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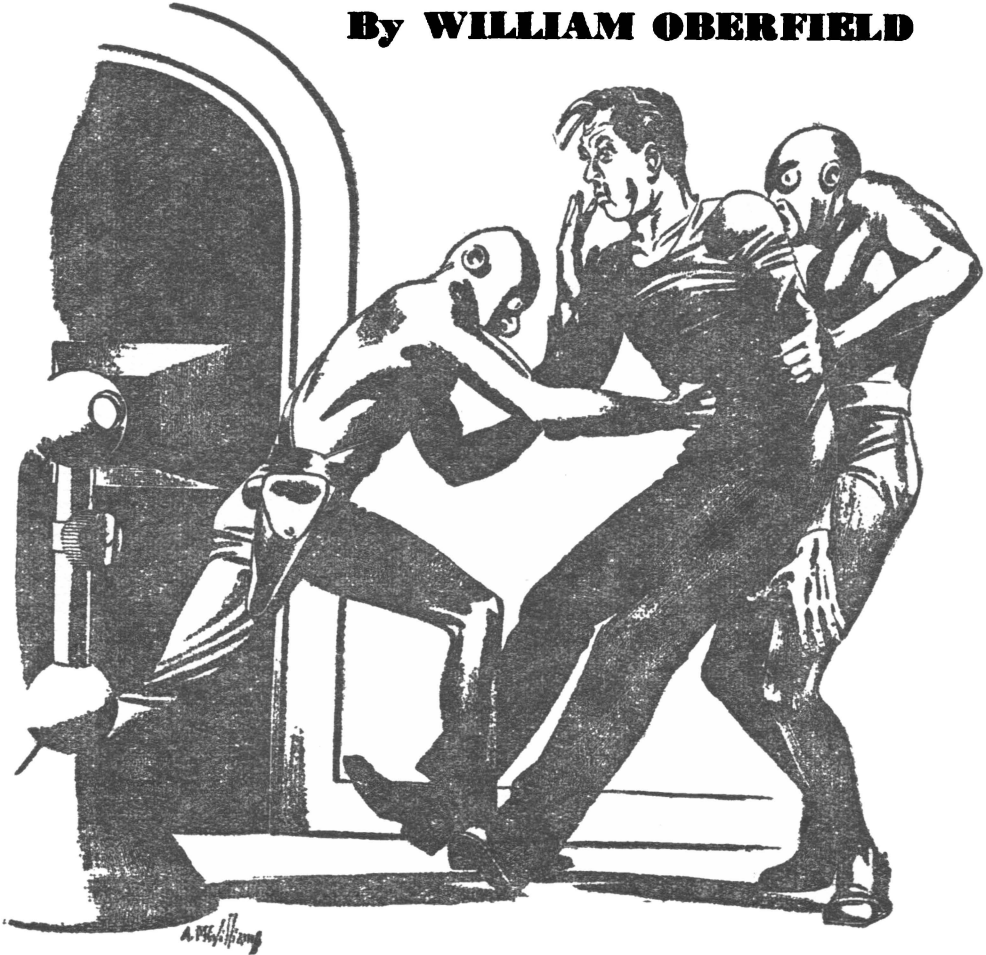
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THE ENORMOUS WORD

By **WILLIAM OBERFIELD**



The effect was amazing.

The blue men had ravaged Terra and reduced Winston Eberly to a contemptible insect. Now here he was, complaining of indigestion!

HURRY! HURRY! Run as fast as you can go to the big tree! Crouch beneath its branches and hide, staring up through its open spaces to see if anything is glinting in the clear sky. Anything there? Oh God, yes! No, its only a bird, a small cloud drifting. Now! Dash madly, crawl on your belly, fight on to the next place of concealment!

Winston Eberly knew he was talking to himself, but he didn't give a damn. He was sweating and sick from exertion, half

mad with burning thirst and bleeding from an unknown number of cuts and scratches, but that didn't matter either. The only thing that had any real meaning or value was the stuff in the box in his pocket.

He slapped the pocket with a dirt-encrusted hand. "Good old box! Good old U-235!" he mumbled feverishly. "You'll pull us out of this mess we're in. You'll show the blasted men from space they're not playing with children!"

Pausing in shadows he looked again at

the sky. All blue and quiet. Nothing stirring up there, nothing glinting. But they were there all right; they were always there. Maybe they were in the stratosphere, maybe above it, or about to streak low across the sky from horizon to horizon in the twinkling of an eye.

