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the
minister
had
to
wait

by . . . Roger Dee

The Brass said, "Turn it on!" So Doc Maxey could but obey—which created one hell of a big mess.

DOC MAXEY DIDN'T BUILD the Di-tube as a weapon. Furthermore, he swore, he would be damned if he'd stand by and see it turned into one.

Dora and I—Dora is Doc's daughter and I'm Jerry Bivins, his assistant—were helping him with the working model of the Di-tube generator in his Connecticut laboratory when he made that plain to the brass and brains of Allied Military, a delegation headed by two full generals and guarded by a hard-jawed squad of MP's.

But for once the Doc was on the wrong end of a browbeating. The generals knew their ground and they shut the Doc up like a thirty-dollar shoe clerk.

"Since a state of global emergency has been declared," Three-star Corbin said icily, "the military has full authority to commandeer the fruits of any independent research. Eastern and Western forces are at the ultimate in cold-war deadlock, a stalemate which must soon cripple the economy of the world unless it is broken. Your Dimension-tube offers an ideal weapon for ending it."

He was right about the deadlock if not about the Di-tube. Every strategically important center in the Eastern Hemisphere had been impregably roofed since the early 1970's with the transmuscreeen, a

THE MONSTERS HAD NO EYES BUT THEY WERE BEMS FOR A' THAT.

force-shield that inerted atomic warheads to harmless isotopic lead. We Westerners had the same protection, of course, which brought on the stalemate. The catch was that neither side could afford to relax its screens for an instant, and the power required to sustain those giant force-shells was rapidly exhausting the resources of both hemispheres.

Two-star Demarest was more diplomatic than Corbin but twice as pompous.

"As we understand it, Dr. Maxey, this Dimension-tunnel effect of yours will permit us to dispatch robojet warheads through an—ah, a cylindrical rift in the continuum of space to any desired part of the globe. A rift large enough would enable us to reach through the enemy's defense screens, short-cutting normal space in much the same manner as a two-dimensional ant, which was crawling upon a flat sheet of paper—"

"Could reach the opposite side instantaneously by piercing the paper," Doc finished for him, fuzzing out his scrubby beard like a baited goat. "The two of you sound like sub-juvenile idiots, mouthing moronic oversimplifications lifted straight from the Sunday comic-tapes. You disgust me with the human species!"

With that he whipped off his bifocals and stalked out. Ten seconds later he stalked back, prodded by the business end of a neuroblast

rifle in the hands of a cold-eyed MP.

"Refusal to aid your country at such a time," Three-star Corbin pointed out, "is a treasonable action, punishable by indefinite imprisonment."

Two-star Demarest gave him the other barrel. "Stubbornness will gain you nothing, Doctor. Have you considered that our serum-and-psycho corps can easily extract the necessary information from you?"

Hard-headed as he was, the Doc read the handwriting on the wall without even adjusting his bifocals.

"You may change your minds after seeing the Subspace Twisters," he said. "Activate the model, Gerald."

I flipped the switch on the three-foot bakelite cabinet that housed our little Di-tube generator. It sizzled for a moment with a sound like frying bacon and shot out a two-inch beam from the copper helix at the bottom—a beam as clearly outlined as a water pipe but which couldn't really be seen because there was nothing there.

Don't let that throw you. Just take my word for it—it was a two-inch cylinder of nothing at all, a clean-cut shaft of absolute vacancy.

Until you looked into the twin-prism eyepiece we had rigged up, that is. You couldn't sight directly down the tube itself because the generator's energy feedback raised a glowing force-bubble that hung above the cabinet like a basketball-sized neon bulb. That bubble repre-

sented a spherical strain against superspace, so Doc said, in compensation for the forced passage of the Di-tube through the continuum of subspace. A demonstration of the first law of physics, to every action an equal and opposite reaction.

Three-star Corbin looked first, pulling his rank. One glimpse of the Twisters was enough—he jumped a foot and turned the color of a dead flounder.

