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The DIMENSION TERROR by EDMOND HAMILTON



"Graham plunged about in mad conflict with one of the beetle-men."

ONE man. . . .
From the very first, the story is his story. We see that, now. The inspiration, the work, the catastrophe—we can follow the thing, step by step, up to its flaming climax, and from the beginning it is centered around that single figure. In his hands lay the fate of worlds, the destiny of universes.

One man. . . .

It is with that man that one begins, with Dr. Harlan Graham, of the scientific faculty of the great America University, in New York City. For two years Graham had held the chair in astro-physics at that institution. It was a much-coveted position, in academic circles; so much so, in

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fact, that there had been a number of unofficial protests when it was awarded to so young a man as Graham, he being a year under thirty at the time.

The most critical, though, had been silenced for a time by the succession of brilliant achievements with which Graham had followed his assumption of the position. Such accomplishments as his famous "light-drift" experiments, and his final proof of the Selsner-Braun theory, had made his name honored among physicists, and had even extended his fame into the wider world. It seemed, indeed, that Graham was only at the start of an exceptionally brilliant career.

Even by that time, though, there

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had been more than one protest against the sensationalism which marred his record. The worth of his concrete achievements none could question, but there were not a few who deprecated the occasional statements which he gave out, statements in which he was not afraid to put forth some extremely radical, not to say revolutionary, theories. These were, in fact, the imaginative fancies of a scientific mind, and should have been regarded as such, but unfortunately for Graham they were heralded to the world by the more sensational newspapers as newly discovered truths. There followed, invariably, a storm of corrections and denials from Graham, and it was felt that the name of the university was cheapened by the whole process.

Yet for all the rising tide of disapproval among Graham's colleagues, none had ever ventured to speak to him about it, for they knew something of his hot temper. In this unsatisfactory condition matters had remained for several months, until at last Graham put forth his famous "dimensional" theory, and set off an open explosion of angry controversy.

It was in a short article in a scientific journal that Graham first advanced his theory. Reading that article now, we find it hard to see in it the cause of such a monumental row as followed. It is true that Graham's idea was radical, startling even; but in itself it hardly seems sufficient cause for the uproar which it created. One can not escape the suspicion that the article was seized upon by Graham's enemies as a pretext for a general condemnation of him. That suspicion is strengthened by the fact that while the hypothesis advanced by Graham was radical enough, yet it was far from impossible, or even improbable.

In that article, indeed, he began by pointing out an obvious fact:

that man's age-old conception of the cosmos as a three-dimensional universe is no longer acceptable. The work of De Sitter, and Einstein, and a multitude of others, has made it clear to us that our universe has at least four dimensions: length, breadth, thickness, and time. Within the last two decades this has come to be accepted by physicists as scientific fact.

But Graham had now boldly advanced another step. "To a savage," he wrote, "there seem to be but three dimensions only. Your savage can not conceive of the existence of a fourth, but we, with our advanced knowledge and science, know that matter has, indeed, a fourth dimension, which is time. Is it not possible, then, that there may exist still another dimension of which we know nothing, a fifth dimension which some day, with the aid of greater science, we may discover? And if this fifth dimension actually exists, then there may exist also, beside us but unseen by us, another world, a world that occupies the same length and breadth and thickness and time as our world, but lying next to us along the fifth dimension, and separated from us by it.

"Impossible? Not so. Take a stone—a solid, three-dimensional stone—and place it on a pedestal. Then remove it and place a book on the pedestal. There you have seen two three-dimensional objects occupying the same space. You will say, 'But not at the same time!' Then it is time that has separated those two objects—time, the fourth dimension. As far as the three dimensions of length and breadth and thickness are concerned, they have occupied the same space, but have occupied different places on the fourth dimension, time; have lain next to each other along that fourth dimension.

"And in the same way, granted the existence of a fifth dimension, two worlds might occupy the same

space, four-dimensionally, but lie at different places along the fifth dimension; lie next to each other along that dimension—two worlds, both occupying the same space at the same time, but each separated from the other by the unknown fifth dimension, if that dimension exists.

“If that dimension exists! But it does exist. Of that much, at least, I have experimental proof. It is not my purpose to relate here the technicalities of the experiment on which I have been working, but it is possible for me to give a hint as to its nature. We all know that the earth’s magnetic currents, those vast tides of magnetic force that race between the poles, are subject to strange distortions and perturbations which have never been satisfactorily explained. Now, if we go on the assumption that another world lies next to us on the fifth dimension, it seems reasonable to suppose that the two worlds—our own and that unknown one—would affect each other’s fields of magnetic force, across the gap that separates them on the fifth dimension. In this way the perturbations mentioned would be accounted for.

“Now it stands to reason that when two worlds, two universes, thus lie side by side on this fifth dimension, there will be some one spot where they will touch, or almost touch, just as two spheres lying side by side will touch at a single point. And it would be at this point, this contact with the other world, that the perturbation of earth’s magnetic currents would be greatest. In other words, if one definitely located the spot where the perturbations centered, one would know that spot to be the contact between the two contiguous worlds.

“And that is what I have done. I have located that spot, that center of magnetic disturbance, and I am convinced that there is the contact with that other world, that world that lies next to us on the fifth dimension. I

am not going to say where that spot is, for I desire to work there in the future, undisturbed. But I repeat that there is such a spot, such a contact, and that if that contact could be opened, if we could pass through it, we would be able to leap the gulf that separates us, along the fifth dimension, and enter an unknown world.”

THUS far Graham’s article. There can be no profit now in reviewing the bitter controversy that followed. It is probable that had Graham merely advanced the idea as an interesting hypothesis, there would have been few objections. But when he stated that he had in his possession experimental proof of the existence of such a fifth dimension, his critics opened the flood-gates of their wrath upon him.

It was demanded, not unreasonably, that he produce or at least explain the experiment to which he referred, or that he give the location of the spot which he called the “contact.” But Graham refused to do this, stating, in strong language, that he would continue to work on the thing in his own way, and would give out no further information on it until his work had met with complete success.

His attitude was thus very much open to criticism, and his enemies took full advantage of the opportunity. They ridiculed Graham’s theory to the utmost of their powers, and in the general condemnation there were those who did not hesitate to belittle his former achievements. The discussion, in fact, grew so extraordinarily bitter that it penetrated into the newspapers, which amused their readers with satirical accounts of Graham’s fifth dimension and its possibilities.

Even among his own colleagues at the university there was some sharp criticism of Graham and his theory. That criticism, no doubt, was en-

hanced by the fact that there had always been more or less friction between Graham and his fellow-professors. Except for his own laboratory assistant, young Stephen Harron, he was almost without defenders at the university. And Harron, though entirely devoted to his superior, had had no part whatever in the disputed experiments, and so could offer no effective objections to Graham's critics.

One can not help feeling some sympathy for Graham under this ordeal. Undoubtedly he regretted, by that time, the impulse which had caused him to publish his theory to the world; but, holding back the rage he must have felt, he refused to enter into any discussion of the subject. Once or twice, though, his temper burst from his control and his anger blazed out against his detractors. And after each such outburst the condemnation and derision of him seemed redoubled.

