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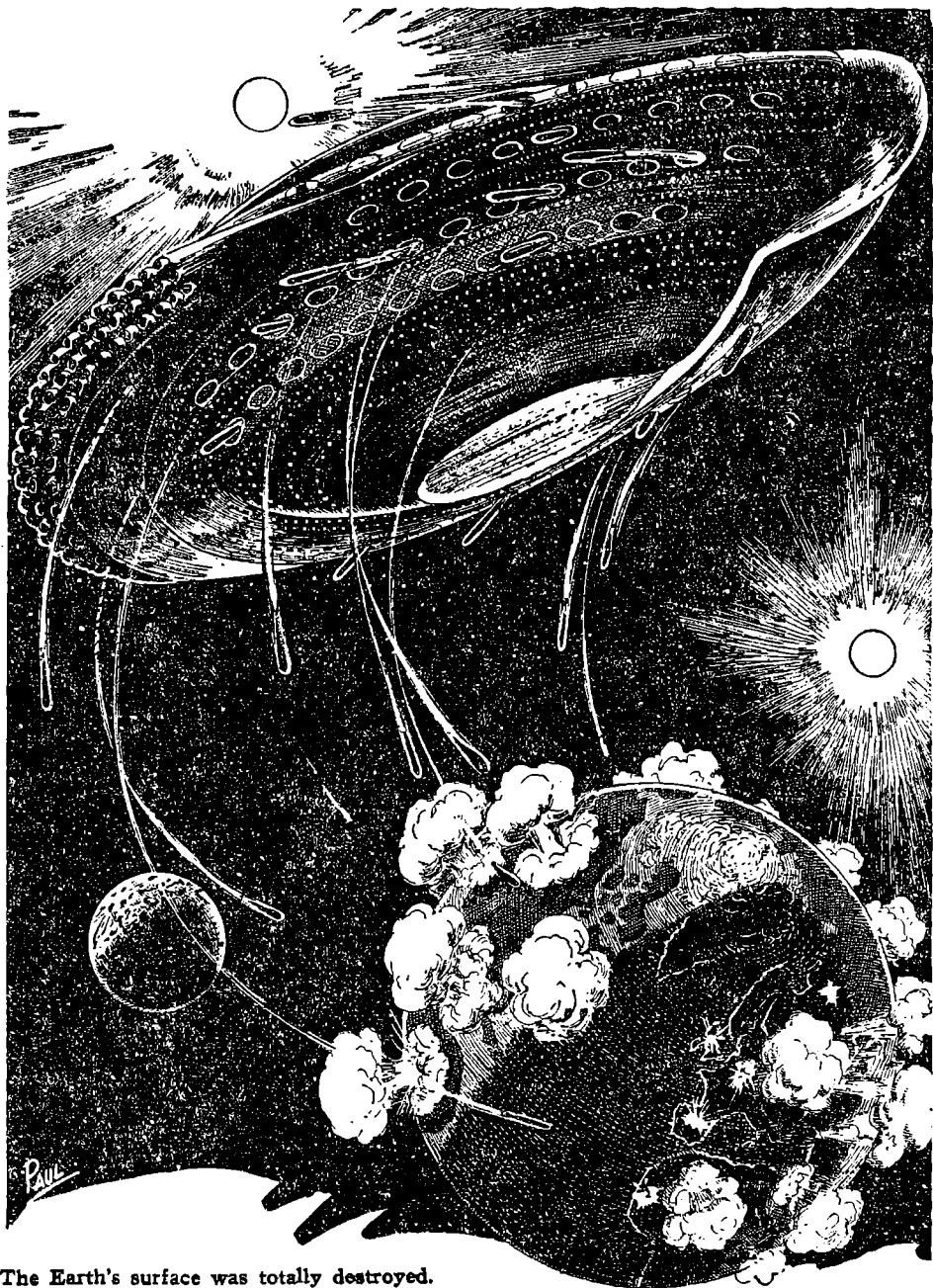
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The Earth's surface was totally destroyed.

By Bryce Walton

The human race was dead, though Anders and his wife still lived. Nothing was left for them now but the ritual of hatred—or the greater ritual of forgiveness!

