

STARTLING STORIES

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A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel



A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

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THE MAN WHO EVOLVED

A Complete Hall of Fame Novelet By **EDMOND HAMILTON**

Author of "Captain Future's Challenge," "Doom Over Venus," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Mad Scheme

THERE were three of us in Pollard's house on that night which I try so vainly to forget. Dr. John Pollard, Hugh Dutton, and I, Arthur Wright—we were the three. That night, Pollard met a fate whose horror none could dream. Ever since then Dutton has inhabited a state institution for the hopelessly insane. Of the three, I alone am left to tell what happened.

It was on Pollard's invitation that Dutton and I went up to his isolated cottage. We three had been friends and roommates at the New York Technical University. Our friendship was perhaps a little unusual, for Pollard was considerably older than Dutton and myself and was entirely different in temperament. He had always been the quiet one of the three. Besides, he had followed an intensive course of biological studies, instead of the ordinary engineering courses we had taken.

As Dutton and I drove northward along the Hudson that afternoon, we found ourselves discussing Pollard with great curiosity.

We knew he had taken his Master's and Doctor's degrees, and had heard of his work under Braun, the Vienna biologist whose theories had stirred up such turmoil. We had heard casually, too, that afterward he had come back to plunge himself in private research at his country house beside the Hudson. But since then we had received no word from him. After so many years of silence, we had been somewhat surprised to receive his telegram inviting us to spend the week-end with him.

It was drawing into early summer twilight when Dutton and I reached a small riverside village and were directed to Pollard's place, a mile or so beyond. We found it easily enough, a splendid old pegged-frame house that for over a hundred years had stood on a low hill above the river. Its out-buildings were clustered around the big house like chicks about some protecting hen.

Pollard came out to greet us.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Some stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Man Who Evolved," by Edmond Hamilton, has stood this test, one of fantasy's prominent followers, Mr. Sam Moskowitz, has nominated it for SCIENTIFUNCTION'S HALL OF FAME.



In each issue, for several forthcoming numbers, we will reprint the most outstanding fantasy classic of all time, as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

"Why, you boys have grown up!" was his first exclamation. "Here I've been remembering you as Hughie and Art, the campus trouble-raisers. You actually look as though you belong to business clubs and talk everlastingly about sales resistance."

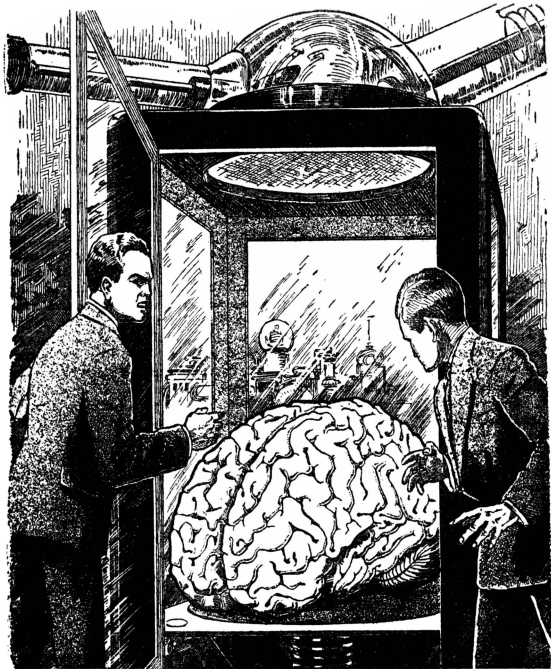
"That's the sobering effect of commercial life," Dutton explained, grinning. "It hasn't touched you, you old oyster. You look the same as you did five years ago."

IT was true, for his lanky figure, slow smile and curiously thoughtful eyes had not changed at all. Yet his usually grave, restrained face showed such unconcealed excitement that I commented on it.

"If I seem a little excited, it's because this is a great day for me," he declared.

"Well, you certainly are lucky to get two fine fellows like Dutton and me to trail up to this hermitage of yours," I began.

Men of Today Glimpse Humanity's Future



It was a great brain—a gray, limp mass four feet across!

He shook his head smilingly.

"I don't mean that, Art, though I'm mighty glad you've come. As for my hermitage, as you call it, don't say a word against it. I've been able to do work here that I could never have done with all the distractions of a city laboratory." His eyes were alight. "If you two knew what— But there, you'll hear it soon enough. Let's get inside. I suppose you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Not I," I assured him. "I might devour

half a steer or some trifle like that, but I have really no appetite for a full meal right now."

