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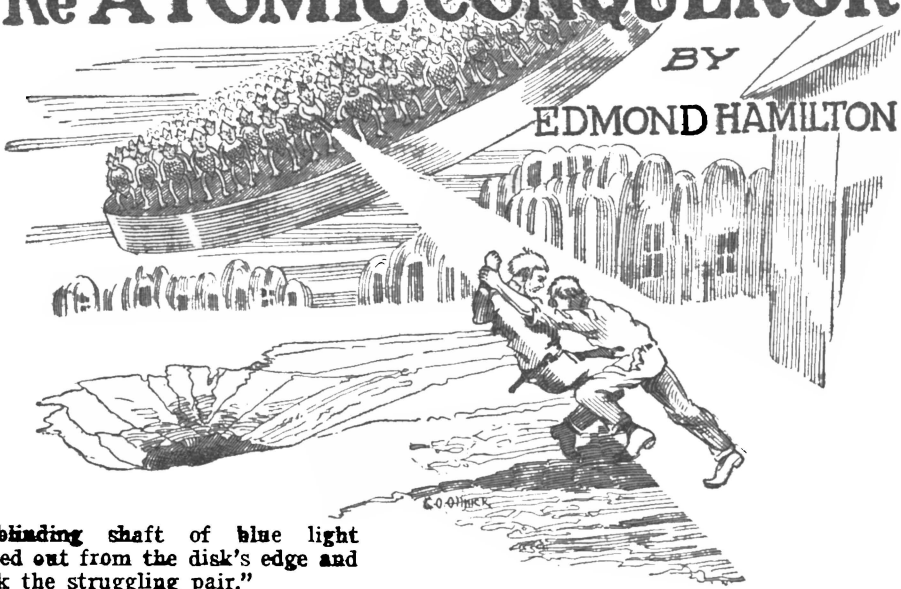
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The ATOMIC CONQUERORS

BY
EDMOND HAMILTON



"A blinding shaft of blue light stabbed out from the disk's edge and struck the struggling pair."

LOOKING back, one is struck with wonder that we know as much of the story as we do; that we comprehend as fully as we do the nature of the strange doom that rushed out onto humanity from a lonely hill in southern Scotland. Had it not been for one small thing, the casual curiosity of a young student, that appalling invasion would remain to this day quite unexplained. A trifle, certainly, that passing interest of a rather commonplace young man, but except for that interest, and what it led to, we would understand nothing of the vast drama that was played around and above us.

Not that our ignorance or knowledge could have affected the outcome of that drama! Beside the tremendous forces that rose and fought and crashed, mankind was but a mass of tiny, frightened pigmies, running about beneath battling giants. Yet one remembers that it was one of those same pigmies, it was a single embittered, insane man who loosed all of that ancient terror upon

us and caused an age-old cosmic feud to flare out in dreadful war, universe struggling with universe in titanic combat, immense, unthinkable. . . .

The story, as we know it, begins on that sultry afternoon in August when young Ernest Hunter came into the village of Leadanfoot and dismounted wearily from his battered bicycle. A day of pedaling over the Scotch hills had made him regret, somewhat, his decision to visit Glasgow on his holiday trip. One of the numberless students who swarm over the English highways each summer, on cycles and afoot, he began to think that this side-trip over the border was, after all, a mistake.

But once inside the dark, cool little inn, with a mug of foaming cider at hand, these doubts fled and the world again seemed a very pleasant place. This Hunter, lengthy and stooping of figure, with a thin, humorous face, was a social type, and looked about now for possible company. Except for himself there was no one in the long, low room but the two men

who stood near the open door, the stocky, aproned innkeeper and a white-whiskered, wrinkled old man with whom he was conversing. His cider finished, Hunter rose and lounged toward them, catching a few words of their talk.

"Thunder? No!" the innkeeper was exclaiming. "Who ever heard thunder like that?"

The other was nodding his agreement when their conversation was broken into by Hunter's friendly voice.

"Thunderstorm here lately?" he asked. "I came through a bad one down at Carlisle, Wednesday. A messy sort of thing. Lightning fired a house there."

The host contemplated him doubtfully before replying.

"It was not a thunderstorm we spoke of," he told him. "There was a queer thing here—I don't just know—McAndrews here heard it, and so did I——"

He paused, but Hunter was interested, and questioning him further, found that the subject of discussion was a series of strange detonations that had been heard throughout the village on the night before, a succession of deep-toned, rumbling explosions that seemed to come from the group of hills west of Leadanfoot. All in the village had heard the sounds, and most had set it down as distant thunder, but the innkeeper quite evidently disagreed.

"Like no thunder you ever heard," he assured Hunter. "Boom—boom—boom—boom—boom! Regular, like a big cannon firing. I've heard enough thunder in my time, and this sound was not like it, not like it at all. Eh, McAndrews?"

The wrinkled oldster sagely nodded agreement.

"Maybe it was blasting you heard," Hunter suggested. "Some farmer up there doing something of that kind, perhaps?"

For a moment the innkeeper contemplated him with that fine scorn with which the rural native regards a stranger ignorant of local geography. "Farmer up there!" he repeated, in the tone with which one would reject an unworthy statement. "Why, there's not a house through all those hills. Too steep they are, and wild. I doubt if a single soul has lived there for the last ten years."

The aged McAndrews removed his pipe from his mouth to voice dissent. "How about the scienteefic chap-pies?" he asked.

"Well, except for them," conceded the host, somewhat discomfited, while the older man replaced the pipe and regarded him with stern gravity. Possibly to cover up his mistake, he went rapidly on with explanations for Hunter's benefit.

"Two science professors they are, that have a cabin on one of the hills. For near a year they've been there, studying the glassy forts, I hear. I never saw them, myself, for they get everything they need over at Dykirk."

A term in his speech caught Hunter's interest. "The glassy forts?" he repeated, interrogatively.

"There's some piles of old stone ruins on some of the hilltops around here," the innkeeper explained. "Some of them have parts of stones all melted into glass. Lightning did it, I suppose. Around here we call them the glassy forts, and it's them that these men are working with, digging and such."

"Oh, I see," said Hunter. More slowly, he continued, "Do you know, I'd like to see some of them if it wouldn't take too long. Do you suppose I could, in a day?"

"Well, you can if you're a good climber," his host informed him. "Lowder Hill is the nearest to here, and they say there's such ruins on top of it. It's not so steep, either. There's another hill right next to

Lowder, Kerachan Hill, but it's too high and rough to get up and down in a day, hardly. It's on Kerachan that the science men are staying, I think. You'd best try Lowder, though."

"I'll stay here tomorrow, then," Hunter told him, "and make the trip. I'm so infernally tired of pedaling that a day of tramping will be a rest."

The prospect had intrigued the young student, and before retiring for the night he acquired enough information to guide him on the next day's trip. Also he had been furnished with a number of weird anecdotes concerning the glassy forts, which were evidently objects of local superstition.

