

The Machine from Outside

By DON HOWARD

MEN call me mad. Perhaps I am, now, but then—before that succession of terrible events—I was at least as sane as the average person. Now the sight of a flame, a red color, or the slightest unusual sound paralyzes my reason with fear and conjures up old memories that haunt me night and day. Then I was normal, aside from the fact that my life was guided and, I pride myself, guided well, by premonition, a mysterious sixth sense that had never failed to warn me correctly. When I did not heed it disaster invariably followed, but never more swiftly and horribly than that winter night.

It was dark, moonless. The stars danced with an unnatural brilliance at the zenith, winking like signal fires portending some dreadful event. I was walking across the silent snowfields that stretched endlessly in every direction.—But were they silent?—A low sound reached my ears, a rushing noise like waves beating on a distant shore. A faint luminous glow spread over the sky and a gigantic shadow of my body was thrown athwart the landscape, a yawning black pit threatening to engulf me.

A giant meteor had swept from the sky. As large as the full moon, but much brighter, it neared the earth, enveloped in a cloud of white vapor and a huge train of sparks trailing in its wake. The light on the snow increased to a blinding glare as the meteor rushed at me with the speed of a rifle bullet. In the hope of escaping annihilation I turned and ran, my way as brilliantly lighted as by a noon-day sun. The roar culminated in a terrific explosion as the meteor crashed to earth just beyond the next rise. Darkness threw a smothering shroud over the scene.

The force of the impact had thrown me to the ground. I could scarcely breathe in the pall of sulphurous vapor that enveloped me. Gasping, I rose to my feet and looked around. The stars had been blotted out and the only light visible was a fire that glowed darkly in the supernatural fog. The sparks had started a blaze in a nearby grove of trees.

A dark form loomed up before me as suddenly as if it had been materialized from the cloud itself and I heard a familiar voice speaking.

“Hello, is that you, Jackson?” and then seeing that his recognition was correct, “Wasn’t it wonderful?”

“Wonderful!” I exclaimed, “Do you mean that for humor, Dr. Sarntoff?”

“Most assuredly not. Why, Jackson, this is the most extraordinary scientific event I have ever seen.”

I might have known it. Dr. Sarntoff was one of those brilliant scientists whose imagination had not been quenched by cold-blooded reason. His work, therefore, was little known in scientific circles where fact and theory must be so skilfully intermingled as not to be easily detected. Sarntoff was unusual. Most men would have called him eccentric, and even at this moment he presented a strange figure. Hatless and coatless, he utterly disregarded the bitter night chill. His collar was slightly awry under his iron-gray beard and his cheeks were flushed from excitement. His small blue eyes were flaming under their bushy brows.

“It must be a gigantic meteorite!” he exclaimed, “And on my property too. What luck!”

He started off on a wild scramble toward the fire, I following somewhat dubiously although he assured me that the danger was past. The warmth of the fire did little to relieve my depressed spirits. I felt that nothing good could possibly come from this incident. It was too weird, too ghastly, too supernatural.

A moment later we stood at the edge of a pit some ten feet in diameter. The snow had vanished from its sides and a faint haze of steam rose from its depths. The inner walls were hot to the touch.

“This is where the meteor lies,” said Sarntoff.

“Well,” I answered cynically, “it can lie there for all I care. A chunk of metal from another star is no different from that we can mine here.”

“I’m not so sure,” he replied, “I’ve been experimenting for years with meteoric iron and I’ve found traces of a new metal, not unlike manganese, but upon which acids and heat have little effect. This huge meteor will give me the opportunity I’ve longed for.”

I was not disposed to a scientific discussion. Such things usually bore me and tonight I was unnerved and anxious

to return home. Sarntoff, nevertheless, continued to elaborate.

“If I can prove there is such a metal and discover its properties we may be able to find it here on the earth. Think of its practical applications! Why, man, it would be one of the most valuable finds of the age.”

He stopped as I yawned audibly. What cared I about this new metal? Probably it was some fiction of Sarntoff’s too vivid imagination. But then I did not know.