"Same here," Dutton said. "I just pick at my food lately. Give me a few dozen sandwiches and a bucket of coffee and I consider myself practically fed."

"Well, we'll see what we can do to tempt your delicate appetites," said Pollard as we went inside.

We found his big house comfortable

and Behold a Wondrous Cycle With No End

enough, with long, low-ceilinged rooms and broad windows looking over the river. We put our bags in a spacious bedroom. While his housekeeper and cook prepared dinner, Pollard escorted us on a tour of inspection of the place. But it was his laboratory that we were particularly interested in seeing.

It was in a small wing he had added to the house. The wing was of frame construction to harmonize with the rest of the building, but the interior was a gleaming vista of white-tiled walls and polished instruments.

A large cubelike structure of transparent metal, surmounted by a huge metal cylinder resembling a monster vacuum tube, took up the room's center. In an adjoining stone-floored room, he showed us the dynamos and motors of his private power plant.

NIGHT had fallen by the time we finished dinner, the meal had been so prolonged by our reminiscences. The housekeeper and cook had gone. Pollard explained that the servants did not sleep in the place. We sat smoking for awhile in his living room, Dutton looking around appreciatively at our comfortable surroundings.

"Your hermitage doesn't seem half-bad, Pollard," he commented, "I wouldn't mind this easy life myself."

"Easy life?" repeated Pollard, shocked. "That's all you know about it, Hugh. Why, I've never worked so hard in all my life as I've sweated up here for the last two years."

"What the devil have you been working at?" I asked. "What could be so unholy that you've had to keep it hidden here?"

Pollard chuckled.

"That's what they think down in the village. They know I'm a biologist and have a laboratory here. Naturally they're positive that I'm doing vivisection of a peculiarly ghastly nature. That's why the servants won't stay here at night. As a matter of fact, if they knew down in the village what I've really been working on, they'd be ten times as frightened as they are now."

"Are you trying to play the mysterious alchemist for our benefit?" Dutton demanded. "If you are, you're wasting your time. I know you, stranger, so take off that mask."

"That's right," I added. "If you're trying to get our curiosity worked up, you'll find we can urge you on as neatly as we could five years ago."

"Which urging generally ended in black eyes for both of you," Pollard retorted. "But I have no intention of working up your curiosity. The truth is that I asked you up here to see what I've been doing and to help me finish it."

"Help you?" echoed Dutton. "What can we help you do—dissect worms? Boy, we're in for some week-end, I can see right now!"

"There's more to this than dissecting worms," Pollard said. He leaned back and smoked in silence, watching us thoughtfully before he spoke again. "Do you two have any knowledge at all of evolution?"

"I know that it's a fighting word in some states," I answered. "When you say it in those places, you've got to smile, damn you."

HE smiled abstractedly, as if he had not been listening.

"I suppose you're aware of the fact, however, that all life on Earth began as simple uni-cellular protoplasm. You know that by successive evolutionary mutations or changes, it developed into its present forms, and is still slowly developing."

"We know that much," Dutton grunted. "Just because we're not biologists, you don't have to think we're totally ignorant of biology."

"Shut up," I ordered Dutton. "What's evolution got to do with your work up here, Pollard?"

"It is my work up here," Pollard answered. He bent forward. "I'll try to make this clear to you from the start. You know—or say you know—the main steps of evolutionary development. Life began on Earth as simple protoplasm, a jellylike mass from which developed small protoplasmic organisms. From these, in turn, developed sea-creatures, land-lizards, mammals, by successive mutations. This infinitely slow evolutionary process has reached its highest point so far in the mammal known as Man, and is still going on with the same slowness.

"This much is certain biological knowledge, but two great questions concerning this process of evolution have hitherto remained unanswered. First, what is the cause of evolutionary change, the cause of these slow, steady mutations into higher forms? Second, what is the future course of man's evolution going to be? What will be the forms into which in future man will evolve, and where will his evolution stop? Those two questions biology has so far been unable to answer."

Pollard was silent for a long, tense moment. Then he made a quiet statement.

"I have already found the answer to one of those questions. Tonight, I am going to find the answer to the other!"

CHAPTER II

Fifty Million Years

WE stared at Pollard in shocked amazement. "Are you trying to spoof us?" I asked.

"I'm absolutely serious, Arthur," he replied earnestly. "I have actually solved the first of those problems. I have found the cause of evolution."