It was not to be expected that the university heads would long endure such a situation. Before they could take any action on it, however, the entire matter was brought to a sudden climax by that stormy faculty meeting which marked the end of Graham's academic career.

Just what happened at that meeting is not, even now, well known. Most of the facts were suppressed, at the time, doubtless because it was felt that such a brawl among its professors detracted from the university's dignity. But some news of what had happened leaked out and found its way into the newspapers—enough, at least, to enable us to understand Graham's subsequent actions.

It would seem that the immediate cause of the uproar at the meeting was a short speech made by one of Graham's fellow-professors, in which the speaker took occasion to make some biting remarks concerning charlatans in general and "yellow-

journal scientists'' in particular. He had long been chafing beneath the fire of criticism, and these words were enough to touch off Graham's fury. He made for the platform and attempted violence upon the speaker. An undignified brawl ensued which made a bedlam of the room for several minutes. By that time some of the calmer heads had managed to quiet Graham, and a few moments later he left the building. His resignation from the university's faculty was announced in the next morning's newspapers.

And there the matter ended. The reporters who called at Graham's lodgings for interviews, the next morning, found that he had hastily packed and departed on the night before, his destination unknown. It was ascertained, also, that he had visited the university during the night and had evidently removed all of his notes and personal effects from the laboratory there. But from that point onward his movements could not be traced. Even his assistant, young Harron, who had been perhaps as close a friend as the fiery-tempered scientist possessed, knew nothing of his departure or his destination. And Harron, who was probably the one person to feel any real anxiety regarding the missing man, could find no more clue to his whereabouts than the reporters.

For a few days, Graham's disappearance was something of a minor mystery. It was believed by many that he had gone into hiding, for a time, to escape the storm of condemnation which had been raised by his own conduct. Not a few, however, asserted that the scientist's once-brilliant mind had become unhinged, accounting for his impossible theories and his strange disappearance. And this assertion was given credit, by a large section of the public, at least.

With the passing days, interest faded. A few weeks later Graham's

chair at the university was again filled, this time by a gray-bearded scientist who was belligerently conservative, and this action seemed to put a period to the entire matter. Other and greater sensations had crowded it from the public mind, by that time. Other and greater mysteries had taken its place in the lime-light.

So Graham passed, and was forgotten. It seems a strange thing, now, that he could have been so forgotten. It seems a strange thing, to us, that the man could have been so forgotten who was to hold in his hands the destiny of planets, who was to change the course of universes, and who was to loose upon our world confusion, and horror, and death . . . and death . . . and death. . . .

2

IT WAS on the first day of September, just three months after Graham's disappearance, that there descended upon the world—the terror. One sees, now, the impossibility of presenting any complete account of that gigantic catastrophe. The thing struck earth, struck all of earth, in a single moment, and in that moment there crashed down the civilization of the last five thousand years. In that moment men died by millions. It was panic; it was horror; it was doom. We who passed under that terror and survived it, we who have seen our own fairer cities rise up to replace those that vanished on that day of dread, need no description of the thing. And to those who did not experience it, no description would be adequate.

Yet even so, it is necessary to present here some impression, however feeble, of the catastrophe. With this purpose in mind, we turn to the account of young Harron, who not only witnessed the catastrophe at the one point where it struck most terribly, but was destined also to be the

one witness of the final, tremendous climax, when the fate of a universe trembled in the balance. It is from the narrative of this laboratory assistant, indeed, that we have learned all that we shall ever know concerning that far-flying machination of dark purposes in which the cataclysm itself was but an incident.

Harron has given over the first section of his narrative to a recountal of the events leading up to Graham's disappearance—events which have already been summarized in this record. From Harron himself we learn nothing new concerning the case. As he points out, the whole "dimensional" business was outside of the university laboratory's regular routine, and as such, he had had no part in it. He admits, also, that the matter was never discussed between Graham and himself, in spite of their friendship, and attributes this silence on Graham's part to the latter's unwillingness to drag his assistant into the controversy.

But if Harron was thus without first-hand knowledge of Graham's disputed experiment and theory, he was none the less his superior's warm defender in the row that followed the publication of that theory. And after Graham's mysterious disappearance, Harron was apparently one of the few who retained any faith in the missing man.

He seems to have made some effort, indeed, through private detective agencies and the like, to discover Graham's whereabouts, and only desisted after all such efforts had proved futile. It seemed that nothing could be done, then, except to wait for some word from Graham himself. And as the days passed into weeks, and then into months, and that word did not come, Harron became convinced that his former superior had met with some misadventure, since nothing else explained, to him, this protracted silence on Graham's part.

So, through the long summer days, Harron went about his work at the university with that conviction and that fear growing in his mind. It was a summer of almost unprecedented heat at New York, he says, a summer of sultry days and brilliant nights. June had passed, and July, and August was passing, and so the long days, one by one, were drawing down toward September, and the first day of September.

The first day of September. . . .

HARRON has given us a detailed account of his own movements on that fateful September first. He had worked through all the morning, he says, in the university laboratories, but was free for the rest of the day and had spent the afternoon in a long, solitary tramp over Staten Island. The afternoon was fast waning when he boarded a ferry for the return to the city, and by the time he landed at the Battery it was sunset—a sunset that hung over Manhattan's up-flung towers like a settling golden haze. Walking across the little park north of the Battery, Harron was so caught by the sunset's beauty that he paused for a moment to view it, seating himself on a convenient bench.

At that time, he tells us, there were exceptionally few people in the little park. Only one or two idlers sprawled on near-by benches, and a few chance pedestrians. In the waters west of the park, though, there was more activity, with a dozen small boats darting to and fro on indeterminate errands, and a large and rusty freighter that was being escorted toward its dock by hooting tugs. High overhead a single airplane dipped and circled.

Harron turned his attention, in a few moments, to the city north of him. Directly beyond the little park its first great buildings loomed, and beyond them there extended away into the distance mile upon mile of

towers and terraced pyramids, a great, man-made range of steel and stone and glass. From where he sat he could gaze up along the canyoned length of Broadway, cutting slantwise across the city, arrowing through a huddled mass of towering buildings. Its highest pinnacles still aspired into the light of the setting sun, but the street itself lay in shadow. In a moment the sun would dip behind the horizon, and down upon the city would steal the darkening dusk. With a sigh, Harron rose to go.

He paused a moment, glancing at his watch, then took a step forward. And in the next moment there came—the terror.

It was the sound that came first. Concerning that sound there has been considerable dispute. Some characterize it as a single clanging note, others as a humming of a few seconds' duration. Not a few assert that it was more like a short, shrill whistle than anything else. But to Harron it seemed exactly like a single tap of metal on metal, not loud, but with singular carrying power.

"It was very much like the sound of a hammer striking a nail," he writes. "A short, staccato metallic note, something like a loud click."

For a single moment he halted, listening. Then—

A terrific, thunderous roar broke from the air around him, a shattering, immense detonation like the shock of colliding worlds. At the same moment, while Harron gazed northward, a multitude of events registered themselves swiftly upon his vision. He had a single glimpse of the massed towers of the great city quivering violently, wavering and trembling like a scene in a shaken cinema-film; then, abruptly, they collapsed, disintegrated, crashed down to the ground in a titanic avalanche of brick and stone and glass. For an instant their thunder was

like the thunder of doom; then it lessened, and ceased. Where the mighty city had towered a moment before there lay now only mountainous heaps of broken brick and stone, a vast waste of wreckage that stretched far to the north and from which great dust-clouds were rising.

