

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME IX

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.  
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# THE RULER OF DESTINY

By CHARLES HILAN CRAIG

**W**ITH an ironic smile upon his face the Ruler of Destiny rode through the streets of the Greatest City. There was in that smile of irony something of disdain, a little of pride, a great deal of triumph—but never a vestige of pity. As the great limousine rolled along the densely crowded street he watched the hurrying crowd—hurrying the Lord alone knew whither. And as he sucked the smoke from an expensive cigar deep within his lungs he watched that crowd with the conscious, positive knowledge that he was their master.

The Master of Destiny, he called himself, and as yet he alone of all the world knew why. The others who had known were dead. He was alone in his secret. It might prove a hindrance if others knew, so he had seen to it that none other did know. The chemists, for instance—the three of them who worked in the Master's laboratory—they had known. And now they were dead: but more of that later. And there was his chief assistant who had died the night after their final discussion of the great thing which had come to pass. "Wood alcohol" had been the doctor's cryptic verdict. But the Master knew better. There is a more subtle poison than wood alcohol; it works more quickly and with no chance of failure. Investigation? No, far from it; for who would think of investigating such a man as the Master—a man

whose beck and call were commands to the politicians?

And so this day he rode among them, smiling sardonically, rode to the War Office where the politicians were awaiting him, ready (he thought) to kowtow before him for what he was—their master. For the war must be won at any cost, and was he not the man of the hour, the Master of Destiny, the Ruler of Fate, the man who could by a wave of the hand wreck the opposing armies?

He was not just fat in the usual sense of the term. His corpulence was of the type which one associates with swine. His cheeks bulged; his eyes were tiny orbs of blue steel set in soggy pockets of baggy flesh; his chins bounced up and down with every movement he made. And his body—ponderous, sweaty, powerful—reminded one of nothing in the world so much as a husky hippo.

Instinctive dislike? Yes! But one's feeling toward the man did not stop there; nor did it, after all, begin there. For to the ordinary person there seemed to be about the personality of Travis Bannister a sinister quality which imparted a touch of that sort of discomfort which writers usually associate with a haunted graveyard at the midnight hour. For some men, to look into the blue eyes in the bulging face brought a sensation of terror; for the braver-hearted, a feeling of icy cold.

He was a scientist. And that he was a remarkable scientist there is no doubt. Not that he was a delver of the usual type. Far from it. Not in fifteen years perhaps had he handled the actual apparatus of his craft. But his ponderous brain worked out marvelous theories which his assistants put into execution.

It was his wont to sit in a huge armchair under an electric fan and sip his liquor while in his soft, womanlike voice he gave directions to his employees. Mix A with B and one has a certain combination. Mix AB with C and the mixer might in all probability be blown to damnation.

But Travis Bannister was never injured by his experiments, for when the result of his chemical combinations was at all uncertain his instructions were given over the telephone. And tragedy stalked after these telephoned instructions to his aids many times. There was, for example, the young college graduate who was ordered over the wire to perform a certain experiment and within five seconds thereafter where the house in which he had been working stood there was nothing but debris. A terrible hole in the earth bore mute witness to the catastrophe. Again there was the time when three assistants were killed by a new kind of poison-gas which ate through their masks and suffocated them.

Travis Bannister was sorry that these things happened, very sorry; but don't mistake me—it was not because of any sympathy for the victims, but rather because costly and rare apparatus was lost in each case.

**I**T HAD been during the World War that Travis Bannister had turned his attention to the making of poisonous gas. He took an intense interest in it—as he always became interested in that which would cause suffering and death. But it was not until after the armistice that he turned his undi-

vided attention to the perfection of a thing so diabolical in its very immensity as to bring a shudder of horror to the war lords who were used to diabolical contrivances of all kinds.

For Travis Bannister had, several years after the end of the war, invented a type of gas which would wipe out of existence the entire human race. And so when in the year 1933 the nations of the world had locked in mortal combat and his own nation was getting decidedly the worst of the fray because of an inadequate air force, Travis Bannister mailed a letter to the War Department.

The Committee of Nine sat about the long table in the War Office discussing the latest phase of the struggle when an orderly entered, handing to the chairman a sealed letter.

Slowly the chairman, as though he realized its importance, opened the letter and with grave face read. There was some potent thing in the very atmosphere which came to head on delivery of the letter—what it was one could not guess. The chairman read, and as he came to the end he smiled; but there was in that smile no hint of mirth.

