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**DARING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL**

PRISONER OF TIME..... Polton Cross 10

Marked for death by the race she had created was the girl of eternal youth—the alluring, ephemeral daughter of time, who had lived five hundred years.

OUTSTANDING FANTASY NOVELETTE

THE MISSING DAY..... Henry Hasse 30

Chained by the shackles of infinity stood the city of the living dead—awaiting that one day when its liberator would be born.

DRAMATIC SCIENCE FICTION

SUNKEN UNIVERSE..... Arthur Merlyn 49

It was a bitter fight he waged for his people—the valiant captive of the seasons, who struggled to preserve the sea for a nameless race.

SPACE HITCH-HIKER..... Eando Binder 64

Meet a man who played tag with a meteor—and missed it by ten feet!

ANDRYNE..... Arthur Macom 82

Faint from another world it came—the voice that whispered an irresistible summons to a land that never was!

THE WORLD WITHIN..... Nelson S. Bond 90

Vast worlds had the ruling race conquered, but one frontier resisted their advance—the intricate micro-universe of the human body.

THE LEMMINGS..... Wilfred Owen Morley 102

"Go down to the sea, my people—or ye perish to the last man!"

THE WEAPON..... H. B. Ogden 115

"We have the weapon that will save you, Earthmen, but we dare not defy the law of the universe—'Every civilization must work out its own destiny!'"

DREADNOUGHTS OF DOOM..... Henry Andrew Ackerman 124

Silently the space stowaway awaited his opportunity—a chance to die, that his planet might live forever!

SPECIAL FEATURES

MISSIVES AND MISSILES..... 6

A forum for the readers

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER..... 76

The official voice of science fiction fan clubs

FANTASY REVIEWS..... Donald A. Wollheim 123

COVER BY VIRGIL FINLAY

Illustrating a scene from "The Lemmings" by Wilfred Owen Morley

THE MISSING DAY



A NOVELETTE

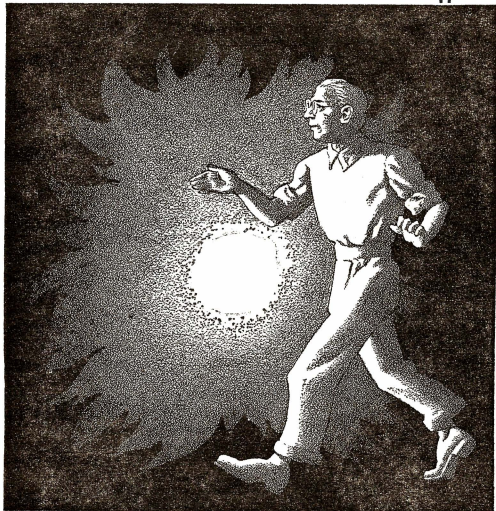
CHAPTER ONE

Symphony of the Immobile

THE world does not know of the missing day. And perhaps that is best, after all, for there would be many uneasy minds, despite the virtual

fact that such a thing will not occur again. Only three persons know—four, if you count Rac. And, but for the fortunate circumstance of Rac's presence, it might have easily been a year, or a hundred years, or all eternity . . . instead of that grotesque day.

Chained by the shackles of the infinite it stood, a city of the living dead . . . until a man from Mars dared pierce the fatal veil that could make an astounding end to the day when the world stood still!



by HENRY HASSE

Rac has returned home now, having become homesick despite his very enjoyable visit. It was inevitable that the good-natured and inquisitive little fellow should become a favorite with Earth's populace.

How very much more would he have

been honored and feted and idolized had they known the fate from which he delivered them!

But behold:

The night of July 31, 1981. Mike Besini, big-shot racketeer and gambler, sat in the private office of his Aero Club, one

hundred stories above New York's streets. Mike was counting some of the night's receipts.

Standing with his back to the door, only casually interested, was Mike's bodyguard. Such things were hardly a necessity any more, but Mike Bessini was romantic. He had read that bodyguards were an institution forty years ago, so he liked to have Joe around. From the casino beyond the private door came faint strains of the latest dance tune.

Presently Mike asked, without looking up, "Full house out there tonight, Joe?"

"Not quite, boss, but it's early yet." Joe glanced at the watch on his wrist. "Only one minute to twelve now."

Joe lit a cigarette, glanced idly around the room.

Suddenly he grew tense, shivered a little. "Say, boss, am I imagining things? It seems to be getting cold in here! That's funny!"

Bessini had thrust the receipts into a drawer and was making notations in his ever-present black book.

"Boss, I've got a funny feeling! There's something—something's wrong tonight."

Joe's tone made Bessini look up, and he too sensed something wrong, something about the night itself. With a bound he was at the open window, looking out at the city below.

A strange peace had come over the city. A stillness that was eerie. Not a sound—nothing.

Nothing, that is, but a thin, transparent blanket of palest yellow that rose up from the world below. Simply a color spreading upward and outward almost with the speed of light. And all was cold, a strange and sudden cold for July 31st.

"Gas! It's a raid!" Mike shouted inanely as he staggered back from the window. "They can't do this; I've been paying off regular! They can't get away with—"

But this was no gas, and those were

Mike Bessini's last words. The rush of atmospheric color had reached the hundredth floor and spread on out toward the blackness of space. In the merest fraction of a second Mike Bessini became as one frozen. He stood poised grotesquely in mid-step, one arm raised in futile gesture. His eyes were open but unseeing; his mouth was open too, the last of his frantic words unspoken.

Joe, halfway across the room, remained a statue of suddenly arrested motion. His look of bewilderment was now frozen permanently on his face. Even the smoke from his cigarette had become a part of the weird effect. It now remained motionless, in beautifully spiralled patterns of blue against the pale atmospheric yellow. . . .

Out in the casino the phenomenon had struck as suddenly. The dance tune had stopped in mid-note. The orchestra leader stood motionless with baton half raised in now nerveless fingers. Out on the floor, in their main number, the internationally famous dance team of Olandra and Leon had been halted in the process of a particularly intricate step. They now remained frozen in the circle of the spotlight, perfection in postural grace.

But none were there who could appreciate this perfect symphony of the immobile. The patrons at the tables were all a part of it. Some had glasses half raised. Others were quietly intent on the dance number. But all occupants of the large room were rigid and unseeing now, all eyes were fixed and unseeing. The white spotlight stabbed eerily through the pale, clear yellow which had invaded the atmosphere so instantaneously.