Harron stared, transfixed, his brain reeling. Slowly, mechanically, he turned to his left. Where the shipping had thronged in the waters a few seconds before there were now only some floating bits of wreckage. Beyond, where Jersey City had stood, there lay now only another dust-shrouded desert of wreckage. The airplane which had been circling above had suddenly collapsed and was plunging toward the ground, a limp, frameless thing of flapping cloth. And over all there reigned a deathlike, soul-shaking silence.

For a time, by his own account, Harron seems to have been a little insane. "I seem to remember staggering toward the wreckage of the city," he writes, "screaming, and with my hands raised toward the sky. There are other things, too, that come back to me dimly, like the misty scenes of some half-remembered dream. One of these memories is of the few people who had been in the park, like myself, at the moment of the catastrophe. The aquarium and other buildings at the south end of the park had collapsed, like the city, into shapeless heaps of ruins, but there remained perhaps a half-dozen people, altogether, in the open park. They were shouting hoarsely and running aimlessly about, and I saw one man throw himself into the water, in sheer insane terror. The rest, I think, wandered into the wrecked city north of us, in search of their own families or friends, no doubt. I was glad enough, then, that I was without family myself! I know, at least, that when I finally came back to my senses there re-

mained but one man in the park besides myself."

It was this other, as Harron tells us, who finally brought him back to a realization of his surroundings, by tugging persistently at his arm. He was a rotund, pink-faced person of middle age, whose eyes were wide with non-understanding terror and who was bleeding from a long cut on his forehead. Clutching Harron's wrist, he pointed into the street a few yards away, where there lay an odd collection of miscellaneous fragments.

"I was driving," he said, his voice thin and quavering, "driving there, and my car—I fell—just pieces——"

Harron glanced for a moment at the fragments in the street, then bent closer to examine them. And as he did so the explanation of all that had happened seared across his mind. For what lay in the street was the remains of an automobile—an automobile from which every bit of iron and steel had vanished. The tires, the upholstery, the steering-wheel's wooden rim, even the bits of copper and nickel here and there—all these were undamaged, but every trace of iron and steel had disappeared. It was apparent that the car had collapsed instantly into that heap of fragments when its frame, motor, axles and most of its body had vanished.

Harron straightened, felt swiftly in his pockets. He drew forth a miscellaneous collection of small articles and stared at them wonderingly. For every bit of iron and steel in his pockets had vanished likewise. The blades of his penknife, most of the works of his watch, the clasp of a little note-book—down to the tiniest bit, all iron and steel was gone. He turned to the bench on which he had been sitting a moment before. In its place there lay on the ground a little heap of wooden slats, the steel framework having vanished.

"Steel!"

Harron cried the word aloud. He turned to the dazed man beside him.

"It's the steel—the iron and steel!" he cried. "Don't you see? The iron and steel's all gone, out of your car, out of everything!"

The other looked at him with blank, uncomprehending gaze.

"My car," he quavered; "it just seemed to fall and break up—I was driving to the ferry, to get home." He raised his dazed eyes toward the dust-veiled ruins across the river. "Home. I must get home, now."

Harron saw then that the man's brain had been turned a little by the shock, and by the wound on his head. He grasped his shoulders and strove to shake him into realization of his situation.

"You can't get home now!" he told him. "The ferry's wrecked—everything's wrecked. The city—everything—"

The other's eyes turned toward the colossal heaps of wreckage north of them.

"Earthquake?" he asked, mildly.

"No!" shouted Harron. "It's the steel—all the iron and steel disappearing—that's why the buildings all fell, when their steel frames and supports disappeared. All the iron and steel gone, God knows how!"

"Steel," whispered the other, staring northward with blank, uncomprehending gaze. In a moment he turned back to Harron. "I've got to get home," he repeated, with dull insistence. He glanced toward the north again, then abruptly started off across the park in that direction, with uncertain steps.

Harron ran after him, clutched his arm. "You can't go that way!" he cried.

The other wrested free from his grasp, with sudden anger. "Let me go!" he shouted, pushing the younger man away and continuing on his way across the park.

STANDING there motionless, Harron watched him go, watched him plod on until he had reached the mighty heaps of ruins at the park's edge. He stared at these for a few seconds, confusedly; then clambered up and over them, and in a moment was lost to sight behind them. Harron found himself alone in the little park—alone in the whole world, almost, it seemed to him at that moment.

Around him there held sway an utter silence, an utter lack of movement. Over the vast heaps of wreckage north of him, and the other mounds of ruin that stood out back against the yellow sunset west of him, over these there hung a tremendous, smothering silence. In that spot, where for decades all the currents of earth's life had swirled together into the roaring whirlpool of the metropolis, there was now but silence—silence and a little wind that whispered furtively of coming night. Already the sky above was graying, darkening. Vague shadows were creeping out from the ruins, across the little park.

Standing there in that place of death, Harron felt his soul bowing beneath the awful silence. He flung out his arms in a grotesque gesture of sudden panic.

"No!" he shouted hoarsely, glancing around him with wild eyes. Then, with abrupt determination, he ran toward the waste of wreckage north of him, clawed his way up its sides, over slopes of broken brick and stone that were starred with shivered glass, until he stood at the summit of the first great mound, panting, gazing ahead with strained eyes through the failing light of dusk. Beyond lay only a vast expanse of miniature hills and gullies, formed from the wreckage of the collapsed city. On that desert of devastation there moved no sign of life, and north and south and east and west no spark of light pierced the deepening night.

It was only then that there came home to Harron some realization of the magnitude of that cataclysm which had riven the world of man. The city beneath him had collapsed into shapeless ruins, he knew, when all iron and steel in it had vanished. Had it been so on all earth? Had all the cities on the globe crashed down to ruin in that same moment of doom? And why? What had caused the vanishing of iron and steel? Had the earth passed through some interstellar nebula or cloud of gas that dissolved all iron like sugar in water? Harron could think of no other explanation. He strove for the moment to dismiss the matter from his dazed thoughts, to concentrate on the idea of escaping from the island, of leaving that place of silence and death.

It was quite dark, by then; the darkness was intensified by the gathering clouds which belted the firmament overhead. For a moment, though, the moon emerged from behind those clouds, and its light, pouring down on the ruins ahead, gave to Harron a rough idea of the path he must follow northward. It would be impossible to cross the rivers on either side, he knew, without a boat or raft, but northward it might be managed. He glanced around once more, then struck out toward the north, across the hills of tangled ruins which covered almost all the island.

Always afterward that journey northward over the island remained in Harron's memory as a confused, vaguely remembered time in which he toiled for a period that seemed eternal over the mighty wreckage-heaps which were all that remained of the great city. His hands torn and bleeding, his body bruised from a score of falls, he struggled on through the unchanging darkness and silence, feeling his way blindly forward.

