

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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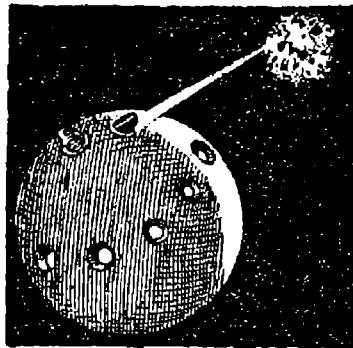
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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Featured Complete Novelet

PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN

By MURRAY LEINSTER



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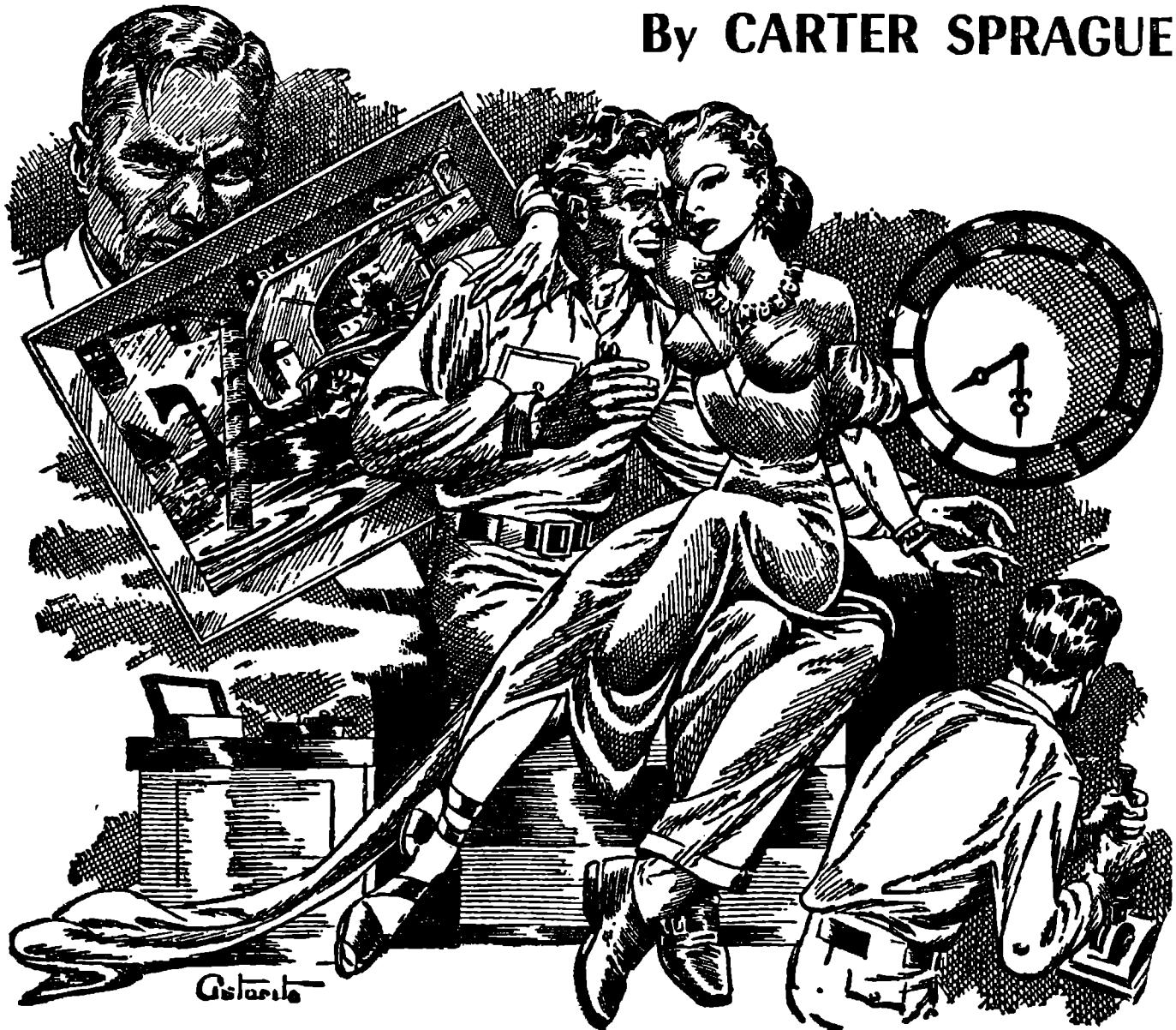
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By CARTER SPRAGUE



the Borghese Transparency

AT twenty-eight minutes after eight o'clock on the evening of June Eleventh, 1961, John Alfredo Bent appeared to be perfectly sane. He sat at ease in his usual big chair in the plate-glass and glass-brick living room of his fabulous sun-heated house. He was enjoying his after-dinner coffee and cigar and chatting with Grace Hallam, his secretary, and Lars Nordmann, his colleague.