The sun was an hour high the next morning when he left the inn, a small package of lunch in his pocket. He swung quickly through the village and tramped steadily over stony roads and rough moor toward the dark, looming bulk of the western hills, whose sides were almost completely hidden by dense forests of fir.

Hunter had been advised to climb Lowder Hill from its farther side, so on reaching it he walked in a great circle around its base, through a narrow, wooded valley that separated it from Kerachan Hill. As he passed along this valley, he was struck by its utter peace and quiet. The smaller forest creatures were frightened away by the sound of his coming, but once he glimpsed the vague dun shape of a deer slipping through the trees in the distance, and now and then startled groups of birds burst up through the trees at his approach, noisily discussing him in disparaging terms, in their flight. The busy, shouting, bellowing world seemed inconceivably remote, in that tranquil spot.

The sun swung higher and higher while he pushed his way forward. And in the world that seemed so very

far, in Leadanfoot and London and New York and Peking, other men were pushing their way forward, in their particular groove in life, scheming for disks of metal and slips of paper, for the admiration of their fellows, for riches or fame or knowledge. A vast mass of tiny conspirators, each intent on his own plots, each sublimely confident of the importance of his especial business and its outcome.

And hidden in those quiet hills into which Hunter advanced was that which was to upset all of those minute conspiracies like little houses of cards, a door through which was to come a menacing terror unknown to man, so that presently, through this world, and worlds above and beyond, would run death, and confusion, and an ancient dread.

2

THE sun was near its greatest height when Hunter came to the farther side of Lowder Hill, and the rude path that twisted up that side. He stared at it rather doubtfully, for the hill seemed very steep and the day was almost half gone. Then, with a shrug, he was about to step forward to the path when the sound of a step behind him made him wheel in surprise.

A strange figure was walking toward him, a small, middle-aged man whose clothes were dirty and torn by briars. He was hatless, and on his pink, round, spectacled face was an expression of dazed wonder. He came forward until he was within a few yards of the astonished Hunter, then stopped and regarded him mildly.

"Not Powell," he whispered, softly, confidentially. "Not——"

He ceased speaking suddenly, looked around with a certain surprise, then sank to the ground in a dead faint.

In a moment Hunter was by the man's side, applying his vague ideas of first aid. He got his pocket flask between the man's teeth, and a little brandy down his throat, which almost instantly pulled him back to consciousness. The man lay there, his eyes sweeping over Hunter's face, then asked, quite unexpectedly, "What time is it?"

On finding that it was almost noon, he straightened to a sitting position. "I'm all right now," he assured the student, motioning the latter to a seat on the ground beside him. His glance wavered about the scene, then came back to Hunter, whom he regarded intently before addressing him.

"Who you are, I don't know," he began, and as Hunter started to explain, he added, "and it doesn't matter. You've had some education, haven't you? Ah, medical student! That makes it easier—much easier."

Hunter began to think that the man was still dizzy, delirious. "Hadn't I better help you back to Leadanfoot?" he asked.

"There would not be time," the other answered, strangely. "I was going to Leadanfoot myself, for— But there, you do not know. There is time to get back, though. You and I. But first you should hear—"

He caught the doubting, half-fearful expression on the young man's face. "No, I'm not a madman," he assured him, almost gently. "But I need help, badly. Need your help."

"But help for what?" asked Hunter. "I think if you would just go back with me to the village—"

"No!" answered the other, decisively. There was a pause, in which the older man stared across the green silence of the valley with unseeing eyes. Suddenly he turned to the watching, puzzled student. "I will put it this way," he began. "Sup-

pose someone was planning to kill every living person in the village yonder, to wipe it out utterly, would you try to prevent it?"

At Hunter's wondering reply he continued, "Of course you would. Now go farther still. Suppose someone, something, was trying to kill every human being on Earth, to annihilate the world as we know it. Would you try to stop that, too?"

The younger man stared at him blankly. "Would you?" persisted the other.

"Why, yes—naturally," answered the student, and the older man sighed.

"It is to prevent that that I need your help," he said, quietly.

Before Hunter could comment on that startling statement the man rushed on. "I am going to tell you enough of the matter to help you understand what threatens. You will not think me a madman, when you hear! We have little time here, an hour perhaps, before we must start back. But it is enough for me to tell—"

"You will wish to know who I am. Marlowe is my name, and until a year ago I held a position on the staff of the Trent Museum, in London. It was there that I met Powell, some three years ago.

"Dr. Henry Powell he was, an elderly physics professor, lately retired from Cambridge. That was all he ever told me of his past, for even after we became better acquainted he was close-mouthed about his former career. By chance I found the reason for that. A friend told me that Powell had left Cambridge under a cloud. It seems that he had been working for many months in collaboration with a fellow professor, Wooding by name, on an element-changing experiment. You know, transmute uranium into radium, or radium into lead. Modern alchemy

they were attempting. After a year of work together the two had split over some disagreement, each carrying on the experiment alone. Wooding was the first of the two to publish his results, and immediately Powell claimed that his former partner in work had stolen his own results.

"There was rather a scandal over the matter, but an investigating committee ruled that Powell's charges were unproved, so he was retired from the university. I never talked with Powell on the matter, and never learned the right of it, but I could see that the thing had embittered him greatly, so that he was wont to snarl viciously at all scientific people, and in fact, nearly all people, of any kind. He grated on me considerably, sometimes, for he was like an animated bottle of acid, thin-lipped, sardonic, sneering. But one thing drew us together, a common interest in archeology. In fact, that branch of knowledge was my work, at the museum, and Powell had taken it up as a sort of hobby, to occupy his restless mind, I suppose. We got acquainted through his visits to the museum and had many a talk thereafter.

"He was intensely interested in the 'vitrified forts' of Scotland, as they are called. Piles of stone ruins on some of the Scottish hills, and in a few valleys, with some of the stones melted into glass. You've heard of them? Well, it was Powell's radical theory that those glassy streaks were not made by lightning, as is commonly supposed, but by some powerful weapon or ray, striking from above. You will see what a revolution in conventional archeological thought would be the result if he could prove that. He got to be a fanatic on the subject, and spent most of his time roaming about Scotland and hunting and digging in such ruins.

"HE HAD been off on such a trip for several weeks when he sent me an urgent wire, from a Scotch village named Dykirk. He had made a great discovery, he said, but needed my help, and offered me a handsome salary for my aid. My own interest was aroused by his message, so I procured the necessary leave from the museum and went at once, being met by Powell when I stepped off the train.

"It turned out that his discovery was on the summit of a hill some miles from Dykirk, named Kerachan Hill. He had had a little cottage, or cabin, built on the hill, and had lived in it for some weeks. It took us most of the day to get to his little home, so we stowed my luggage and waited until the next morning to inspect his discovery.

"And it was really astounding. The summit of the hill was flat, and there, with a few crumbling stone blocks scattered about, but in the center of that level expanse, was a shallow pit, newly dug, that was circular in shape and perhaps twenty feet across. At its bottom, a foot or so from the surface of the ground, lay a flat round stone, the surface of which was almost completely covered by a mass of strange characters, carved into it deeply.