Twice he heard the sound of wailing voices from somewhere in the darkness ahead, and once a cry of

mortal agony whispered through the night to his ears. Once, too, he saw, far to the south, a great reflection of red light against the sky, a red glare that quivered in the heavens as though reflected from a great fire. For minutes Harron watched it, then turned and struggled on.

For more than a mile he toiled north across that desert of devastation, groping forward in deepest night, his only illumination that of the moon when it peeped occasionally through crevices in the clouds. Most of the time, though, he could but plunge blindly forward through the darkness.

He had struggled thus over a steep little ridge, and was making a sliding, scrambling progress down its other slope, when he blundered without warning into something warm and moving. It was a man, a man who clutched Harron's arm and uttered a hoarse cry.

With sudden panicky surprise Harron struck out at the other, strove to wrest himself free. For a single moment they struggled thus, in the dense darkness, and then the moon drifted again from behind its screen of clouds and poured down a flood of white, revealing light upon the face of the man with whom Harron struggled.

It was Graham.

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FOR a moment the two men stared wildly into each other's eyes, without speaking, and then a choking cry burst from Harron.

"Graham!" he cried. "Graham!"

Graham was grasping his arm with fierce intensity, but for the moment he did not speak. When he did so it was in a hushed voice.

"Harron!" he whispered. "You escaped, Harron! You escaped—this—" and he flung an arm out toward the waste of wreckage that encircled them.

Abruptly he sprawled to the ground and lay there, his body shaken by great sobs. Harron dropped beside him, his brain whirling, and in a moment Graham raised his tear-stained face.

"My fault, Harron!" he cried. "This terror that has shattered the world of men to fragments, that has slain millions upon millions—and that greater terror that waits to spring upon a riven world—all my fault, Harron, from the first!"

Harron grasped the other's shoulders with sudden fierceness.

"Graham!" he exclaimed. "What happened? What have you done? My God, man, it's the end of everything! The iron and steel vanishing, cities collapsing like this one—and God knows how far this disaster has extended!"

Graham's eyes became fixed, staring, and when he spoke his voice was deadened. "It is over all earth," he said dully. "The iron—the steel—gone over all earth, at the same moment. I know."

Harron shrank back, appalled. "Over all earth!" he repeated. "Over all earth—like this!"

Graham bent his head. "Yes. Cities and ships and trains and airplanes and bridges, all gone, now; all collapsed in that one moment, when the iron and steel in them vanished; all crashed to the ground in that one moment. Civilization itself crashing to the earth in that moment—and the fault all mine!"

Harron was silent, stunned. It was Graham who spoke first. "Yet there is a chance yet for man," he said slowly. "A chance, if he can escape that greater horror that waits to spring upon our world. And that chance lies in our hands, Harron."

"It was I who loosed this doom upon the world," he said, his voice low and vibrant, "but maybe yet, together, we can stay that doom. You know nothing of what has happened, Harron, not even what has

caused this city here, what has caused all our civilization, to crash to fragments. But I know."

He was silent for a moment before speaking again.

"You remember the dimensional experiment and the uproar over it," he continued. "After that uproar, and after my temper had got the best of me at that faculty meeting, I determined to go on with the experiment and attain complete proof of my theory, and to return and ram that proof down the throats of my enemies. I was confident that I could do so. Already I had incontrovertible proof of the existence of the fifth dimension, and already I had located the contact between our world and that other world that lies next to us along the fifth dimension.

"I had located that contact, as I stated at the time, by charting the currents of magnetic disturbance on the earth's surface and finding the spot where that disturbance was most intense. Strangely enough, I found that spot to be hardly more than a score of miles from New York City itself, and that spot I knew to be the contact between earth and its unseen neighbor world. The spot itself was situated deep in a large marsh that lay at the edge of the east Long Island coast, in that strange region of swamps and sand-dunes which stretches north for some miles beyond the resorts on the lower coast.

"This marsh, called Devil's Marsh in the near-by villages, was fully deserving of its lurid title. It was a nearly impenetrable place, with great beds of man-high reeds and stagnant, swampy pools, and with here and there a knoll of solid ground. There were paths through the marsh, precarious paths that led from knoll to knoll, but few knew them well enough to venture inside, for there were legends of more than one person who had met death in the quicksands which abounded there. It seemed almost incredible that there

could be a place of such wildness within so short a distance of the world's greatest city, but the very solitude of the place suited my plans well.

"It was on one of the knolls of ground, lying far in toward the marsh's center, that I had definitely located the point of greatest magnetic disturbance, and there, I knew, lay the contact which I sought, and which I meant to open. I had shared my knowledge with no one, for I wished to work there undisturbed. So when I left the university I was able to take the equipment which I had prepared and go straight to the place, without leaving any trace of my movements, since I had told no one—not even you, Harron!—what my intentions were. I had bought a small motor-boat in which was loaded the equipment I needed; so after leaving the university I was able to set out at once for the marsh.

"It was my plan to enter the marsh from the ocean side, by means of my boat, and thus avoid any news of my activities there becoming known in the villages that lay on the marsh's shore side. So I went there, alone, in my boat, mooring the boat itself to one of the outer knolls and transporting my equipment to the contact knoll by means of a rude scow which I had prepared. A tent which I set up sufficed me for a dwelling, and it was not long before I had the equipment I had brought set up also, and ready for my attempt to open the contact. That equipment included a small gasoline motor-generator, or dynamo, and a number of step-up transformers which would supply me with the high-frequency currents I needed. At last all my preparations were complete, and at once I began work on the great problem.

"The next six weeks were weeks of uninterrupted work, and they were, too, weeks of unchanging failure. It is useless to review to you

all the different methods I used in my effort to open the contact, or even to learn something as to its nature. All my methods proved quite futile, and after weeks of such failure it began to seem to me that perhaps even my own theory of the fifth dimension's existence was baseless, and that I was following a blind lead.

"At last, though, discouraged as I was, it occurred to me to try a different tack. I knew that magnetic force or waves could pass through the contact, for they did pass through, causing the disturbance of magnetic currents on our side which had led me to my discovery. Therefore, I reasoned, it should be possible to send sound-waves also through the contact, if their wave-length were changed to that of the magnetic vibrations. Following this theory, I constructed a crude sender and receiver for sound signals, one which stepped up their frequency in sending and stepped it down again in receiving. The apparatus itself was actuated by a clicking sound-bar, much like that of a telegraph-sounder, and it was my plan to catch these sounds and hurl them out after increasing their wave-length, then use a circle of recording microphones to ascertain whether or not this sound was markedly weaker in one spot than another. If it were, it meant that in that spot some of the force of the sound-waves was decreased by penetrating through the contact itself, into that other world.

"So I set the apparatus into operation, and for a few days was at it almost constantly. So far as I could judge, at the end of that time, the sounds received by the microphones at the north edge of the knoll were somewhat weaker, and if my theory were correct it was there that the contact must be located. Before going farther, though, it occurred to me to set the receiving apparatus also in operation. It might be that some occasional sounds could come through

the contact that were high enough in frequency to register on my receiver. So I switched on the receiving apparatus and then, the next moment, fell back, stunned. For coming through it—coming, I knew, through the contact itself—were signals, clear and definite clicking signals, signals that repeated, over and over, the ones which I had sent out during the past few days. Signals that could come only from conscious, intelligent beings on the other side!