"Then tell us what it is!" Dutton burst out.

"What most biologists have recently thought it to be," Pollard answered. "The cosmic rays."

"Cosmic rays?" I blurted. "The vibrations from space that Millikan discovered?"

"Yes, the cosmic rays, the shortest wavelength and most highly penetrating of all vibratory forces. It has been known that they beat unceasingly upon Earth from outer space, where they are created by the huge generators of the stars. It has also been known that they must have some great effect in one way or another upon the life

on Earth.

"I have proved that they do have such an effect, and that the effect is what we call evolution! It is the cosmic rays, beating upon every living organism on Earth, that cause the profound changes in the structure of organisms which result in mutations. Those changes, of course, are painfully slow. But because of the effect of cosmic rays through the ages, life has been raised from the first protoplasm to man, and is still being raised higher."

"Good Lord, you can't be serious, Pollard!" Dutton protested.

"I am so serious that tonight I am going to stake my life on my discovery," Pollard answered quietly.

We were startled, despite the calmness of his statement.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Now suppose those concentrated cosmic rays—millions of times stronger than the ordinary cosmic rays that strike one spot on Earth—fall upon a man standing inside the cube. What will be the result? It is the cosmic rays that cause evolutionary change. You heard me say that they are still changing all life on Earth, but so slowly as to be unnoticeable.

"What about the man under those terrifically intensified rays, though? He will be changed millions of times faster than the usual rate. He will go forward, in hours or minutes, through the evolutionary mutations that all mankind will experience in countless eons to come!"

"And you want to try that experiment?" I cried.

"I am going to try it on myself," said Pollard gravely, "and find out for myself

Why "The Man Who Evolved" Is My Favorite

By SAM MOSKOWITZ



Sam Moskowitz

TO reply successfully to the query of why I chose "The Man Who Evolved" by Edmond Hamilton for *STARTLING STORIES* "Hall Of Fame" I must first answer the question of why it is a great story.

Science fiction is a fertile field for the combination of almost any conceivable plots. Air stories, Northwestern stories, western stories and detective stories all see print clothed in a thin veneer of death rays and rocket ships.

It is refreshing, then, to find a story like "The Man Who Evolved" which is one hundred per cent, unadulterated science fiction—and good science fiction in the bargain.

Only in science fiction could one find this unique type of plot: a man builds a machine that in the course of a few hours will project him along the entire road of future human evolution.

Only in science fiction could one find this novel type of suspense which appeals more to intellectual curiosity than to the emotions: the author takes you through stage after stage of possible development—what will—what can come next?

Because this story is typical of real science fiction; because the things that happen and the manner in which they happen is characteristic only of science fiction, and because the author has outdone himself not only in writing and imagination, but in the providing of a surprise twist ending as well, I nominate "The Man Who Evolved" as my first choice on *STARTLING STORIES* hit parade.

"I have found in the cosmic rays the cause of evolution, the answer to the first question. Tonight, by means of them, I am going to answer the second question. I intend to find out what the future evolutionary development of man will be."

"But how could you possibly—"

"Easily enough," Pollard interrupted. "I have been able, in the last few months, to do something no physicist has been able to do. I succeeded in concentrating the cosmic rays, yet I managed to remove from them their harmful properties. Did you see the cylinder over the metal cube in my laboratory? That cylinder is to cosmic rays what a telescope is to light. It gathers and focuses the radiation, concentrating them at the base of the cube.

the evolutionary changes that await mankind."

"Why, it's insane!" Dutton exclaimed.

POLLARD smiled with infinite sadness. "The old cry. Never an attempt has yet been made to tamper with nature's laws, without that cry being raised."

"But Dutton's right!" I protested. "Pollard, you've worked here alone too long. You've let your mind become warped—"

"Are you trying to tell me that I have become a little mad?" he asked. "No, I am sane. I think I am wonderfully sane to try this."

His expression changed. His eyes became brooding.

"Can't you two see what this may mean

to humanity? As we are to the apes, so must the men of the future be to us. If we could use this method of mine to take all mankind forward through millions of years of evolutionary development at one stride, wouldn't it be sane to do so?"

My mind was whirling as I objected to the frightening idea.

"Good heavens, the whole thing is so crazy! To accelerate the evolution of the human race? I can't help thinking it's the one thing nature has forbidden."