Men from space. Hateful, sadistic, repulsive men from outer space! Oh, how overbearing they were; how greedy and cruel and how sure of themselves! They had reason to be confident, of course. They had simply stood far off in space and shrouded the entire world in a terrible radiation that brought unconsciousness to all and death to many. And something in that radiation had sought out every particle of refined Uranium and Hiroshimaized the world.

One had to respect that power, if not admire it. Even now, they could bring quick death to every single Earthman by simply pressing a button somewhere in their one established city, in ' Sahara Desert. Clever. It seemed they could do anything. Why wouldn't electric and internal combustion motors run since the coming of the space men? More important, how could their high-flying ships detect even the slightest unauthorized action on the ground below?

They had the world in their power, right enough, and even darkness brought the Earthmen no chance to strike back. The invaders called their ships back to the Sahara at dusk and at dusk all good little Earthmen went to bed, or went strangely to sleep where they stood.

Eberly called an end to his watchful reflections and darted into the open again like a frightened doe. This was the only chance and here, between the hidden place where determined men had worked tirelessly and ingeniously to refine only a small capsule of pure Uranium in a year and the hidden place where other learned men waited to incorporate the product into an atomic bomb that could destroy the city of the invaders completely, lay the greatest danger of defeat.

As he stumbled on toward his goal he cursed the power that made all modern conveyances impossible. This snail's pace across open country, under the cosmic mi-

croscope of the alien invaders, was maddening, with so much at stake. But it was no more so than the task of mining and refining ore or that of constructing an atomic bomb without the aid of modern machinery, no more so than being forced to live practically like wild animals as all must now do.

He swore to himself that a way would be—had to be—found to get that weapon across to the enemy once it was constructed. The steam engine had not been in use for years, but it would still work, and balloons, dirigibles, would still rise into the air. It might take another year or two years, but the invaders would learn that Earthmen don't give up easily. A way would be found!

Then it happened; the thing that made Winston Eberly curse and sweat and retract his noble thoughts. There would be no pitiful steam-powered dirigible or any other weapon carrier. What need for one, when the bomb, itself, would never be completed? The men waiting for the Uranium were never going to see it!

Without warning, something tugged at him, passed away and returned, unseen and weird. He took one straining step—two, and knew that he wouldn't take another. Like the petrified terror of dreams he strained against his unseen bonds, unable to lift or swing an arm.

Above his head a branch of a tree twisted and snapped, pulled away and hung suspended in mid-air. The branch remained the same distance above him as his feet left the ground. Its shadows still fell across him as the tops of trees swam below him.

Yes, it was the invaders. Up there, somewhere above him—he was unable to move his head to see where—they hovered safely out of reach of the fanatic hate of Earthmen and drew him up to them like a fish on a hook. He didn't mind for himself, but the U-235, a whole year of back-breaking work for his fellows, the very life and freedom of Earth was being offered up to sad memories with him!

He choked back curses and sobs of frustration while he soared higher and tried to think. They would get the Uranium, those parodies of organic life, and that wasn't right. He had to get rid of it,

hide it, throw it away! But how? How, when he was rising up through open air, unable to move a finger, could he dispose of it?

A dark shadow fell over him. An opening suction-cupped down around him and clanged shut. Only then did the terrible force that held him in its embrace subside. Only then was he able to move freely and his first thought, his first action, was to snatch the small box from his pocket and pry it open with shaking fingers.

He couldn't let the invaders profit in any way from the sweat of Earthmen. He had to dispose of that precious capsule at once! But—how? There were only smooth metal walls around him; no holes, no ledges, not a single hiding place for it and no way to get it out of the ship!

There was a whirring sound and a thin slit of light showed from inside the ship, widened. Suddenly, impulsively, he thrust the capsule into his mouth, swallowed, gagged and gulped it on down. Not a very good hiding place. It might make him sick. But the invaders would never get it. If they did they would have to dig for it.

The blue-skinned man from space seemed to be having trouble with the English language. Evidently it bore absolutely no relation to his native tongue. The combination of his serious, arrogant manner and his distorted speech was almost humorous.

"Give me why you have with that emotion we pick up on ours detector," he barked harshly. "At ones! Or I take you in torture to tell!"

"Go to hell!"

