walls of the chamber. The soft hum of hidden machinery, set in operation by the pressure of Harg's feet before the door, was in his ears.

His eyes went to a strange box with a barred metal grill across its front. The mysterious voice was coming from this box. Harg came closer.

"Hello, hello," a metallic voice was saying, "this is J. J. Franklin speaking. Push the red button. Push the red button. Push the red button. Hello, hello. . . ."

Harg listened to the words repeat again and again the same message. At last his finger poked the red button and the voice changed. A square of light came from the machine and centered on the dark-shadowed wall above the box.

"A, b, c, d, e, f. . . ." the voice droned on. "The symbols that represent these letters appear on the screen above. The

alphabet of 1960, men of the future. In the sealed cases are histories and the scientific texts of our day, as well as many of our tools and weapons.

"Perhaps you have learned much that we do not know. Perhaps. But if civilization has gone, as I fear it may, this store of knowledge may help mankind to climb again from the level of the beast.

"Listen and follow the directions I will give you. There is much to learn. First of all our written language. . . ."

Harg listened to the fascinating history of an older, wiser age. For a week thereafter he explored the treasure trove of ancient knowledge. Then with three of the metallic-leaved books and a small acid pistol, he paddled homeward. . . .

Years passed. Harg was a young man of twenty-five. He could read the ancient books and solve the number problems of the ancients. He no longer paddled a raft, the books had shown him the graceful swift canoe, and a revolver had replaced his stone hatchet.

Harg realized his limitations. One man could do little with the knowledge of the Ancients. Many hands were needed to build machinery and equipment. A thousand trained minds must concentrate on new weapons and defensive mechanisms.

Harg knew where the pens of his people lay, far to the south and east. Avot had told him of the ancient tubes, piercing the earth below the tribal pen, and how to traverse them. Yet he hesitated. The superstitious fear-ridden inats of the pens were poor material from which to forge a new civilization.

Suddenly Harg grinned at a new thought. Tomorrow he would go to the lair of the Great Ones and lead a few inats to freedom. They would obey his every command as though he were their father or the priest.

The next morning he slung a silent air rifle, loaded with acid pellets, across his bronzed shoulders; belted an acid

pistol about his hips, and saluted the distant rocky island.

"So long J. J.," he laughed. "Don't get lonesome."

Harg followed the game trails south. Sometimes he rode a log along a broad stream but a network of trails and crumbling concrete roads made travel on foot more practical.

A week after he left the lakes Harg came in sight of the soaring walls and towers of the Great Ones. Harg was a man, a tall man well-muscled and broad, but he dwindled ant-like beneath the glowing bulk of that awesome pile.

Once a Great One came through the wall, a section swinging outward. His vast noseless face, three hundred feet above, was a rounded bluish hill atop his massive trunk.

Harg hid between two great boulders watching the Great One pass. Every step crushed small trees and brush down into a broad circular depression some forty feet in diameter. Harg was amazed at the vast size of the alien being. He had not dreamed. . . .

FOR two days Harg circled the walls, searching for the opening through which Avot had climbed. It was the second evening when his search ended and he descended the tangled roots into the old sewers.

Unlike Avot he could see. He carried a small carbide lamp and could travel swiftly where she had crawled. There was little water in the tubes. Harg grinned. He could bring the inats with him on their own legs.

He found the opening into the inat pen, the mouth well-screened with thorny brush. A stone fastened to his rawhide rope solved the climbing problem by wrapping securely around a sturdy limb. Then Harg slipped silently away toward the crude village of his kinsmen.

Thereafter, for a week, in four huts

there was sadness. Evil things, spirits from the forest, had stolen away their young—two boys and two girls, none of them older than sixty moons. The priests grew rich as terror gripped the tribe. Nor did the priests venture alone into the ominous forest shade. . . .

Harg toiled northward, his progress maddeningly slow. The four tiny children he had kidnapped hampered his progress. He killed for five now, and searched for the more open trails as they went. Even so a march of five or six miles exhausted their little legs; then Harg fashioned a sledge of poles for them to ride upon.

A week away from the pens of their people Harg left them and went into the forest after game. Shortly, coming out into a grassy glade, he saw a small herd of wild horses. Memory of those hours every day when he must drag his crude sledge along the forest trails made him grit his teeth. He fashioned a loop in his rope and crept nearer.

Not until the next afternoon did a much-battered and weary Harg lead a plumb mare into his camp. The four hungry children greeted this new captive with wide eyes, wondering if this was to be their dinner. But Harg tied the mare to a tree and went out in search of a deer or pig.

For more than a week he worked with the mare until she grew gentle. Then he slung the four children in twin sacks of skin across her back, took the rope halter, and set out for the lakes at a trot. . . .

The boys grew into young manhood. Two more dwellings, well-lighted and warm, were raised near Harg's. Then, when Jon looked softly at Maro, Harg joined their hands and sent them to one of the new homes.

