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# STARTLING STORIES

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## A Complete Novel



### Against the Fall of Night

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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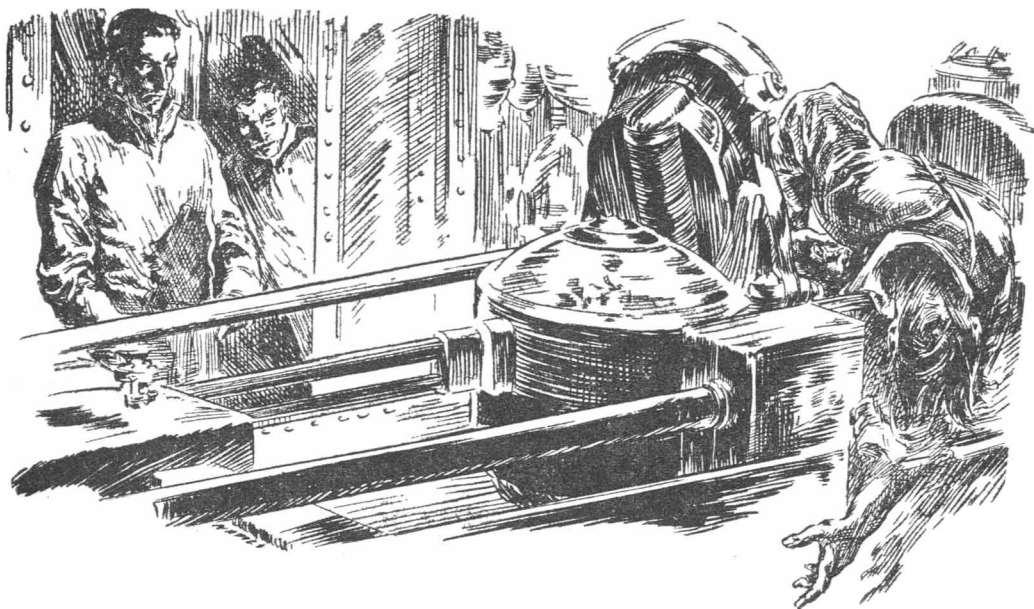
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Jim Anderson was slumped down in front of the control panel

# The Stubborn Men

*"Someday we may know the answer. . . ."*

**T**HE SOUND was like small glass bells ringing, a thin clear chiming that pulsed with a deep, compelling rhythm, elfin music from fairyland. Contrasting with this dainty chiming, the radiation counter on the wall suddenly began to bark like some ugly but faithful watchdog smelling danger in the night. Jack Danby came to his feet and looked at me, the healthy brown of his face fleeing under a creeping tide of white.

Then he seemed to grasp what was happening. "He lied to me!" he burst out. "This proves it. Gave the staff the night off. Had me ask you down to keep *me* busy and out of the way. What a man!"

Clean and clear and dainty, the elfin music pulsed with a deep vitality. High notes, clear notes, like the sky is high and clear on October nights. On the wall the watchdog hooted now in crazy fear.

Jack Danby went out of the barracks building on the run, heading for the squat structure with the three-foot thick concrete walls, the radiation laboratory. The strange music was coming from the lab and I wondered, as I followed Jack, how the sounds—if they *were* sounds—were getting through those concrete walls.

The door was lead-lined steel. Jack grabbed the latch. The door was locked. He jerked at it.

"Jim!" he screamed. "Open this door."

The elfin notes, as if in answer, swept up in a ringing flood. The laboratory seemed to vibrate with the sound. It appeared to come from the earth below us, from the stars overhead, from the depths of space between those stars. In the fractional part of a second, it seemed to sweep through the whole of space like lightning flashing from a far-off

By **ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS**

star, then died as the lightning dies, so swiftly you can hardly realize it has come and gone.

Jack seemed to hold his breath. Inside the door, a lock clicked softly, and the steel barrier swung open. But no one looked out at us.

"Dead man's control," Jack Danby whispered. "No, Steve, don't follow me." He went in and I followed him.

Jim Anderson was slumped down in front of the control panel. As he fell, his foot had slipped from the floor switch. That had actuated the circuit that shoved in the baffle plates, stopped the pile, and opened the door.

It was the first time I had seen a man who had just died. There was pain on Jim Anderson's face, and peace too, as if at the last moment he had learned a secret that made the pain unimportant.

Jack swore luridly. "We were scheduled to run this test Monday."

"And you would have been here Monday, in the lab?" I asked.

"Of course." The tone of his voice said this was a silly question. "The whole staff would have been here."

**I** DIDN'T ask what had killed Jim Anderson because I knew. A sudden and unexpected flood of radiation. Not gamma, though that is deadly enough, but some other unknown kind that exploded in singing music, and killed instantly. This was an atomic research laboratory. Here stubborn men worked with the atom, trying to learn more of its secrets than Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, and Bikini have revealed.

