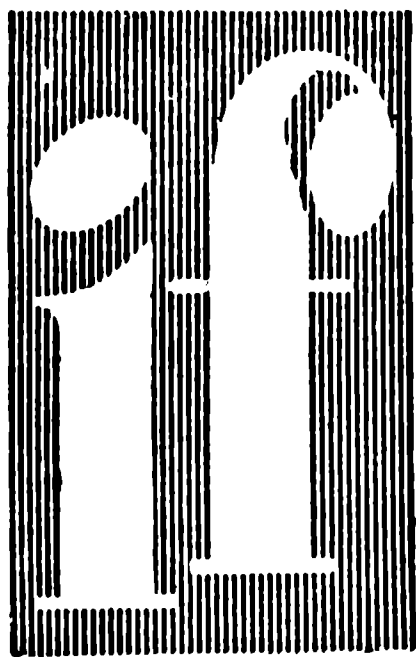




WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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SPECIAL!

THIS LONELY EARTH by Dr. Walther Riedel **36**

NOVELETTE

IT'S COLD OUTSIDE by Richard Wilson **4**

SHORT STORIES

THE CHASM by Bryce Walton **45**

ROUTINE FOR A HORNET by Don Berry **50**

FAMILY TREE by Charles L. Fontenay **60**

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE by Russ Winterbotham **82**

THOUGHT FOR TODAY by Henry Slesar **90**

BUT THE PATIENT LIVED by Harry Warner, Jr. **102**

FEATURES

EDITOR'S REPORT **2**

WHAT IS YOUR SCIENCE I.Q.? **112**

SCIENCE BRIEFS **113**

HUE AND CRY **117**

COVER:

A Symbolism of "This Lonely Earth", by Mel Hunter

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It was a war of survival. Children against old men.

And not a chance in the world to bridge——

THE chasm

BY BRYCE WALTON

THE OLD man's face was turning gray with fatigue under the wrinkled brown. He was beginning to get that deadly catching pain in his left chest. But he forced himself to move again, his ragged dusty uniform of the old Home Guard blending into the rubble the way a lizard merges with sand.

He hobbled behind a pile of masonry and peered through the crack. He angled his bald head, listening. His hands never really stopped quivering these days and the automatic rifle barrel made a fluttering crackle on the concrete. He lowered the barrel, then wiped his face with

a bandanna.

He'd thought he heard a creeping rustle over there. But he didn't see any sign of the Children.

He'd been picked to reconnoiter because his eyes were only comparatively good. The truth was he couldn't see too well, especially when the sun reflecting on the flat naked angles of the ruined town made his eyes smart and water and now his head was beginning to throb.

A dust devil danced away whirling a funnel of dust. Sal Lemmon looked at it, and then he slid from behind the rubble and moved along

down the shattered block, keeping to the wall of jagged holes and broken walls that had once been the Main Street of a town.

He remembered with a wry expression on his face that he had passed his ninety-fourth birthday eight days back. He had never thought he could be concerned with whether he lived to see his ninety-fifth, because there had always been the feeling that by the time he was ninety-four he would have made his peace with himself and with whatever was outside.

He moved warily, like a dusty rabbit, in and out of the ruins, shrinking through the sun's dead noon glare.

He stopped, and crouched in the shade behind a pile of slag that had once been the iron statue of some important historical figure. He contacted Captain Murphy on the walkie-talkie.

"Don't see any signs of Children."

"Max said he saw some around there," Murphy yelled.

"Max's getting too old. Guess he's seeing things."

"He saw them right around there somewhere."

"Haven't seen him either."

"We haven't heard another word from Max here, Sal."

The old man shrugged. "How could the Children have gotten through our post defenses?" He looked away down the white glare of the street.

"You're supposed to be finding out," Murphy yelled. He had a good voice for a man two months short of being a hundred. He liked

to show it off.

Then Sal thought he saw an odd fluttery movement down the block.

"I'll report in a few minutes," he said, and then he edged along next to the angled wall. A disturbed stream of plaster whispered down and ran off his shoulder.

Near the corner, he stopped. "Max," he said. He whispered it several times. "Max . . . that you, Max?"

He moved nearer to the blob on the concrete. Heat waves radiated up around it and it seemed to quiver and dance. He dropped the walkie-talkie. There wasn't even enough left of Max to take back in or put under the ground.

He heard the metallic clank and the manhole cover moved and then he saw them coming up over the edge. He ran and behind him he could hear their screams and cries and their feet striking hard over the blisters, cracks, and dried out holes in the dead town's skin.