"It's a glorious thing if it can be done," he returned. "I know it can be done. But first one must go ahead—must travel on through stage after stage of man's future development to find out to which stage it would be most desirable for all mankind to be transferred. I know there is such an age."

"And you asked us up here to take part in your insane idea?"

"Just that. I mean to enter the cube and let the concentrated rays whirl me forward along the paths of evolution. But I must have someone to turn the rays on and off at the right moments."

"It's absolutely incredible!" Dutton shouted. "Pollard, if this is a joke, it's gone plenty far enough for me."

For answer, Pollard rose.

"We will go to the laboratory now," he said simply. "I am eager to get started."

I cannot remember following Pollard and Dutton to the laboratory, my thoughts were spinning so furiously. It was not until we stood before the great cube, from which the huge metal cylinder towered, that I was aware of the dream's horrible reality.

Pollard had gone into the dynamo room. As Dutton and I stared wordlessly at the great cube and cylinder, at the retorts and flasks of acids and strange equipment about us, we heard the hum of motor generators. Pollard came back to the switchboard which was supported in a steel frame beside the cube. As he closed a switch, there came a crackling, and the cylinder glowed with white light.

FIRST Pollard pointed to it, then to the big quartzlike disc in the cubical chamber's ceiling, from which the white force-shafts shot downward.

"The cylinder is now gathering cosmic rays from an immense area of space," he said. "Those concentrated rays are being focused through that disc into the cube's interior. To cut off the rays, it is necessary only to open this switch."

He reached for the switch. The light died.

Quickly, while we stared in helpless horror, he removed his clothing. In place of it, he donned a loose white running suit.

"I will want to observe the changes of my own body as much as possible," he explained. "Now I will stand inside the cube, and you will turn on the rays. Let them play upon me for fifteen minutes. Roughly, that should represent a period of some fifty million years of future evolutionary change. At the end of fifteen minutes, you will turn the rays off and we will be able to observe what changes they have caused. We will then resume the process, going forward by fifteen-minute—or rather fifty million year

—periods."

"But where will it stop?" Dutton asked. "Where will we quit the process?"

Pollard shrugged with complete indifference.

"We'll stop where evolution stops. That is, where the rays no longer affect me. You know that biologists have often wondered what the last change or final development of man will be. They've often speculated on the last mutation. Well, we are going to see tonight what that will be."

He stepped toward the cube. Pausing indecisively, he went to a desk and brought from it a sealed envelope which he handed to me.

"This is just in case something fatal happens to me," he said. "It contains an attestation, signed by myself, stating that you two are in no way responsible for what I am undertaking."

"Pollard, give up this unholy business!" I begged, clutching his arm. "It's not too late. You can't go on with this ghastly nonsense!"

"I'm afraid it is too late," he replied firmly. "If I backed out now, I'd be ashamed to look in a mirror the rest of my life. And no explorer was ever more eager than I am to start down the path of man's future evolution."

He stepped up into the cube. Standing directly beneath the disc in its ceiling, he motioned imperatively. Like an automaton, I closed the door and then threw the switch.

The cylinder broke again into glowing white light. As the shafts of glowing white force shot down from the disc in the cube's ceiling upon Pollard, we glimpsed his whole body writhing as though beneath a terrifically concentrated electrical force. The shaft of glowing emanations almost hid him from our view. I knew that the cosmic rays in themselves were invisible. But I guessed that the light of the cylinder and shaft was in some way a stepping-down of part of the rays into visible light.

DUTTON and I stared with terrified eyes into the cubical chamber. Those fleeting glimpses of Pollard's agony only intensified our terror. My watch was in one hand, the other hand on the switch.

The fifteen minutes that followed seemed to pass with the slowness of fifteen eternities. Neither of us spoke. The only sounds were the hum of the generators and the crackling of the cylinder as it was gathering and concentrating the rays of evolution from outer space.

At last the watch's hand marked the quarter-hour. I snapped off the switch. As the light of the cylinder and inside the cube died, shocked exclamations burst from both of us.

Pollard stood inside the cube, staggering as though still dazed by the impact of the experience. But he was not the Pollard who had entered the chamber!

He was transfigured, godlike. His body had literally expanded into a great figure of such physical power and beauty as we had not imagined could exist. He was many inches taller and broader, his skin a clear pink, every limb and muscle molded as

though by some master sculptor.