"It was to decipher this inscription that Powell needed my help, for I am by way of being an expert in hieroglyphics, cuneiform writing, and such. He said that he had found this inscription beneath a protecting layer of cement of some kind, and was afire to learn its meaning, as he well might be.

"So I settled in the little cabin and began work that very day. To my surprize, I found the inscription quite easy to decipher, for all that the characters were totally strange and unknown. Whoever had carved it had placed in it, here and there, small pictures, symbols, giving a key

for its translation purposely. Within a month I had translated and arranged my translations of it, and found that the inscription told a stupendous, incredible story.

"According to it, these ruins of forts that lay scattered through Scotland had been built ages before by a race of strange folk who had invaded the Earth then. And these strangers had come, not from another planet, as one might suppose, but from a single atom in the Earth.

"This will sound incredible to you, as at first it did to me, but consider. We know that each atom of our Earth consists of a number of electrons revolving about a nucleus, and what is that but a miniature solar system? Just as our sun and its circling planets may be an atom in a vastly larger system, and so on infinitely, perhaps. The idea is not new, it was advanced years ago. And in this particular atom of the Earth, on its electrons, its tiny planets, dwelt a race proportionately tiny, the atomic people, I will call them. They had crowded over every one of their electron-planets, and were now gradually stifling from their ever-increasing numbers.

"They had science, a strange sort of science, and now, at the time of their greatest need, one of their scientists announced a startling discovery. He had found a way by which the size of any object could be increased or decreased indefinitely, at will. And the secret of this was stunning in its very simplicity.

"We know that the universal, all-pervading ether is the base of everything. Vibrations of that ether, in a certain octave, cause light; in a different octave, radio waves; in still another, chemical rays. But what we do not know as yet, what the scientists of the atomic people had learned, is that all matter itself is but another vibration of that ether, in a different lower octave. That stone, that tree,

you and I, all but different vibrations in the ether. And the atomic scientists had found that as a stone is simply an etheric vibration, by raising the frequency of vibration the stone would be made larger, by lowering that frequency it would be made smaller.

"Their method of changing that frequency was told by the inscription. They would ascertain the frequency of vibration of an object, then concentrate on it other artificial electric vibrations, much like radio waves, which would change the vibratory frequency of the object just as the rate of swing of a pendulum can be raised or lowered by a tiny force applied to it at the correct moment. Thus these atomic people could make any object, make even themselves, large enough to dwarf their world or small enough to disappear entirely.

"It was a chance to relieve their crowding numbers and they seized it at once. Using their discovery to grow in size, they burst up from their own atom into this world, into our Earth, and found that the atom that was their universe was an atom of a simple grain of sand, on Earth. That sand-grain, though, held their world, so they built a great structure around it, in what is now Scotland, so that it would always be there as a refuge for them to flee to, in case of need. That attended to, up from the atom, out of the sand-grain, streamed their people, gigantic masses of them.

"The Earth then was savage and forbidding, but nothing daunted, they spread over its surface, began to raise their structures of stone, to shape this world to their will. It must have seemed to them that they were secure forever in this greater universe.

"But now came disaster. Certain adventurous spirits among them were not satisfied to stop in this universe. They saw the sun and its attendant planets and realized that this, our own solar system, was after all only

an atom in a still greater universe. So a number of them, using the same method of changing size, grew again until they had entered the world above this, the universe in which ours is but an atom.

“Now in that greater universe, in that superworld, as I shall call it, there was civilization, a civilization of beings who had advanced far beyond the crude semi-barbarism of the people of the atom. So when the atomic invaders entered their world, the superpeople knew they had come from beneath, from an atom, for they themselves had long possessed that power of changing size which the atomic people had just discovered. Although these superpeople promptly beat back the invaders in that first attack, time after time in the years that followed the warlike people of the atom persisted in attempting to enter the superworld, which was so much fairer than either their own world or this one.

“A long while their attacks continued until finally the patience of the superpeople was exhausted and they gathered together all their forces to crush these atomic invaders forever. They poured down from their greater universe to this Earth, and then was a battle such as was never known before, the people of the superworld and the people of the atom locked in a death-struggle, smiting with strange weapons, a colossal war raging over the shuddering Earth that reeled beneath them.

“The atomic invaders could not stand against the mighty weapons of the superpeople, and soon all of them not slain were fleeing in dread to their own world, that sand-grain that held their universe. They sped back to that grain and down into it, dwindling in size and vanishing, until of all their number, only their dead remained on Earth.

“And now the superpeople set about to seal them forever within that

atom, within that sand-grain, so that never again should they break out and carry war and death through the superworld. To accomplish this they set that grain of sand within a circle of perpetual electric force, a field of strange force within which it was impossible to grow or dwindle in size, as the atomic people had done, by changing the frequency of etheric vibration. Thus the people of the atom were locked forever within their own tiny universe.

“This accomplished, they covered the sand-grain and the forces they placed around it, setting over them a great stone, on which was written the history of what had happened, and which warned whoever might find the stone in the future never to tamper with or change what had been done, lest they loose again the atomic invaders upon the Earth and the superworld alike. Having done this, the superpeople left the Earth to its own devices, and passed up into their own greater universe.

“Came then, on Earth, the painful upward surge of changing, ascending species, the long road from anthropoid to troglodyte to modern man. The structures of the atomic people crumbled soon, until only a few remnants were left. Over all the world it was as if their invasion had never been, nor did men dream that such people had held the Earth ages before themselves. And up in a Scottish hill, under a great stone that was covered by the drifting dirt of ages, lay a grain of sand that held war and death and terror, in a single atom of which the atomic people were prisoned for all time.

3

“**S**UCH was the colossal epic the inscription narrated. And it was so convincing that neither Powell nor I doubted it. But now a dispute arose between us. I believed that we

should heed the warning of the inscription and not delve farther into the thing, lest we loose dread upon the world. But Powell was afire with curiosity and would not listen. So, with help, we removed the great circular stone and set it to one side. And beneath it, as it had foretold, we found the sand-grain that held the atomic world.

"Under the circular stone was a cube of the same smooth rock, some six feet square. On the upper surface of this cube was set a small plate of smooth metal, at the center of which lay the sand-grain, set in the metal. Around this metal plate, embedded within the surface of the cube, was a circle of seven little blocks, that glowed steadily with a feeble purple light. In daylight the little blocks seemed merely purple in color, and it was only in darkness that their luminosity became apparent. Without doubt that circle of glowing blocks was the producer of the force mentioned in the inscription, the force that made size-changing impossible within their field, that held the atomic people prisoners in the sand-grain.

"From that day onward Powell took me less and less into his confidence. He had fitted up a small laboratory near the cabin, and began working there on some problem connected with what he had found. Once or twice he consulted me concerning the meaning of certain technical parts of the inscription, but aside from that he told me nothing of what he was doing, and I decided that I was wasting time to stay. It was on the very day that I meant to tell Powell so, and leave, that he came running toward me excitedly, with the news that his experiment had succeeded.