"What was that box around? Where did you do with the inside-of-box thing? Give reply! Quickly at ones!"

"I don't hear you."

The blue skin of the man from space turned purple. "I am in soft talking for you now," he thundered, getting his language a little more confused in his anger. "In the later it is much harder with you to be so when you do not give now! Maybe it is be you hear we are only survivors of a race that is boom out by other-race nations on world home of us. Yes, you know this? You maybe think it is why we are in running here from there because we

are little in courage and you are bigger, so you can say Hell to us without hurt. Yessir? Then why we are able of holding all of you in sleep at dark times? Now! We are so little in all that we are able to make each of ten zones sleep as soon when dark comes to each zone and can keep all Earthmen down under with only five ships at a time to watch the five zones that are light at a time! See! You will see when you don't hear talking and are saying Hell!"

Eberly shook beads of perspiration from his face. It was unbearably hot inside the ship. He forced a grin.

"Well, Windy," he addressed the space man defiantly, "I see that the art of bragging isn't strictly confined to Earth. Thanks for the information anyway. I might be able to use it some day."

The purple face blanched to powder blue. The owner spouted a stream of his native language that sounded to Eberly like nothing recognizable and threw up his hands in resignation.

Only five ships out at a time, Eberly thought as two hefty space men prodded him back toward the air-lock. All but a few of the invaders huddled together in a single city that could be utterly destroyed by the blast of one atomic bomb. Such a blast would also destroy the great radiation generators that held Earthmen in sway and the few remaining invaders would soon be overcome or driven away. And he was walking around with the only fuel for such a weapon in his stomach!

They were crowding him into the air-lock now. What were they going to do? Not turn him loose. Dump him into space?

A moment later, he knew. In only a few minutes they had come all the way from America to Africa! These men from space had science, all right. They must have learned how to overcome inertia somehow without giving the sensation of change in motion. He hadn't been aware of the slightest motion, yet he saw their city as soon as the outer seal of the lock opened and there was no mistaking that city.

He was out of the ship and onto the rubbery surface of a street, being hurried, pushed along it toward some unknown destination. His captors bullied him along

between tall, smooth buildings that seemed to be constructed of solid expanses of plastic, broken only by the unrevealing doors and windows.

The people in the streets didn't jeer at or mock him. They only looked at him as one might look at a stinking, stray dog or simply ignored him completely. That was worse.

He was suddenly pushed into a flight of steps and stumbled up them, in through broad doors. There were more steps and endless halls and elevators that took you up or down with no sensation of motion and finally a room, a laboratory of some sort it seemed.

The one who had tried to question Eberly aboard the ship had followed along. He spoke to the man they found in the room. He might have been speaking mainly for Eberly's benefit, because he spoke in what he called English.

"This one is in need to explain some things, but is not willing to say those things," he sneered. "You are for making him hear what is say to him and to reply with not insults. Make it at once."

Eberly was feeling a little ill. A diet of U-235, he realized, was not so good. He just couldn't help it. He belched loudly.

Eyes turned toward him; puzzled eyes with questions in them.

"What is that big word you are make? What it does mean?"

"It has been called a 'burp'," Eberly said. "As far as you are concerned, you can think of it as the worst insult you know of." The Uranium capsule was a hard lump in his stomach. He didn't know much about Uranium—whether it was some effect of the Uranium or just the indigestibility of it—but he was feeling sicker by the minute. Pain stabbed across his chest and he burped again.

Evidently, the space men could think of some pretty raw insults, judging from the expressions on their faces.

"Silent, dog you!" he shouted, purple-faced. Then, to his two bullies, "Make him tight with chains to the wall! He must be teach not to make burp of us and to give true talk when told! When I am return he is to be made talking!" He slammed out of the room as if he were ready to take

off for America without his ship.

A number of the space men had crowded into the room to watch the torture of an Earthman. Their eyes, small sadistic eyes, glistened with the interest of bad boys watching a fish drown with a stick propping open its mouth or the antics of a frightened dog with a can tied to its tail. Or maybe it stirred some hidden emotion within them that would drive a bad boy insane.

Winston Eberly had felt hideous insects swarming over his body and gouging at his flesh, had turned numb under heat extracting beams followed by heat rays that sent agony racing through his every nerve. They wanted him to scream with pain. They wanted him to be the perfect slave, bowing and scraping and speaking softly and obediently. He wouldn't give in, damn them! He hadn't yet given in and he wouldn't, ever! Let them torture him to the death, and then, what more could they do? What could they do except realize that Earthmen would fight to the end?