MOTORS purred softly as the huge passenger liner slipped swiftly through the sky enroute from New York to San Francisco. In the pilot's seat Carl Bowman peered ahead at the tiny cluster of lights that was the

city of Cincinnati. Never, he thought, had he seen so clear and so dark a night. But suddenly the dark sky far off to his left seemed to shiver, to grow pale, to move! Startled, he looked around him. The entire sky behind had become a vast shimmering blanket of palest yellow, seeming to reach from the earth up to the stars. Even as he looked, the color seemed to leap swiftly toward him, swallowing up the sky! Instinctively Bowman reached out to make sure the gravity control was on.

But the swift color from behind reached and swallowed up the air-liner when the pilot's hand was still two inches from the control—and there his hand remained. The purring of motors ceased. The liner stopped in its forward motion as though a huge invisible hand had grasped it from behind. Then it plummeted earthward, carrying fifty-two persons to their death.

Through some mechanic's oversight the gravity control had not been on.

MISS DELLA JONES noticed nothing unusual about the stranger who entered Ye Nifty Tasty Shoppe. He was tall and well dressed and rather good-looking. He ordered coffee, which she served him. He lingered over it, and she wished he would hurry, for it was nearly midnight and she wanted to lock up. He finished finally, came slowly over to the cash register and said calmly, "Don't scream; this is a hold-up."

She looked up into the muzzle of a very large revolver. She felt her legs suddenly become weak, like wet macaroni. Foolishly she opened her mouth to scream, but the scream never issued—for at that moment it was midnight.

The girl's eyes remained wide and frightened; her mouth remained open, and the revolver in the hand of the stranger remained leveled as they faced each other fantastically across the counter, there in

the suddenly motionless silence. . . .

IN THE control room of the spaceship *Terra*, Vee Deering glanced up from the charts she had been studying. She suddenly laughed at what she saw.

"Heavens, Bob, look at Rac now! Did you ever see him more excited? Not even the time when you gave him the flashlight for his very own!"

Rac, the birdlike little Martian, was indeed excited as he stood at the prow of the *Terra* and gaped at the spinning blue globe ahead that was Earth. On his head and breast the soft down fairly glowed with its lichen-green lustre. His flat, stubby bill was pressed against the glass, and his peculiarly apelike face was almost radiant. The cowl-like frill arching over wide, staring eyes gave him a perpetual quizzical expression. It was the rapid ruffling movement of that frill, denoting excitement, that attracted Vee at this moment.

Rac simply could not stand still. He balanced himself on one spindly leg and then the other. He turned to Vee but she pretended she was busy. He toyed a minute with the flashlight, his proudest possession. Finally he extended his stubby wings and half ran, half soared along the forty feet of space in the *Terra*. He went back to his corner and pored over the simple English sentences Bob Stevens had outlined for him. But the transparent prow drew him irresistibly and he was soon back again, staring fascinatedly at the blue globe of Earth.

Rac caught Vee's eye at last, and his own beady black eyes glittered. "Rac—" he began in his excited staccato manner, "Rac arrive soon now?"

Vee sighed. "Not soon, Rac. Earth is still far away. One sleep period yet. One more sleep."

Bob Stevens, his lean face dark from four years of Martian wind and sand, looked up from the transmitter over which

he'd been working incessantly for the past few hours.

Grim lines still showed around his mouth, but he managed a wry smile as he said, "Vee, that must be the hundredth time you've explained space distance to that brat."

"And how many times," Vee stormed, "must I tell you to stop calling him 'that brat'? I simply adore him—and so do you! Besides," she continued, "why shouldn't Rac be impatient? We've told him so much about Earth, and he wants so much to learn more. His inquisitiveness is fairly oozing out of him!"

Bob winced. "It always will!" He was remembering the almost incessant line of eager questions Rac had peppered him with in his limited English. And Rac was learning English fast.

They had found Rac and a few hundred others, the last handful of a dying race, burrowed beneath ruins of an ancient city near the Martian polar cap, almost in semi-barbarism, but with queer memory remnants of a long lost science.

"Yes," Bob said reflectively, "I thought man was an inquisitive cuss—until I met Rac and his friends! Man is merely inquisitive, but the amazing thing about Rac is his remarkable retentive memory. He does not understand—he inquires—and he remembers! In a few years we'll be sending colonies to Mars, and meanwhile Rac is the ideal emissary. He's learning fast and he's insatiable. When he returns he can teach his people. I'll venture to say that some day he'll be king, or whatever they choose to call it, of a new race."

"What! Not Rac, that brat!" Vee rocked with glee. "Do you hear, Rac? Some day you are to be king!"

But Rac, if he heard, did not care. He remained poring over the hand-printed sheets Bob had given him. He read a few of the sentences in his queer staccato voice. But he made occasional trips back

to the prow to stare at the blue globe glowing ever nearer.

FOR hours more Bob worked over the transmitter, but it remained dead. His brow was knit into a puzzled frown.

"Vee, I simply can't make it out! I should be able to contact Earth. We're surely within the zone by now!"

"Maybe. But remember, we've been gone four years! Our return could hardly be suspected. We've probably been given up for dead long ago, just another futile space attempt added to the long list."

A small transparent square on the instrument panel lighted up with a green glow, flickered uncertainly. Bob turned to it feverishly, manipulating the dials.

"This may be it! I think I've gotten through!" The light dimmed; they heard a few ominous clicks—and then a thin voice came through:

"—York! W24X trying to contact the Terra! Answer Terra, if you're on our beam. W24X New York! W24X trying to contact—"

In a fever of excitement Bob switched over.

"Hello, New York! This is the Terra. We've picked up your beam! We're now about ten hours out, and—"

"Rac-c-c? Rac-c—" Upon hearing the strange voice come through, the insatiably curious little Martian was instantly at Bob's elbow, quizzical, aware of something unusual.

"Rac, go away! Can't you see I'm busy?" Bob exclaimed roughly.

But Rac was not to be denied so easily. He wanted to know.

"Vee, try to explain to him!" Bob cried at last in desperation. "I've got to keep on the beam!"

It was difficult, but Vee courageously tried to explain how the voice they heard was transmitted to them from the blue

globe ahead. Rac never more than half understood, but he listened and bobbed his head and was satisfied for the moment.