“It was the last thing I had looked for, this presence of intelligent, living creatures in that other, neighbor world. It had never occurred to me, somehow, that that world might be inhabited, the same as our own, but now I saw that this must be the case. They had caught the test-signals which I had sent through the contact and had sent them back to me, had repeated them, to show me that they had heard. At once I threw aside my first interest in opening the contact, and applied myself wholly to this communication with the beings on the other side.

“THE next few weeks were weeks of wonder, to me. I spent the greater part of both day and night at my apparatus, in constant communication with the enigmatic creatures beyond the contact. And gradually, in those weeks, my communication with them became more and more intelligent, understandable, as more and more I came to learn their language, their clicking signals. I could never have learned it, perhaps, by signals alone, but any sound could be sent through the contact if its wavelength were changed enough; and by sending through the sound of an object, such as the splash of water or the tap of metal, and then giving its name, I soon got the rudiments of a vocabulary and in a short time could converse with them with some proficiency. Of course I understood only the clicking signals that passed be-

tween us, and their written or spoken language would have been incomprehensible to me, but the signals were all that I needed to know.

“During that time, and after I had learned to read their signals, those on the other side were constantly questioning me, asking about this world, its resources, the strength of its peoples, the limits of their science. They told me little enough about themselves, though I gathered that they were not human in our sense of the word, and that their own science was a far-advanced one, as, indeed, it must have been to receive and understand my signals. But their own questions concerning our earth never ceased, questions the purpose of which I did not divine, then.

“During all that time, indeed, I had given hardly any thought whatever to what I was doing. The sheer intoxication of my success, the sheer glory of the stupendous thing I had accomplished—these filled my mind to the exclusion of all else. I saw myself returning with what I had learned, to fling my achievement into the faces of those who had criticized me. There remained but one thing to be done, first, and that was to open the contact itself. Were this to be done, were one or two of those people on the other side to come through, there could be no further doubts as to my success. If the contact could be opened!

“It was that problem which I put up to those on the other side, through our signals, and they assured me that the thing was quite possible. For long, they told me, they had been aware of the existence of the fifth dimension and of the contact between the two worlds, but alone they could not open the contact. It could be opened, they said, only by means of a special, powerful repulsion ray, of which they had the secret, and that ray must be directed onto the contact

from both sides, from both worlds, at exactly the same moment. If they were to apply it from their own side the only result would be that the powerful ray would drive through the contact and blast a great crater or pit from the earth's surface, on this side. But if I were to prepare a ray-projector, and apply the ray to the contact from this side at the same moment they did so from the other side, the two rays would meet at the contact and would oppose and equalize each other, and the effect of their equalization at the contact would be to open that contact so that any matter could pass through it, from one world to the other.

"At once I agreed to follow their instructions and operate a similar ray from my side; and so, following the instructions which I received from them, I built up a ray-projector that would direct the powerful repulsion ray against the contact. Parts of what I built were clear to me and parts of it I never understood, so complicated was the work, but the detailed instructions signaled to me from the other side kept me on the right track. In hardly more than a week the projector was finished. In appearance it was something like a small, thick mortar or trench-cannon, mounted on a square case which held the actuating chamber of the ray. Switches for its control were mounted on the side of this case, and the tube-projector itself I carefully sighted so that it seemed to be pointing into the open air at the north edge of the knoll; though in reality, as I knew, it was aimed at the unseen contact between the two worlds. At last all was finished, and I stood ready for the attempt.

"It was at dawn that I waited there for their signal, for then was the time agreed on. Dawn of the first day of September, less than twenty-four hours ago! The ray

was to be turned on, on both sides, at the exact moment when there sounded the tenth of a series of ten great bell-notes; for, as I have explained, it was vitally important that the ray be turned on from both sides at the same moment. So at dawn I stood beside the projector, my hands on its switches, and with the sound-receiving apparatus beside me, waiting for the signal.

"**A**T LAST the signal came—a great, clanging bell-note, which arose from the receiving apparatus beside me and rolled out across the misty marsh, echoing away. Another note clanged, and another, and another, until nine such had sounded, and my hand trembled on the switch. Then—the tenth note. I snapped over the switch.

"Instantly a broad ray of brilliant blue light shot from the stubby nose of the projector into the air beside the knoll; then seemed to halt, at its edge, and spread and broaden into an oval screen of misty blue luminescence, like a single great upright oval of misty blue light, which seemed to rest upon the ground at the very northern edge of the knoll and which was all of thirty feet in height, with half that width. Through that area of curdled light I glimpsed, dimly, distance upon unfathomable distance, receding back and back, and knew that I was gazing into another world, gazing through the contact across the fifth dimension gap, into earth's neighbor world. The contact had been opened!

"For a moment there was nothing but that oval of azure light, and then something dark appeared behind it, seemed to swim through it, emerge upon this side. It was a dark shape that passed swiftly through the contact and stepped upon the knoll, followed by another, and another, until perhaps a dozen had passed through. Then another

great bell-note clanged out, and as agreed, I snapped back the switch of the projector. Instantly the ray died, and the oval of light at the knoll's edge vanished. And there, confronting me, stood a half-score or more of the inhabitants of the other side.

"For a moment, dazzled as my eyes yet were by the oval's blue brilliance, I could only dimly make out their forms, and in that moment they seemed not unhuman, to me, with dark bodies carried erect, and of much the same size and shape as human bodies. But as my eyes cleared and took in the details of the appearance, I sickened with sudden, alien horror. They were beetle-men!

"I can describe them only by that term. They were great, manlike forms, a little over the average man in height, but their bodies were dark and hard and shiny, like the bodies of insects, and the heads, or faces, were completely blank except for two eyes that protruded on short, waving stalks. The two legs and the two arms, placed much as on the human body, were slender and white, and stiff-jointed like the limbs of an insect. In all my communication with these beings, through the contact, I had never dreamed their appearance to be such as it was. I had assumed, with unconscious anthropomorphism, that they must necessarily be manlike, or human, and now that they stood before me in all the strange horror of their actual being, I shrank back in utter terror.

"Only an instant we stood thus, staring at each other, and then one of the things took a step toward me, uttering some strange, twittering sounds, like chirping and squeaking noises. He held out toward me one of the stiff spider-arms, and that was the final touch on my terror. I shouted something incoherent and staggered back, toward the knoll's

edge. Before ever I reached it, though, there was a rustling rush behind me, a chorus of excited twitterings, and then I was gripped from behind by a dozen of the slender limbs, fettered swiftly with tough thongs, and then let fall to the ground. I was their prisoner.

"For a time, though, after securing me, they took no further notice of me, concentrating all their attention on the ray-projector which I had built, under their instructions, and carrying on a twittering conversation as they examined it. Next I saw one of them enter my tent and emerge, in a moment, with most of the articles inside in his grasp. After examining these, also, they held a conversation of minutes and then laid my rifle, the only weapon on the knoll, upon the ground. Then all stepped back and one held forth a small metal disk and pointed it toward the rifle. There was a tiny click, and as I watched I saw the barrel and the trigger and hammer mechanism of the rifle suddenly vanish, leaving only its wooden stock on the ground. They crowded around that stock, examining it, and seemed to discuss it for a few seconds; then they returned to the projector and to my sound-sending and receiving apparatus. In a moment one of them began to operate the latter, speaking through the contact with those on the other side by means of the clicking signals. And as I lay there, listening to those signals which I knew and understood, I comprehended at last what doom I had loosed upon the world.