With the wit and brilliant fancy

which, coupled to his amazing inventive faculties, had gained him the title of infant terrible of American science, he was amusing himself and his companions by a theoretical application of atomic power to golf balls. He appeared to have entire control of his faculties.

"Theoretically it should be possible," he said, his lined but still-handsome face giving no hint of the absurdity he was evolving in the course of his monologue, "to make the rounds of even old

Can a Work of Art be a Formidable Foe?

St. Andrews in exactly eighteen shots. If we were to apply directional control to the ball through the clubhead . . ."

His voice trailed off and he paused to glance at the platinum watch on his left wrist. Without a word he put down his demitasse on the table at his elbow, laid his half-smoked panatela in the tray at its side. Then, swiftly, he got to his feet and strode from the room, leaving the others staring after him.

"What in the world happened?" said Grace Hallam, half rising from the sofa on which she was seated. She was an alert, intelligent young woman. Her horn-rimmed harlequins could not hide the attractiveness of her features any more than her simple tailored dress could conceal the opulent curves that lurked beneath it.

"Let him go," said Lars Nordmann. He smiled faintly and stirred his coffee. "Inspiration may have struck."

"I've worked for John for three years now," the girl said evenly, a line of worry appearing vertically between her brows, "but I've never seen him act like that. He seemed to forget we were here. He forgot what he was saying. I don't like it."

"He's been doing the work of three men," said Lars Nordmann soothingly. He was tall, thick set, silver blond, spoke with a trace of Swedish accent. "Perhaps—" He shrugged slightly.

"I don't like it," the girl repeated, her face setting in a mold of determination. "I'm going to see what he's doing. He turned toward the passage to the laboratory."

SHE left the room swiftly, gracefully. Nordmann looked after her a moment, then shook his head ever so slightly.

She was just in time, as she entered the long corridor that led from the house to the only privately owned atomic laboratory in the United States, to see the thick metal door at its far end slide slowly shut. For some reason panic surged within her. Her running feet echoed sharply from walls and roof of the corridor.

It took her fifteen seconds to manipulate the machinery that reopened the door. She darted through it and onto the balcony that surrounded the great sealed chamber which extended far underground. She was just in time to see John Alfredo Bent stepping purposefully from the lowest steps onto the laboratory floor. He was moving purposefully toward the control room.

"John!" she cried, flinging herself recklessly down the steel staircase in pursuit. "John—what are you doing?"

He gave no sign that he had heard her. His footfalls continued in measured tread toward the control chamber door. She was panting from fright and exertion when she reached the floor and raced after him around the great cinder-block structure which hid the plutonium pile and contained its deadly radiations.

Upon the control of the pile depended three solid years of work on the most important application of atomic power to transportation since its first use, in 1957, in seagoing vessels. Between what lay locked within the pile and behind the brilliant forehead of John Alfredo Bent rested most of man's immediate hopes of applying the atom to flight in the air, to space flight.

His hand was on the lever that would stop it, shut it off, destroy all that labor and all these hopes, when she followed him into the control chamber. And though it didn't register until later her employer was humming softly to himself—of all things, "O, sole mio!" She flung herself on him like a tigress, tugging him clear, almost shrieking at him in her desperation.

Suddenly he seemed to shudder. He withdrew his grip on the lever, began to duck Grace Hallam's assault. "Hey!" he shouted. "What are you trying to do? Cut it out, Grace. I bruise easy."

Sensing his normality, she stopped. She gasped for breath, her face flushed, then said, "What are you doing? Are you trying to destroy everything you've been working for?"