"And when I found the nature of that experiment I was astounded. He had been attempting to follow up the sparse details given in the in-

scription and rediscover the method of changing size. And he had done it! He showed me the apparatus he had worked out, a compact black case which strapped around his chest and which would cause everything within its field of action to grow or decrease in size. And standing there on the hilltop, he grew in size until he towered up a giant of a hundred feet, then dwindled until he was an inch in height, a tiny manikin.

"He was exultant, and I thought that at last he would leave the hilltop, and cover the sand-grain once more. I pointed out to him what good he might accomplish in the world with that great power, but he only snarled at me and for the first time revealed his intention. He was planning to dwindle in size until he could enter that atomic world, to go down into the sand-grain, to the atomic universe.

"Short of force, I used all my efforts to prevent him, for I was aghast at such a plan. But he went on, unheeding, making his preparations for the trip. He dug out and removed the little circle of blocks around the sand-grain, then gradually began to dwindle in size until he was a tiny figure a few inches high, standing on the metal circle near the grain of sand. Smaller and smaller he became, until he vanished entirely from my sight, and I knew that he had entered the sand-grain.

"For three days I watched beside the stone cube, waiting for his return. It was toward evening of the third day that he finally came back, a tiny upright form on the metal plate that grew swiftly to the man I knew. He had come back.

"He had come back—but changed. He seemed to be filled with an immense excitement, to be spurred on by some hidden purpose. He gave small answer to my flood of questions. He had found the atomic world, had been guided down into

that particular atom of the grain by 'certain signs,' a phrase which he did not explain. As to the people of the atom, he said only that there were many of them and that they were 'different.' More he would not tell me, and my fear, my misgivings, increased.

"THE night of disaster rushed upon us, a week after his return. I was asleep in the cabin while Powell worked, as I thought, in the laboratory. Some time after midnight I woke and sensed that Powell was not in the cabin. I dressed hurriedly, and found that he was not in the laboratory either. Instantly I knew where he was and hurried up to the hilltop, and to the pit on that hilltop that held the stone cube and the sand-grain.

"He was standing on the edge of that pit, watching intensely, but at the sound of my approach he wheeled instantly, holding a little stone cone in his hand, the end of which glowed suddenly with dull green light.

"At the same moment I fell in a heap to the ground and lay there quite motionless, seemingly paralyzed, unable to move a muscle. And Powell laughed. He mocked and taunted me and for the first time disclosed the depth of his plans. He was going to loose once more the atomic invaders upon our world. He had gone down into their world and conspired with those in power there, promising to free them from the world where they were prisoners, to release them upon the Earth and the superworld.

"First, he boasted, the atomic invaders were to strike at the world beyond this, at the superworld, to stab out unexpectedly at their ancient enemies in that greater universe, crushing them by an unlooked-for attack. Then, free from any possible interference, the invading hordes would sweep over Earth; and he laughed

wildly as he pictured to me the destruction of the races of man and their works, dwelling especially on the fear and terror of his (Powell's) enemies. For the first time I saw that the man was completely insane, an embittered maniac who secreted hate for all mankind as the result of his wrongs, real or fancied.

"Even while he spoke, a slight humming sound arose from the pit. The humming waxed swiftly to a loud droning, then up from the pit floated a black disk, some three feet across and swiftly growing. Hovering a few feet above the ground, it continued to grow, and the droning became a loud booming, a tremendous rumbling thunder. Even as I stared at it, lying there, I fathomed the cause of that rolling thunder, knew that it was the sudden expansion of the disk that beat out those thick waves of sound. The disk grew until it was perhaps thirty feet across, then ceased expanding. It slid gently down toward us until it was nearly touching the ground, and I saw that it was crowded with dark shapes that pushed toward the rail to stare down at us.

"Then down from the edge came a folding metal ladder, and clambering down this ladder came three creatures, shapes grotesque and terrible, three of the atomic people.

"I had thought of them as being somewhat human, perhaps with different features or coloring, but still essentially human. But these things! They were reptilian, saurian! In height they were a little under the human standard, and their figures were even roughly human in shape, with the head carried erect, a squat, powerful body, two thick, bowed lower limbs, and two short arms, ending in cruel, curved talons. But with that rough travesty on the human shape, all resemblance ceased. To begin with, the things were completely covered with thick, hard scales, like

those of a crocodile. Their heads were peaked, instead of round, with gaping, fanged mouths and small, black, glittering eyes, browless and lashless like the eyes of a snake. They were noseless and earless, and their only sign of clothing was a queer sort of metallic armor that seemed more designed to carry their weapons than as clothing.

"Lying there motionless, regarding them with sickened horror, I saw the three advance to Powell, who greeted them with a queer gesture. One brought forth a tablet like a small slate, on which he wrote, then passed it to Powell, who studied it, then wrote in turn and handed it back. Evidently such writing was Powell's only means of communication with the things. For a few minutes they conferred in that fashion with Powell, then returned to the disk, which immediately ascended from its hovering position on the hill-top.

"As it rose it grew, spreading out swiftly in ever-expanding size, growing until it had shut off the light of all the stars for a few seconds, then seemingly breaking up into small masses, cloudily disappearing. It had become so large that it was invisible, had passed from this universe into that greater one. For a moment I wondered if its momentary eclipse of the stars would cause any star-gazer to guess at what was happening, then realized that to any chance watcher of the sky it would seem only like a drifting cloud, if noticed at all.

"Again rose the humming from the pit, many times louder, growing to an ear-splitting thunder as another force of the atomic people floated up from the pit, a great mass of tiny black circles, miniatures of the first disk, that drifted up and rose at once into the air, not stopping to confer with Powell as had the first. And as that mass of disks rose above the hill-

top, the familiar droning was again waxing louder as another mass of them came up.

"How many of the disks streamed up from the atom while I lay there, I can not guess. Their number seemed infinite, but my memories are fragmentary, disjointed. I must have been unconscious for a few minutes at least, for I remember that amid the rumbling thunder of the rising disks, as I watched Powell, who was gazing triumphantly at their coming, a dizzying blackness seemed to descend on my brain, and when consciousness returned the last mass of disks was rising from the pit, vanishing like the others in the sky above.

"UNTIL now Powell had held me prisoner with the glowing cone, which he had placed on the ground before conferring with the atomic people, so that it held me prisoner without his attention. Now he picked it up and permitted me to re-enter the cabin, where he forced me to lie down in the bunk, then placed the cone again on the table in the room, still pointing toward me, still holding me a prisoner, powerless to move.

"Why he did not kill me outright, I can not say. I think it was only because he desired someone, even a prostrate enemy, to whom he might boast of what he was doing, that he desired someone to know the power and the menace that he really was. It must have been so, for the next day he boasted for hours to me of what he was doing. He spoke of the great force of invaders I had seen, and said that even by that time their numbers and mighty weapons would have crushed into submission the people of the superworld.