He dodged into rubble and fell and got up and kept on running. The pain was like something squeezing in his belly, and he kept on running because he wanted to live and because he had to tell the others that the Children were indeed inside the post defenses.

He knew now how they had come in. Through the sewers, under the defenses. He began to feel and hear them crawling, digging, moving all over beneath the ruins, waiting to come out in a filthy screaming stream.

Sal was still resting in the corner of the old warehouse by the river.

A lantern hung on a beam and the dank floor was covered with deep moving shadows.

Captain Murphy was pacing in a circle, looking like something sewn quickly together by a nervous seamstress. Doctor Cartley sat on a canvas chair, elbows on knees, chin in his hands. He kept looking at the floor. He was in his early eighties and sometimes seemed like a young man to Sal. His ideas maybe. He thought differently about the Children and where things were going.

"We're going to get out tonight," Captain Murphy said again. "We'll get that barge loaded and we'll get out."

Sal sat up. The pills had made his heart settle down a bit, and his hands were comparatively calm.

"Is the barge almost loaded now? It better be," Sal said. "They'll attack any minute now. I know that much."

"Another hour's all we need. If they attack before then we can hold them off long enough to get that barge into the river. Once we get into the river with it, we'll be safe. We can float her down and into the sea. Somewhere along the coast we'll land and wherever it is will be fine for us. We'll have licked the Children. They know we've found the only eatable food stores in God knows how many thousands of miles in this goddamned wasteland. They can't live another month without this stuff, and we're taking it all down the river. That's right isn't it, Doc?"

Cartley looked up. "But as I said before, squeezing a little more life out of ourselves doesn't mean any-

thing to me. What do we want to get away and live a little longer for? It doesn't make sense, except in a ridiculous selfish way. So we live another month, maybe six months, or a year longer? What for?"

Sal glanced at Murphy who finally sat down.

"We want to live," Murphy said thickly, and he gripped his hands together. "Survival. It's a natural law."

"What about the survival of the species?" Cartley asked. "By running out and taking the food, we're killing ourselves anyway. So I don't think I'll be with you, Murphy."

"What are you going to do? Stay here? They'll torture you to death. They'll do to you what they did to Donaldson, and all the others they've caught. You want to stay for that kind of treatment?"

"We ought to try. Running off, taking all this food, that means they're sure to die inside a few weeks. They might catch a few rats or birds, but there aren't even enough of those around to sustain life beyond a few days. So we kill the future just so we can go on living for a little longer. We've got no reason to live when we know the race will die. My wife refused to fight them. They killed her, that's true, but I still think she was right. We've got to make one more attempt to establish some kind of truce with the Children. If we had that, then we might be able to start building up some kind of relationship. The only way they can survive, even if they had food, is to absorb our knowledge. You know

that. Without our knowledge and experience, they'll die anyway, even if they had a thousand years of food supplies."

"It can't be done," Murphy said.

Cartley looked at the shadows for a long time. Finally he shook his head. "I don't have any idea how to do it. But we should try. We can't use discipline and power because we're too weak. And too outnumbered. We'd have to do that first in order to teach them, and we can't. So there has to be some other way."

"Faith?" Sal said. He shook his head. "They don't believe in anything. You can't make any appeal to them through faith, or ethics, any kind of code of honor, nothing like that. They're worse than animals."

Cartley stood up wearily and started to walk away. "They hate us," he said. "That's the one thing we're sure of. We're the means and they're the ends. We made them what they are. They're brutalized and motivated almost completely by hatred. And what's underneath hatred?" He turned back toward Murphy. "Fear."

Sal stood up. "I never thought of them as being afraid," he said.

"That doesn't matter," Murphy said. "It's the hate and vicious brutality we have to deal with. You do whatever you want to do, Cartley. We've voted, and we've voted to move the stuff out tonight on the barge. The world we helped make is dead, Cartley. The Children grew up in a world we killed. We've all got bad consciences, but we can't do anything about it. The chasm between them and us is too wide.

It was wide even before the bombs fell. And the bombs made it a hell of a lot wider. Too wide to put any kind of bridge across now."

"Just the same, we ought to die trying," Cartley said. When he went outside, Sal followed him.

The barge was about loaded. All outer defense units had been pulled in and were concentrated on the head of the pier behind walls of sandbags. Burp guns and machine guns were ready, and the barge lay along the side of the pier in the moonlight like a dead whale. There were several sewer openings near the head of the pier. Men were stationed around these sewers with automatic rifles, hand grenades and flame throwers.