I SLEPT fitfully through the night. The next morning found me so feverish and exhausted that my physicians recommended a complete rest at the seashore. They said I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Although I did not see Sarntoff again for more than four months, I followed as well as possible the history of the meteor as it was given in the newspapers.

When Sarntoff recovered it from the pit it was found to weigh more than five tons. A dozen museums and a thousand private collectors bid fabulous sums to induce him to sell it. For a month it was on exhibition at his home until Sarntoff made the announcement that set the scientific world awry. The next day he would start dissolving the meteor to test for the unknown metal.

The collectors arose in a body. Destroy irreparably this magnificent scientific relic? They pleaded with Sarntoff, begged, chided, scolded, threatened, and finally obtained an injunction through the courts forbidding him to continue his experiments. A month and a half of wrangling passed before Sarntoff won a complete victory. The jury had decided that the meteor was his own property and that he could use it as he wished.

Several weeks later I received a telegram.

“COME TO ME AT ONCE MOST EXTRAORDINARY DEVELOPMENT CONCERNING METEOR—SARNTOFF”

I obeyed with misgivings. My nerves had not yet recovered from the shock of close contact with that meteor. In my dreams I could hear it hissing by, feel

its heat on my face, and would wake up trembling with fear. The slightest humming noise of any sort was enough to make me sick with dread. This specter haunted me night and day but nevertheless I returned.

Sarntoff greeted me excitedly and pulled me toward his laboratory without giving me a chance even to remove my coat. His appearance was enough to startle anyone. I doubt if he had seen sleep inside of a week. His hair had become a shade whiter, but his blue eyes were dancing wildly in his florid face like bubbles of water on a red-hot stove. Could pseudo-science have driven the man mad?

"What is the meaning of all this, Sarntoff," I asked, glancing askance at the disordered laboratory which confronted me.

"Never mind this mess," he said, "look into that vat. There is the most wonderful machine—"

"Everything you see is 'The most wonderful,'" I interrupted, gazing into the huge built-in trough. It was full of an evil-smelling acid and small bubbles of gas that rose from the depths. For a moment I could see nothing. Sarntoff switched on a light. Vaguely I glimpsed the outlines of some framework, yes, a machine, but of such an ethereal nature that it seemed scarcely more substantial than the bubbles which floated from it.

"Some new invention of yours?" I asked.

"No, Jackson," he said in a queer voice that thrilled me to my finger-tips. "It was crystallized in that meteor!"

Astonished, I grasped him by the shoulder and, I warrant, shook him more violently than the occasion called for.

"You can't mean that!" It was an exclamation rather than a question.

"Yes. I put the meteor in that vat of acid so that all the soluble matter would disappear. This beautiful engine is the residue."

My eyes were now more accustomed to the darkness. I could see the machine plainer. In shape it approximated a cube two feet in each dimension. The thread-like stays were as lustrous as burnished silver and wound around each other, in and out, like a queer sort of spider-web waiting to catch its prey. My heart grew cold within me. My sense of danger had warned.

An idea came to me. "Perhaps this is no machine but only the crystalline structure of your new metal that takes on this strange shape."

Sarntoff's answer was brief.

"Look closer."

I did so, and found that within the threads was a system of small wheels and gears, so complicated that the whole affair was a maze of intricate interlacings.

"What is its purpose?"

"It is my aim to find that out," he replied quietly.

I could sympathize with Sarntoff. His was the mind that rose beyond all difficulties. No doubt in his imagination, this engine was some affair that would solve the mystery of the universe, complete the knowledge of the human race, or provide a source of power far beyond human concept. To me it was only an instrument of death, dark and sinister. I confided my fears to Sarntoff.

"It's a devil engine! A machine from outside. We had better leave it alone."

"Nonsense, Jackson. If it were built by the devil himself it would only add to its scientific interest."

Though still unconvinced, I turned the conversation into other channels while Sarntoff and I sat up late into the night discussing the different angles this affair had taken. I advised informing the newspapers.

"No!" he exploded, "I'll not have another gang either of those inquisitive journalists or those meddling scientists up here."