THE SURVIVORS

FROM the observatory tower, Anders stared dazedly at the bitter Lunar landscape. He thought, The Moon at least is unchanged. Its harsh angles, its sharp black and white shadows over the shiny lakes of frozen lava had the frigid quality of eternity. The Moon had become a cenotaph, a satellite tomb, a frozen airless monument to the murdered Earth.

It had been a brief thing. Mary had run screaming into her room here in the Lunar Observatory tower and locked herself in. Was it luck that four people had been on the Moon and that two of those four still lived to look down at a blackened Earth?

Anders still sat, with the vision persisting on his retinas: the black ship suddenly there, belching out its many smaller ships like ferocious dark darting little bugs; the leaping flares of exploding cities; the incandescent vapor that had been teeming cities and men and history and the laboriously-built ideas of men.

Anders stared. About six miles away the black ship hovered in the shadow of mighty Theophilus where, an hour ago—immediately after the assault on the helpless Earth—it had settled like a giant scale that had been flung by cosmic force from some nameless and distant scab. Anders watched it. The ship hadn't moved. Anders hadn't moved. He studied it with intensity as though expecting it, like a lingering facet of nightmare, to fade into the lost sunlight of reality.

"Andy, I'm afraid."

"Mary!" He turned. She seemed sane still, and he was glad.

She tried to smile across the shiny floor. "I'm afraid, Andy, because of

the way I feel. I—hate them so much."

Hate, fear, cold, he thought. Back to fundamentals.

Her eyes stared past him, fixed by the black ship's silhouette against the weird light of Earth's two suns.

He put his arms around her shoulders. Her skin was cold, her flesh rigid. Her profile was beautiful, more beautiful now than he'd ever seen it before, because of the powerful emotion shining from it—hate. It was a physical force, powerful, glittering.

"It wasn't even a war," she whispered harshly. "It came from nowhere and everything ended. I wonder how much suffering—"

The chains of fire had encircled Earth like necklaces and the holocausts had shot upward like fiery pearls. "It happened so fast," he said. "It must have been easy. Yes, it must have been. Are we lucky to be left, Mary?"

She shook her head. "Oh no, we're dead too, dead!"

He groped for words. "No . . . There's something we should do, a reason why we're left. There must be."

"Dr. Pangloss," she said, then smiled, her lips like thin dark wire.

He felt a chill over him as her face darkened, her eyes blazed. Her fingers curled, bit into his arm and her teeth bared and shone like an animal's. "We were left to hate!" she cried out suddenly. "We were left for revenge."

"No, that's wrong! We left that behind a thousand years ago. The Three Hundred Years' War ended that. We've got to keep the fire burning that man finally found—the fire of peace, love, understanding! Maybe this is the final test—"

Her laughter was ice. It fell over

him in harsh, frozen spray. She hated with an intensity man had forgotten long ago. Somehow, he began to feel it too. He half rose, turned his gaze toward the ship. Had the old emotions returned at the final curtain for the last laugh? Revenge—hate! Laughing, gloating puppets dancing and shrieking at man's stupidity.

No! Anders sat down and buried his face in his hands. Man had learned and he was the last man. He must not forget.

HER VOICE drifted to him. "You must feel this hate too, Andy. Help me! The neutrino machine Morley was working on—he never finished the projecting device. But if we could get it near the ship! It will work at short range the way it is—"

He scarcely heard her. "Curiosity," he murmured, "that's it. I'm curious. I don't hate them, whatever they are. I can't. I don't understand; I'm confused, nearly insane with the shock of it. But I can't let myself hate. That would be the last failure. If I can keep from hating, then I feel somehow there will be no defeat. You must see that."

"We could get very close to the ship," she said tensely. "I don't think they would see us. Then turn the neutrino distorter on it—"

"No, that isn't the way!"

He got up and stretched his short, muscular body. He pressed his left eye and some of the dull throbbing behind it was pressed inward and forgotten. He said, "A thousand years ago it would be easier to understand, before the Three Hundred Years' War. A thousand years ago, man was destructive, pathological; he made war on himself. There wasn't any reason for it, except his own insanity. He suffered from a vague fear, a free-floating anxiety—that is what our

socio-psychological history tells us. He suffered a long, tormented time, Mary. Maybe too long."

He walked to a locker, opened it. He started climbing into the pressurized suit. He zipped up the front of it, checked the oxygen capsule and the valve. She wasn't looking at him, but at the ship.