Bob looked up triumphantly. "So, Vee, our return hasn't been expected? Well, I've just learned that we were first sighted by an amateur astronomer in Australia fourteen hours ago; since then scores of telescopes have been trained on us!"

"Oh, dear," Vee couldn't resist saying, "and I forgot to pull down the shades last night!"

"Sh!" Bob said as the voice of the Earth announcer came through again.

"—and although every effort has been made to keep your coming a secret until you had effected a landing, the news has leaked out that the returning *Terra* has been sighted. It's nearly midnight now but crowds are still converging on the spaceport by road, by plane, and afoot. You are not to be alarmed. All is under control here and your landing shall not be hampered. Remain on the present beam. Field lights shall remain on, all is in readiness. . . ."

Bob, with sudden inspiration, said to Vee, "I think I'll let Rac say a few words when W24X switches over. That should be a surprise to them!"

The over-zealous voice from Earth was still coming. "Speculation here is rife, for yours is the first successful space flight! There have been several other disastrous attempts since you left four years

ago. The Haley rocket, two years ago, is thought to have reached the moon and crashed—"

"Still trying for the moon," Bob breathed. "I warned them it was folly to try for the moon, but they wouldn't believe me!"

"—other attempt, the Spurlin expedition, is believed to have made an erratic—"

Bob tired of the voice. He clicked it off abruptly, and sent his own through. "What about Dr. Broxted? Does he know we're returning? He'll be glad to know the fuel he prepared for us is highly successful!"

The answer came: "Oh, yes; but I'm not sure whether he's received the news yet. However, Broxted isn't experimenting with rocket fuels any longer. Instead, it's rumored that he's—"

It was then that the Earth voice abruptly ceased, without the slightest warning. With a muttered "Damn!" Bob tried to pick it up again. It was to no avail. He glanced quickly at the panel. It still glowed green, unwavering, and that meant he was still on the beam. But—

Suddenly Rac set up a clatter such as they had never heard before. He rushed to Vee and pulled her, crying, "Come! Come quick, see!" The cowl over his eyes was in rapid ruffling movement. Bob, certain that something was wrong, rushed over to see.

Rac was pointing excitedly at the spinning globe of Earth ahead. Even as Bob looked, he knew, and yet did not know, why the announcer's voice had been suddenly cut off.

Over the surface of the globe a strange and swift transformation was taking place. Before their very eyes they saw the bright blue color of Earth change to a pale yellow. They judged it must have started at a point not far from New York City, and it spread out in a perfect, unbroken, rapidly growing circle. They saw it expand over the Atlantic, over Canada, over the Great Lakes and Florida and beyond. It was only a matter of seconds, not minutes, until the usurping color had covered all the hemisphere visible to them; and it was not difficult to suppose that it continued, embracing the entire globe.

Bob and Vee stood there a full minute, watching, dazed and awe-struck. But that was all; nothing else happened. It was now a yellow-tinged Earth that spun out there before them. They looked at each other, not daring to voice the foreboding in both their minds.

Rac was asking questions, but for once his curiosity had to remain unsatisfied.

CHAPTER TWO

City of Silence

A MILE above New York City the *Terra* streaked on stubby wings. Even at that height the magnificent panorama brought a nostalgic longing. There were no aircraft at their level, but far below numerous planes hovered. In spite of the brief glimpse, however, something seemed wrong. Those planes weren't moving. Everything was strangely quiet.

It seemed that their tiny shell was the only moving and only sounding thing in all the world.

They braked gradually, and inside of thirty miles set the *Terra* down in a lonely rural spot. Rac was fairly dancing with glee, but Bob and Vee didn't notice his antics now. They peered curiously out into the yellowness.

"We'd better decide what to do," Bob said practically. "First we'll test that atmosphere. Frankly, I don't trust it any more."

The test proved the air fresh and pure, and Bob was surprised, almost disappointed.

"Had you expected some kind of—gas?" Vee asked.

"Yes, something like that."

"Me too. But now what?"

"Now we get out. This is the end of the line."

It was good to feel the earth under them once more. But they were even further mystified, for there was an uncomfortable chill to the air despite a morning sun that shone wanly now through the yellowness. And this was July!

Grimly silent, they made for one of the arterial highways they could see in the distance. Rac, with his funny skipping pace, stayed very close to them; he wasn't gleeful now; he was so over-awed at this strange new world that for the moment he could not even evince his usual curiosity at anything. Even to Bob and Vee it almost seemed that they had somehow missed Earth and landed on some alien world.

Vee stopped suddenly, holding up a finger.

"What's the matter?" Bob asked.

"Listen!"

Bob listened. "I don't hear a thing."

"That's just the point!" Vee exclaimed.

"It just now struck me why everything's so eerie. It's the silence! No sound of a plane overhead, or a motor car, or a bird singing out here as there should be. Not even any of the tiny little sounds we're so accustomed to hearing almost sub-

consciously. And look at those trees over there, how still! There's not even the slightest breeze. It makes you almost want to whisper! Bob, it's frightening!"

Bob had been pondering, looking about him. Now he repeated her words almost to himself. "Yes, it is frightening. And I'm afraid that—" He did not finish.

"Bob, what is it? If you have any idea what this is all about—"

"No, no, of course I haven't," he answered too hurriedly. "I'm just beginning to form a theory. It may not be right. We'll have to wait and see."

THEY walked half a mile before they came upon the sedan, standing curiously in the exact middle of the highway, headed toward the city. The driver was the only occupant. He sat stiffly erect, staring straight ahead, both hands on the wheel. The motor wasn't running.

"Hey," Bob called as they walked around the side of the car. There was no answer. Bob reached in and shook the fellow, who immediately toppled over sideways on the seat. But his arms remained stiffly erect, parallel, in the position of driving.

Vee gasped and whispered, "Is—is he dead?"

Rac only stared in wide-eyed wonder.

"No, not dead. It seems some sort of cataleptic state—but not exactly that either. It's peculiar! Well, I'll move this fellow to the back seat and we'll ride to town—if this car will still operate."

Bob soon had the motor purring, and they proceeded toward the metropolis. Rac's awe was beginning to fade a little. He was so delighted at this new mode of locomotion that he could not remain still. Soon they came upon another motionless car in the middle of the highway. They stopped to investigate. It had four occupants and all were in the same curious, wide-eyed, immobile state.