"In God's name," he choked when he got his breath back, "what are they?"

"We don't know," I told him. "But I'll give you odds that they wouldn't be chummy if they ever got up here."

I knew how he felt. My first sight of the Twisters had given me nightmares for a week. I won't try to describe them because they never looked alike to any two people. Doc said that a description didn't matter because what we thought we saw were only multidimensional cross-sections anyway—but I wouldn't know about that. To me they looked like inside-out octopuses.

"You see?" Doc snapped, bristling his beard triumphantly. "The cross-sections we see of these inhabitants of subspace give no clue whatever as to their true nature. Even you should realise that opening a larger rift into their domain would be an extremely dangerous undertaking."

"Allied Military," said Three-star

Corbin, who had got some of his color back, "is quite capable of dealing with these brutes if necessary. Dr. Maxey, you will proceed with the construction of a full-scale Dimension-tunnel."

The doc made some sulphurous remarks that were lost in his beard.

"I'd rot in prison first," he growled finally, "but for the fact that it would be suicidal to trust such equipment in the hands of morons. A larger generator could extend a Dimension-rift clean to infinity and sooner or later some incompetent fool would swing the beam in operation and slice the universe in half!"

And that was how the brass and brains of Allied Military got their big Di-tube generator built. It took three weeks, with Doc superintending and Dora and me doing the work, to set it up and tune it for the test.

Doc, being a hard loser, made one last-ditch attempt to argue them out of using the Di-tube.

"The mathematical concepts involved in this operation," he told the generals and their white-smocked technical staff, "are obviously beyond the grasp of your stunted intellects. Therefore I shall make shift with your adolescent analogy of the two-dimensional ant, which improbable brute in boring through his sheet of paper would find himself *for the duration of his passage* in a plane totally alien and untranslatable to terms of his own experience.

"Like the ant we are dealing with a wholly new concept—subspace. My calculations show that other dimensions—there is no way of determining how many—lie above and below our own. In short-cutting either adjoining dimension we shall be as utterly out of our accustomed element as the ant in the paper. Moreover the continuum we call subspace is inhabited. Surely even you can see the danger involved?"

He was right, of course, but it didn't buy him anything. Nobody ever convinced a full general with that kind of argument.

"Proceed with the test," ordered Three-star Corbin.

There was nothing else for it. Dora clung to my arm, pressing close enough to make me almost glad of the risk we ran, while Doc obeyed orders.

Doc, muttering minor blasphemies into his beard, punched the button that activated the big generator—and loosed catastrophe, as the telepapers later said, on an unsuspecting world.

The big Di-tube machine didn't sizzle like the model—it roared. The glowing strain-bubble over the generator built up slowly to a humming orange sphere ten feet across. The cylindrical shaft of nothingness that speared out of the under side helix punched a hole like a mine shaft in the laboratory floor, a vertical tunnel of absolute vacancy that twisted the eyes half out of our heads with its brain-wrenching alienness.

The Twisters were out in force, swarming around in the big beam and looking more than ever like inside-out octopuses. They didn't have any eyes, as far as I could see, but I could feel them staring upward, studying us.

"Now will you listen to reason?" Doc demanded, and reached for the switch. "I'm going to turn off the beam, before—"

Catastrophe stopped him.

The big orange strain-bubble over the Di-tube generator exploded like an A-bomb. Concussion rocked the room, shattering windows and piling brasshats and technicians together in aimless heaps. Dora and I landed together in a corner, knocking over the little cabinet that housed our first model Di-tube generator.

The big generator overloaded, pouring out black smoke. Relays slammed like triphammers, shutting off current. The Di-tube shaft in the floor blinked out, taking the Twisters with it.