The greatest change, though, was in his face. Pollard's homely, good-humored features had been replaced by a face with perfectly cut features. It held the stamp of immense intellectual power that shone almost overpoweringly from the clear, dark eyes. It was not Pollard who stood before us, I realized instinctively. He was a being as far above us as the most advanced man of today is above the troglodyte!

He was stepping out of the cube. His voice reached our ears, clear, triumphant.

"You see?" he asked. "It worked just as I knew it would. I'm fifty million years ahead of the rest of humanity in evolutionary development."

"Pollard!" My lips moved with difficulty. "Pollard, this is terrible—this change—"

His radiant eyes flashed.

"Terrible? It's wonderful! Do you two realize what I now am? Can you understand it? This body of mine is the kind of body all men will have in fifty million years. The brain inside it is a brain that is fifty million years ahead of yours in development."

He swept his hand about, gesturing distastefully at the equipment.

"Why, this laboratory and the former work of mine seems infinitely petty and childish to me. The problems that I worked on for years I could solve now in minutes. I could do more for mankind now than all the men now living could do together."

"Then you're going to stop at this stage?" Dutton cried eagerly. "You're not going further with this?"

"Of course I am! If fifty million years development makes this much change in man, what will a hundred million years—two hundred million—make? I'm going to find out."

I GRASPED his hand, pressed it in desperate appeal.

"Pollard, listen to me. Your experiment has succeeded. It has fulfilled your wildest dreams. Stop it now. Think what you can accomplish! I know your ambition has always been to be one of humanity's great benefactors. By stopping here, you can be the greatest! You can be a living proof to mankind of what your process can make it. With that proof before it, all humanity will be anxious to become the same as you."

Irritably he freed himself from my grasp. "No, Arthur. I have gone part of the way into humanity's future. I can't stop now. I must know the final stage."

He stepped back into the chamber, while Dutton and I stared helplessly. It seemed like a nightmare—the laboratory, the cubical chamber, the godlike figure inside that was and was not Pollard.

"Turn on the rays, and let them play for fifteen minutes more," he was directing. "It will project me ahead another fifty million years."

His eyes and voice were irresistibly imperative. I glanced at my watch, and snickered over the switch. Again the cylinder broke into light. Again the shaft of force shot down into the cube to hide Pollard's splendid figure. . . .

CHAPTER III

The Monster Brain

DUTTON and I waited with feverish intensity for the next fifteen minutes. Pollard was standing beneath the broad shaft of force, and so was hidden in it from our eyes. What would its lifting disclose? Would he have changed still more, perhaps into some giant form? Or would he be the same, having already reached humanity's highest possible development?

When I shut off the mechanism at the end of the appointed period, and the shaft vanished, Dutton and I recoiled. For again Pollard had changed.

He was no longer the radiant, physically perfect figure of the first metamorphosis. His body, instead, seemed to have grown thin and shriveled, the outlines of bones visible through its flesh. His body actually appeared to have lost half its bulk and many inches of stature and breadth. But these shrinkages were compensated for by the change in his head.

The head supported by this weak body was an immense, bulging balloon that was fully eighteen inches from brow to back! It was almost entirely hairless, its great mass balanced precariously upon his slender shoulders and neck. His face was changed greatly, the eyes larger and the mouth smaller, the ears tiny and close to the skull. The great, bulging forehead dominated the face.

Could this be Pollard? His voice sounded thin and weak to our ears.

"You are surprised to see me this time? Well, you see a man a hundred million years ahead of you in development. I must confess that you appear to me as two brutish, hairy cave-men would appear to you."

"But Pollard, this is awful!" Dutton cried. "This change is more terrible than the first. If you had only stopped at the first. . . ."

The eyes of the shriveled, huge-headed figure in the cube flashed with anger.

"Stop at that first stage? I'm glad now that I didn't! The man I was fifteen minutes ago—fifty million years past in development—seems to me to have been half-animal. What was his large, clumsy, animal-like body beside my immense brain?"

"You say that because in this change you're getting away from all human emotions and sentiments," I burst out. "Pollard, do you realize what you're doing? You're changing out of human semblance."

"I realize it perfectly," he snapped, "and I see nothing to be deplored in the fact. It means that in a hundred million years, man will be developing in brain capacity and will care nothing for the development of body. To you crude beings of the past, this seems terrible. To me, it is desirable and natural. Turn on the rays again."

"Don't do it, Art!" yelled Dutton. "This madness has gone far enough!"

POLLARD'S enormous eyes surveyed us with cold menace.