As they came closer to the outskirts of the city, this motionless "traffic" became so frequent that Bob had to drive slowly and with considerable caution, threading his way through it. Once he gave an experimental blast of the horn. The sound went shivering away into the vast silence, to die away finally, fainter and fainter. The effect was so mournful he did not try that again! Off to the right they could see a sport-model plane hovering on its gravity control at about a thousand foot level. Soon they began seeing more and more planes, strangely motionless. At one place close to the highway they saw the tangled remains of one.

For some time Vee had been wanting to say something, but hardly daring to speak. "Bob," she said at last, "I'm scared and I don't care who knows it! I'd rather face those dust plains of Mars again than this. There's just something so—"

"I know exactly how you feel," he replied grimly, "and I'm afraid I'm thinking the same thing you are. Are we the only ones to have escaped this?" He shrugged, hoping Vee wouldn't see the hopeless look in his eyes. "But we've got to face the facts, Vee—and prepare for the worst."

Despite all morbid speculation, it was not until they entered the city that the full significance of an appalling situation burst upon them. As they drove through the streets they became ever more cognizant of the abysmal stillness. Their ears hearkened for the accustomed noise, but all seemed one vast void of soundlessness that overwhelmed them in new awe.

Where was the thunder of the city? Where was the sound of traffic, of planes overhead, the cries of the inevitable newsboys, all the usual noon-day noise and bustle of a busy metropolis? At first the streets were almost deserted; but soon they began to see, here and there, the

grotesquely poised figures of belated pedestrians of the night before.

Once Bob stopped the car at a red traffic light that shone like a baleful eye through the ghastly yellow. But after a minute the light did not change, and Bob grinned foolishly as he drove through.

"There, I've just realized a life-long ambition," he said with an attempt at jocularity he did not feel. "I always wanted to drive through one of those red lights without worrying about a cop lurking around."

Ever more frequently now did they find the stark, motionless figures, revealing so graphically the frozen fate of this world. There a man was bowed low, just entering a taxi. There in a doorway a young man was just kissing his girl friend good night; there had never been a longer kiss! The fact that everyone seemed in the very act of making some movement or gesture, but did not, was most unnerving.

There a man was just stepping off the curb directly into the path of a car that was very close to him; the driver was tense, as though he were applying the brakes, and on his face was frozen a look of horror at the impending accident.

This tableau interested Bob exceedingly. "Wait a minute," he said, as he stopped the car. He walked over to the pedestrian and hesitated. Then, as Vee watched in amazement, he carried the man to the middle of the street and left him standing poised in mid-step, but beyond the danger of the approaching car.

"What was that for?" Vee asked.

"Just a hunch," Bob explained a bit foolishly. "But I may have saved that fellow's life."

Nearing Times Square the motionless traffic was so heavy they had difficulty driving through it. "We may as well get out here," Bob said at last. "We don't know where we're going anyway. Still scared?"

"N-no," said Vee, "I think I'm beyond that. I'm just a little awe-struck still. Rac too, judging by his silence. I just know what he's thinking: that this is nothing like the world we described to him!"

IN GRIM retrospection Bob and Vee stared around. How many times had they traversed these streets rife with turmoil! What a contrast now! They walked along slowly, instinctively avoiding contact with the people, trying not to let the gruesomeness of it get on their nerves.

A beggar stood furtively in a doorway, and a lady was in the act of dropping a coin in his outstretched hand. A taxi driver had his head out of his cab window, bawling out a motorist. At the next corner a policeman seemed to be reprimanding a troublesome drunk, who stood there motionless now, leering at him.

"What a paradise for a pick-pocket!" Vee said, staring around.

Rac suddenly broke his long silence to say, "*Terra* returning earthward."

They stopped. "What did you say, Rac?"

"*Terra* returning earthward," Rac repeated.

"What the devil can he mean?" Bob asked, puzzled. "Oh, now I see!"

They were near a newsstand where a boy stood with an open paper thrust out toward the pedestrians. His expression was ludicrous, his mouth open wide in the act of bawling his wares. At any moment they expected the stentorian sound to emerge, but it didn't.

The paper was a "Special Midnight Extra" and the headline read: *Terra Returning Earthward!* Another paper proclaimed: *Terra, Missing Four Years, Sighted!* Rac read all the headlines aloud, laboriously but correctly, very proud of his ability.

Streets around the Times Building

seemed especially crowded, everyone looking up to where the news sign eternally moved. But it was no longer moving nor discernible in the yellowish atmosphere.

"I guess our return was being proclaimed up there," Bob said, "at the very instant this thing—happened."

"Bob," Vee said, suddenly deadly serious, "we've simply got to face this business squarely and—"

"How do you face a nightmare like this at all, much less squarely? Anything in mind?"

"Well, we've got to grasp at straws. I was thinking—maybe there are people somewhere who escaped this—people who were indoors?"

Bob shook his head. "I think not. Else why aren't some of them on the streets now?"

"Maybe afraid if they emerge they—they'll fall victim to this."

"Then why aren't you and I and Rac affected? No, I'm afraid that argument won't hold water, Vee. To get at this systematically, we can only be sure of one thing: the source of this must be local. We can discount that the Earth passed through the tail of a comet or some other gaseous matter, because we had a

grandstand seat in the *Terra* and we know that no such thing occurred. Besides we saw it start at a point right about here, and then quickly spread. That brings us right up against a blank wall. All I can think of is to explore this old planet from stem to stern."

"Bob! Do you suppose they had a war? Things were comparatively peaceful when we left, but a lot can happen in four years."

"Hmm. It's a possibility, at that. If so, all I can say is whoever thought of *this* sure had the ace card up his sleeve!"

"We must explore first, of course," Vee said dully. "There must be somebody . . . Bob, if there isn't, I simply couldn't bear to stay here." She suddenly brightened. "We can always go back to Mars and Rac's people. I was just getting to like it there."

"Liar," Bob replied. "Besides that's just what we can't do. You forget we're low on fuel now, and only Dr. Broxted knew the formula."

"He may have left it around."

"Not Dr. Broxted. Besides, we've been away so long trying for Mars instead of the moon, he probably thought the fuel was a failure."

AS THEY walked along they noticed all the clocks had stopped at midnight; the hands were like single forefingers pointing mutely upward, as if calling the fatal minute to their attention.