"These beetle-people, inhabitants of earth's neighbor world for ages, had long been aware of the existence of the fifth dimension and had been aware that another world—our world—lay next to them on that dimension. Crowded, cramped, in their own world, they longed to enter and conquer ours, but such a course was impossible, for them. The contact,

as they had told me, could only be opened from both sides at once, and so they had been forced to forego their cherished dream of sweeping through it to take possession of our world.

"At last, however, there had come through the contact my signals, which had been heard by their scientists stationed on their own side of the contact, since always they were studying it and examining it. Those signals they had at once answered, and so they had got into communication with me in the way I have described. Masking their real purpose, they had feigned sympathy for my desire to open the contact, and had furnished me with information which would enable me to do so. It was one chance in a million, for them, this chance of getting someone on our side to help them open the contact. They had learned from me the condition and resources of the earth and knew that once the contact was opened they could rush through and conquer it; so that they awaited only the opening of the contact. And I had opened it!

"I had opened the contact, had acted unconsciously as their tool, had loosed a horde of savage conquerors upon the world, to annihilate the races of man. And as I listened to their clicking signals, I understood, too, what forces they would use to crash down the power and civilization of man, without the slightest risk to themselves. Forming a truly colossal plan, they meant to destroy, in a single moment, every bit of iron and steel on the surface of the earth, and thus, in that one moment, to destroy all the civilization and organizations of mankind.

"**T**HINK what a part iron, and iron as steel, plays in our civilization! Man's civilization was built upon steel, made possible by steel alone. All forms of communication, of transport, of defense and attack,

of daily existence, depend upon this one element, iron, whether as wrought-iron or cast-iron or steel. Trains, ships, planes, rails, bridges, buildings, machinery, weapons, instruments—all are built of iron or steel, or on a basis of iron or steel. Annihilate all iron and steel in the world and you have annihilated the civilization and power of man.

"And that is what these beetlemen were coldly planning to do. And as I listened to their signals and understood the method which they planned to use, I knew that they could do it. Already, as you know, men have achieved success in the age-old dream of transmutation of elements, and have changed one element to another with ease, in the laboratory. Modern alchemy! Not only the familiar uranium to radium process, which is a natural one, but also they have changed ordinary, every-day elements such as nitrogen or sodium into wholly different elements. Nor, knowing what we do, is such an accomplishment to be wondered at.

"We know that every atom of every element consists of a certain number of positive and negative electrons, some of which form a nucleus around which the others revolve. We know, too, that the nature of any element depends upon the number of electrons it contains, and that if you change that number you change the nature of the element, change it into a totally different element, in fact. That has been done, in the laboratory. An aluminum atom has a large number of electrons, while a hydrogen atom has but two. But suppose you use some ray or force to knock out of the atom of aluminum all electrons but two. Then what you have left is an atom of hydrogen. That very process has been accomplished. You will remember the experiments of Professor Ernest Rutherford, of Cambridge University. He was able to knock

electrons loose from atoms almost at will, and was thus able to change a dozen different elements, such as aluminum, sodium and chlorine, into hydrogen, simply by knocking electrons loose from the atoms of those elements.

"The scientists of the beetle-people, too, had discovered this process, and had gone farther in it, even, than we, since they were able to change iron, also, to hydrogen, by using an electrical vibration or wave which knocked loose electrons from each iron atom. It was a small wave-generator of this type which they had used to make the iron and steel in my rifle vanish, changing it from iron to weightless, impalpable hydrogen. Steel, of course, being but iron and a little carbon, was changed in the same way as the pure iron, by the same wave. And it was with this disintegrating wave that they planned to wreck the civilization of man, by using a wave-generator powerful enough to encircle the whole surface of the earth with its vibrations, destroying, in a single moment, all iron and steel on the earth's surface by converting it into hydrogen, into tenuous gas. A mighty blow that would crash down in one moment all the pride and power and civilization of a world!

"They had brought with them, through the contact, the materials which they needed, and at once they set to work to build the wave-generator which was to depose man from his lordship of the world. They did not set it up on the same knoll as the contact, the knoll on which I lay fettered, but erected it, instead, on a neighboring knoll, which lay some fifty or sixty feet away and was much smaller. Lying there on the ground, the bitterness of death in my heart, I could hear them working, splashing back and forth through the marsh from one knoll to the other, conversing in the squeaking twittering that was their speech.

"They paid no attention to me, for the time, though one remained always near by to watch me, but were intent on the wave-generator which they were building. Through the hours I lay there, under the hot sunlight, wondering what my own fate was to be. They had spared my life, so far, but that I could only attribute to the fact that of all men on earth I knew most about the contact, which was the gateway from their world to ours. I had no hope for long-continued life, nor did I wish to live long if I were thus to be the cause of the world's death.

"WITH mid-afternoon their work on the other knoll slackened and ceased, and I saw that they had apparently finished their work on the great wave-generator. It was simple in appearance, being a disk like the one with which they had destroyed my rifle, but many times larger, since this disk was all of thirty feet across and a fifth of that in height. Connected to it by heavy cables were other, smaller mechanisms, and there were other connections that seemed to run down into the soil of the knoll. The thing, however, appeared to be quite ready, and I knew that soon they would be putting it into operation. I knew, too, from their communication through the contact by means of the signals, that on the other side of the contact, in that other world, the forces of the beetle-people were massing, and that after the world had been devastated by the wave-generator, those forces would be able to sweep through the contact upon our world, spreading over it in their air-vehicles and raining down destruction on the races of man. They had agreed to open the contact just before dawn of the next day, when the signal would be given from the other side.

"Now, if ever, I must escape, but there seemed no chance for escape.

Two of the beetle-men still remained beside me, one being engaged in a general examination of the ray-projector's mechanism. It occurred to me that the ray-projector itself would be destroyed by the annihilating wave they planned to send out, but even that hope died as I remembered that in building it I had used, under their orders, no scrap of iron or steel. The only chance was for me to escape and carry a warning of the thing which threatened earth; yet how to escape?

"At last, though, there came my chance. For a moment the two guards on my own knoll left it, splashing across the marsh to join the others in their twittering conversation around the great wave-generator. At once, with pounding heart, I rolled across the knoll toward my tent, and into it. There, after a moment of agonized fumbling, I found what I sought, a heavy, keen-edged hunting-knife. Gripping this in my hands, behind my back, I managed to sever the bonds that held my ankles, and in a moment had freed my hands also. I jumped to my feet, then, and crept cautiously from the tent.

"All the beetle-men were still gathering around the mechanism on the other knoll, and were apparently paying no attention to me for the moment. I crept stealthily across the knoll and slid quietly into the marsh on the other side, then started to make my way, as quietly as possible, in the direction of the spot where my motor-boat was moored. Before I had taken twenty steps, a squeaking cry went up from behind and I knew that my escape had been discovered. Abandoning all efforts at stealth, I splashed madly ahead.