But another Dimension-tunnel speared downward through the roof, ending at the spot where the exploded strain-bubble had been. *And it wasn't ours.*

It was packed solid with what looked like bedsprings, coiled and conical, eight feet long and blazing with a crackling bluish light that hurt the eyes. They slid down the beam and popped out into the lab with a swift precision that meant they knew exactly what they were doing, to cluster like sizzling blue

glow-worms about the smoking generator.

Half-dazed as I was, the truth hit me with a shock that curled my hair like an Angora rug. Those sputtering fire-worms were not ganging around the dead generator just to get warm.

They were *studying* it.

I got up somehow and headed for the laboratory exit, carrying Dora's limp form in my arms. The military beat me to it. The generals and their staffs were already there, jamming the doorway like a herd of stampeded sheep. I was the last man out, leaving the fire-worms still circling about the smoking generator.

Doc Maxey had stopped on the graveled gyro court halfway between the lab and his house on the hill above but he wasn't waiting for us. He was staring back toward the lab with his scrubby beard fluttering in the night wind and his eyes shining like wet marbles.

I looked back to see smoke pouring out of the laboratory windows. Great sparks of light shot out through it but it wasn't until I understood Doc's yammering that I knew what they were.

"They've left the rift!" he was yelling. "They're free—we've let those monsters loose on the world!"

The fire-worms scattered systematically, taking off in every direction like snaky skyrockets. One minute the air was full of them—the next they were gone.

"This new Di-tube came through

when our strain-bubble burst," I said, looking up at the shaft of vacancy dwindling away into the sky. Dora came out of her faint then but I didn't put her down—I liked holding her too well. "But how, Doc, and from where?"

"From superspace, the plane of existence immediately above ours," Doc said, wringing his hands. "The energy backlash from our generator must have weakened the spatial barrier between dimensions, enabling them to break through at the point of stress."

Even I could understand that. Dora got it too and hid her face against my chest. "We've got to stop them somehow," she said. "Jerry don't just stand here—*do* something!"

At another time it would have been funny—she was asking *me* to stop this catastrophe when the best brains in the Western Hemisphere were legging it up the hill with nothing on their minds but mileage.

"This is no time for jokes," I told her. "Let's get up to the house and call Washington, Doc."

There were two phones in the house but we couldn't get within yelling distance of either of them. Both generals were on the wire, countermanding each other's orders right and left and screaming for the Air Marines. The living-room t-v was blaring full blast at a circle of both Eastern and Western hemispheres and they were hitting us right where we lived.

In the space of a few minutes

those speeding fire-worms had spread over the entire globe. They had penetrated the defense screens of both Eastern and Western hemispheres and they were hitting us right where we lived.

"The invaders do not seem to be conscious of us as entities," the newscaster gabbled. "But they are attracted to concentrations of nuclear materials as flies are drawn to honey and for the same reason. Every atomic pile on Earth has been besieged by these alien monsters, who are draining away our nuclear energy like leeches. At the present rate all smaller piles will soon be inerted and larger ones—wait, a special bulletin. . . ."

"Latest information sheds some light upon the sudden onslaught of the Blazers, as the invaders are being called by a public still largely unaware of its danger. They first appeared some twenty minutes ago during a top-secret military experiment at the Connecticut laboratory of Dr. Marvin Maxey, well-known scientific—"

Somebody shut off the set and we stared at each other in blank silence. Nobody even tried to pass the buck—fixing the blame wasn't important now. All that mattered was that unless the Blazers were stopped immediately our world was finished. Those fission-hungry fiends would strip us to the last erg of our nuclear energy—and to a world geared to atomic power that meant the end.

We had forgotten the coming

war completely. There was no point in worrying now about being blasted out of our beds. In a few days most of us would be starving to death in them.

The brasshats camped on the telephones until daylight before they gave it up. Dora was dishing up scrambled eggs and coffee to Doc and me in the kitchen when Three-star Corbin stumbled in, out on his feet.

"You were right, Dr. Maxey," he groaned. "Using your Dimension-tube as a weapon was a mistake, a cosmic and irremediable error. These invaders are indestructible—the concerted might of Allied Military has failed to repel them. The doom of Earth is sealed."