"And we were wondering how we were going to escape the welcoming crowds!" Bob said. "I even had Rac rehearsing a little speech of greeting to the people of Earth. Ironic, isn't it?" He stopped suddenly, noticing they were in front of a pretentious cafe. He gazed ever so wistfully in.

"Do you know, Vee, I'd made up my mind that one of the first things I wanted when I got home was a decent meal!"

Vee brightened. "You get the most marvelous ideas! It's what I need to cheer me up."

"Besides," Bob added, "I can think better with a warm meal in me."

Rac stayed close to them as they entered. He still gazed around at this strange world where everything and everyone was so still. But now Rac was pondering. He knew that this motionless silence wasn't the usual "sleep period" on this alien world, such as his two friends had to undergo regularly. No, this wasn't like that, nor was this anything like the world they had described to him in such glowing terms. This was different—and wrong! Rac had observed how perturbed his two friends were. He had a very sincere feeling for them, and appreciation of all the things they had shown and taught him.

From the very depths of his heart he wished he could help them now.

They had started to seat themselves at the nearest table when they both thought of something at the very same moment.

"We'll have to help ourselves; we can't order!"

They both laughed, the first heart-felt laugh since they had landed, and it seemed

to break the tension that gripped them. The scene in the room—patrons at the tables, waiters hovering about, a floor show in progress—now seemed like some bizarre marionette show halted in the middle of an act. They proceeded toward the kitchen, but Vee suddenly stopped. A waiter had just been in the act of emerging from there, bearing a tray of steaming food.

Vee stared and exclaimed, "Bob! This stuff should be cold!"

"What? Of course it should be, by now."

"But it isn't! Look—it's still steaming hot!"

It was true. But before they could marvel long over this miracle, Bob had discovered another. The door behind the waiter, being on swinging hinges, should have swung shut, but it had not! It remained ajar, precisely in keeping with the rest of the motionless phenomena.

And now Rac, who had been wandering around the tables, set up his "Rac-c-c" sound denoting that he too had discovered something of more than passing interest.

Rac was staring, fascinated, at a beautifully spiraled, but very quiescent pattern of blue smoke curled up from a cigarette in the fingers of a gentleman at one of the tables. They watched the still glowing end of that cigarette with a sort of fascinated horror. But it crept no nearer to the fingers that held it! Rac was delighted that he had shown them something of probable importance.

"Do you know," Bob said with a sigh, "this sort of thing would soon drive me batty if it weren't rather funny. But I'm beginning to form a theory which, if true, makes it not so funny any more." He fanned the air violently, and the tobacco smoke drifted and thinned.

"What is your theory?" Vee asked.

"It's—well, just fantastic enough to fit all this," Bob replied enigmatically. "But

I don't want to spill it until I'm sure. Let's have that steak or whatever it is you want."

"It seems price is no object," Vee said, "so the best is none too good." She stared around at the tables. "See that roast duck over there? That for me!" She pointed to a table where a pompous gentleman had been about to begin the appetizing repast.

They soon were demolishing the duck dinner. Rac would touch nothing but three or four kinds of fruit that Vee brought him from the kitchen. The main provender of Rac's people had been a sort of sickly grayish fruit which they prepared in various ways; but evidently Rac thought the Earth fruit much tastier. He viewed the duck, however, rather dubiously. He may have recognized it as a sort of far distant Earthian cousin of his!

THEY were in much better spirits and Rac was almost jubilant as they went out into the streets again to observe a city halted in its stride.

Rac at last felt equal to testing his stubby wings. He would take ten or twelve long-legged running steps, then soar fifty feet into the air. Because of the denser atmosphere this was more height than he had ever been able to attain on Mars. But the stronger gravity would not allow his wings to sustain him for more than a few seconds, and he'd come gliding back down at them.

He would skip along beside them for awhile, quaintly pronouncing words on shop windows, on the theatre billings—proud of his ability, even if he didn't know what half the words meant. Then, suddenly tiring of his oral prowess, Rac would run swiftly ahead and soar upward again.

Once they stopped at a drinking fountain, and after persistent attempts, water gushed forth, to Rac's amazement. It all seemed every wasteful to him, almost sacrilegious. Water was a scarce commodity

in the barren caverns of Mars, something to be hoarded and treasured.

Once, stopping before a little coffee shop, they saw a startling tableau at the counter. A man stood there. In his hand was a gun, pointed straight at the girl behind the counter. The girl's mouth was open, as if she had screamed or was just about to. Vee tried the door and it was unlocked. She entered. She gingerly took the gun from the man's hand, then placed it firmly in the girl's fingers so that it pointed straight at him!

"What was that for?" Bob asked in amazement.

Vee smiled sweetly. "Maybe for the same reason you moved that pedestrian back there. Who knows?"

Bob shook his head sadly. "I'm going to watch the papers for this tomorrow—if there ever is a tomorrow!"

At last they gazed out upon the most breathtaking spectacle they had yet seen, but one that was very appropriate to this new motionless world. As far as the eye could see the ocean lay before them like a huge, flat mirror of greenish glass, unbelievably vast and placid! To the very horizon it stretched in absolute quiescence, not the tiniest ripple disturbing the surface. Words were unnecessary as they stood in awe before this expansive miracle which no person had ever seen before. The very placidity of the vast water seemed to grip them so they hardly dared move.

But not so with Rac. To him that great green expanse was simply another natural part of this alien world. He had taken another of his short soaring flights and was hovering fifty feet above the water. Now he began to glide swiftly down, straight for the smooth green surface. They shouted at him, but it was too late. A yard from the surface he balanced himself on his stubby wings and alighted with a little splash.

Rac sank from sight and came up sput-

tering, a very surprised Martian indeed. With instinctive strokes of his wings he made his way to where Bob, laughing, could help him out. Rac was more frightened than hurt, more astonished than frightened. Never had he dreamed that smooth expanse could be water. It was more water than he had ever dreamed existed! He simply stood there dripping and looked to the horizon, enraptured.

That ocean spelled doom to their waning hope; it was the final proof they needed that the condition encompassed the globe. Now it was nearing dusk, and they began to realize that for the first time in history the metropolis was going to pass a night shrouded in utter darkness.

"Let's return to the *Terra*," Vee said a little anxiously. "I don't think I could stand it here tonight. It's like some city of living dead!"