"Just ahead of me lay a great patch of high, concealing reeds, and I threw all my strength into an effort to reach it. I neared it, reached its edge, and then from behind came a sighing, whistling sound, and some-

thing flicked through the air past my ear. It was a little cloud of dense brown gas, flying through the air with arrow speed, fired from some weapon by my pursuers, I knew. It must have been intensely poisonous gas, too, for the reeds where it touched ahead withered and shriveled instantly under its touch. For the moment, though, I was safe, since before they could fire the thing at me again I was inside the shelter of the reeds.

A single moment I halted, panting; then moved as quietly as possible on through the reeds, toward the knoll where my boat was moored. I heard the cracking and splashing of my pursuers' progress, behind, but in that swamp they could not trace me, and as I went on the sounds of their pursuit died away. Within the next twenty minutes I had come to the little patch of solid ground that was my goal, and throwing the cover off the boat I started its motor, then swung it out toward the open sea. Slumped across the wheel in an utter stupor of exhaustion, I held to a course that took me southward along the coast.

"The sun was sinking by that time, and I split the waters with the utmost speed of which the craft was capable as I swung on around the resorts at the point of the coast and headed up the bay toward New York City. I was racing against time, I knew, for the beetle-men would inevitably hasten to carry out their plan, turning on the wave-generator as soon as I escaped, lest I carry warning. Yet there was a chance in a million that I might reach the city in time to bring that warning, and might take back help to destroy the invaders and their mechanisms.

"Hope rose in me as I sped up the bay toward the city, narrowly missing collisions by reason of my crazy speed. Then, when my hope was at its highest, when I was only a hundred yards from the docks, from the

city, there came the terror. I heard a low, metallic click, and the next moment I saw the whole city ahead collapse to earth; saw every building and bridge and vehicle in sight crash to earth, disintegrate. The next instant I found myself struggling in the water, my boat in floating fragments around me.

"I knew, in that moment, that my chance in a million had failed, and that the invaders had turned on the wave-generator, and in one moment had devastated a world. For a moment I felt like letting myself sink to my death in the waters below me, but the will to live was too strong in me for that, and I found myself swimming toward the shore. I reached it, that shore of ruin and death, and for a time lay like one dead myself. When I finally rose to my feet it was deepest night, and on all the horizon there was no sign of light. Vaguely it occurred to me to search over the ruined city for others who might have escaped, and so I set off across the desert of wreckage. And in the darkness I blundered into you, Harron. And now you know all.

"There in the marsh lies 'the machine that has wrecked our world, and there, too, are the invaders, the beetle-men, who have loosed this doom upon us. A few hours, now, and the contact will again open, and through it will pour the hordes of the beetle-people to annihilate mankind, already terrorized by this cataclysm. Out of that gateway into the unknown has come a terror that has shattered the civilization of man, and now, beyond that gateway, a greater terror waits to spring upon our wrecked and riven world!"

4

HARRON sat quite silent and unmoving, when Graham's voice had ceased. From somewhere out in the darkness there whispered again to his ears the sound of wailing voices,

thin and unreal, but that was the only sound to be heard—that and the far howling of a dog.

It was Graham who broke the silence first. "There lies but one course open for us, Harron," he said. "but one chance yet, for the world. We must go back. Back to the marsh, to the contact. If we can get to that contact, can prevent its opening again, there will yet be a chance for man. That wave-generator—it destroyed all iron and steel in the world, at the will of the invaders, but if we could annihilate them we could use it to build up iron and steel at will, out of any element, to build up a new and fairer world. But the contact—that must not open again. There is so little time——"

The two stood up, and it was only then that Harron found his voice. "It's the only chance," he said, his voice sounding strangely in his own ears. "If we can get there—in time——"

Graham glanced up at the moon, a misty ball of light behind its screening clouds. "It's near midnight, now," he said, "and they plan to open the contact just before dawn. That will give us almost six hours. If we can make it in that——"

A moment longer they paused; then, silently, moved off over the ruins toward the east, Graham leading and Harron following close on his tracks.

Harron was never to forget the things he saw on that journey east across the face of a wrecked world, that journey through night and death toward the final hour of a planet's doom. Over the width of Manhattan Island they encountered only the mountainous ranges of wreckage, though there were voices, from north and south, coming faintly to their ears. Graham stayed for none of these, but pressed on through the darkness toward the docks east of the island, where they must cross to Brooklyn. There, after clambering

over mighty masses of shattered timber which were all that remained of docks and ships, they managed to cross the river on a crude raft made of planks tied together with lengths of rope. On this they were able to paddle over to the Brooklyn side.

That other side they found to be only a reproduction, on a smaller scale, of the desert of ruins which they had left. More had escaped there than in New York, though, and some had escaped who were not unscathed, for there came to their ears through the darkness piercing cries of pain, and vain appeals for help. Harron would have stopped for these, but Graham pressed on, with set face, through the night, toward the east. So at last they came out of the wreckage-plain that had been Brooklyn and made their way through the ruins of the suburban villages eastward. A thin moonlight illuminated the scene, by then, and there were other lights bobbing about in the wreckage on all sides of them, for it was apparent that many had escaped in these less thickly settled portions. Still the two forged on, east. east. east.

Four hours had passed, and the moon had sunk beneath the western horizon, when they came at last to an expanse of sandy beach, beyond which thundered the rolling waves of the Atlantic. Then, at last, Graham halted for a moment, grasping Harron's arm and pointing toward the north.

"Look!" he whispered.

Harron strained to pierce the darkness ahead with his vision, and at last made out, far ahead, a point of white light, a flaring speck of light that lay far out to their right. He turned questioning eyes to Graham.

"The knoll!" whispered Graham. "That light can only come from it, Harron. The marsh lies just ahead of us."

Stumbling and slipping, they start-

ed through the dry sand of the beach, and soon there came to Harron's nostrils the peculiar rotten smell of decaying vegetation and stagnant waters. A few rods more and there loomed ahead of them, white and ghostly, a forest of slender reeds, extending far ahead and far out on each side.

"The marsh," whispered Graham. A moment he halted, glancing toward the flaring point of light and taking his bearings from it; then plunged into the reeds, followed by Harron. Then began what was, to Harron, the hardest phase of their journey. The reeds were thick, and they dared not break their way through them, for they cracked with the sound of pistol-shots, there in the silence of the night; so they had to slide between them in slow, tortuous progress. At every step their feet sank into the water and mud for inches, and each step was an effort. They had lost sight of the point of light, on entering the reeds, but Graham pressed unhesitatingly forward. And after almost an hour of such progress there glimmered to their eyes, from far ahead, a feeble white light, a faint and far illumination that they were able to see only by reason of the darkness of the night.

At once Graham halted, crouching down, and pulling Harron down beside him. He spoke rapidly, in whispers.

"We must separate, Harron," he said. "One of us has as good a chance as the other, now, and by separating our chances are doubled. I'll circle around and approach the knoll from the other side, while you make your way straight to it from here. If one of us can get to that ray-projector and smash it, or damage it, it means a respite for the world, and before they can repair it we can get help and crush them. But it is the last chance, for earth, now."