"You will turn on the rays," his thin voice ordered deliberately. "If you do not, it will be but the work of a moment for me to annihilate both of you, and go on with this alone."

"You'd kill us," I said in loathing, "your best friends?"

His narrow mouth seemed to sneer.

"Friends? I am millions of years past such irrational emotions as friendship. The only emotion you awaken in me is contempt for your crudity. Turn on the rays."

His eyes blazed as he snapped the last order. As though propelled by a force outside myself, I closed the switch. The shaft of glowing force again hid him from our view.

Of our thoughts during the following quarter-hour I can say nothing. Both Dutton and I were so rigid with awe and horror that our minds were chaotic. I shall never forget, though, the first moment after the appointed time had passed and I again switched off the mechanism.

The change had continued. Pollard—I could not call him that in my own mind—stood in the cube-chamber. The sight of that fearful shape stunned our minds.

He had become simply a great head!

A huge, hairless head fully a yard in diameter, it was supported on tiny legs. The arms had dwindled to mere hands that projected just below the head. The eyes were enormous, saucerlike, but the ears were mere pin-holes at either side of the head. The nose and mouth were similar holes below the eyes.

He was stepping out of the chamber on his ridiculously little limbs. As Dutton and I reeled back in unreasoning horror, his voice came to us as an almost inaudible piping. But that squeak held pride.

"You tried to keep me from going on. Now do you see what I have become? To such as you, no doubt, I seem terrible. Yet you two and all like you seem as low to me as the worms that crawl."

"Good God, Pollard, you've made yourself a monster!"

The words had burst from me without thought. His enormous eyes turned on me.

"You call me Pollard, yet I am not the Pollard you knew. I am as much the man who entered that chamber as you are the ape from whom you evolved. And all mankind is like you two. Well, they will all learn the powers of one who is a hundred and fifty million years in advance of them."

"What do you mean?" Dutton whispered.

"I mean that with the colossal brain I have, I will master without a struggle this man-swarming planet. I will make it a huge laboratory in which to pursue the experiments that please me."

"But, Pollard, remember why you started this!" I cried. "To chart the path of future evolution for humanity—to benefit humanity and not to rule it!"

THE great head's fantastically large eyes did not change.

"I remember that the creature I was until tonight had such foolish ambitions. It would stir mirth in me now, if I could feel such an emotion. To benefit humanity? Do

you men dream of benefiting the animals you rule over? I would no sooner think of working for the benefit of primitive human beings. Do you two yet realize that I am as far ahead of you in brain power as you are ahead of the beasts that perish? Look at this. . . ."

He had climbed onto a chair beside one of the laboratory tables, was reaching among the apparatus there. Swiftly he poured several compounds into a lead mortar, added others, poured upon the contents another mixture he had quickly made.

There was a puff of intense green smoke from the mortar. Then the great head—I can only call him that—turned the mortar upside down. A lump of shining, mottled metal fell out. We gasped as we recognized the yellow sheen of pure gold. It had been made in a moment, apparently by a mixture of common compounds!

"You see?" the grotesque figure was asking. "What is the transmutation of elements to a mind like mine? You two cannot even realize the scope of my intelligence! I can destroy all life on Earth, if I desire, without moving from this room. I can construct a telescope that will allow me to look on the planets of the farthest galaxies. I can send my mind forth to make contact with other minds without the slightest material connection. Do you still think it terrible that I should rule your race? I will not rule them. I will own them and this planet as you might own a farm and animals."

"You couldn't!" I protested. "Pollard—if there is anything of Pollard left in you—give up that thought. We'll kill you ourselves before we'll let you start a monstrous rule of men."

"We will!" Dutton cried, his face twitching with frantic emotion.

We had desperately started forward toward the great head. We stopped suddenly in our tracks as his great eyes met ours. I found myself walking back to where I had stood—walking back and Dutton with me, like two automatons.

"So you two would try to kill me?" sneered the head that had been Pollard. "Why, I could direct you without a word to kill yourselves and you'd do so in an instant. What chance have your puny will and brain against mine? And what chance will all the force of men have against me when a glance from me will make them puppets of my will!"

A wild inspiration flashed through my brain.

"Pollard, wait!" I exclaimed. "You were going on with the process. You wanted to see the last mutation. If you stop here, you'll never know what changes lie beyond your present form."

HE seemed to consider for several moments.

"That is true," he admitted. "Though it seems impossible to me that by going on, I can attain to greater intelligence than I now have, I want to find out for certain."