"You make good talk now?"

Eberly lifted his head weakly, stared his hate at the questioning eyes that pressed close in front of him, struggled to put unfelt strength into his voice.

"Don't you know an Earthman is ready to suffer anything for honor? Don't you realize that none of us will rest until an atomic bomb has sent all of you drifting with the wind? No! I will not bow to you! Kill me and you gain nothing."

His head drooped again as giddy grayness fogged his eyes. Faintly, he heard something akin to laughter from the hateful creatures around him. Laughing! What were they laughing about? What had he said?

"So! The little Earthdog has exploded the fine particle!" His torturer answered his unspoken question. "The childish scum of this world are done things that ours great science cannot do. Fools! You are base your hopes on a dream, a deception! Those enemy of us are reach you with message. Those enemy that drive us from home world are inform you that we come this way before we are come. Then you make many big explodes to scare us from

here with thought of exploding particles atoms. Ha! We are not fool to come convince of the impossible!"

The import of the words cleared Eberly's head a little. What was this? Was it possible that the great science of this race had never discovered atomic power? Maybe there was some condition in their distant system that prevented nuclear fission or perhaps they had never found a suitable substance for experimentation. So the men from space thought nuclear fission impossible, did they?

His thought was almost a voice, and the voice said. "Here in your intestines lies a glass capsule and that capsule contains pure Uranium! enough to blast this city from the face of the earth, and the invaders are unsuspecting!"

The torturer had gone aside to talk to another. Eberly looked toward them. "Why not kill me and have it done with?" he shouted. "You know now that you can't subdue an Earthman. Your methods are all weak. Even the radiation with which you took Earth could not kill all of us. It's as weak and faulty as everything else you have."

His torturer took the bait. He came to where Eberly hung in his chains. "It are weak, is it so?" he sneered. "It are so weak you would how like to make squirm under such radiate?"

Eberly let fear show in his eyes. "I—I—didn't mean it that way," he stammered. "You can't really use it here, can you—on me?"

"Yes. Oh yes but yes!" The other seemed pleased. Now, he thought, he was getting some results. "We can make little or much radiate. Just right for make scream from you, maybe yes. You are in fear from that? I think you are make good talk by some time."

It was with mixed emotions that Eberly watched the camera-like device being wheeled into the room. He was filled with elation and hate and noble thoughts all at the same time. And there was doubt, too. What if the torturer should somehow realize what he was trying to do? What if some other torture were used before the radiation and would result in death? He

had to prevent that. He would have to make their overbearing pride work for him.

"No!" he protested as the projection rods of the radiation generator were turned toward him. "Please, don't use that on me. I'll—I'll do anything you want, only don't turn that on me."

The torturer brightened while murmurs of self-praise rose from the watchers. "Oh, you are not think us are so weak now! Then say to me why you are in the emotion we are detect and bring you here against." He bent his head close to Eberly's, better to hear the sweet music of this Earth fool's whining.

Eberly belched in his face.

"Burp, burp, burp?" the torturer shouted foolishly, stepping back. "You try make fool with us, oh? Very and well! We see how you say burp when you get this!" He made a final adjustment on the radiation generator.

It was working! Anger flared in the eyes of the torturer, in the eyes of the watchers. Eberly fed it. "I'm not afraid of you," he taunted. "Why should I fear cowards who run from their home world because they haven't the guts to stay and fight?"

The effects of his words were amazing, cutting sharply at a sore spot in the minds of the space men. The watchers growled oaths, some of them leaping to their feet. The torturer, his face nearly black with anger, reached up and depressed a lever on the radiation generator, spitefully.

Winston Eberly burped for the last time. It was a terrible, frightening, destructive, big burp. It could be felt for miles. The force of it knocked gulls from the sky over the Mediterranean. It shook buildings and rattled windows in Italy. And, when the smoke cleared away, there was not the slightest doubt that the mighty expulsion of Winston Eberly had done its work well.

Soon the few remaining space men returned to look down with troubled eyes upon that boiling crater. They circled and puzzled and spoke sad words. Then they pointed the noses of their ships up toward open space and proved once more that they were brave only when they held the upper hand.