They found the same car they'd driven into the city and headed back out to the *Terra*. Bob left the car in the middle of the highway again, and carefully placed the driver in the front seat the way he had found him. They were silent, thoughtful, as they walked the rest of the way. Even Rac now was more quiet and a little scared. The moon peered palely through the lucent yellowness of the night like a poor frightened ghost of the moon they had formerly known.

CHAPTER THREE

"Bid Time Return".

"**M**AYBE we'd better try the radio again," Vee said as they entered the spaceship.

"Smart girl. We should have done that long ago."

For several hours they sent out messages, calls of frantic query on all wave lengths. But it was futile. The receptor remained dead. Bob gave up in despair.

"Well," he said at last, "it looks as if

the world is ours—but I don't know what we're going to do with all the people! Talk of your Alexanders and Caesars—those boys were pikers compared to us; our private estate extends for 25,000 miles and meets itself."

He went into the rear compartment of the ship and rolled out their small plane, which they'd used for scouting on Mars. "There's only one more thing to do," he said. "I'm going to play my hunch."

Soon they were flying back over the darkened city, Bob at the controls. He flew high above all traffic levels to avoid collision with numerous planes that still hovered. But all below was a sameness, dark and silent.

"What are you looking for?" Vee called.

Bob shook his head. "I don't know. A light. Anything!"

They found it minutes later. They had criss-crossed the city. Rac's sharp eyes spotted something first, far to the right. He pointed excitedly. Far below them they saw a tiny bright parabola flash across the sky. It was followed by two more. Signal rocket flares! It meant that someone, after all, was down there!

Quickly Bob headed the plane for the spot. He zoomed and raced the motor as a signal, and the tiny flaming arcs continued. They seemed far away, out over Long Island somewhere.

As they came nearer, Bob called, "I know who it is now! Dr. Broxsted! We should have known it!"

Vee nodded. Far below a little square of light loomed against the darkness. A minute later their plane was slanting down toward it. They recognized the huge white house and wide lawn, now ablaze with lights, the only light in all the surrounding darkness. They set the plane down, and a small, tense figure of a man came running toward them.

As they stepped out he stopped abruptly, stared, then rushed forward and grasped their hands. "Bob Stevens! And

Vee! Good heavens, I thought—Where've you been all this time?"

"Merely to Mars, Doctor," Bob replied. "Your fuel was quite a success! But didn't you hear on the radio that we'd been sighted?"

Broxted shook his head. "No—I've been too busy. I did hear your motors tonight, and sent up my signals. But I didn't dream it was you. I haven't been into the city yet. I—I didn't want—"

"I don't blame you," Bob said. "It's not pleasant. But here, let me introduce you to a very good friend of ours." He drew Rac forth into the light. "Doctor Broxted, meet Rac."

But Rac was very silent again, as he always was when things happened too fast for him.

Broxted stared at the birdlike creature in amazement. "Wh-what's that?" he stammered.

"You mean who, Doctor, not what. Rac's a Martian. We've been on Mars nearly four years, and I must admit we expected a better welcome home than this. What's it all about? I can see how Vee and I escaped this thing, being in space, but I don't see how you—"

"I don't myself, Bob. It was only pure luck; I can tell you that. But—do you mean you can't guess what's happened?"

"I can do more than guess. It begins to look as if my theory—"

"Bob Stevens!" Vee exclaimed furiously. "You've been ranting about a theory as if—as if it were exclusive property or something. Well, I've got one of my own and I'll bet it's as good as yours!"

"Okay," Bob grinned. "Spill!"

"All right, smarty, I will." She turned to Broxted. "Doctor, you've been working on that time-experiment thing again. I thought you had given it up."

"That's right, Vee. But I had a new principle this time," Broxted began eagerly, "a different line of—"

"See!" she exclaimed to Bob.

"Yes, Vee, you're positively brilliant."

"Come on, I'll show you." Broxted eagerly led the way to the house. "But I must admit, I seem to have bungled things. Rather badly, I'm afraid."

"That," Bob said, "is only putting it mildly."

Broxted waved a defiant finger. "But my principle was correct, is still correct! Something just happened; I can't quite figure it out yet myself. You shall see for yourselves."

"And your time theory—it's the same as before?"

"Yes, just as I explained to you four years ago. Except for the device itself. Oh yes, I finally built it. I proceeded along entirely unprecedented lines, with a series of rotors of my own design connected in such sequence as to set up a definite stress in the time field."

"Well, isn't there any way you can—undo this terrible thing that you've done?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that," Broxted replied with a strange bitterness, opening the laboratory door. "Here we are."

THEY entered. They stared around. The room seemed extraordinarily bare; at least there was nothing which might even remotely have been a time device.

"But where is it?" Bob exclaimed. "I don't see a thing!"

"Don't you?" Broxted said, and that same strange bitterness was in his voice. "Well, it's right there in front of you."

At these words Bob looked up sharply. A terrible thought had occurred to him. Broxted's brain had become unbalanced by the sudden world calamity.

"I know what you're thinking," Broxted went on, "but I assure you I'm not mad. The time device is right there. Just take a few steps forward, but carefully!"

Bob walked slowly forward, hand outstretched. Then he touched something. It was like nothing he had ever felt before.

It didn't seem to be a substance at all, but a force, smooth, cold, impenetrable—and invisible! He passed his hand along it for a few feet. It seemed curved.

"Roughly it's about eight feet in diameter," Broxted explained. "And just inside that invisible barrier is my time device."

"You mean—you can't get in there?"

"My dear boy, what do you suppose I've been doing here for the past many hours? I assure you most positively that I can't get in there!"

Vee stepped forward and felt along the barrier of force. "What about dynamite?" she said.

Broxted shook his head patiently. "I tried blasting; the explosion is only hurled outward. I've made every test I can think of, including acids. Nothing seems to affect that barrier. It's pure static force. My only solution is to build a duplicate time device, but it'll take months. What I hope to do then—and it's only a forlorn chance—is to use the second time device to go forward in time and release the first one."

"Then you mean to say," Bob exclaimed, "that beyond that barrier—"

"Is the future—yes. My time device reached into the future but, I believe, *only for a fraction of a second!* I'd set my experiment for exactly midnight last night. I stepped into the machine, and precisely on the second of midnight I released the power. There was a lurch, then a vast surge. Fortunately I was hurled backward as the machine slipped under me. I was dazed for several minutes. When I came to, everything was just as you see it now. That time surge had hurtled outward, almost with the speed of light, to envelope the whole world. I discovered that minutes later.