Looking at the man on the floor, Jack choked, and swallowed. I knew the depth of the respect and affection he had held for Jim Anderson. He turned it out of his mind.

"Something here we don't know about," he said. "Some new particle, some new radiation. Have to check."

"Jack!" My voice must have been raw along his nerves.

He put his arm around my shoulder. "Steve, will you call Dr. Carson? He'll want to check this too. Here, I'll go with you."

Because the bulked equipment might still be "hot"—might be emitting lethal quantities of invisible radiation—he scooped me out, brothing me to safety. That's what he was—my brother. Hours later, when I got a

chance to talk to him alone, I reminded him of it.

"Danby, you don't have to be the one who runs that check!"

"You don't understand," he answered. "Research, Incorporated has poured millions of dollars into our work."

"Research has all the money it needs. If it wants more, all it has to do is ask somebody, anybody. I am not aware that the Danbys have any more lives than the Andersons."

He sighed. "We need to know, Steve." He gestured toward the northern sky. "When it comes we got to know."

He was talking about an atom bomb.

"But *you* don't have to run that check. Let somebody else do it."

"I'm chief now, Steve," he said. Then he grinned. "Don't worry so much about it. When I'm in the lab, I know I'm working with something a lot more dangerous than a thousand rattlesnakes. You can be certain I'll be careful."

"Then," I said. "You won't mind if I'm here."

His eyes went into wary alertness. "There's no need, Steve. But—" His shrug was elaborate. "I'll write or call you and have you come down for it."

"And if you should forget to write or call?"

"Me?" He laughed. "I won't forget."

"Promise?"

Irritation crept into his voice. "Okay, it's a promise."

With his promise, I agreed to go back to school. I was in college, finishing a master's degree.

A week later, he wrote me, saying that a physicist named Hughes had been promoted to his old job of assistant, that it would be several months before they were ready to run another test, and that he was having trouble replacing staff men who had resigned.

The letter announcing the test came in April. Would I take the night train on Friday? The test would be run Saturday morning.

Hughes met me at the station. He was a big man with gray eyes and a ready grin. He said he was glad to meet me.

"Where's Jack?" I inquired.

"At the lab, checking the connections. He asked me to pick you up."

As he stopped the car in the laboratory

parking lot, I heard the small glass bells ringing.

"What's that?" Hughes said.

"The sneaking, dirty liar!" I burst out, and leaped from the car.

In the soft April night the concrete lab was a monster rooted deep in the earth. From it came high notes, clear notes, like the sky is high and clear, like atoms ringing tiny glass bells as they fled through a crystal lattice. The elfin music burst in a flood, and stopped, and I knew the dead man's switch had gone into operation.

I carried Jack Danby from the concrete lab to the barracks building where he had lived. Later, Hughes came in, gulping, trying to say something when he knew there was nothing that could be said.

"Can't understand it," Hughes said. "Thought we had screened those radiations."

"Where's the staff?" I said.

**H**E LOOKED surprised. "Jack gave them the night off, to celebrate."

"And he sent you to meet me?"

"Yes. Uh. You think he was trying to protect me?"

"Start checking the shielding," I said.

He looked relieved. "Well, that's what I thought *ought* to be done. Here's a letter I found in the lab. For you." He went out. The note said:

— Steve:—

I'm writing this before I run the test check, and if you get to read it, you will know that I was wrong. I want you to promise me something—that you will never do atomic research. There are plenty of other people who can and will do it.

Jack, I thought, do you remember when I used these same arguments on you? Do you remember when I begged you to let somebody else do it? The note continued:

The life of one member of a family is enough, Steve. So promise me you will stay away from the atom.

"Jack," I whispered. "I can promise to stay away from the atom but how can I make it promise to stay away from me?"

Somehow I went back and finished school. Then I went looking for a job. At Research, Inc., they admitted they needed men for a certain project but I was just a kid out of college. The man who interviewed me was quite scornful, and tough. Then I told him who I was.

"Danby? Oh." He looked me over for a long time, repeating "Danby!" half aloud. The way he said it, it sounded like a prayer. "Our Danby who—"

It's October now, with clear bright nights so peaceful and so quiet you'd think they would remain this way forever. Only you know they won't. Nightly as I go from the concrete lab to the barracks used for living quarters, I look up at the night sky, wondering when it will come. Maybe it won't come. That's a hope. And a prayer.

We think we've found a way to test the pile now, by putting the operator in a shielded remote control lab located a mile away.

Hughes thinks a mile is safe, but he doesn't know. Nobody knows.

Some day Hughes will find out. Then, if he fails, it will be my turn. I'm stubborn too.