"He spoke, too, of the paralyzing cone that held me prisoner, a weapon which he had brought back from the atomic world, and revealed that he had another one on his person also. It was, he said, a ray that neutralized

the electric messages in the nervous system, thus wiping out the commands of the brain in that system, so that while reflex actions like the breathing of the lungs and beating of the heart were unaffected, the conscious commands of the brain to the muscles were nullified, paralyzing those muscles.

"All of that day, and all through the next night, I lay in the bunk without moving a muscle, save only an hour in which he permitted me to eat. I heard him leave the cabin early the next morning, the second after the coming of the invaders, this very morning. Lying there, I listened with dull despair to the wind slamming the door of the cabin. The cone on the table was in the line of my vision and suddenly I gasped with hope, for at a particularly hard slam that cone had rolled a little way toward the table's edge. I waited breathless. Then, just as my hope was beginning to die, the door slammed to with all the wind's force behind it and the cone rolled from the table to the floor, breaking and exploding there in a flash of intense green light.

"My first move was to search the cabin for a gun, but there was none. The cabin stood at the edge of the bare and treeless hilltop, and from its window I could see Powell's head bobbing about in the pit of the sand-grain, as he prepared for the coming of the second force of invaders. I knew that he must be imprisoned or killed at once, but knew too that he carried with him another of the paralyzing cones, so that I dared not rush him on the open hilltop. Neither could I remain in the cabin, so my only chance was to make my way to the nearest village and get help, or at least, a gun.

"So I slipped out a rear window and got safely away without being seen by him. All of this morning it took me to get down the hill, and

when I met you here I knew I should not have time to get to a village as I had planned, but must go back and do what I could myself. And now I have told you all. Up on that hill Powell is awaiting the second invasion of those monsters from the atom, an invasion that will annihilate our world. If we can overpower him and replace the glowing blocks around the sand-grain, we shall have prevented disaster. If not—— But do you believe the story? Will you help me?"

Hunter answered slowly, his brain whirling from the things he had heard. "It's so incredible," he began, "but the booming sounds you mentioned, they heard that in Lead-an-foot. It seems so queer, though ——" Suddenly he thrust a hand toward Marlowe. "I believe you," he told him. "I want to help."

The other gripped his hand silently, then glanced up at the sun. "We have, perhaps, four hours," he said, rising. Hunter, too, jumped to his feet, and for a moment they looked together up the dark sides of Kerachan Hill.

Presently the two men were forging steadily up that hillside. They spoke little and their faces were set, drawn. The sun was falling ever more swiftly toward the west, and always their eyes measured the distance between that descending sun and the horizon.

By the time they surmounted the first rough heights and began their progress up the thinly-wooded upper half of the hill, the gray veils of twilight were already obscuring the surrounding country. Over peaks and valleys, over forests and grassy fields, lay a strange silence, ominous, foreboding. As they toiled up toward the summit through the thickening dusk, it seemed to Hunter that the whole world was silent, breathless, tensely waiting.

4

COMPLETE darkness had fallen when Marlowe turned and made a cautioning gesture.

"We are very near the summit now," he told Hunter, in a whisper. "For God's sake, go quietly."

Together they crept upward, through thick underbrush and over jagged rocks, until they crouched at the edge of the smooth, grassy space that was the hill's summit. This summit was not exactly level, but sloped down from them in a slight grade, and at its center Hunter saw the black, yawning hole Marlowe had mentioned, the pit that held the sand-grain.

Marlowe was tugging at his sleeve. "Powell—down at the other edge," he whispered, excitedly.

Glancing down to that farther edge of the summit, Hunter saw there a thin, spare figure dimly outlined against the stars, the figure of a man who was gazing silently at the twinkling lights of a distant village. And over to their right, at the very edge of the bare summit, was the rough dark mass that he knew must be the small cabin. Again Marlowe twitched his sleeve.

"We must rush him from both sides," he told Hunter. "You crawl around the right side of the summit and I will take the left, and when you get near enough, go for him. Don't give him time to get that cone out." With a whispered "good luck," he wrung Hunter's hand and began to creep stealthily around the left edge of the hilltop.

His heart pounding violently, Hunter crept forward on the right side, toward the man at the summit's edge, who still stood motionless, watching the distant lights. Hunter wondered where Marlowe was, in the darkness. By now he was crawling past the open door of the cabin, keep-

ing close within the shadow of the little building.

From that point he could glimpse, in the starlight, the profile of the man they stalked. A strong, mad face it was, with burning eyes beneath a mass of gleaming, iron-gray hair, a face that was turned toward the south and its distant lights as though fascinated by them.

Suddenly Powell laughed, and at the unexpected sound Hunter stopped short, on hands and knees. A bitter, mocking laughter it was, that sickened the listening student. As it ceased, the man at the hill's edge raised a clenched fist and shook it at the distant lights. And his voice rang out over the silent hilltop like the note of a warning bell.

"O man, take heed!"

Even while Powell voiced that cry of hate and menace, Hunter moved forward again. And at his first movement, his knee pressed down on a small stick that broke with the sound of a pistol-shot.

Instantly Powell turned, his hand flashing down to his pocket and emerging with a small object in its grasp. As Hunter gathered himself for a swift, desperate spring, that object glowed out, a tiny circle of luminous green, and the young student sank back to the ground, deprived of all power of motion by the paralyzing cone. Powell advanced toward him, holding the cone outstretched.

"So you escaped, Marlowe," he said, and Hunter realized that in the darkness the man had mistaken him for his former prisoner. Powell was speaking on. "I think that I'll stop your interference now, for good. Not that I have any personal animus against you, I assure you, but I can't allow you to disrupt the plans I have made." As he said this, mockingly, he carefully placed the cone on a small mound of earth, so that its rays still held Hunter paralyzed. Then he

straightened, and was reaching for the pistol at his belt when a dark figure sprang from behind, dashing him to earth. Marlowe!

The thought beat through Hunter's brain as he lay, unable to twitch a muscle, watching the combat of those two figures that reeled about, striking, kicking, twisting. But what was that—? What? That thin humming that suddenly made itself heard, that grew to a droning, to a rumbling, reverberating thunder. Out of the pit a dark shape was drifting up, a black disk that grew, grew, grew.

Boom! Boom! Boom! It grew until it had attained a diameter of thirty feet, then hovered above the pit, near the struggling men. As he glimpsed it, Marlowe cried out despairingly, and Powell's mad laughter flung up. And now was a sudden stir at the edge of the hovering disk, a flurry of movement there. Hunter darkly glimpsed shapes that crowded about the disk's edge, that peered at the struggling men. Did they mistake the two as a menace to themselves, did they fail to recognize Powell? For even as the two men reeled in battle toward the disk, a blinding shaft of blue light stabbed out from the disk's edge and struck the struggling pair. Under that ray and in its light, Hunter saw the faces of the two men change horribly, stiffen, draw, crack, and over him swept a breath of utter cold, an icy little wind that seemed to freeze his blood.