"Yes, Mary," he heard himself saying. "Yes—evolution, psychobiotics, and a lot of luck and man finally climbed up out of the bog. It was a great era when he did that, Mary. Copernicus, Darwin, Freud, and Newton—they broke the old values, they were ego-deflators. They almost finished man. Man went crazy looking for a new sense of personal value. He was no longer a creature-of fate, nor of Providence, Mary. He became his own value finally. He began to think in terms of a sad Chimera called progress. Progress was economics and science. Progress was size, it was bigger and better levers, pistons, explosions. . . ."

"Andy, I'm going down in the lab and get the machine Morley built. I know I can reach the ship and destroy it. Watch it fly into a million pieces—"

He went on talking, tried not to hear her. "Psychobiotics gave man a new life. Individual anxieties and hostilities gave way to warmth and sanity and a sense of personal value. But before that, we reached the zenith of horror through destructive warfare—"

Anders felt the playing of the weird double-sun light over his face. A war so terrible it had put two suns in the system in place of one, changed the planetary patterns, shifted orbits; ships vanished into hyperspace bent on conquest; planets turned to radioactive dust—the cosmobombs that turned Saturn and her moons into a second brilliant sun— and the shock taught

man the universal wisdom of non-violence, of peace, of the happiness and truth he could find only in himself.

Anders swayed weakly. He closed his eyes and looked straight ahead of him into the fathomless black pits of his lids. He blinked them open. "Mary, you've got to see it. You're mad with shock. Violence breeds violence. Hate rebounds on the hater. Even now, after what's happened, you must see that to hate is futile, negative, wrong!"

She screamed, "After what the black ship's done to us? Listen to me—Morley suspected what would happen. He felt it when our scope spotted the black ship that first time. Morley felt it, remember? No one would listen to him. He did it all on his own, hoping he could finish the projector. I understood him, but who else did? Nobody! Remember what Morley said? 'The ship's coming too fast, too intently. It won't be friendly. And Earth is totally unprepared for attack. There's only one ship—and one weapon, great enough, might stop them . . .' That's what Morely said. But he never got a chance to use the neutrino machine. The shock drove him and Burkson to suicide. But the machine's down in the lab. It's light. We could carry it easily to the ship. Andy, you've got to help me."

He shook his head slowly. "Maybe it's because you're a woman," he whispered. "A woman—watching all the children die, helplessly. A woman, cornered—the subconscious taking control—the subconscious, like the Law of Draco which makes hate and death the only possible punishment for crime. Mary—I can't help you. I'm sorry. . . ."

"You won't help me, then. But you won't stop me!"

"No," sighed Anders.

He watched the feverish eagerness of her. "But, Mary—give me a chance to do what I want to do first. Will you?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I'm going to try to find out what they are, if I can. Give me a little time."

She nodded. She didn't look at him, only at the ship. He kissed her, but she kept on looking at the ship. He dropped the oxygen helmet over his head and turned the clamps tight, adjusted the valve. She half-turned as he went out through the airlock. He waved, but she didn't move. Her face faded as though seen through the waters of an aquarium.

Anders sank down through the shifting, wavering moonlight. Caught between the two distant suns, the Moon was ever a glittering flickering kaleidoscope of color, as was the Earth.

In the thick pumice dust that rose to his thighs, Anders stood in the depths of overpowering awe. He stared at blackened Earth, and beyond it toward the icy pinpoints of the stars. What would the old system have done against the black ship? The old warring, armed system of pre-binary days? Shoot, ask questions afterwards—that had been one motto. They would have stopped the black ship. Maybe they would have sent out a fleet of big warships and met the black ship beyond the limits of the Solar System, and fought it out there, light years away.

Anders shrugged his shoulders inside the heavy inflated suit. He didn't know what men would have done in those days. He fought down and buried the tugging emotions of excitement that had grown within him for a moment as he thought of the old system and its terrifying ferocity and madness. It was a long time ago, an alien time. It was impossible to imagine how men had thought or acted in those times.