"Then you'll go under the rays for another fifteen minutes?" I asked quickly.

"I will," he answered. "Lest you harbor any foolish ideas, you may know that even inside the chamber I will be able to read

your thoughts. I can kill both of you before you can make a move to harm me."

He stepped up into the chamber again. As I reached for the switch, Dutton stood trembling beside me. We glimpsed for a moment the huge head, before the down-smiting white force hid it from our sight.

The minutes of this period seemed to be dragging even more slowly than before. It was hours before I reached at last to snap off the rays. We gazed into the chamber, shaking with anticipation. How ghastly could he be?

At first glance, the great head seemed unchanged. But then we saw that it certainly had changed.

Instead of being a skin-covered head with at least rudimentary arms and legs, it was now a great, gray, headlike shape of even greater size, supported by two gray muscular tentacles. The surface of this gray head-thing was wrinkled and folded. Its only features were two eyes as small as our own.

"Oh, Lord!" quavered Dutton. "He's changing from a head into a brain! He's losing all human appearance!"

Into our minds came a thought from the gray head-thing before us. That thought was as clear as though it had been spoken.

"You have guessed it. Even my former head-body is disappearing, all atrophying except the brain. I have become a walking, seeing brain. As I am, so all of your race will be in two hundred million years. Gradually they will lose more and more of their atrophied bodies, developing in inverse proportion their great brains."

His eyes read our minds without effort.

"You need not fear the things I threatened in my last stage of development. My mind, grown infinitely greater, would no more want to rule you men and your little planet than you would want to rule an ant hill and its inhabitants. My mind, fifty million years ahead in development, can soar out to vistas of power and knowledge unimagined by me in that last stage. My thoughts would be completely unimaginable to you."

"Pollard!" I moaned. "What have you become?"

"Pollard?" Dutton was laughing hysterically. "You call that thing Pollard? Why, we had dinner with Pollard three hours ago. He was a human being, not this thing."

"I have become what all men will become in time," the brain's thought answered me. "I have gone thus far along the road of man's future evolution. I am going on to the end of that road, to attain the development that the last mutation possible will give me! Turn on the rays. I must be approaching the last possible mutation."

CHAPTER IV

End of the Journey

OBEDIENTLY I snapped over the switch. Again the white shaft of the concentrated cosmic rays veiled from us the great gray shape. I felt my own mind giv-

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ing beneath the strain of horror of the last hour. Dutton was still half-hysterical.

The humming and crackling of the vast apparatus seemed to thunder in my ears as the minutes passed. With every nerve keyed to highest tension, I threw open the switch at last. The rays ceased, and the figure in the chamber was once more revealed.

Dutton began to laugh shrilly, then abruptly started sobbing. I do not know whether I was doing the same, though I have a dim memory of mouthing something incoherent as my eyes took in the shape in the chamber.

It was a great brain—a gray, limp mass four feet across! It lay in the chamber, its surface ridged and wrinkled by innumerable, deep convulsions. It had no features or limbs of any kind on its gray mass. It was simply a huge brain whose only visible sign of life was its slow repulsive pulsation. Thoughts beat strongly into our own horror-weighted brains.

"You see me now, a mere colossal brain, just as all men will be in the far future. Yes, you might have known—I might have known when I was like you—that this would be the course of human evolution. The brain alone gives man dominance. Naturally that would develop. The body that hampers the brain must atrophy until he develops into pure brain, as I now am.

"I have no features, no senses that I could describe to you. Yet I can realize the Universe infinitely better than you can with your elementary senses. I am aware of planes of existence that you cannot imagine. I can feed myself on pure energy, without the need of a cumbersome body to transform it. I can move and act, despite my lack of limbs, by a method and with a speed and power that are utterly beyond your comprehension.

"If you still have fear of the threats I made two stages back against your world and race, banish them. I am pure intelligence now. As such, though I can no more feel the emotions of love or friendship, neither can I feel those of ambition or pride. The only emotion that still remains to me is intellectual curiosity. This desire for truth, which has burned in man since his apehood, will thus be the last of all desires to leave him."

"A BRAIN—a great brain!" Dutton was babbling dazedly. "Here in Pollard's laboratory. But where's Pollard? He was here, too. . . ."

"Then all men will some day be as you are now?" I blurted.