An instant he saw Powell and Marlowe thus, staggering, reeling, falling, then they had collapsed to a shapeless heap on the ground, and the blue ray, striking out past them, had touched the glowing cone on the little mound, which instantly exploded with a flash of light, releasing Hunter from its prisoning power.

The blue ray was sweeping in a circle about the hilltop now, and with sudden frantic fear he crawled

through the open door of the dark cabin, crouching in a corner of it fearfully. Suddenly the ray swept up to the cabin, and beneath its touch the glass of the windows cracked instantly. An icy puff of air again swept over Hunter, in his corner, as the ray swept through the open door and hung steady for a moment.

Its blue light illumined a little metal stove opposite the door, a stove that covered instantly with a rime of frost and ice at the ray's touch. A moment the ray hung thus, steadily, doubtfully, then abruptly vanished, as though snapped out. Hunter sighed chokingly.

The humming sounds began again outside, and his fear mastered by curiosity, he crept to the cracked window. A mass of tiny black circles was rising from the pit, floating up and growing at the same time, while the first disk hung to one side, watching. The black circles rose high, expanded almost instantly to the size of the first, were joined by that first disk.

For a minute Hunter watched the disks circling above, swirling about in an eddying mass. Then three detached from those above and sank down to the hilltop, hovering close above it and sweeping it ever and again with the deadly blue ray that came and went across the cabin while he watched. The other disks, more than a score in number, grouped in a compact formation, then raced swiftly south.

The vanguard of the atomic conquerors, loosed at last upon the world of man!

5

It is doubtful if we shall ever know the exact purpose of that first raid on the atomic invaders. That question might be solved if we knew how much information they had received from Powell regarding our Earth. As it is, we look on that first coming

as an effort, not so much to destroy as to disorganize, to terrorize. Doubtless it was their plan to break up all chance of organized opposition in England by a series of swift and deadly blows, then take over the island at their leisure and make it the base of their future operations.

Whatever their intentions, they passed over all northern England without stopping, and the world first became aware of their presence when they struck with terrific force at Manchester and Liverpool, successively.

There is no clear, coherent account of their coming to Manchester. The survivors saw that hour of dread through a haze of terror, and it was long before all accounts were pieced together to make a reasonably complete story of the happenings there. One sees, through those horror-stricken tales, a terror descending without warning out of the darkness, on the unsuspecting city beneath. No doubt the streets were crowded, and theaters and show-windows ablaze, all the life and stir of early evening. Then a swift gathering of dark shapes above, the deadly blue ray flashing down on the streets, searing an icy path of death across the city.

It must have been utterly incomprehensible destruction to those below. Even now we scarcely understand the nature of that blue ray, the Cold Ray, as it is now called. We know that all things in its path acted as if under the influence of extreme, unheard-of cold, absolute zero. It was exactly as if the invaders had concentrated utter cold and hurled it forth in a single stabbing ray. Strictly speaking, of course, there is no such thing as positive cold, only absence of heat. The theory generally accepted now is that in some unexplained manner the ray had the power of instantly sucking away the heat of anything it touched.

Certain it is that the ray was a

terrible weapon. Beneath it, flesh and blood froze immediately into black hard lumps, metal cracked, trees and plants shriveled instantly. It is curious to note that the action of the ray was highly localized, that it could slay one man while another man ten feet away would feel only a sudden breath of intense cold.

As it swept steadily along the streets of Manchester that night, overtaking the fleeing crowds and leaving them in shapeless heaps, it must have seemed like the very day of doom to those below. They speak of it as enduring for hours, that time that the invaders hung above the city, while in reality the disks remained over Manchester somewhat less than twenty minutes. How many were slain in that time it is impossible to guess. The city, at least, was thrown into a wild intense panic, and no doubt that was the purpose of the invaders. That accomplished, they gathered together and sped away to the west, to Liverpool.

The story of the massacre at Liverpool is almost identical with that at Manchester. There too the disks struck down with icy death at the city, but one curious feature differentiates the Liverpool account. It seems that as the Cold Ray swept around the city, it crossed, ever and again, the city's harbor and the sea outside. And for many days afterward, immense icebergs of unprecedented size ranged the English coast, born of that striking of the ocean by the blue ray.

At Manchester and Liverpool, and even as far south as Birmingham, the invaders came down without warning, striking unexpectedly, spreading death and dread, then racing away. But some time before they reached London, word of the attacks on the northern cities had been received, and men waited, ready for battle, so that it was over London that the atomic

people and the forces of man clashed for the first time.

It was the assumption of the War Office in London that Manchester and Liverpool had been attacked by the airplanes of some continental power, without the formality of a declaration of war. Certainly they did not dream of the real nature of the menace that was speeding toward them.

Presently, from all the air-stations around the city, plane after plane was spiraling up, while in a great ring around London the giant searchlights stabbed the night, sweeping the sky in search of the invaders. Even while the planes ascended and hung in a thin line high above the city, thunder was growling, low and ominous, and lightning flickering across the sky.

It was with this gathering storm that the disks raced down toward the city, never glimpsing the line of planes above. For a space of minutes they hung motionless, surveying the shining, splendid metropolis. The streets below, temporarily deserted beneath the coming storm, were like brilliant rivers of light, connecting the lakes of luminescence that were the squares. One imagines the invaders in the disks staring down at the city in amazement, if their reptilian natures possessed the power. As they hung there, the beam of one of the questing searchlights caught them and held them, and the stabbing rays of the other lights shifted to them at once, bathing the disks in a flood of white light. Then, from high above, the airplanes drove down upon them and the battle had begun.

One can see that battle clearest, perhaps, through the eyes of a single individual, a certain young Brownell who was the pilot of a single-seater combat plane. At the first orders he had taken the air almost joyously, with the exciting thought that at

last his training was to be tested in actual battle. He thrilled to the thought, as with the other planes he swooped down upon the disks.

Down he went and down, diving toward a single disk that hung at some distance from the mass of its fellows. His hands grasped the control of the plane's machine-gun, and even above the roar of the motor he heard the pup-pup-pup-pup of the gun, spraying bullets on the disk. He swept down onto that disk and over it in a great curve, passing above it at a height of a few yards. As he flashed over it, the lightning flared out blindingly above, and as he caught momentary sight of the things on the disk, his hands trembled on the controls. He had glimpsed a mass of upturned heads, scaled and peaked, with fanged and gaping mouths. For the first time he saw the creatures of dread he was fighting. As he drove up above the battle and banked and circled for another swoop, his hands were still trembling.

From below came the popping of bombs, a few of which scored hits on the disks, most of which plunged down toward the city below, misses. The roar of their detonation seemed feeble beside the crash of the thunder, which was now rumbling forth almost continuously. Away to the left of the battle, two planes collided and dropped swiftly to earth, trailing long streamers of red flames, blazing comets plunging earthward through the upper darkness.