I dropped the point. Sarntoff's claim to secrecy was justified.

"Think of what this all means, Jackson. A machine from another world. It proves that intelligent, perhaps super-intelligent life exists somewhere else in this universe."

"On Mars?"

"I have an idea that it came from something far beyond. The chemical composition was different from any other meteor I have ever examined as was its crystalline structure. It was more like the pig-iron from our blast furnaces than a meteor."

"Perhaps it is a fake, then. A hoax. I know what it is—a publicity stunt for 'The Meteor,' that successful play of the year."

Sarntoff, disgusted at my flippancy, waned into a silence that was not broken for many minutes. When he did speak the cloud on his florid face had vanished. Excitedly he sat up.

"I have a probable explanation for it now! The metal of this machine will withstand high temperatures. After it was finished, the iron was flowed in on top of it. Perhaps the whole affair is a torpedo shot at us by some distant planet, the machine being the explosive part."

And thus for a week we theorized, while Sarntoff and I labored night and day at the devil engine, as I had come to call it. The acids had to be carefully washed from it until finally it stood clean and dry on the floor of the vat. We dared not move it though it seemed to possess great stability. There it lay, as bright and shining as a dewy cobweb. It scintillated like a diamond and its jeweled radiance so fascinated me that I would gaze into its depths for hours, lost in thought. Only a crystal gazer could have appreciated the hypnotic force that held me.

"What is it for?" I asked Sarntoff a hundred times a day and I received as many answers as questions. The scientist's imagination was dancing about as much as his flashing blue eyes. He was engrossed in diagramming the gearing.

"Here is something queer," Sarntoff interjected. "Look at the color of the light as it shines through the machine in different directions."

I had noticed the weird pattern before and the beautiful display of colors.

"Jackson, I believe that we are nearing the solution of this problem. In some way this engine decomposes light." He paused to make some calculations. "Yes, the result is exactly the same as if the light were made to move in a curved path through some hyper-space."

I had no idea what he meant, nor did I care. After the first hundred explanations each new one decreased in interest. I gave myself again to gazing into the machine and so completely did I lose all sense of time that it might have been five minutes or five hours until Sarntoff spoke again. He had been pecking the internal workings of the machine.

"Jackson, I have found it! I have found it!" he shouted like a modern Archimedes.

The devil engine gave a slight flutter.

"Hold it down!"

The vibrations of the myriad wheels thrilled me. I was afraid. I desired to let go but some strange fascination held me fixed, like a boy that holds a lighted firecracker in his hand until it is too late.

Sarntoff shouted something at me but his words were lost in the roar that came from the machine's interior. Heavens! Was the world being turned inside out? Was it an earthquake which shook the walls of the building so strongly that the roof seemed about to fly into space? My body was growing numb with the continued vibration. My heart was frozen with the chill of death. Before I entirely lost consciousness I had the sensation of floating away on a sea of clouds, at

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first slowly and then more rapidly until my senses gave away under the strain.

"JACKSON, Jackson!" I heard a voice calling out of the darkness which was so intense as almost to smother me. All was silent now. So this was death? But yet I felt as substantial as the solid rock that now supported me. If only I could see! As if in answer to my desire a flame appeared at my side. It was Sarntoff.

"My God! What has happened?" I cried.

"I don't know."

"Where are we?"

"That also I don't know. Look at the sky."

The stars, for the most part, were very faint. The Milky Way was plainly visible, but where were the constellations, the old familiar figures? Not one could be recognized! Where could we be!

Somewhat unsteadily I gained my feet.

"Can't we find some way to make a light?"

Sarntoff struck another match which shed a dim radiance about us. As far as we could tell, no trees existed on the side of the rocky hill that sheltered us. In lieu of wood we set fire to a handful of dry grass which burned with a red flame, casting a lurid glare on the surrounding scene. The rim of darkness showed no break in the monotony. We fell into an awed silence for we were aware that something unusual had occurred, though what we could not comprehend.