He read the letter aloud:

The War Department:

Sirs:

Realizing that our forces are hard pressed I hereby volunteer to win the war for our country. In so doing I shall introduce a poisonous gas which will, under proper direction, exterminate every living plant and animal in the enemy's country. I am, sirs,

THE MASTER OF DESTINY.

Silently the letter was passed about the table. An intangible something emanated from it, bringing to the members of the committee a sensation of impalpable gloom.

They called the telephone number given and asked the Master to come before them. And presently he was announced by an orderly who said:

"Sirs, a gentleman who says he has an appointment. He calls himself the Master of Destiny, sir."

"Show him in," returned the chairman.

And so Travis Bannister came into the presence of the Committee of Nine, assembled in the War Office to discuss the question of avoiding inevitable defeat. He came in fat and bland and suave, and smiling that cold, ironic, chilling smile.

"Bannister!" exclaimed the chairman. "So it's you!"

"Yes," replied the huge man in that soft, even voice which made one involuntarily hate him. "I, sir, am the Master of Destiny."

"Just what do you mean by that, Bannister?"

Bannister smiled, icily.

"What do you suppose I mean, dear sir? But I shall explain. I mean that I am your master, that —"

"Are you mad?"

"—that I am the world's master."

The members of the committee were nonplussed. Never before had a man come before them save in humble mien. And now there was stealing through the blood of each man there that terror which the sight of the gargoyle invariably brought.

And then he was explaining in that voice of horror which made men grit their teeth to keep from screaming: "I have invented a poisonous gas, sirs, which will at my dictate annihilate the entire world."

"But how——" began the chairman.

Bannister waved a pudgy hand, deprecatingly.

"I shall explain and then you can tell me what you will do. I have in my laboratory two tremendous machines, lately perfected. One of them generates a gas so terrible that it brings instant death to any form of

life—plant or animal. The other machine is a counter-agent.

"Let me tell you my plan. The gas machine can be assembled anywhere and set going, and the gas will follow the wind. At the same time the counteracting machine can be set going. The poison gas will travel about the entire world killing as it goes. It is too heavy to rise high in the atmosphere and it will not evaporate or disintegrate. To the best of my knowledge it will, without the counter agency, exist several years.

"Now on the other hand the counteracting gas will be generated here and will form a transparent wall which will keep out the poison. The poison depends on the wind, but the protecting gas can be guided by radio activity. The other nations of the earth shall be destroyed and we shall prosper. Presently the counter-agent, turned on full force, will destroy the gas and then we can stretch our empire over the entire world."

The immensity of the suggestion stunned the committee.

"But if this is as you say, what will happen to our allies?" asked the chairman. "It will take a long time to form a protection for them—and the enemy is coming."

The tiny blue eyes of Travis Bannister lit up with a demoniac light.

"Who said anything about our allies?" he said, coldly. "They can die also."

"Do you mean, sir," asked the chairman, "that we shall destroy the population of the world at one stroke with your machine?"

"Oh, it will take time."

"But ultimately the whole world will die, save us?"

"Yes."

"But think of the non-combatants!"

"They do not interest me."

"But the women and little children?"

"They'll die sometime," came the cool reply.

"Good God, man, are you a monster?"

The cold smile disappeared from the face of the fat man. A diabolic expression so malevolent in its distortion came over his face that the committee trembled.

"You shall vote," he said harshly. "You shall vote now whether to die at the hands of the enemy—or be saved. I have a personal interest. I am the richest man in the nation. I want my property protected. Vote!"

"We shall vote," said the chairman, trembling.

"Sir," said the admiral of the fleet, "I have never believed that our country could lose, but rather than destroy the whole world I shall surrender!"

There was a ripple of acclaim about the table. The chairman was himself again.

"We thank you, Mr. Bannister," he said. "But we feel that we would be slapping the face of God to commit such a crime as you suggest."

The jowls of Travis Bannister were blue with anger.

"Remember, sirs," he said, "you have refused the Master of Destiny." He glared upon them for a moment and passed from the room.

**I**T WAS the next day that the last air-defense line broke and the enemy was ready for his last thrust upon the Greatest City and the country behind. Every available airship was hurled into service ready to turn the invasion, but as the war committee sat in their office they realized that they represented a beaten nation. The radio had announced the enemy fleet on the way at tremendous speed. Terror-stricken people were milling in the streets before the War Office—some praying, some shrieking blasphemy, some fighting.