And now, their first shock of surprise over, the invaders struck back, and the blue ray flashed up, searching out and finding the planes, whose wings shriveled and collapsed beneath its touch. Two of the disks had been forced down by lucky hits with bombs, but the others were almost unscathed, and now the planes were falling ever more rapidly beneath the Cold Ray.

Suddenly, from high above, a single plane rushed down toward the massed disks, in a dizzying nose-dive. The blue ray stabbed up from a dozen disks to meet it, but it plunged on, smashed down into one of the disks, and plane and disk whirled together down to earth, the latter spilling out a mass of grotesque figures that raced it in its fall.

Brownell shouted hoarsely as he saw. From all around planes were diving down now, smashing squarely into the disks and falling with them, a deliberate heroic suicide on the part of their pilots. An immense exaltation ran through Brownell, that vast, forceful rapture of heroism that can sweep men up to titanic heights. He circled again, then dipped the plane's nose sharply and rushed down upon a single disk like a falling plummet.

Pup-pup-pup—at the last moment he clung to the gun-control. Rush of wind past him—flash of lights—a roaring in his ears—the disk was nearer, rushing swiftly up to him—nearer—nearer—crash!

Then plane and disk were tumbling down to earth together, speeding down to the brilliant streets below, crashing down near the docks, where something in the wrecked disk exploded with stunning force.

Above, the battle was all but finished. Only a few of the planes remained and the blue ray was searching these out, one by one. Presently the invaders held the air alone, nine disks remaining of the twenty or more that had begun the attack. The city below was at their mercy, but they did not heed it. Circling and forming, they massed again together, then moved away to the north, seemingly daunted by the fierce and unexpected resistance they had met. They had conquered, but at a price that disinclined them for further battle at that time.

The people in the city below waited tensely, but no more aerial wrecks

whirled down upon them. And the ever-questing searchlights revealed no sign of plane or disk over the city. Through all London reigned a deathlike silence, that first moment of astounded silence before the hoarse roar of fear and rage that would roll through the city. Only the deep rumble of thunder broke the stillness.

Across the sky the lightning flared again, once, twice. Then down upon the city swept the lashing, flooding rain.

6

IT IS to young Hunter's story that one must turn again for an account of the invaders' movements after that first raid. Crouched by the window, he saw them returning from the battle, nine scarred disks returning where more than a score had gone out. For the first time it struck him that possibly the forces of man might have checked the first rush of the invaders. He wondered intensely as to that.

During all of that period of hours while the disks had been fighting and killing and terrorizing England, he had not dared to escape from the cabin, for the three guardian disks still hung very low above the hilltop, and the blue ray constantly swept about that summit, marking a path of death. The guardians were taking no chances of anyone tampering with the sand-grain, of doing harm to their own world, that lay within that grain.

And now, when the defeated nine returned, he saw that his chances of escape were even less. For except for one disk, that dropped down into the pit, dwindling and vanishing, these returned disks took up a position with the watchful three, hovering low over the hilltop. Now and then one would sweep up into the sky, circle for a time, then return to its position over the summit of Ker-ath-an.

Hunter wondered intensely what the mission of the disk that returned into the sand-grain had been. A call for aid, for reinforcements? The waiting attitude of the others seemed to indicate that. Dawn had come, and with its gray light he moved silently about the little cabin, finding food in plenty and bolting a hasty, uncooked meal, then returning to his position of observation by the window.

All over the world that day was wonder. The news of the battle over London, of the death that smote the northern cities, had flashed out over all the Earth, bringing surprize and doubt and fear to cities far away. A wave of terror rolled over the British Isles, and already the Channel was crowded with the shipping that bore away the first great crowds of the impending exodus.

The theory of attack by a foreign power had collapsed, and as men examined the crushed, mangled bodies found in the wreckage of the disks at London, they realized that Earth was invaded by creatures wholly different from man, but superior in power. It was but natural that they should conceive these invaders as arriving from another planet, and that was the theory held by all.

In every mind was the thought that the invaders had retired only temporarily, that they would return to spread terror and death again. The disks had been discovered, hovering watchfully over Kerachan Hill, and from all the country about that hill the inhabitants poured forth, choking the roads in their frantic haste to escape from the vicinity. By evening of that day, less than twenty-four hours after the first coming of the disks, it is doubtful if a single living person with the exception of Hunter remained within ten miles of the hill.

It strikes one as curious that the invaders, during all that day, made

no effort to destroy or kill in that vicinity. They simply hung above the hill, hovering and circling restlessly, waiting, as it seemed to Hunter. Waiting, he thought, for the return of the messenger who had gone back down into the atomic world.

Once only they struck, late in the day. A force of field artillery had been ordered down from Glasgow with orders to shell the hill that was evidently the base of the invaders. Men and guns and horses rattled south along the rough road, under the hot afternoon sun. High above them a black speck suddenly appeared in the blue, the shape of a watching disk that swept down to investigate. A few ineffectual rifle-shots were fired as the disk sank down toward them, then there was a bolting of men into the neighboring fields and hedges, a plunging of panic-maddened horses as the dark shape loomed above. Then the frosty blue Cold Ray, springing down from the disk, leaping swiftly along the road in a trail of icy death, pursuing and exterminating the running men in the fields. A moment the disk hovered and turned, then swept swiftly back up into the blue.

No man in that battery returned to Glasgow to report its fate, and when three planes were ordered south to investigate, none returned. Thereafter no more such futile attempts were made.

That night there was utter darkness in every city in England, for strict orders were given and enforced that no spark of light should betray a city's presence to the invaders. But though in all England, Europe, America, anxious people waited through the night for news of another attack, the disks of the invaders still hovered above Kerachan Hill, waiting, waiting.

In southern England masses of aircraft collected, the combined air-power of England and France, await-

ing the invaders' return. And through the English roads, meeting and passing the sea-bound masses of refugees, rolled the tanks, the guns, the long brown masses of marching soldiers. Mankind was gathering itself for the struggle, but through all those masses ran an unspoken thought, an unvoiced fear. What avail were rifles and bombs against the smiting ray? Or airplanes and dirigibles against the swift and mighty disks?

On a hilltop miles away from Kerachan men lay hidden, with powerful telescopes and radio-transmitters, ready to flash word of the invaders' movements to all the Earth. And all the Earth waited tensely for that word, wondering, hoping, fearing.

The bright morning of that day passed, the second since the first night raid of the invaders. And all through that morning no word came from the hidden watchers. Two hours of the afternoon had passed when a message finally came, short, concise. It said only, "Disks are gathering in immense force above Kerachan Hill and are evidently preparing to move."

That message, short as it was, was sufficient to cause the last stable forms of life in England to break up, melt away. Those crowds of people who had remained, hoping against hope, now fought their way madly toward the sea-coast, to escape, to life. Over those fleeing hordes ran a shout, a threat, a warning. "They are coming!" They called it to one another, autos racing through country villages shouted it, the mobs on the roads voiced it fearfully, soldiers resting by the wayside repeated it thoughtfully, looking toward the north. Over England, over Europe, over the whole world it ran, swiftly, terribly:

"They are coming! They are coming!"