Suddenly I thought of the cursed machine that was responsible for our plight. Reversing it might carry us back. I sought for it with the aid of a match. When I found it a cry of dismay escaped from my lips. The devil engine lay broken upon the ground, its silvery stays torn out as though to release the demon that seemed to govern it. Without new metal repair was out of the question.

The daze that clouded my brain began to vanish, and my fears, dulled for an instant by a sense of the unusual, stabbed again at my heart. Nothing but death could be the outcome. And such a death. Slow starvation in this utter darkness.

"My God, Sarntoff! What can we do?"

"Wait," was his philosophical reply.

I was on the verge of insanity but a sudden purple radiance that glowed on the horizon filled me with a new hope—**dawn!**

Silently we watched the sun rise. The purple aureole gave place to a vivid rose which rapidly covered the entire sky. If the world were to have caught on fire in one moment the color could have been no more ruddy. No blue in this atmosphere! The sun was a brilliant white, too dazzling for conception. I noticed that it did not appear exactly round and presently the reason for this became apparent. It was extended by the attraction of a second sun which suddenly launched itself into the sky. Impossible as it may seem only one explanation was admissible. We were cast away without hope of escape on a planet revolving about a double star!

Sarntoff was so wildly excited that he stammered when he addressed me.

"At first I thought that the devil engine might have carried us through time and that we might be still on the earth some centuries removed. But now I see that we have been carried through space as well. You see, Jackson, that we're a long way from where we started."

"Through time! Through space! What are you talking about?" I demanded, struggling to understand.

"Well, very evidently this machine has carried us over trillions of miles!"

"In that short space of time? Impossible!"

"Don't be foolish, Jackson, we have done it. But don't try to imagine us flying up that distance. We surely didn't do that."

"How did we get here, then?"

"If I'm right, it's rather complicated to put into simple language. It means only that the world has four instead of three dimensions."

"That sounds like Einstein."

"Yes. He and other eminent investigators have shown us that our conceptions of space and distance are not always what they seem to be. On earth we know of but three directions, forward, up and to the side. We gauge our distance from a body by the space we must cover in going there in the three recognized dimensions, but it might be infinitely nearer in a fourth direction if one exists."

"I confess that I don't understand."

"Let me reason by analogy," he replied, "If a man were constrained to live in a sewer-pipe he would know only of the forward and back direction. And if, perchance, the pipe were curved into a second dimension, he might, by crawling for miles, reach a point adjacent to some place he had previously been. If, at that moment, some force could have opened a trap-door he could have made

as unbelievable a jump as we ourselves have experienced."

"The devil engine let us in the back way, so to speak?" I questioned.

"Exactly," answered Sarntoff somewhat impatiently. "Here we are, thrown by fate into a new land and you stand there asking foolish questions. I want to see what sort of a place this is."

Our ardor quickly withered at the sight which confronted us.

The lurid glare of the sky was reflected in the features of the planet's surface, red soil, red rock, red everything. But, after all, why should not red be the dominating color somewhere!

"It is only a question of the size of the dust particles in the atmosphere," explained Sarntoff. "On the Earth they scatter the blue light, Here the red."

Simple enough, but why had not Nature wielded a more restful brush when painting the landscape, a delicate green or blue here and there to relieve the monotony of the scarlet splashes. Even the grass, the single form of vegetation that covered the bare earth, was crimson. Sarntoff and I chewed it, finding therein small relief for our hunger as it was very bitter. We quenched our subsequent thirst at a small spring whose water, God help me, was the color of blood, so stained, I realized, by fine dust from the red rocks.

No breeze, no air stirred in this land of death. Could there possibly be inhabitants? And if so, would they be hostile? We longed for, yet dreaded discovery. The silence of a graveyard at midnight persisted even when he had aroused enough courage to send a loud "halloo" echoing from the massive cliffs in the distance. We set out for the highest of these, hoping that from its summit the view of the surrounding country would solve our problem. Perhaps the high-walled canyons might shelter the elusive inhabitants of this strange sphere.