The jangle of the telephone.

A voice soft and cold over the wire said: "The enemy is on his way."

"He is!" snapped the chairman.

"There is yet a chance. Say the word and I shall start the machines." "Never!"

"Do you want to die?"

"Not with that crime on my hands."

"Fools, I am the Master of Destiny! You and your people shall die with the enemy, but I shall live and protect my own. A last chance. Do you want to live?"

"Never under your administration."

"Then die," came the cold voice of fury. "Sir, you are talking to the last man who will live upon this world. You can see the roof of my building from your windows. *Watch!*"

"I shall watch."

"Look to the east, fool, look to the —,"

The chairman rushed to the window. There on the horizon was a growing cloud, now the size of a man's hand—but it grew larger.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman in his cool, precise voice, "the enemy is upon us. Shall we prepare to die?"

"Watch!" had been the Master's command, and the committee watched. "I shall save my own," had said the Master. They watched the laboratory roof in the distance. They saw running figures. They saw a thing which looked like a gigantic cannon raise its ugly mouth to the heavens. Another cannon. "Watch!"

A deep reverberating boom sounded across the city. Purple fire burst from the mouth of the cannon, rolled out with the wind toward the oncoming horde of airplanes. A hissing mass of purple fire, gloriously tinted at the edges, iridescent, but hideous as death. With the wind rolled the fire, billowing, changing color.

The airplanes were close now, too close. In a gigantic triangle they

moved. First the scouts, then the fighting helicopters, then the giant bombers. Behind all came the dirigibles. The pop-pop of the protecting anti-aircraft guns. The rattle of machine-guns, and then—

The mass of purple smoke and fire met the coming horde. A vast chaos; the wind blew on. The smoke issued no longer from the laboratory—a stream of purple fire. The fire and smoke dissolved, but the oncoming air fleet was no more, though here and there a plane rolled drunkenly in mid-air without a guiding hand. The gas of the Master of Destiny had wrecked the greatest air navy in the world.

“Saved,” breathed the chairman. Then he gasped in utter horror: pointed toward *them* was the great gas gun; it belched flame and smoke—death. The committee did not try to run. They were ready for the end. They saw the gas leap toward them on wings of vengeance—the gas of the Master. A faint breath of it in their nostrils. They saw people a quarter-mile away falling; saw trees shrivel. A faint odor; then they died.

**T**HE blighting breath of the greatest war mankind ever had known had left its terrible mark on every nation in the world. Millions of men, countless millions of dollars worth of property, had been wiped out by the contrivances devised by men to destroy other men. The bravest and best of every nation participating in the Gargantuan struggle had been destroyed. The flower of the world's best manhood was no more. And those who were left in the armies of the world were plunging into the same chaos. Behind, the women took up the men's work. The remaining men—the misfits and failures of life—were hurled into the breach in a vain attempt to stave off disaster.

And then through the radio came a sinister tale of wo that brought fear

to the rest of the world. First a wild rumor, then verification. Terror!

From the top of a great laboratory (went the tale) a huge cannon was sending gust after gust of poisonous gas into the air, which burned with a purple fire, which seared like a white-hot brand through any gas mask ever devised. A gas that would not disintegrate, a gas against which there was no protection. Already in the Greatest City where the machine was located, every man, woman and child was dead, every plant and animal was no more—with one exception. Travis Bannister still lived in the laboratory, about which a pink nebula had formed a protecting wall.

Terror and chaos ruled the world. The radio spoke wild and improbable tales. Nations of people were dying, dead. And then through the air waves there came a message—an ultimatum:

To the Remaining People of the World:  
Cease fighting and bow to my will and I will yet save the world from destruction. But only on this condition—that I am to be named the sole ruler of the entire world. Submit—or die!

THE MASTER OF DESTINY.

“Never,” said the ruler of a great country. “We will fight to the end,” said another. But rumor on rumor came over the air. Death ran rampant through the earth. And at last the countries of the world yet in existence agreed to submit. Over the air went the token of surrender.