Inside the oxygen helmet, Anders' eyes were tense. He pushed, pushed with stubborn tenacity at the pumice dust that rose in lazy streaming rib-

bons and hung almost motionless. He wormed, wriggled, and his head moved slightly nearer to the black ship. Meteors exploded soundlessly on the beds of lava and seas of dust, shooting up thick motionless clouds that seemed almost solid. Above him, the eighteen-thousand-foot wall of the crater towered.

Anders sagged. Racking sobs exploded in the tiny helmet. Down the walls of the crater, across the lava floor, through seas of pumice, it had been a long way to reach the black ship. His head was mole-like, moving, a speck of shiny stuff, inching above the dust. Now he was within fifty yards of the black ship, and he lay there, his suit blending with the cold airless landscape.

The black ship lay in silent silhouette against a silent jagged landscape that had driven many pioneers mad with loneliness. The icy silence had never affected Anders before. But now it added inconceivably to the horror that had come from the stars, nameless and without reason. Now the Moon seemed a ghastly tomb, soundless, a lump of incredible loneliness without storm or wind or rain. The bitter deadly cold plucked at his suit. Its fingers were feather soft and mocking on his helmet plate.

And more silent still was the black ship: motionless and gigantic and silent. What did it wait for? For the smoke and flames to clear from the world it had destroyed? That would be unlikely. They had left nothing down there for themselves.

He crawled nearer. It had taken a long time to get this far, and his oxygen wouldn't last forever. A quiet desperation seized him. This was his way out. Mary had chosen her way. Who was to say who was right, or if such decisions mattered now? Perhaps his

own stubborn clinging to the values of a destroyed humanity was only a form of insanity. A last defense before the crumbling conclusion.

The ship loomed up before him, lengthened intolerably either way. The brilliant glare of the sun that had been Saturn had become a flickering shadow of flames about the ship. He studied its length and height carefully. He listened. His ears ached with soundlessness. He watched, and his eyes wavered with the sight of nothing at all. It was incredibly frightening, because he knew the ship was not dead. It was a crouching monster, waiting with deadly patience for some alien purpose of its own.

He glanced back across the vast crater toward the top of the observatory. A natural camouflage of light and shadow made it indistinguishable unless one knew it was there.

He thought of Mary. She would be taking action, he knew that. She wouldn't be waiting. She would be wheeling that small but ghastly neutrino machine out into the airlock, donning a pressure suit. How long would she give him?

He thought of what would happen when she turned the neutrino rays on the ship. What had Morley said about his neutrino machine? Oh yes—neutrinos explained why electrons, shot out of the same atomic nuclei under the same conditions, do not have the same energy. Morley found that invisible neutrons shot away too, affecting the recoil of the atom. Neutrinos, two-thousandths the mass of electrons and with no electric charge by which they could be influenced electrically. Morley also found that there were antineutrinos. When the two met, they annihilated one another. It was this neutrino annihilation that resulted in the emission of gravitational waves. As a

weapon, Morley's invention was rather simple. It prevented momentarily this annihilation of neutrinos. The result was that the matter affected lost all cohesion and completely disintegrated.

It would be painless, Anders thought, which was a thing to be considered when the results otherwise were inevitable.

Anders leaped up and ran in long weightless jumps toward the ship.

Nothing happened. Nothing moved. No port opened to project destructive fingers at him. He thought of attempting communication with the radio on his belt. But whatever these creatures were, they were certainly too alien for that.

Anders stood beneath the upcurving side of the ship. He touched the space-scarred metal. What distant worlds had it known and forgotten? He moved around beneath its bulk until he stood beneath the rounded section that might be a port. He hesitated a moment. His throat was dry and he sucked at the precious oxygen, then he leaped upward and pounded the metal hinges of his hands against the metal.

HE DRIFTED down into the thick pumice dust again and waited. He felt his lips stretched tight and dry, and his heart pounding wildly.

The door began to open, revolving on a pivot, a massive metal disc opening without sound. The outrush of air into the Moon's near vacuum caught Anders full, hurled him back. He was on his hands and knees then, crawling back toward the ship. He stared at the suited outline in the airlock opening. The figure held some sort of coiled weapon.

Anders stared crazily. His ears began to hum. His muscles were reluc-

tant to respond, and sweat ran down his face, half blinding him. His own voice whispering was subdued thunder circling round his head, bounding inside the helmet.

It was impossible, impossible! It was insane!