For days we wandered over the face of the planet, chewing bitter weeds and drinking vile water. The rocky crags suddenly refused to give up their secret though they seemed to hover menacingly above us, peering over our heads as if they alone could see that for which we were seeking. The sky remained forever cloudless, though a slight purple haze at dawn was customary but quickly dispelled by the powerful rays of the two suns. Time had been drawing them apart so that now the dreadful nights were much shorter, a condition that was not distasteful to us for their absolute darkness was appalling. It hung over us

like a visible curse, sucking the breath from our bodies as we tried to sleep. I would have given years from my life to have had some natural noise break that eternal silence. A shrieking wind. Falling water. Anything!

As we progressed we noted every landmark, carefully filing them in our memories against the hour of our return. Each day had been a repetition and this was no exception. Slowly and laboriously Sarntoff and I scaled the highest cliff and, of life, found as usual—nothing. In one direction a plain of fire stretched endlessly into the blazing sky with nothing more than a thin purple line of separation. In the other lay the sea, an ocean of blood, whose calm surface, reflecting the heavens, was unruffled by wind or tide, as though it had suddenly congealed in fear and horror. I shut my eyes to obliterate the view, feeling as if I had been thrust into the heart of a blazing furnace, but when I opened them the naked world appeared the same—no sound, no motion.

The descent was even more difficult than the ascent had been and night had thrown its black shroud over us long before we reached the level. We elected to remain in a small cave that offered, if not shelter, at least a foot-hold that would keep us from dashing to the ground thousands of feet below. Making ourselves as comfortable as possible we tried to gain some much needed rest. Sarntoff, the imperturbable, dropped easily to sleep. To me sleep was impossible. Silence! Solitude! An indescribable terror took sudden possession of me. Above Sarntoff's muffled breathing a slight noise, a warning hiss, seemed to float like a vapor from the canyon below.

I listened tensely. It was repeated, increasing in volume, slowly rising to a shrill scream, wailing loudly like a human being in great agony. The cry echoed from cliff to cliff and continued to re-echo in my consciousness some time after it had died away. Again it came, moaning like the wind in the pines, increasing to a gale until the rocks were shaken by its force.

As though at a signal, a thousand wisps of luminous mist dashed from as many crevices in the canyon walls. One rushed from our own shelter, nearly precipitating me into the depths from fear and from its suddenness. I could not speak nor, I suppose, could Sarntoff. My tongue was swollen with horror. A colony of ghosts in a land of blood and fire! A master's touch to an inferno!

For hours, with wildest confusion, they danced in the canyon. An occa-

sional laugh, like that of a maniac, floated upward. The display of colors was wonderful, all shades of the rainbow—no two exactly alike. At times the phantoms were round, huge, iridescent soap-bubbles, and again shapeless, like phosphorescent mist rising from a dead swamp.

Ages passed. Time in which my consciousness recognized nothing but the myriad clouds of light as they sported in the valley. The weird cry was again repeated. The lights as suddenly vanished and I felt a chill wind strike me as the thing, whatever it was, returned to shelter. A moment later dawn splashed the scene with blood. Sarntoff and I gazed at each other questioningly. Neither spoke of the terror that had gripped our hearts. It was too vague, yet too real to be aught but a part of this dream planet.

Seemingly hours passed before we essayed to move. Sarntoff was the first to speak.

"Look—look at the roof of our cave, Jackson."

Weakly, yet fearfully, I complied. Hanging from it in long shreds was a huge supply of that spun-glass metal from which the devil engine was constructed.

"With this, perhaps we can repair it?" I did not dare mention *what* for fear that the phantom might hear us and try to thwart our plans for leaving.

"Perhaps," replied Sarntoff. "But not before I solve this unspeakable mystery!"

"The farther I get from it the better," I replied, "and the sooner. I have no desire to spend another night in such a horrible place."

Sarntoff yielded to my wishes, but, after we had gathered a supply of the metal and were moving down the slope, I noticed a queer light in his eyes.

"Has it occurred to you, Jackson, that we might have been sent for?"

"Sent for?" I echoed.

"Yes. Is it not possible that the machine was given us so that we might visit this unexplored land? If so, it seems a shame to leave it."