Sal walked to where Cartley stood leaning against the partly closed door of the rotting warehouse. Jagged splinters of steel and wood angled out against the sky.

After a while, Sal said softly, "Well, what could we try to do, Doc?"

Cartley turned quickly. Some of the anguish in his eyes had gone away, and he gripped Sal's shoulders in hands surprisingly strong for so old a man. "You want to help me try?"

"Guess I do. Like you said, we only have a little time left anyway. And if we can't help the Children, what's the good of it?"

They stood there in the shadows a while, not saying anything.

"This way," Cartley said. He led Sal down away from the pier and along the water's edge. Dry reed rustled, and mud squished under their shoes.

"Here," Cartley said. There was a small flat-bottomed rowboat, and in it were several cartons of food supplies, all in cans. There were also several large tins of water.

"We'll need a little time," Cartley said. "We'll have to wait. I figure we'll row upstream maybe a few hundred yards, and hole up in one of those caves. We can watch, Sal. We can watch and wait and try to figure it out."

"Sure," Sal said. "That seems the only way to start."

Cartley sat down on the bank near the boat, and Sal sat down too.

"The Children," Cartley said, "never had a chance to be any other way. But we're the oldsters, and we've got this obligation, Sal. Man's a cultural animal. He isn't born with any inherent concepts of right, or wrong, or good or bad, or even an ability to survive on an animal level. We have to be taught to survive by the elders, Sal. And we're the elders." He hesitated, "We're the only ones left."

A flare of horrid light exploded over the warehouse down river and it lit up Cartley's face and turned it a shimmering crimson. His hands widened to perfect roundness and he raised his hands in a voiceless scream to stop the sudden explosions of burp guns, grenades, machine guns, and rifles.

Looking down river then, Sal could see the flames eating up through the warehouse. The pier, the barge, everything for a hundred square yards was lit up as bright as day, and the flare spread out over the river and made a black omi-

nous shadow of the opposite bank.

"They're getting away," Cartley said.

Sal watched the barge move out. The Children came screaming out of the blazing warehouse, overran the pier, streamed into the water. But a steady blast of fire from the barge drove them back, and in a few more minutes the barge dissolved downriver into darkness.

Cartley's hands were shaking as he gripped Sal's arm. "Let's go now. We need time. Time may help us a lot, Sal. We can wait and watch. We can figure something out."

Sal heard the screams and mocking savage cries coming up over the water, and then the jagged cries of some oldsters who hadn't managed to get away.

Still looking downstream toward the blazing pier, Sal pushed Cartley into the rowboat, and they shoved off. Sal started rowing, but he kept looking back.

"They should have put them in the same shelters with us," Sal said, "that would have made a difference. But they put us in separate shelters."

Only the oldest and the youngest had been saved. The old out of pity and because they were helpless, had been granted the safety of shelters. The young because they were the symbols of hope had been granted shelters, too.

"No," Cartley said. "It started long before that. The chasm was building up long before the war. This alienation between the young and the old. Between the sun and

(Continued on page 101)

THE CHASM

(Continued from page 49)

the seed. That's what we've got to bring back, Sal. Between us, we have stored up a hundred and seventy-nine years of human culture. There isn't a kid back there, Sal, more than twelve years old."

"We'll find a way," Sal said.

The rowboat was about fifteen feet away from the thick reeds growing in the marshy ooze of the bank.

Cartley heard the sound first and turned, his face white. When Sal looked toward the bank, he saw the girl. She came on out from the curtain of reeds and looked at them. She was perfectly clear in the moonlight standing there. She wore a short ragged print dress and she had long hair that seemed silken and soft and golden in the moonlight even though it, her dress, her little legs and her face were streaked with mud.

Sal hesitated, then pulled heavily

on his left oar and the boat nosed toward her. Up close, Sal could see her face, the clear blue eyes wet, and the tears running down her cheeks.

The girl reached out and asked in a sobbing breath,

"Granpa? Is that you, Granpa?"

"Oh God, Oh God," Cartley said. He was crying as he picked her up and got her into the boat. He was rocking her in his arms and half crying and half laughing as Sal rowed the boat upstream.

"Yes, yes, honey," Sal heard Cartley say over and over. "I'm your granpa, honey. Don't cry. Go to sleep now. I'm your granpa and I've been looking for you, honey, and now everything's going to be all right."

It's funny, Sal thought, as he kept on rowing upstream. It's a funny thing how one little girl remembered her granpa, and how maybe that was the beginning of the bridge across the chasm. • • •