7

AND now the last great hour of Earth's destiny was swiftly closing down, with that massing of the invaders above the Scottish hills. Crouched beside the window of the cabin, Hunter watched them pouring up from the pit, from their atomic world, masses of tiny disks that grew with inconceivable speed to full size, that moved away and made room for the others to rise. Up, up, up, gigantic masses of the disks, countless hordes of the monsters they held, a vast force of invaders before which all human resistance would be vain, he knew.

After that night of the invaders' first attack on Earth, that night of his imprisoning in the cabin, he had watched through a day and another night and now well into this day, except for a few hours of sleep that he had snatched. Watching, waiting, fearful of the ever-present guardian disks above, like them waiting, waiting. And now this flood of the disks, this up-springing of all their mighty forces. As he gazed at them now, floating up from the pit in dark, endless masses, it seemed to him that the malignant spirit of Powell laughed again beside him.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The rumbling thunder of the expanding disks seemed to him like the sound of a mighty bell, tolling the end of the reign of man. Boom! Boom! Boom!

He glanced up, saw the hundreds of disks above spreading out in a long double line, in an irresistible formation, awaiting the others that were still rising from the pit. But as Hunter watched them circling and forming above, the sky seemed to darken suddenly, the sunlight to be cut off, to vanish. And along the line of invaders above ran a quick start, a sudden nervous shock.

Darker and darker grew the sky,

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Atomic Conquerors

(Continued from page 180)

until it seemed to be obscured by a mass of small dark clouds, clouds that drew together, fused, condensed. Smaller and smaller grew that mass of blackness, the sunlight pouring down around its edges. And now it was descending, dropping swiftly down toward the massed disks above, dropping down until it showed itself as not a single mass, but as several, dropping down until he saw that it was five black disks, five that raced toward the line of other disks above. Wonder filled him, and a dawning comprehension. These were disks returning from the superworld, he saw, dwindling down until they entered our own universe—but how came it that only five returned? Five, of the mighty thousands Marlowe had seen, that had attacked the superworld! Were they messengers?

He saw the five race toward the hundreds above, saw them hang with those hundreds for a space of minutes, then confusion seemed to run through the massed disks above, that were suddenly swooping back down to the hilltop. As they sank down to the summit, their numbers darkened the sky, and he saw, without understanding, a mass of their number that seemed to grow smaller, that dwindled and vanished within the pit. Another mass did likewise, and another. They were returning to their own atom! And now Hunter understood, at last.

The five were—*survivors!*

Their attack on the superworld had failed—they were in retreat—retreat from—but look! *Look!*

The sky above was again darkening, even more intensely than before. Even as the disks of the invaders dwindled and sank with frantic haste into the pit, the darkness above was compressing, contracting, resolving

into a myriad of dark, long shapes, shapes that swooped swiftly down upon the disordered disks above. Long, black, fishlike hulls, utterly different from the disks of the atomic people. As they came down upon the disks, flashes of violent lightning flickered from the fish-hulls, striking disk after disk, sending them down in whirling masses of bursting flames.

It was the superpeople, Hunter knew, pursuing the atomic invaders from their own greater world, where the attack of their mighty fleet of disks had failed.

From the few disks that stood to the terrible attack of the superpeople, the blue Cold Ray sprang out sullenly, but at its first appearance the circling, swooping hulls vanished entirely from view. Then from all the air around the disks, flash on flash of lightning stabbed at them. The superwarriors had made themselves invisible.

In panic haste the last few disks sank down toward the pit and the lightning ceased abruptly. It was as though the desire of the attacking superpeople was only to force the atomic invaders back down into their own universe. The last few disks dwindled, diminished, vanished into the pit, into the sand-grain, and the last humming sound ceased. The invaders had been swept from the Earth. Running out from the cabin, Hunter saw that the pit was empty of them, and he shouted aloud.

Abruptly the long narrow shapes of the hulls reappeared above, swooping swiftly down upon the hilltop. And with a sudden sense of nearing peril, Hunter fled down the hillside, sinking to the ground when his stiff limbs could carry him no farther. Above, the black hulls were clustered thickly around the hilltop, and the droning of a machine of some sort reached him, then a sudden sharp tapping of metal on metal.

Within a space of minutes the

hulls suddenly swung up from the summit and hovered momentarily, circling. And from one of their number, beneath the rest, swung suspended a glistening globe of shining metal, a ball some three feet in thickness. Even as the awed Hunter comprehended that the superpeople had sealed the sand-grain within that shining metal sphere, from all the gathered hulls above, flash after flash of terrific lightning stabbed downward toward the hilltop, with a splitting crash, and beneath Hunter the ground heaved and swayed. He staggered to his feet, glimpsed the edge of a narrow, deep abyss in the hilltop created by that blasting force, then saw the ball of metal whirling down into this abyss, holding within it the atomic world, forever. Again flashed down the lightning, and beneath him was a gigantic rumbling, a grinding and crashing, as the abyss closed, imprisoning the ball within its incalculable depths.

Hunter sank again to the ground, his brain turning dizzily. He saw vaguely the dark hulls sweeping back up toward the zenith, dimly saw one of them that swooped down close above him and hung for a moment as if in curiosity, and from the side of this a score of faces peered down at him, faces not unhuman in shape, but unhuman in the high and untroubled serenity that lay on them, faces that seemed to look down at him with a calm benevolence, an amused but kindly pity.

Then that last hull, too, drove up toward the zenith, and all gathered there, expanding, growing, darkening the skies once more, bringing twilight that deepened into blackness, a blackness that hung for a moment, then broke up, dimmed, vanished.

Standing there on the hillside, Hunter raised tremulous hands toward the sunlit sky, as if in gratitude, as if in prayer.

8

SUNSET illumined Leadanfoot with a glory of orange and crimson light when Hunter reached the village. He walked slowly down the silent, deserted street, and sat down wearily on a bench in front of the inn. With an uncertain smile he remembered his conversation with the innkeeper, and wondered where the man was now.

And, too, with a flash of sudden pity, he remembered Marlowe, and their toiling race up the hill. A kindly, honest man he had seemed, one who had probably lived a life of serene content in his quiet museum before fate dragged him into the whirlpool of cosmic war. A war that he had striven to prevent, however powerlessly. And, more somberly, Hunter thought of the other man, of Powell. Well, it was over now, and what could one say of the dead?

As it was, he thought, with those two dead, he was the only man on Earth to know what had really happened. Those others, those millions in the world outside, they would be wondering, doubtful, puzzled, yet thankful, too. Well, soon he would be getting back to that world, to tell them what he knew.

But just now he wanted to sit in the quiet, deserted village, breathing its peace after his two nights and days of nightmare fear and terror. Just now he wanted to sit and listen to little, trivial sounds, the wind that whispered in his ears, the crickets in the long grass.

In next month's WEIRD TALES will appear the most thrilling weird-scientific story Edmond Hamilton has yet written: "Evolution Island," the tale of a spawning horror let loose upon the world.