"Don't let your scientific ardor carry you away, Sarntoff. We'll be lucky if we ever leave. It's going to be no easy task to repair that engine."

"I'm not the least bit hopeful that I'm equal to it," confessed the scientist, "but I'm quite sure that it would be no disappointment to me if I were obliged to spend my life here. The study of this wonderful geology alone would be enough to attract me. It is only for your

sake that I'm even considering returning."

"But the hardships, man! And these queer creatures. What assurance have you of their harmlessness. It's a ghastly place, a fit abode for lost souls, and we'll be well rid of it."

FIVE days passed. As our eyes were more accustomed to the darkness, we traveled much during the night and indeed gained comfort by so doing, for then only, under the faint cold light of the distant stars, was the distasteful ruddy glare invisible. How I enjoyed looking upward! The faint glitter of the Milky Way warmed my heart with its companionable ring, the only link to our former life—that past which seemed so like a dream. And which, of those thousand orbs that sparkled in the black velvet depths of heaven, was our sun with its eight attendant planets? I marveled that I should feel such a patriotic thrill when I thought of *Our Earth*.

"Here," I thought philosophically, "is one solution for universal peace. Let those who are so unsatisfied with their own world glimpse it from without and if they will then only say '*Our Earth*' with half the enthusiasm they now say '*Our Country*' they will bring in the millennium."

Sarntoff interrupted my wandering thoughts.

"Here we are, Jackson." And, following his finger through the darkness, I recognized the spot as our landing place.

"The devil engine is gone!"

I rushed to his side.

"The ghosts have stolen it!"

"At least this proves that they are substantial. Ghosts could not move material objects."

I stood aghast—helpless.

"We are too accustomed to think of life as enclosed in a solid form, though even on our earth there are many gelatinous or semi-liquid creatures from the jelly-fish to the amoeba. I do not consider it a big stretch of the imagination to think that beings can be gaseous in form and yet have intelligence."

I was about to argue the point when I saw a dark shadow against a neighboring rock. It proved to be the devil engine.

"And restored to perfect order!" cried Sarntoff.

"By the ghosts!"

"By these people, yes. It goes to prove my point, Jackson, that they have a wonderful civilization. If I only knew how to communicate with them I would remain. There *must* be some way."

"No. No." I interposed hurriedly, fearful that he might change his mind.

Since that memorable event of the canyon we had seen nothing of the weird creatures that inhabited this strange world but the moment I touched the devil engine a faint light appeared. Turning quickly, I found hundreds of the creatures slowly encircling us, gradually filling in the ever narrowing rim of darkness.

"Hurry, Sarntoff!" I shouted. "They'll stop us!"

Sarntoff did not reply as he touched the lever that would reverse the engine, sending it back along the path through which it had come.

I grasped the engine with a new confidence in spite of the dancing bubbles, feeling its vibrations tingling in my brain. A strange glow suddenly seemed to come from the machine's interior.

Whether it was reflected light or not I could not say but, in my horror, I fancied that one of the creatures was concealed therein! I cried my conclusion to Sarntoff.

"Nonsense!"

Nevertheless the idea of a machine with a soul—a true devil engine—sporting through my consciousness, filling me with a terror as deep as infinity. The machine quivered as though anxious to be off.

That weird cry that drove the spirits to oblivion resounded as dawn's bloody dagger cut through the darkness.

Sarntoff suddenly stood erect, the light of a new resolution burning in his eyes.

"Goodbye, Jackson. Someday I may return."

"Not come with me?"—but it was too late. The words trailed into the

vacant ether. My last vision of him will remain painted forever upon my memory and in one color, a stalwart figure silhouetted against a blood-red sky.

For an eternity I floated away as in a dream.

"Crash!" I had struck something hard and a slight explosion followed. I was lying on the floor in Sarntoff's laboratory with a red flame licking at my feet. I fainted.

The next day at the hospital the interne acquainted me with the details.

"A fire at Sarntoff's," he explained. "You were rescued from the midst of the flames."

"And Sarntoff?" I questioned.

"It's queer. His body has not yet been found."

It never was.

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