



Robert W.  
Lowndes,  
Editor

Volume I

March, 1951

Number 6

## ★ *Feature Novels*

- INCOMPLETE SUPERMAN** ..... Poul Anderson 8  
They were homo superior, but they had a fatal defect.
- AGE OF PROPHECY** ..... Margaret St. Clair 26  
Young Benjamin had the powers of a True Prophet, and ...

## ★ *Short Stories*

- THE GRAY CLOUD** ..... Walter Kubilius 44  
The tenth atom bomb brought forth unsuspected results.
- WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!** ..... Judith Merrill 51  
Such catastrophes will always be with us.
- THE LAST LUNACY** ..... Lester del Rey 52  
When the moon came close to Earth, the last phase began.
- THE LITHIUM MOUNTAIN** ..... Noel Loomis 60  
Any mistake is fatal when dealing with an atomic pile.
- MARTIAN HOMECOMING** ..... Frank Belknap Long 70  
Dreams can be deadly, and when they come true ...
- WHAT IS "EVIDENCE"?** (Science Article) ..... James Blish 78  
Here's why responsible scientists question Dianetics.

## ★ *Departments*

- FROM THE BOOKSHELF** ..... 69
- TODAY AND TOMORROW** ..... 77
- DOWN TO EARTH** ..... 81
- READERS PREFERENCE COUPON** ..... 83
- RATINGS ON THE NOVEMBER ISSUE** ..... 86

Cover by Milton Luros, illustrating "The Last Lunacy"

Interior illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence, Poulton, and Luros

FUTURE COMBINED WITH SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyrighted 1950 by Columbia Publications, Inc., 20c per copy; yearly subscription \$1.20. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.



Middlebrook caught the picture of a woman. She was ill, and he had the feeling she was in some sort of medical amphitheatre. There was an impression of lights...

# THE GRAY CLOUD

*by Walter Kubi*

(author of "Caridi Shall Not Die")

*The tenth atomic bomb explosion brought about a reaction that hadn't been considered before . . . and it wasn't a chain reaction.*

**T**HERE WAS a sharp rap on the door. Hurriedly Dr. Jennings tossed the roll of graph paper into a desk drawer. "Come in" he said, locking the desk. He quickly glanced about his office to see if any other graph rolls had been left.

Middlebrook slammed the door shut as he walked in. His fat beefy face already bore the pink evidence of hypertension; an X-ray would also show the professional badge of the busy executive, the stomach ulcer.

"Taking the night plane back to New York," Middlebrook said briskly, "Reconsidered our offer? Big money in it, you know."

Dr. Jennings shook his head. "The proposition doesn't interest me. Tell the corporation that I'm not for sale. My work in thought-pattern reading is pure science, and I have no intention of letting any private company or war-minded bureaucracy get their hands on it."

Middlebrook ignored his words. He pulled out a heavy chair and sat down at the desk facing the tired doctor. From his pocket he drew out the evening edition of the local newspaper and flung it upon the desk. The front page with its garish headline, *Tenth Atom Bomb Explodes!* opened before Jennings. The doctor closed his eyes as if in pain; he turned his head away and looked through the window. A few miles away he could see the mine-shaft in which he had plunged the mile-long electrode. Overhead were a few gray clouds.

"Big things happening in the world," Middlebrook said, "Why bury yourself in this coal-mining country nut house? We could use a top-notch man like you in our Cybernetics Division. With your knowledge of the electrical circuits of the nervous system, and my company's electronic computing machine laboratories, we could build the finest mechanical brain in the world. Each brain can have in it the elements to build a better brain. There's no telling where we would stop!"

"Not interested," Jennings said. Would the fool never go away? Jennings was not interested in building mechanical brains, when that graph paper locked within his desk carried the thought patterns of a brain so vast that it was beyond all understanding. Billions of paltry human minds put together could not add up to one lobe of that great brain whose secrets he had tapped.

Middlebrook's lips tightened, but when he spoke his voice was again mild, coaxing, and even gently patronizing. Underneath, however, lay a subtle threat and warning that Jennings was quick to recognize. "Why are you wasting your time in thought-pattern work in this hole?" he demanded, "What can you possibly discover in experimenting with improved encephalographs for a bunch of catatonics and schizophrenics? Good Lord, look at you! Overworked, exhausted, and worn out from handling trivialities. With us, you would have the finest lab and the finest assistants in the coun-

(Illustration by Poulton)

try. Right now you're so tired that you're hardly able to pay any attention to me. Hell, man, your face looks as if you saw the end of the world!"