Wilam and Salo, the other young ones, quarreled often after that, but Harg saw Wilam sit idle for hours, his eyes on the shining golden hair of the girl. Harg took Wilam away to the island of J. J.

and left him there to study—and shortly Salo's hair seemed to dull and she laughed rarely. All day she sat and watched Harg and Jon at work in the hidden workshop.

Harg laughed silently, then, and took Salo to the other new dwelling.

"Bake food and prepare meat," he told her, "for this evening you will take your mate's hand and we will feast together."

Salo smiled up at Harg. Harg felt, uneasily, that he was a man, and she a woman; so it was that he hurried down to the lake and paddled swiftly away. Salo's smiling face danced before him. His fingers ached to stroke that shining hair. . . .

When Harg placed the hand of Salo in the hand of Wilam, that evening, the girl paled and her eyes went up, bewildered, to those of Harg. Only then did Harg know that Salo loved him. . . .

THE years dragged along in the lake country. A dozen times the people of Harg, Yankas they called themselves, raided the inat villages to carry off their young. The few houses expanded into a village, and the village into four others. Jon and Wilam died and their grandsons followed them to the grave. Another Salo, the tenth generation offspring of Salo, had taken the hand of Harg.

Harg searched his head for grayness and his skin for wrinkles. He was a young man among young men, yet two hundred years had passed since Avot fled the inat mob.

Two-score dirigibles were moored beneath concealing green roofs of hemlock and spruce. A hundred swift fighting planes and bombers lurked in underground hangars. The Yankas were girded for war.

The people of Harg numbered more than a hundred thousand and their five sunken cities were marvels of perfection and utility. Already they had equalled and surpassed the knowledge of the An-

cient. And in every city a bronze tablet was raised bearing the initials J. J. to honor the ancient dust of an eccentric American scientist.

It was Harg, in a tiny fly-like craft, who first explored the vast buildings of the Great Ones. Safe among the swarms of huge flies that had journeyed to this world in the space-ship he cruised for a day along great halls and above gigantic machinery.

Among all those vast walls he found but two of the Great Ones. But two of the hundreds that had so triumphantly exterminated the annoying inats.

The two scientists were old. Their life span of a thousand earthly years, was almost at an end. They must soon return if they would walk the gray plains and harsh yellow hills of their own distant planet.

So now, flying far above the bald blue skulls of the Old Ones a tiny inat, blessed—or cursed—with the deathlessness, implanted within his sire's warped body, transmitted to his own body, watched them refueling and provisioning their ship.

Harg watched great robot machines perform their myriad duties. He saw a science, mighty and unbelievable, that had made the Great Ones invincible. Only a miracle could destroy these mighty intelligences. And Harg had planned that miracle.

Had not the Great Ones been old and homesick they might have noted the discolorations that circled the control turret and the main lifting jets. They might have seen, every night, a score of flying craft hovering over the ten miles of dully gleaming metal dropping a steady rain of soft acid shells.

Harg scouted the vast rooms of the Old Ones daily. His radio was constantly in touch with Yanka headquarters and as the Great Ones prepared to enter their great ship all the massed aircraft of Harg drew near.

All the ships dove down upon the great

ship as the outer locks clanged shut behind them. Acid bombs dropped upon the pitted outer skin of the ship. Tons of dynamite blasted at the control room. They were as mosquitoes about an elephant.

Suddenly a vast shimmering bubble of flame built up about the ship and expanded. Dirigibles flared up on contact with that wall of force and bombs exploded harmlessly.

The undamaged ships withdrew quickly but not before twenty airships and thirty airplanes had become hot dust about the great ship.

The space-ship quivered, slipped ahead, and surged upward into the cloudless sky. A hundred miles—two hundred miles—she roared out into space before one of the jets, acid-eaten and weak, exploded violently.

SHE pitched crazily, curving back toward Earth, while the Great Ones fought their controls. Then the control turret gave way and the frigid emptiness of space swallowed their precious air. One of the Great Ones reached a sealed life-

boat before the cold stiffened his great carcass, but his fellow died in his cushioned harness.

The lifeboat flashed free of the hurtling derelict as the Atlantic Ocean was just beneath. For a short time the little ship wavered on into the east until, over France, the twin hearts of the aged Great One failed him and he crashed, in death, against the Alps.

Back in Avot, capitol of the Yanka nation, there was joy. Mankind was free to again cover the continents with vast cities and squares of cultivated ground—or to indulge in bloody suicidal war.

Harg stood on a hill, high above the city. He felt the warmth of his mate's smooth flesh. . . . But a vision was come upon him. . . .

He saw her grow old and wrinkled . . . saw mankind, grown strong and arrogant . . . friends were gone and new faces about him. . . . New conquests, new worlds to pioneer. . . . He was weary, and the world grown old and cold and bare. . . .

Harg laughed suddenly. The world was young and Salo beautiful. . . .

THE END