"Yes," came the answering thought. "In two hundred and fifty million years, man as you know him and as you are, will be no more. After passing all the stages through which I have gone tonight, the human race will have developed into cosmic brains. They will inhabit not only your Solar System, but the systems of all the other stars."

"And that's the end of man's evolutionary road? That is the highest point he will reach?"

"No, I think he will change from those

great brains into still a higher form," the brain answered, the brain that three hours before had been Pollard. "I am going to find out what that higher form will be. For this will be the last mutation of all. With it, I will reach the end of man's evolutionary path, the last and highest form into which he can develop. You will turn on the rays now. In fifteen minutes, we will know what that last and highest form is to be."

My hand was on the switch, but Dutton had staggered to me, was clutching my arm.

"Don't, Arthur!" he was mumbling thickly. "We've seen enough horrors. Let's not see the last—get out of here. . . ."

"I can't!" I cried. "I want to stop, but I can't now. I want to see the end myself. I've got to see!"

"Turn on the rays," came the brain's thought-order again.

"The end of the road—the last mutation," I panted. "We've got to see—"

I drove the switch home. The rays flashed down again, to hide the great, gray brain in the cube. Dutton's eyes were staring fixedly as he clung helplessly to me.

The minutes passed. Each tick of the watch in my hand was the mighty note of a great tolling bell in my ears. An inability to move seemed to be gripping me. The hand of my watch was approaching the minute for which I waited, yet I could not raise my hand toward the switch.

Then, as the hand reached the appointed minute, I broke from my immobility. In a sheer frenzy of sudden strength, I pulled open the switch, rushed forward with Dutton to the cube's very edge.

The great gray brain that had been inside was gone!

On the cube's floor, instead of it, lay a shapeless mass of clear, jellylike matter. It was almost motionless, save for a slight quivering. My shaking hand went forth to touch it. That was when I screamed—a scream such as all the tortures of hell's cruellest fiends could not have wrung from a human throat.

The mass inside the cube was nothing but protoplasm! This, then, was the end of man's evolution road—the highest form to which time would bring him—the last mutation of all. The path of man's evolution was a circular one, returning to its beginning!

From the Earth's bosom had risen the first crude organisms. Then sea-creature had spawned land-creature, which had created mammal and ape, the parents of man. From man, the road would rise in the future through all the forms we had seen that night. There would be supermen, bodiless heads, pure brains—only to be changed by the last mutation of all into the protoplasm from which it had first sprung. . . .

I do not know exactly what followed. I know that I rushed upon that quivering, quiescent mass, calling Pollard's name madly and shouting things I am glad I cannot remember. I know that Dutton was shouting, too, with insane laughter.

As he struck with lunatic howls and fury about the laboratory, the crash of breaking glass and the hiss of escaping gases was in

my ears. Abruptly from those mingling acids, bright flames were leaping and spreading. Those fires alone, I think, saved my own sanity.

I can remember dragging the insanely laughing Dutton from the room, through the house and into the cool darkness of the night. I remember the chill of dew-wet grass against my hands and face as the flames from Pollard's house soared higher. And I remember that, as I heard Dutton's crazy laughter by that crimson light, I knew he would laugh thus until he died.

* * * * *

SO ends my narrative of the end that came to Pollard and Pollard's house. It is, as I said in the beginning, a narrative that only I can tell now, for Dutton has never spoken a sane word since. In the institution where he now is, they believe his condition was the result of shock from the fire, just as Pollard was believed to have perished in those flames. Until now I have never told the truth of that frightful night.

But I am telling it with the hope that it will in some way lessen the horror it has left with me. For there could be no horror greater than the one we saw in Pollard's house that night. I have brooded upon it. With my mind's eye, I have followed that tremendous cycle of change, that purposeless, eon-long climb of life. Up from simple protoplasm, it went through myriad forms and lives of ceaseless pain and struggle, only to end in simple protoplasm again.

Will that cycle of evolutionary change be repeated over and over again upon this and other world's ceaselessly, purposelessly, until there is no universe on which it can exist? Is this colossal cycle of life's changes as inevitable and necessary as the cosmic cycle? In dark space, the nebulae become myriad suns, the suns become dark stars, which collide with one another and form nebulae again. Is that the universal path of life?

Or is this evolutionary cycle a cycle in appearance only? Is there some change that we cannot understand, above and beyond it?

I do not know which of these possibilities is truth, but I do know that the first one haunts me. It would haunt the world if my story were believed. Perhaps I should be thankful as I write, knowing that I will not be believed. . . .