Dr. Jennings turned swiftly, his face suddenly flushing. He glanced down at the newspaper where the word *Tenth* drew his eye as a magnet.

Perhaps Middlebrook was right; maybe he did work too hard. He felt exhausted and his eyes were tired. Studying the thought patterns on that roll of graph paper in his desk had tired him too much. His imagination was beginning to run away. He was seeing parallels and significance where there may not be any. His "translator" might be a failure and the ideas which so terrified him were probably only the imaginings of his over-worked mind.

He knew he had to test them, to have them experienced by an unimaginative clod, by a man who was practical, cold-blooded, and unemotional. A man like Middlebrook, for example!

**H**E LOOKED up at him. "Do you really want to know what is keeping me here?" he asked quietly.

Middlebrook faced him. His eyes were cold stones. "Yes," he said bluntly, "I want to know. I want to know why your medical histories are faked; they are only a front to cover up some other work you are doing. You order quantities of steel, chromium, tungsten, and other metals that are altogether out of proportion to the number of encephalographs you build. Why do you send those machines to the abandoned coal mine? What are you building there? What have you found out that has practically terrified you? What's behind it all?"

"Simple," Jennings said, "I was one of the crew that visited Hiroshima."

There was a blank look on Middlebrook's face. "So?" he demanded.

"I saw what the atom bomb did and I vowed never to do anything

which might be turned to military advantage."

Middlebrook relaxed as if he was about to hear an argument that he could easily answer.

"I made up my mind," Jennings went on, "to use whatever knowledge I had concerning the human brain for the promotion of peace and understanding between men."

"We're not looking for any offensive, destructive weapons," Middlebrook said; "the atom bomb is enough. All we want to do is to develop a brain that can out-think, out-reason, and out-invent any and every foreign power."

"So I came here," Jennings went on, as if his thoughts, were in another world, "to build a machine that could read the human mind, and make a book out of the human soul."

Middlebrook stared at him. "Were it not for your reputation in cybernetics," he said, "I would think you've cracked. There's no such thing as a mind-reading machine; it's impossible."

For the first time, Jennings smiled. At last he was beginning to unload the sequence of events which led to the capture of "Her" thought patterns. Perhaps he was wrong in his interpretation of them. He clung to this feeble hope, desperately anxious that a clod like Middlebrook, with a mind unfettered by imagination, would see through it and find a practical, simple answer where Jennings could not.

"Know anything about thought waves?" Jennings asked mildly.

"Enough to know that there's no such thing as mind-reading," Middlebrook snorted.

"I felt so, too," Jennings said, "until I began to study in more detail the curves on the encephalographic charts made by my patients in the sanitarium. It is simple enough to measure any radical change in thought patterns by the use of electrodes on the patient's skull. The radiations emitted by electronic patterns within the human brain can thus be captured and recorded on graph paper. The basic principle is

commonly understood, but as yet no one had constructed encephalographs of such sensitivity that they can record every thought, and not merely radical departures from the average."

He paused and watched Middlebrook's calm, and slightly contemptuous face. The secret he had kept hidden so carefully would now be given to this military-minded corporation agent. Before long the Army would hear of it and Jennings' isolation and independence would be ended.

"The infinite number of electrical patterns for an infinite number of ideas and sensations produce an enormous number of patterns on the graphs. My work here has been to codify these patterns so that they can be read, and then to reverse the process so that they can be translated electronically and verbalized in my own mind."

"Good idea," Middlebrook said, a shade of doubt in his voice as if he did not see any wide implications in the plan.

Jennings sighed. The bureaucratic mind had no imagination. You had to draw a diagram with clear and simple labels before any new idea could register.

"Let me show you how it works," he said finally.

**H**ANDS ENCASED in rubber, and sterile gown and mask securely in place, Dr. Jennings prepared the uneasy Middlebrook for the demonstration. Small spots were shaved clean on his head and electrodes attached to the exposed skin. Gleaming stylii emerged from a mass of pulsating tanks and their stained points pressed multi-colored lines upon a roll of moving graph paper.

"Looks like an ordinary lie detector," Middlebrook said uneasily.

Jennings shrugged his shoulders. "This will be something like the word-association test," he said, "but instead of responding to any words or questions, you will remain silent."

"Clear enough. Go ahead."

"Black." Electrical patterns form-

ing in Middlebrook's brain actuated the sensitive electrodes attached to his head. Amplified, the currents passed on to a shifting stylus whose moving finger wrote a jagged line upon the roll. This would be the symbol for white.