He looked at her oddly. Something like fear flashed into his dark brown

eyes. "What am I doing?" he asked. He looked around him, seemed surprised at his surroundings. "Good Lord—what am I doing?" He glanced at his watch. "Eight-thirty. Why, it seems—"

"Just two minutes," said Grace Hallam. "What happened?"

"Suppose you tell me," said John Alfredo Bent quietly. She did so. He listened in silence, then shook his head.

"Apparently," he told her, "I have a great deal to thank you for. I wish I could understand it. I've had moments of wanting to spoil this whole blasted business—moments when I've been fed up enough with politicians and generals and airmen and FBI men and admirals. Those moments were when things haven't gone right."

"But you haven't wanted really to wreck it," said Grace.

"How can I tell?" he said helplessly. "Lars has warned me about overdoing things. But they're all so impatient to have us succeed. I'd better lock myself up until I can see a psychiatrist."

"How did it happen?" she asked him again. "There must have been something, some specific reason, or you wouldn't have acted this way."

He stared at the dial of his wristwatch. "It seems silly," he said, "but somehow the time seems important. Eight-thirty. And I rested for an hour in the library this afternoon."

"I know how you rest," gibed the girl. "You don't."

"Honestly, I rested today. I actually fell asleep and Lars had to wake me up. I was looking at that picture he bought me and . . ." His voice faded and there was sudden light in his eyes. "It's impossible!" he muttered. "It has to be. But just the same, it can't be!"

"What is it?" Grace Hallam asked, trying to match her long strides to his longer ones as he strode from the laboratory.

"I've remembered about the time," he said. "It lights up in a tower along the grand canal. But it doesn't make sense."

"You're telling me," she said derisively but he didn't bother to answer.

He was gaining on her as he walked back along the corridor to the house, and she broke into a sort of half trot. He cast a purposeful glance into the living room, which was empty, as he passed, then went on to the other wing where the library was.

THE picture was not large and it was very old. It rested face up on the library table, serene and old-world and not especially colorful beneath the glass of its frame. It was an old mezzotint of Venice, early Eighteenth Century in period, obviously an authentic antique of more amusement than artistic value.

"You were looking at that?" said Grace Hallam, disappointed.

He nodded. "It doesn't look like much this way, does it?" With quick incisive motions he held it up to the light so that they could both look at it. The girl gave a gasp of surprise.

With the light behind it the picture came unexpectedly to life. The windows in the buildings had been picked out and were backed with thin yellow paper so that it looked as if they were lighted. There was the clock in the tower, its hands pointing to eight-thirty. There were Venetian cavaliers and their ladies, strolling on the bridges or the embankment or lounging languorously and amorously in silken-lined gondolas.

And there, more ominously, was a man engaged in the foreground in pushing the lever which operated a drawbridge whose pier resembled uncannily the atomic pile in the laboratory. They stared at the detail of the picture, then at one another.

"It's a Venetian transparency," he told her. "But you don't for a moment suppose that it influenced me?"

"A self-operating hypnotic picture with a post-hypnotic suggestion built in?" said the girl. "It doesn't seem possible. But you say Lars gave you this—and he has been talking about your being in danger of a breakdown. John, did he ever actually suggest that you might imperil the work?"

"Well, no," said the scientist, running

long strong fingers through his hair. "That is, he didn't actually come right out and suggest that. Of course not! It's silly. Why should he? I must have done this to myself. I tell you, Grace, I'd better get into town and see a good psychiatrist—and quickly."

"I don't think you need a psychiatrist," said the girl. "Besides, if you need one I have a degree myself. You're as sane now as you were the day I came to work—which may not be saying a lot but should pass you. You *like* your work, even if you have an occasional little-boy craving to bust it to pieces."

"No, John," she went on, shaking her head, "it isn't you. Somehow this—this transparency hypnotized you. I'd like to know more about it—and other things."

She picked up the picture, turned it over, examined it from all sides and angles. Then she began to work the paper loose from the back of the frame. Moments later she had the transparency clear of its mounting. She studied it, noted that the copperplate writing at its bottom stated that it had been executed by a Carlos Mendozzi for the Contessa Borghese in Rome in 1722.

"I seem to remember," she said thoughtfully. Then her expression hardened with decision. "John, I want you to be careful. I'm going to fly to New York tonight."