Doc plucked unhappily at his beard.

"Surely we can retool our industries to electric power in time," he said. But he didn't sound sure. He sounded beaten.

Corbin shook his head grayly. "You don't understand the psychology of panic, Doctor. Law is dependent upon power. When power fails the mob rules. By this time tomorrow government will have begun to break down. Civilization as we know it will disintegrate within a matter of days."

I had known that all along, of course, but all of a sudden the real enormity of what was happening hit me like a boot in the stomach. There sat Doc Maxey, one of the most brilliant physicists in the world—stumped. Beside him

drooped Three-star General Corbin, high commander of Allied Military, and he was as helpless as a corner newsboy. A top-flight crew of research technicians stood around in the living room like so many cigar-store dummies, looking at each other blankly while the world skidded to ruin on a slippery cosmic banana peel.

Dora came over and put an arm across my shoulders. As suddenly as I had got scared I got mad.

It wasn't just the idea of the world going bust that burned me. This was a personal business that threatened Dora and me and our friends and all the millions and millions of people we had never even seen. Here was the lot of us headed A-over-T straight back to the stone ages. A few days more and people we had known and loved would be hunting each other through the streets with clubs, driven to murder and worse because a crew of greedy alien fire-worms had a taste for atomic fission.

It was a hopeless affair and I knew it. But down inside me a nagging little ghost of an idea kept whispering that we must have overlooked *something*, that somewhere there must be a loophole these high-voltage intellects had missed. Sometimes, I told myself, theorists can be as dumb as ordinary people. Sometimes they just can't see the trees for the woods.

"Look," I said. "We're missing a bet somewhere. We built the Di-tube in the beginning to . . ."

Doc gave me a pitying look. "Will you keep your infantile inspirations to yourself, Gerald? I'm trying to think."

I turned to Three-star Corbin, getting eager because the idea had just nudged me again. It wasn't clear yet—but it was there, begging to be recognized like a half-remembered name that trembles on the tip of your tongue.

"Will you listen, General? There's a chance that . . ."

The general gave me a poisonous glare. "Can't you see that I'm planning a course of action? Shut up or I'll have you thrown out!"

I jumped up, knocking over my coffee, and walked out. Dora came outside after me and caught my arm. "Jerry! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going down to the lab," I said. "Maybe I'm nuts but I think we've still got a chance to beat this infernal thing."

The sun came up round and rosy while we walked down to the lab and I felt my scalp prickle when I saw the no-colored shaft of the Blazers' Di-tube rising against it like a black finger of doom.

"There used to be an early mail rocket out of Waterbury at sunrise," Dora said softly, "and a passenger flight just afterward. Remember how we used to complain because they woke us up, Jerry? And now—"

"Now there won't be any more rockets," I said. "There won't be any more movie dates or drive-ins

or corny floor shows, no more football games or Sunday afternoon spins in the country. There won't be any more people after awhile, except a scattering of gee-strung savages running wild in packs and maybe eating each other. Go back and look after Doc, will you? He needs you."

But she wouldn't go.

The original Di-tube model was still in its corner, undamaged. I had done a solid job of wiring and testing that rig and it had stood the blast without even so much as a bent helix.

I checked it over, working fast, and bolted on a power feed rectifier that would adapt it to a mobile a.c. input. The little cabinet was too heavy to lift, so I edged it onto a hand-truck and trundled it out of the lab and across the graveled landing court to the shed where Doc's gyro stood.

Dora helped me hoist it inside and bolt it down. Ten minutes later, when it was all set to go, I tried again to talk her into going back. There wasn't more than a chance in ten thousand that my idea would work and if it did I'd be left stranded in an alien dimension. And besides that . . .

I should have saved my breath. "I don't know what you're planning," Dora said, squeezing into the seat beside me. "But it doesn't matter. I'm going with you, Jerry."