"Boy."

Again a stylus moved to indicate a word, *girl*. Jennings quickly ran down the word association list to check the accuracy of the machine, and his own ability to read the chart.

"Suppose I am telling you the truth and this is really a mind-reading machine? What do you think could be done with it?"

*Just supposing?* Middlebrook thought, *Well, it would be the biggest thing for Military Intelligence. All we need to do is capture one operative, or a few technicians from the enemy and all their secrets would be ours. Nothing could be hidden any more. Every fortification, armament factory, rocket port, and technical center would eventually be known to us. The whole world would be ours! And say, if this is really a mind reader, I suppose he'll find out that I'm from Army Intelligence sent to check up on him, and that 'Middlebrook' is only a phony name. If he's right, we in the Army could use a gadget like this.*

Jennings switched the line of questioning. When the test was finished, Jennings read the graph as one would read the printed page and told the baffled Army officer—Middlebrook—what had gone on in his mind. The condescending look was wiped away and in its place was the realization that in this small machine lay the power to rule the Earth.

"This is big," he said softly, "big."

"Then you also know why I will not permit the Army or anyone else to get their hands on it. If this is to be of any value, it must be distributed to all nations simultaneously. When there are no secrets, surprise attacks and hypocritical pretenses of peaceful intentions would become impossible."

Middlebrook shook his head. "It's

too big. I'm phoning Washington. You'll be drafted and put in the army before sunrise."

Jennings glanced toward the window where the gray clouds could be seen. Was his imagination playing tricks? They seemed to come from outer space and they were growing bigger.

"There's more to this machine," he said, turning back to the officer; "I haven't showed you the translator. Since this encephalograph converts thought patterns into marked lines on a graph, it should also be possible to reverse the process."

"You mean a machine which will write down words instead of graph lines?"

"That's possible, too, but what I have built is a sort of thought creator, an apparatus to instill ideas within the mind. It enables the brain to act as a receiving station for thought images given to it by the encephalograph."

Taking out a key he unlocked the desk drawer and removed the rolled-up graph that had given him a vision of the ending of the world. There was an air of resignation about him, and a heavy weariness around his shoulders.

"This is a thought-pattern whose images I have been absorbing through the 'translator.' Each of these lines will actuate a stylus and by the fluctuations of various electronic fields, will stimulate your own mind so that you too will experience the thoughts which are captured here on paper."

"One of your patients?"

Middlebrook's hand trembled. "You will notice," he said, his voice uneasy, "that the lines on this graph resemble somewhat a seismographic chart."

"Now that you mention it, yes. You're sure you haven't slipped in an earthquake record by mistake? Seriously though, if I understand your machine correctly, it will create in my mind those thoughts made by your patient?"

"Substantially, but remember that we think in words. The machine can work equally well on a mind using

a foreign language. It is your own mind which verbalizes thought, so it would seem that the being whose patterns I have here thought in a language you know. Ready?"

"Ready."

There was a purr as the motor was turned on, and then a slight scratching as the stylus began to follow the graph lines. Jennings had not told the whole story. He still withheld the identity of the Being whose thought patterns now formed within Middlebrook's brain.

**THE BEING**—so the thought patterns impressed themselves upon the mind of Middlebrook, as they did when Jennings first read the results of his experiments with the planting of a gigantic electrode in the shaft of a deep, abandoned mine—was a woman. She was fertile, young, and in some indefinable way, beautiful. It was strange that he felt this so sharply for there was no image whatever in his mind that suggested a definite physical body, face, or feature. Rather he caught the illusion of spherical perfection—the music of the spheres as some poet said.

She was nameless, and her presence was near. He was conscious of her thoughts, and these were filled with a terror that swept over Middlebrook in shocking, tearing waves.

She was ill. She felt no pain but knew from the case histories of others that her disease was fatal. She seemed to be in the center of some circling medical amphitheatre and all around her, as if watching from a balcony, were those of her friends and physicians who had come to see the disposition of her case.

"Would you call me bloodthirsty?" the surgeon said. "I resent the implication of the doctor that I am in any way vindictively eager to destroy this poor afflicted woman. But what other course is there? Nine times within a few moments the rash has broken out on her body, and thus we have nine distinct proofs that she is infected with the germ."

"But the germ has never been seen," her physician protested.