"Be careful?" he asked, bewildered. "Of course I'll be careful. But you—what has New York to do with this?"

"They have a Public Library there," she told him. "It has a very complete collection of prints and information about them." She paused, added, "I'd like you to drive me to the airport. And you could stay in town and meet me when I get back."

"You're afraid of something—for me," said John Alfredo Bent. He studied her, then permitted himself a smile that made ten years disappear. "Very well, Grace. You seem to be running my life anyway. And I no longer seem to be able to run it myself."

"Don't be an idiot, John," she said severely. "I'll be ready in fifteen minutes."

"What about Lars?" he asked. She regarded him evenly for a moment and there was an odd note in her voice when she replied.

"I'll see that he is fully informed," she said.

She made him sign in and leave his suitcase in the town's one half-decent hostelry before she would allow him to drive her to the airport. There she was able to purchase a ticket on the eleven o'clock plane to New York City.

"I'd come with you," he told her, "if I thought you wanted me to. But frankly, I'm a little scared."

"You should be," she told him, "but not of yourself. O-ho! Here comes my plane. Good-by until tomorrow, John. Please wait for me here in town. I'll wire or phone when I'm coming back."

There was no mistaking the tone of her final words. They constituted an order.

HE was pacing the airport ramp impatiently when her DC-8 came roaring in to its landing shortly after four o'clock the following afternoon. He grabbed both her hands in greeting with an enthusiasm which caused her to look at him strangely from the shelter of her harlequin glasses.

"I called the house this morning," he said excitedly. "It seems that Lars has packed up and left."

"What else could he do?" she countered. "I left a note suggesting he do just that."

"You did what?" he all but shouted. "Grace, I appreciate the loyalty you have shown in my behalf but don't you think this is just a trifle high-handed?"

"Perhaps," she said, a faint smile tilting the corners of her lips. "But it was the only way, believe me."

He was so steamed up about Nordmann's departure that he forgot entirely to ask her what she had learned in New York. He drove them back to the house-laboratory at the highest speed his tricycle-car could achieve, almost forcing its teardrop body out of shape in the air resistance he built up by his haste.

When they reached the house a gray-haired gray-faced man of iron visage—John's laboratory chief—was awaiting them. He handed his employer an envelope, addressed to John in Lars Nordmann's Gothic handwriting. It had not been opened. John ripped the envelope apart and scanned it with growing disbelief. Grace Hallam, watching his expression, turned a most unusual pink. Finally her employer handed it to her. It read:

Dear John—This is a highly difficult letter to write, containing as it does a most unscientific confession which reflects little credit upon Lars Nordmann—in fact, quite the reverse. John, in return for the many favors you have shown me over recent years, I have attempted to do you great harm, perhaps irreparable harm. And, oddly enough, the cause of my defection is the source of my undoing. Its name is Grace Hallam—yes, your secretary.

This, I know, is deplorably unscientific—but I have fallen in love with Miss Hallam. I have declared myself to her repeatedly but to no avail. Her interest is focused entirely in her work—and, I suspect, in you, John. This I could endure if you showed yourself to be aware of her in any way save as the most efficient of all your machines. But you have never, I suspect, looked at the woman beneath the secretary facade. Perhaps, unless this letter should awaken you, you never will. You are a fool, John.

Feeling as I have felt this past year it is not, perhaps, strange that I should attempt to do you harm. And fate, in the form of that picture, coupled with your well-buried but very real desire to knock down your own house of cards, has virtually forced me to do as I have done. Had I not happened to see the mezzotint transparency in a Third Avenue antique shop window on my last trip to Manhattan, had I not happened to know something of its history—but by this time you, or at any rate Miss Hallam, knows the truth.

For attempting to destroy the work of three years I am sorry. For attempting to destroy you, perhaps both as a man and a scientist, I am not, John. It is highly doubtful that you will ever see me again—but should our paths cross at some meeting of scientists, I promise to keep well away from you for both of our sakes. Good-by, John,

Lars Nordmann

Grace Hallam looked up to find John Alfredo Bent studying her with a not so faraway look in his eye that caused her color, already unusually high for her, to become near-crimson. She handed him back the letter and her gaze could not meet his frank appraisal. She did not dare face what she might find there.