I looked out at the Blazers' Di-tube, standing black against the sunrise, and I didn't argue. Maybe

she was right. Why not go now, together, and get it over with?

"All right," I said, and sent the gyro whirring out of the shed. "Hang on tight, Kid—here goes nothing!"

The MP's poured out of the house just as we took the air. I could see them yelling and waving their neuroblast guns but there was no point in waiting. They wouldn't have listened anyway.

The lab slid under us and we shot straight for the big Di-tube looming up ahead. Breaking into it made me feel the way the Twisters looked—inside out, upside down, impossibly extended and at the same time compressed to microscopic smallness in a vast hueless infinity that lasted for I don't know how long.

It turned out that there really was no such thing as time—or distance either for that matter—between dimensions. The Di-tube itself was a sort of sensory compromise, an illusion created by the mind's effort to visualize a cross-section of a continuum that can't be visualized.

Our transit made me think of the two-dimensional ant. One instant we were over the lab—the next we were out of this world, in superspace.

The Blazers' dimension was worse than the Di-tube.

Looking through the gyro's window made me feel like a schizophrenic drunkard with a set of mirror-image screamies, watching impossibly elastic nightmare

shadows flickering across a crazy-house looking-glass. There was an upside-down horizon that heaved like a bowl of phosphorescent jelly, a scattering of what might have been animated buildings and, close at hand, a great flurry of helical Blazers, circling like mad about something I *did* recognize.

It was a huge orange strain-bubble, a space-warp set up by whatever sort of generator that Blazers had made to pierce our dimension.

There wasn't a chance of making any real sense of what I saw. It would have been easier for a flea on a camel's back to describe what went on in a three-ring circus.

But the strain-bubble was what I had come to see. The rest didn't matter too much.

"Warm up the model," I said. My voice had a thin, windy sound and I couldn't keep it steady. "From the way they're flitting around that bubble they've got troubles of their own—and they're going to have more!"

Dora understood then what I had in mind. "Their generator is weakening the barrier to the dimension above this one!" she said. "Jerry, something is trying to break through, isn't it?"

Our little Di-tube model gave a tentative sizzle, and it sounded pitifully weak. Using it was like tackling a grizzly with a hatpin—but there was no help for that now.

"They aren't zipping around that space-blister for exercise," I said.

"Maybe they don't know exactly what is on the other side, but they're worried."

That was the whole crazy million-to-one chance that had brought me there. It stood to reason that the Blazers' Di-tube generator would create a strain-warp similar to ours in their own dimension. If we could puncture their weak spot as they had punctured ours . . .

The two-inch beam of our little Di-tube shot out, boring wide of the outlandish blob that was the Blazers' generator. I swung it back, correcting my aim, and the heat went on.

The Blazers dropped their work instantly and whirled up toward us. But for once they were slow—our little Di-shaft sliced through and beyond them. And touched the strain-bubble.

There was a searing flash and a soundless jarring concussion, and the thing went up in a blinding shower of orange sparks.

It was over as quickly as that. The Blazers swarming toward us whipped back to man the breach we had made and they had unexpected reinforcements—they must have alerted their party on Earth already because the wavering Di-tube was suddenly crowded with returning fire-worms, zipping back home to superspace.

I swung our gyro toward the fading Di-shaft, gave it full throttle and prayed. Dora was gripping my arm and crying something in my

ear but I didn't understand a word of it.

I looked back once, just before we hit the crumbling column. The shower of sparks had died out, and in its place stood a familiar shaft of vacancy, boring outward into the upside-down sky. Something squeezed through the break while I watched, beating back the Blazers who fought to stop it.

I got only a glimpse but I'll never be the same again.

It was a Twister but it didn't look like the ones we had seen through our Di-tube. What we had seen then were only reversed projections, Doc Maxey said later, transposed cross-sections altered to something we could partially visualize with our limited senses.