"Virus, then, not germ," the surgeon said. "The disease can be transmitted; we have proved this in the laboratory. There is no immunity. Time and time again we have noted that as soon as the disease struck it instantly assumed crisis proportions and soon spread to other individuals. We cannot isolate. We cannot immunize. We can do nothing but destroy each patient as soon as the disease manifests itself. All of us may even at this moment be infected by her presence here. I ask the assembly that we mercifully destroy her, and in this way exterminate the virus that now infects her."

The physician prepared to restate the case. No attempt had been made to study the actual nature of the virus. It was true that violent death usually followed the tenth, and sometimes the twentieth or thirtieth outbreak. But were nine individual examples of the disease's presence on

her body enough? Would it not be best to study the patient—no matter the risk—before destroying her? The virus had to be isolated and studied, and a specific found before it killed them all. Frantic efforts to kill every patient were failing. Instant execution was no longer the answer.

But the physician's arguments were not heeded, for at that moment there was a cry of pain from the woman. The surgeon, the physicians, and the entire medical amphitheatre turned and looked upon her. In one instant the rash had broken out and soon faded, the putrescent mass of poison flowed invisibly around her body. This was the tenth outbreak, the tenth proof that she was infected.

"Kill her!" the surgeon screamed, "let loose the Gray Cloud upon her and kill the virus before it kills us all!"

**T**HE SENSE of terror which leaped through Middlebrook's mind brought sweat to his forehead.

He ripped off the headset and electrodes and sent them clattering to the floor. His clothes were wet from fright, and his face had turned pale.

"Who is she?" he demanded, trembling as he arose from his chair, "Who is she?"

Jennings felt a sinking wave of fear. He knew that his interpretation of the thought-patterns was correct.

"I had a theory," he began softly, "and it has proved itself. You remember the childish poem about fleas having little fleas upon them, and so on ad infinitum?"

"Sure I have heard it, but so what?"

"Suppose we reverse it? Imagine for a moment that just as various bacteria and germs infect us, so do we infect someone else?"

"There's no one," Middlebrook said agrily; "this is nonsense."

"Suppose," Jennings went on, "that this Earth we live on is not a lifeless mass of stone, but a living sentient being with a mind and soul just as we have? Would we not be germs upon such a body? Would not our activities be considered 'disease' by such a being?"

"But that is nonsense. Rocks don't live or breathe as we do!"

"Not as we do, no. But we need not be the only form of life. The germs within our bodies do not live or breathe as we do, yet they are real. The Earth, the Moon, the Sun, the very stars in the sky, they do not live or breathe as we do but they are alive!"

"You're insane!"

"Do you think so?" Jennings demanded, "Whose thought patterns did you feel? Not from a patient in the san, I assure you. They were gathered from the impulses assembled by a giant electrode planted in the mine. They were the thoughts of the Earth itself as it, and the Beings around it, realized that the Earth is infected with a deadly disease—the human race!"

"I—I can't see it that way."

"No? Think of those nine 'rashes' the surgeon talked of. They are the nine atomic bomb explosions upon the face of the Earth. As for the

tenth 'rash' that led to their decision to kill the patient with the 'Gray Cloud', you have only to look at this newspaper: *Tenth Atom Bomb Explodes!* From the other thoughts we can learn another startling fact. The Earth is not the only world that is infested with human life. You heard the Surgeon say that after 20 or 30 manifestations of the disease, the patient is usually killed by the virus. What does that mean but that atomic warfare, towards which we are racing, is big enough to kill a living planet? How many worlds encircling dead stars have been brutally murdered by living species, like Mankind, which develop atomic energy and then in their blindness destroy themselves and the living world they inhabit? We are the virus! We are the disease which has infected the Earth!"

Middlebrook shook his head, but he could not shake off the knowledge that the things Jennings said were true. The agony of the Woman patient had scared through him, and he knew beyond all doubt that the "Woman" was the Earth itself. She was doomed by whatever stars in heaven served as surgeons and executioners of those whose bodies were infested with Life.

**I**N SILENCE they looked out of the window and across the great plains where night was falling. The evening stars had come out in all their glory and the eternal Milky Way looked like a circling medical amphitheatre surrounding the Earth.

"Astronomers," Jennings said quietly, "have long been familiar with galactic dust clouds which obscure the lights of suns a thousand times stronger than Sol. Is the orbit of the Earth now about to enter such a cloud?"

They looked at the horizon. A few gray clouds seemed to be growing with startling rapidity.

The verdict of the surgeon had been given, and the patient was about to be sterilized so that the virus which infected it would be destroyed.

THE END