"Is this true?" he asked her. "Has

Lars been making—I mean, has he been annoying you, Grace?"

"Well, not exactly," she replied but there was no doubt of the weakness of her denial. John Alfredo Best cleared his throat.

"Letting that go for the moment," he said, "I still don't see how this hypnotism business was accomplished."

"Come," she said, leading the way toward the library. "I'll show you. I found the information I wanted in New York."

"For Pete's sake, what is it?" he asked irritably.

"Sit down—there, where you sat when you rested yesterday," she said. "I want this to be clear."

GRACE HALLAM walked over to the table and picked up the dismembered picture and frame which still lay there while her employer grumbly sat down in a chair that faced one of the room's wide windows.

"The first of these prints," she said, holding it up and studying it carefully, "was designed by Carlos Mendoza for a very—well, romantically inclined Roman contessa in early Eighteenth-Century Rome. Very well—but according to rumor the man who plotted the picture was a Dr. Ariosto, who seems to have been the mentor of Cagliostro, the charlatan who won fame a generation later."

"The hypnotist fellow!" exclaimed John Alfredo Best. "I'll be hanged!" Comprehension began to come into his eyes.

"Right," she said calmly. "It seems the contessa was suffering from unrequited love for a cavalier who was afraid of her husband's vengeance. So, when he fled to Venice to escape her charms, she consulted Ariosto, who suggested the transparency and designed it cunningly to force the reluctant cavalier to succumb to her."

"She followed him to Venice, planning to show him the picture and hypnotize him into falling for her. Apparently she or some other woman with a jealous husband was successful, for

the man in question, shortly after, was found floating in one of the canals, suffering from violent death."

"And Lars got hold of the picture?" said Bent.

"He got hold of one of them. Mendozzi ran off more than a hundred before the Contessa's husband managed to bring Papal pressure upon him to stop the presses. And Lars made a couple of changes to suit his own purposes."

She plucked at the print and pulled from its surface a bit of old paper which had been pasted on. Then she held it once more against the window for him to look at. The man pushing the lever to work the drawbridge was gone, as was the structure which resembled the atomic pile.

"When I saw another copy in the library," she said, "I realized what Lars had done."

Instead of bridge and bridge worker, in the foreground was a gondola. It contained a beautiful woman, obviously offering her lips to a lover concealed by the cabin of the boat. Bent looked at it for a long moment, then mopped a brow that was suddenly hot.

"Er—suggestive, isn't it?" he said uncomfortably.

"Very," she said. "I want you to sit here and study it once more. It's important that we know whether this was what really affected you so strangely yesterday evening."

"I see what you mean, Grace," he said. "Very well."

AT twenty-nine minutes past eight o'clock on the evening of June twelfth, 1961, John Alfredo Bent appeared to be perfectly sane. He sat at ease in his usual big chair in the plate-glass and brick living room of his fabu-

lous sun-heated house, enjoying his after-dinner coffee and cigar and chatting with Grace Hallam, his secretary.

Miss Hallam, who had never looked more lovely in a simple but alluring blue hostess gown with her red-brown hair falling softly to her shoulders, appeared to be concealing a restlessness. She kept glancing at the clock on the far wall, as if unable to endure the slowness with which its hands moved.

"Something troubling you, Grace?" asked John Alfredo Bent, interrupting a highly brilliant discussion of the possible application of atomic energy to shaving. Even as he spoke the clock chimed the half hour.

Bent picked up his cigar, which was half smoked, and went on with his conversation. Grace Hallam seemed to crumple before his eyes. And then, suddenly, her eyes glazed. She rose from her chair and crossed the room toward him, slowly but with the definite purpose of the sleepwalker. Her arms went around his neck tightly and she sank onto his lap as her lips met his fiercely, possessively.

Moments later she came out of it with a little gasp of alarm. She sought to pull herself clear of him but his arms tightened about her, refused to let her go.

"John," she cried, her voice thick with emotion and shock. "John, what's happened? What am I doing here?"

"That's easy," he said, kissing her again. Then, later, "You didn't think I'd let that bloody picture hypnotize me twice, did you, honey?" he asked.

"But what about me?" she said helplessly.

"You forget," he told her. "You've been looking at it most of the day."

"Oh, John," she said softly and the rest of her words were buried by his kiss.