**I**N A little room of a great laboratory building the Master of Destiny received the reports from the nations. Surrender, unconditional surrender! And as the last report came in he walked ponderously to the roof and threw on to the full the power of the counter-machine which had heretofore been throwing off gas sufficient only to maintain the protecting wall about his buildings. A gigantic spurt of pink flame soared into the air with a hissing grandeur. A crash of

sparks, the breaking of steel. The pink fire died. The counter-machine was dead.

Then for the first time in all his life the face of Travis Bannister wore an expression of fear. The fat lips parted in horror, the tiny eyes widened as realization came over him.

Too soon had he put the machines into operation. The one was perfected, but the other was inadequate. Realization! Through the world, blown hither and yon by the winds of destiny, the poison gas seared a path more arid than the desert's trails. No longer was there a counter-agent. It would now be only a matter of time till that devastating flame had destroyed the life of the entire world. Then he would be left alone—the only living thing in a dead world.

Feverishly he hurried toward the lethal machine to turn off the power, but out from the machine came terrific waves of heat that beat him back, and he knew then that the gas would continue to come till the engine of death had melted away. And then when he had decided there was nothing left for him to do he betook himself to the radio room, there to await the last reports from a dying world.

Out of Africa came the news of the strange gas that was strangling the people. Out of South America came word of the people dying by tens of thousands. And even as one radio speaker gave the word, a death rattle came into his throat; and Travis Bannister, listening, knew that the gas had reached him.

Day after day, day after day the winds blew the poison about the world. There came an hour when only one radio operator in all the world remained. He was situated in Australia, and it was with mockery that he spoke to the Master of Destiny, with the bravado of a doomed man:

"Are you listening, Master of Destiny? Are you listening? You should be satisfied now, for all the

world is dead save you and me. All the world is dying save you, for even now the gas is slipping in through my supposedly gas-proof room, sweeping in like a dread blight. All—are—dying. Ah, the hands—of doom—are on—my throat. I—am dying. Master of Destiny—may God—have mercy—on—your soul!"

Might God have mercy on his soul! It had been a long time since Travis Bannister thought of God.

It had come. Everything was dead, save only him. Dead! One remaining life in all the world. The days passed and he watched that pink aura about his laboratory, and through it he could see the purple tentacles of disaster pushing, pushing, pushing. The counter-machine was dead. The gas cannon still was hurling its horrible product into the dying atmosphere. He knew not how to stop it.

And now the purple was beating back the pink, closing in upon even the Master of Destiny. Was it possible that he, too, must die? Die by his own diabolic invention?

He visioned the approaching end and he knew beyond a doubt that it would be an end of horror. For relentlessly, a little at a time but inevitably as the sun, the purple would press in the pink till it suffocated him, crushed him down slowly; vastly more slowly would he die than those victims of his had died. And so the last man upon the earth became afraid of the justice of fate.

Even the air was dead now, for there were no plants left to return oxygen. Long since he had started his oxygen machines going. Utter silence reigned. His footsteps when he walked were ponderous and the sounds reverberated in his tortured ears as the cannonade of war never did. Hour after hour of stark silence—the silence of the grave.

Purple streamers were slipping in  
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# The Ruler of Destiny

(Continued from page 480)

toward him from the pink wall. Tentacles of death reached out toward him. He knew full well now what his end must be. One moment he looked out from the top of his laboratory upon the ruin he had wrought, saw that his world had come to chaos, and all the unutterable terror of a world ages old rose up within his soul, beating upon his reason like a blight of infinity. Ponderously he rushed down the stairs, out the door and into the desolate street before his workhouse. The stench of the dead was in his nostrils. Purple fingers of horror reached out toward him; purple that changed to black. The wrath of God was descending upon him in that black cloud hovering above, inky, ever increasing in magnitude, crushing down upon his tortured soul, surrounding him in impalpable gloom like a cloak of blackness.

A tongue of purple licked through the air, hovered above him. His huge face was gray with terror, his eyes filled with panic. He tried to run; fell; rose to his feet; staggered toward the pink veil which held out the purple, trying to hold it back. Breath coming in hoarse sobs, eyes aflame, then blinded with tears, cheeks jouncing, he tore at the pink as though it were a tangible thing—*passed through!*

The fingers of the purple night swept in upon him, gladly, one might think (though there was none left to see); tentacles of purple swathed him, clasped him, crushed him.

A moment of unutterable terror, an instant of fiery pain, a burst of vivid memory as the gates to hell yawned. Then the Master of Destiny was no more.