"As for this barrier—well, my only explanation is this: you've heard it said that time is only an infinite numbers of 'nows,' each impinging delicately, intangibly upon the next. This impenetrable

force is the barrier between our 'now' and the next one existing an infinitesimal fraction of a second beyond us! Ironic, isn't it? There sits my time device only a fraction in the future, and we can't reach it!"

Bob was vociferously skeptical. "That," he exclaimed, "sounds screwy! Time is only an abstract conception, not something that—well, that can be tampered with!"

"You're right on one point at least," Broxted agreed bitterly. "It's certainly not to be tampered with. I've learned that now, maybe too late. But look at it this way: we've been accustomed to regard time as we would some perpetual motion machine; it goes on forever. But throw a wrench into the perpetual motion machine and what happens? It instantly stops. Well, in effect that's what I've done with my time device; I've instantly and completely jammed the time-flow between the infinitesimal 'nows.' How else can you account for that motionless world out there? It's motionless because it's timeless."

Vee spoke up eagerly, "Oh, I understand that! I read somewhere that time is what keeps everything from happening at once."

"Vee, don't try to be funny!" Bob exclaimed.

"That's not so facetious as it sounds," Broxted said. "Nothing can happen without time to happen in. And you, Bob, are wrong when you say time is only an abstract conception. My time theory is only a matter of logic, and I'll give you a lucid example. Suppose a book lies on a table. The book has length, breadth, and depth. Would you say, with those dimensions, the book exists?"

"Yes," Bob said positively.

Broxted turned to Vee, smiling in his best class-room manner. "And you, Vee? Would you say it exists?"

"Well, I'll say no, but I think there's some catch in it."

"No catch, merely logic. No, the book would not exist. To exist any object must have not only length, breadth and depth—but also time in which to exist!"

"Then why are we existing," Bob persisted, "if time has stopped?"

"Time is still here," Broxted explained patiently, "it's merely static. Suppose I reach out and move that book to the other end of the table. I could not have moved, nor could I have caused the book to move, save through a certain section—a few seconds—of the fourth dimension, time. Or, very simply defined, time is merely the duration of movement. So now that my machine has jammed the time-flux, nothing can move except by some outside impetus."

"How right you are," Bob said bitterly. "Everything out there's motionless, from cigarette smoke to the ocean itself!"

"But what about decay, and disease?" Vee said practically. "Do you suppose that'll come, if things are—are left this way?"

"I doubt if there's any danger of that," Broxted replied. "But you're right; something must be done—and the only way is to reach my time device and release it."

"And you say it'll take months to make another one!"

Vee exclaimed suddenly, "Bob! Where did Rac go?" She was looking anxiously around the laboratory, but Rac was nowhere to be seen. "He was here.

He was standing right here by me just a minute ago! Rac, where are you?" she called.

And then, although they couldn't see him, they heard Rac's voice.

"Here I am," his voice said from somewhere very near. Then Rac suddenly appeared, out of the thin air, and walked over to Vee!

BROXTED stood quite tense for a moment, staring. Then he yelled, "He came out of there!" He rushed over to Rac and exclaimed, "How did you do it? How did you get in there? Tell me!"

Rac cinged against Vee.

"Wait a minute," Bob said, "you're scaring him!"

"But he got in there—through the barrier!" Broxted was very excited. "Ask him how he did it. Tell him to do it again!"

"Now, Rac," Bob said to the little Martian, "this is very important. Tell us how you got in there. Or better still, just show us. This will be a big help to us, Rac. You understand that? Just do again what you did a few minutes ago."

Rac bobbed his head, quickly comprehending. "Like this," he said. He turned, walked toward that invisible barrier—and disappeared!

"But why?" exclaimed Broxted, puzzled. "Why can he do it and not us?"

"Rac," Bob called, "can you see us?"

"Yes," the little Martian replied, puzzled. "I can see you."

"Is there a machine in there?"

"Yes, all shiny."

"Don't touch it!" Broxted called quickly. "Come on out, Rac."

Rac emerged, pleased at the excitement he had caused. But he couldn't understand it! All this talk about barriers. All he had done was walk straight to the shiny glass machine he saw standing in the centre of the room.

"I simply can't understand it," Broxted was muttering. "Why, why—"

"Why?" Bob answered. "Because Rac's a very remarkable person, that's why, and he'd do anything for us!" He was pleased at this unexpected prowess of Rac's. But to himself he muttered, "No, damned if I know how he did it!"

"Then—if he can get through there like that, he might release my time device and bring it back!" Broxted pondered a moment, then added hopelessly, "No, it's no use. Too complicated a task."

"Doctor," Bob said, "we'll excuse your saying that this time, because you don't know Rac very well. But let me tell you, nothing's too complicated for Rac. You just draw a diagram showing him what to do."

"I can do better than that. I have a tiny model I made before the real one. But you don't understand. Even if I could get in there myself, I'm not sure I could bring it back. It's more than just pulling a lever or pressing a button. There will have to be certain calculations, adjustments."

"You just bring out your model and show Rac what to do."

Then Bob turned to the little Martian and said, very seriously, "Rac, all the other things you've learned weren't very important. What you must learn now is more important than all of them put together—but I know you can do it. In your hands lies the salvation of our entire

world, the world we told you about. You understand? You must listen very carefully to what Doctor Broxted tells you."

Rac understood. He bobbed his head solemnly. Using the tiny model, Broxted explained the complicated details no less than a dozen times, slowly, step by step. Rac merely watched, listened, sometimes nodded or asked a terse question. To him it was all very fascinating.

Then Rac showed them that he'd absorbed it all. He went through the whole process by himself, flawlessly. Broxted was amazed, for it had included a rather complicated formula. He looked upon Rac with a new but bewildered respect.

Bob said proudly, "See?"

THEY were moving over to the time barrier with Rac. Vee suddenly called, "Wait a minute! If this works, if Rac releases the machine, what will happen? Will everything go on just as before, from where time stopped?"

"Yes," replied Broxted, "I'm sure of it."

"And all the people out there, everywhere in the world—for them apparently no time will have passed?"

"Come to think of it, no."

"Then we've got to wait!" Vee exclaimed. "Don't you see? Time stopped precisely at midnight and it must resume exactly at that time, even if it is a day late!"