But this Twister wasn't transposed and it didn't look like an inside-out octopus. It writhed and swelled and radiated a dark devouring *coldness* that snuffed out Blazers like sparks against an ice cake.

Other Twisters may have followed it—I wouldn't know. We hit the Di-tube then and at the same moment the Blazers' generator blew up with an appalling blast . . .

The next instant we were sailing over a parched and blazing desert, a glaring waste of jagged lava that stretched away on every side through a shimmering haze of heat. Black basalt cliffs jutted up here and there, warped and eroded by scorching winds.

Dora and I looked at each other dumbly.

"We got away," Dora said. "But what sort of dimension is *this*? Where are we, Jerry?"

It was a good question. Judging from the landscape the collapsing Di-tube could have shunted us straight into the ash-bin of hell. There wasn't a twinkle of water anywhere, not a wisp of cloud nor a flutter of bird in the sky. Just a vast wind-swept desolation, parching to a sandy crisp under a flaming sun.

I was fumbling for an answer when Dora caught my arm. "Look, Jerry—there, over the horizon. Isn't that smoke?"

I looked and it was—a thin white streamer of smoke rising across the badlands, wavering at the top like the crooking of an enigmatic finger.

"We may as well investigate," I said, heeling the gyro toward it. "If it means another danger we might as well face it now as later."

But it wasn't another alien menace.

It was a sheep camp at the edge of the lava beds not far from San Rafael, New Mexico. The Mexican herder ran like a jackrabbit when we swooped down, never having seen a gyro before, but at Acomita—over on the Pueblo Indian reservation—we found a government agent who gave us our bearings and brought us up to date.

After what we had been through, it was only a minor shock to learn that it wasn't 1982 any longer. It

was 1985 and the Blazers had been gone for so long that they were practically forgotten. Doc Maxey explained later, when we showed up with a small army of telepaper reporters at his Connecticut home, that our being caught in the collapsing Di-field had somehow distorted the time values involved and had shunted us three years into the future.

We took his word for it.

"The proponents of the circular-universe theory were more right than they knew," Doc said, beaming and wagging his beard. "There would seem to be only three major planes of existence, each existing in a state of reciprocal contiguity to the other two.

"I suspect also that spherical space is actually a unilateral continuum of three layers, restricting lateral transit to one direction in much the same fashion as a rectifying crystal governs the flow of electrons. That would explain why the Twisters could force entrance to the Blazers' dimension, once you destroyed the strain-bubble in su-

perspace, but could not enter our plane from their own subspatial continuum."

"It's all physics to me," I said, holding Dora's hand and feeling almost safe again. "Only one thing worries me—did the Blazers lose the rhubarb we ran out on or will we have them back in our hair again some day?"

Doc gave me a startled squint and fuzzed his beard goatishly. "Get that model generator out of the gyro," he ordered, sounding like his old self. "We'll never know what the situation really is unless we reactivate the Di-tube and—"

"And start that ratrice again?" I yelled. I could see the whole crazy business happening over and over in a sort of vicious cosmic circle, and the thought made my scalp crawl. "Over my dead body you will!"

Dora and I had planned to find a minister next but the big moment had to wait. I had one final adjustment to make on that infernal Di-tube model first.

I made it on the spot—with a large sledgehammer.

Dr. Einstein has received a multitude of well-deserved honors but as far as we know science fiction has yet to do him direct homage. And surely he rates it—for had he not, some sixty years ago, come up with his full-born theory of the fourth dimension (and won worldwide publicity for said dimension) STF would have been deprived of one of its basic staples. Without the fourth (and fifth, sixth, seventh and so on) dimension, authors of speculative fantasy would have been left stumbling amid the distorted metaphysics of their Gothic forerunners—and would thereby have been constantly at war with the clergy. Thanks to Dr. Einstein they can roam the dimensions at will, threatened by no purgatory except that of creative writing itself or of the possibility of a rejection slip.