THE two men rose to their feet, and Graham took a few steps away, then paused and turned back to Harron, his face strange and drawn in the pale light from ahead, and lit by a haggard smile.

"Good-bye, Harron," he said. "I could wish that you had never been drawn into this, but—good luck!"

With that, and a final wave of his hand, Graham moved away, and in a moment he was swallowed up by the darkness. Harron found himself alone, and with racing pulses he, too, crept forward, toward the distant glimmer of light. That light intensified as he went on, and there came to his ears strange, small sounds, high and squeaking—twittering sounds, like none he had ever heard. Pushing forward through the mud and rotted reed-stalks and evil-smelling water, he came at last to the end of the reeds, and before him lay a clear circle of open marsh.

In this circle were two knolls, or patches of solid ground, rising above the shallow green water. The larger of these knolls lay on the other side of the clearing from where he crouched, while the smaller, on which was nothing but a single great disk-like object, was not a dozen feet from him. The flaring white light which illuminated the clearing proceeded from a single round bulb, or torch, which was suspended from the top of a tall rod planted in the larger knoll.

On this larger knoll, too, stood the machine Graham had described, the ray-projector, its stubby nose pointing toward the knoll's north edge. And around it, too, stood a dozen grotesque, nightmare forms. The beetle-men!

Harron's skin crept with deep horror as he gazed on them for the first time. The hard, shiny bodies, the blank faces, the protruding eyes and unhuman limbs—they gave, together, a sense of an inhabiting in-

telligence far removed from the intelligence of man, yet, in a way, akin to and superior to it. The beetle-men, he saw, were gathering around the ray-projector, for the moment, except for one who was busy with a smaller apparatus at the other side of the knoll, an apparatus which Harron guessed to be the sound-receiver which recorded the signals from the other side of the contact.

As he watched, the one at the sound-receiver uttered a squeaking call and the others left the projector for the moment and hastened toward him. Harron heard a clicking sound and knew them to be in communication with those on the contact's other side. For the moment, though, he did not heed them, for his eyes were on the projector, standing unprotected for the time being. It was the chance that Harron had hoped for, and at once he slipped from his place of concealment and crept forward across the open water, writhing snakelike onward toward the larger knoll, toward the mechanism on which depended the fate of a world.

He saw the beetle-men there suddenly turn and hurry back to the projector. In the next moment, one of them grasped a large switch on its side. One turned and stared fixedly toward the spot where Harron lay, then uttered a twittering cry. In a moment a half-dozen of them leapt from the knoll toward him. And at the same moment there rose abruptly from the sound-receiver behind them a mighty, clanging sound, a single great bell-note, that rolled out over the silent marsh like the stroke of doom.

One!

The first of the ten notes of the signal! The thought flashed through Harron's brain even as he strove to leap aside from the onrush of the beetle-men. They were too swift for him, though, and in an instant they were upon him.

Two!

The second great note clanged out as Harron went down beneath the rush of the invaders. He struck out with blind rage, felt the hard outer shell of their bodies break, crack, beneath his blows. But the others had gripped him from behind, pinioning him in their grasp.

Three!

With the last of his strength Harron struck out to free himself, but his blows were futile. He was hauled to his feet and dragged toward the smaller knoll, and onto it.

Four!

Harron had a glimpse of the beetle-man at the projector, standing ready at its switch. He and the one at the sound-receiver were all who remained on the larger knoll, now. The others were crowding about Harron, some holding him while others began to bind his arms and feet with thongs.

Five!

Abruptly Harron's body stiffened, and his eyes widened, as glancing beyond the beetle-men around him he saw something moving at the opposite edge of the clearing—something dark that was creeping slowly toward the larger knoll, unperceived as yet by any of the beetle-men. On it crawled—on—

Six!

Suddenly Harron bit his lips to keep from shouting aloud. That dark, creeping figure had raised itself a little, for a moment, and Harron had glimpsed its face. It was Graham!

Seven!

Abruptly, at that moment, a cry went up from the beetle-man at the sound-receiver, on the larger knoll, as he glimpsed Graham. He rushed from the knoll toward him, while the figures around Harron turned swiftly, startled from their task of binding him; then they, too, raced across the marsh toward Graham.

Eight!

Harron uttered a mad shout. He had seen Graham plunging about in mad conflict with the single beetle-man from the sound receiver, who had thrown himself upon him. And while the two whirled about in the shallow water the others raced toward the mêlée, with Harron struggling to release himself from his half-tied bonds.

Nine!

Graham suddenly straightened, and with a great whirling blow thrust the beetle-man with whom he struggled from him, then raced toward the knoll. He had reached it, now, was staggering toward the ray-projector, where the single guard there stood ready at the switch. The others were splashing madly toward the knoll, now—had reached its edge. The last of Harron's bonds gave way beneath his frantic fingers, and as he jumped to his feet he saw Graham throw himself upon the single figure at the projector-switch.

Ten!

The last mighty note clanged out, and in the instant that it did so the beetle-man at the switch threw that switch half over. But before he could completely open it Graham had reached him and with a single mighty blow had knocked him back from the machine. The next moment an oval of dazzling light appeared for a single instant at the edge of the knoll, and then it seemed to vomit azure lightnings upon the knoll, in one vast burst of brilliant blue fire, while a mighty explosion rocked the ground beneath Harron, throwing him from his feet.

He struggled up again, to see only thick clouds of white steam that hung where the knoll had been. They cleared, in a moment, and there, where the knoll had stood, where the ray-projector and Graham and the beetle-men had been, there was now but a single great gulf torn from the

soft ooze of the marsh—a single great crater blasted from the earth's surface there by the ray that had flashed through the contact from the other side—the ray that had blasted earth on this side, even as Graham had foretold, when it was not met by the opposing, equalizing ray from this side. The projector, and the man who had built it, and the beings who had thought to use it to loose hell upon the world—all these had been annihilated, together, in that one instant.

The contact was closed—forever.

IT WAS more than an hour later that Harron staggered out of the marsh, at last, and into a wrecked little village that lay at its edge. He walked down its street with slow, uncertain steps, and paused, finally, to seat himself on some concrete steps, all that remained whole of a small building. He glanced around him, then, with weary eyes.

In the little expanse of wrecked buildings around him, lying silent beneath the paling light of dawn, there was no sign of life. Wherever the people of the village had fled, they were not in sight. Harron turned from it, toward the east, where, even as he watched, the gray

sky was flushing to rose—a rose that deepened to crimson. Then rose the sun, flaming red, washing the world with rosy light as it swung higher and higher.

All over the world, Harron knew, that rising sun would be looking down on scenes like the one around him, on shattered villages and cities, on a devastated planet. All over the world, too, its first rays would be falling upon a dazed and terror-stricken humanity, wandering among the ruins of its world of yesterday.

But that would soon pass. It would pass. . . . That wave-generator lying back there in the marsh, that mechanism that had wrecked a world, it would help to rebuild a world, too; it would help to rear up that fairer world of which Graham had spoken. The disorganized, terrorized races of man would gather together again, build up again their ruined civilization.

And then, at least, they would understand the greater doom that had hung above them—the doom that they had escaped only by the narrowest of margins. Then, at least, they would come to know how the world had been saved, at the last moment, by one man.

One man. . . .