"Good Lord, that's right," Broxted said, looking at his watch. "Otherwise, according to all clocks out there, the sun would rise two hours late in the morning! It's barely ten P. M. now."

"And what about Bob and me?" Vee went on. "Crowds were waiting for us at the spaceport—including reporters and photographers, no doubt. It'll still be midnight of July 31st for them, and they'll still be waiting there. But no *Terra* in sight!"

Bob groaned. "I wish you'd quit think-

ing of these things! Well, tomorrow we'll simply have to give ourselves up to the reporters; we'll tell them we strayed off the radio beam, made a blind landing, and came on here to the doctor's house."

For the ensuing two hours Rac practiced his movements with the miniature controls, until they were sure there would be no-slip-up. At last it was midnight and all was ready for the real test. Rac walked through the time barrier with ease, and disappeared. Breathlessly they waited. Nothing happened.

Rac appeared again, puzzled. One of the controls, he told Broxsted, was different than the one on the model. He showed him, and Broxsted remembered that he'd made a slight change. He explained the difference to Rac, who nodded and entered the time zone again. It was then two minutes past midnight.

Broxsted hovered around the time barrier, nervously tugging at his thinning hair. Vee and Bob went out onto the lawn. Almost fearfully they waited for the change to come, not knowing quite what to expect. But all remained the same; the city was dark and still and motionless. What had gone wrong? Had Rac failed after all? Had he forgotten the instructions? Had all the calculations been of no avail?

And then it came, with a stunning, frightening suddenness. For many hours they had encountered an utterly silent world, and now, in the merest split-second, the city was as it had been before. A vast blanket of light leaped up and they heard a whole city roar back to life . . .

BUT to the millions there had been no silence; there had been no cessation; nothing had been wrong. To all but three persons and a little Martian, it was still midnight of July 31st . . .

On the one hundredth floor of the Aero Club Mike Bessini staggered back from the window with a curious presentiment

of disaster, words tumbling from his lips; then everything was normal, and Mike passed a hand across his bewildered brow.

"Funny!" he muttered, "I could have sworn— Say, I guess I'd better see the doc first thing in the morning; maybe I've been working too hard."

In the casino beyond his private door the music and the dance number continued, no one aware that anything had been amiss.

In the vicinity of Cincinnati the wreckage of the huge passenger liner was found; but it was considered strange that no one had seen or heard the fatal plunge.

The man whom Bob had moved beyond the danger of the approaching car, now looked back, terrified at the sudden screaming of the brakes, amazed at the alacrity with which he'd moved from the curb!

The roar of traffic and planes resumed; the stentorian newsboys shouted the headlines; the sign around the Times Building continued to spell out the news of the *Terra's* return. In a certain restaurant a pompous gentleman who had been about to attack the duck dinner on the table before him was amazed to see it vanish, seemingly under his very eyes! It was simply no longer there! After being revived he demanded to know what legerdemain was going on here. He stalked out furiously, refusing to pay his check and vowing that they'd no longer get his patronage.

And all Miss Della Jones did was make the front page with a heroic story and a three-column cut of her demonstrating just how she had held the revolver. The words over her picture read: *Daring Girl Foils Bandit*.

She told reporters, "I simply don't know how it happened. When he pointed that gun at me I was so scared my knees were shaking. But I was awfully excited too, and I guess I just grabbed the gun without thinking—because suddenly there

it was in my hand. I know I wouldn't do it again!"

There was a sensation when it was discovered that no less than forty-nine planes had crashed throughout the country that night. That many usually didn't crash in a month's time. Furthermore, it was discovered that all these planes had failed to have their gravity-control on. There were suspicions of sabotage; there were rumors of secret weapons in the hands of foreign powers; there were investigations galore, but they resulted in nothing . . .

IN BROXTED'S laboratory Bob and Vee saw the time device for the first time. It stood there in the middle of the room, very visible now.

"You're about to witness the end of the first time machine," Broxted said bitterly as he began dismantling it. "And it'll be the last one if I can help it. For three years I worked on this, and for what? So I could send it a fraction of a second into the future. But after all, it's for the best. I've proven that time travel is impossible; it must never be attempted again. I shall destroy my notes. And I could even rest contented if it weren't for one thing! I'll never be satisfied until I know why Rac could walk through that time barrier and we couldn't!"

Instinctively three pairs of eyes turned to the little Martian. At this, Rac fidgeted uncomfortably. They weren't really expecting him to speak, but Rac thought they were.

Rac touched the shiny machine again, lovingly, and said in a hesitant voice, "Maybe it would work on my world. Here your time does not affect me, so maybe our time would not—" Rac stopped, abashed, as though afraid they might laugh at his idea.

But they did not laugh. Broxted stared at him a moment, then sank down into a chair. "Of course, Rac, you're right. It's as simple as that. Why didn't I think of

it before? It's a new time theory! There's no time in empty space, of course, except when there's something out there for which it can exist, such as your *Terra*. And so it must be with worlds, a different time field affecting each world and the people of that world. If our time has no barrier for Rac, the Mars time should have no barrier for us!" Broxted was on his feet again, pondering this new idea.

Vee said, "Well, Doctor, we saw some gorgeous ruins of ancient cities up near the Martian polar cap. If your time experiment works there, you could go back and see what the race was like that Rac's descended from!" The idea seemed to intrigue her.

"That's all very well," Bob said, "but tomorrow we introduce Rac to the world—the world we promised him—and something tells me that's going to be a job! So what about getting some sleep?"

"I cannot sleep tonight!" Broxted said. He was dismantling his time device, carefully packing the parts away until the day he could continue the experiment on Mars. Rac stood beside him, watching each of those mysterious parts as it came out. The cowl-like frill over his eyes was beginning to ruffle again, denoting his growing excitement. Bob and Vee looked at each other and laughed.

"What's the matter?" Broxted asked, looking up.

"You'll find out! Good night, Doctor."

So Broxted, in blithe innocence, continued to dismantle his machine. And Rac, who had already fallen in love with it, gazed at the shining intricacies with his perpetual wide-eyed wonder. And Rac, being Rac, could not remain silent long.

For an hour, valiantly, Broxted answered Rac's incessant queries. Suddenly he realized this had every indication of going on forever! He looked at Rac half in respect, half in a sort of horror. He decided, with a sigh, that he'd better get some sleep after all.