Anders rose, fell forward, drifting, dazed and only partly conscious. The features behind the helmet plate expanded in Anders' sight, terribly magnified. They swam toward him. The coiled weapon loomed larger, wavered, disappeared. . . .

Voices filtered to him. He was sitting on a soft couch. Lights were gentle, soothing, trying to be kind. He straightened up jerkily, numbed, lost in a confused jumble of meaningless speculation. A large circular chamber, mesh-grilled. Bulkhead doors at either end. They had removed his helmet, and the air was good. He listened to them and looked at them, and wondered if he were still alive. Was this some fantastic, distorted memory of living?

Their pressure suits were removed. He listened and looked. They spoke English, though rather strangely. They were human.

He tried to understand what they were saying. Eyes swam before him. Faces blurred and solidified and blurred and ran together like streamers of gray paint.

Then a calmness gradually settled over him after they gave him a glass of liquid and he drank it. Opposite him, sitting on the edge of a deeply cushioned chair, was a small wiry man with pale drawn features, and thinning gray hair. He seemed prematurely gray, somehow ageless. His lips were thin and emotionless, and his sunken eyes remained fixed on Anders as though doubting his reality.

His words seemed controlled only by a terrific mental discipline. "I am the

captain of this ship. I am Richard Jackson III. My father and my father's father commanded this ship. You seem human. You talked—our language. I don't understand—"

"I am Joseph Anders, an astronomer. My wife, Mary, and myself, and two others were here on the Moon in our observatory when your ship—attacked Earth and finished it. Mary and I are still alive—I presume. Morley and Burkson committed suicide."

Anders sat there in a silent tomb. He remembered the perplexed, shocked whiteness of the faces of the others as they filed out of the chamber leaving Jackson and himself alone here. There were expressions of horror there, disbelief, illness.

"I don't understand," the man said to Anders. "My grandfather was the first captain. We left Earth in twenty thirty-four—" he paused. "Our orders were to carry man's conquest and domination throughout the galaxy. That was our only purpose. We have done that. But there were few worlds worthy of conquest, and most of those we encountered had to be destroyed. Strange life forms . . . alien, beyond man's ken—would not be conquered. We had to destroy. We destroyed fast and without preliminary, never giving them an opportunity to strike us. There were worlds with greatly advanced science that could have destroyed us too, so we adopted the policy of never giving them a chance, you understand?"

"No," Anders said. "I have not been conditioned to understand that."

The small man snapped irritably, "Stand at attention! Have you never learned discipline?"

Anders scarcely heard the order or the question. He said in a harsh whisper: "I remember now. It was impossible to believe that once man felt that way. Now I see. No, I don't say that I

understand. Since your grandfather left to conquer everything, we learned to think differently. We acquired a completely different set of attitudes. There were no wars, after that. I remember how history tells of your ships going into deep space, for conquest. None of them ever returned, until now. They were thought lost. We had forgotten that once man sought such conquest—such senseless ego-projection."

"Stand at attention! Stand at attention! Who do you think you are?"

Anders didn't get up. It did not matter to him. "That's all finished," he said. "We've succeeded in destroying ourselves anyway, you see."

The captain of the black ship jumped to his feet. His hands clenched. "I don't understand! I've rechecked the maps since you were brought in. This system—it's binary! It has no resemblance to the Solar System my grandfather left! None at all. There are two suns. The planetary orbits are different. The one sign that would identify Earth's planetary system among any in the entire galaxy was Saturn! Saturn with its rings—unique in the galaxy! Where is Saturn? What—?"

The captain stopped talking abruptly. Perspiration streamed down his face. His mouth twitched.

Anders said, "The last war altered things. We conquered the Solar System. We fought the Martians for two hundred years. We blasted the inhabited moons of Saturn with cosmobombs. An unstable element reacted, and Saturn and her moons became a second sun. The planetary orbits shifted. That is what happened, Captain Jackson. Do not deceive yourself. You have come—home."

The captain's eyes wavered. "Stand at attention," he whispered. "Have you never learned discipline? What social disintegration occurred during our

absence? Perhaps you grew weak, undisciplined, and deserved to— No, I don't understand!"

Anders shook his head. "I wonder if I could explain it to you, now?" He rose slowly, turned his back on the captain, started for the bulkhead door.

"Stop! You're a prisoner. You—" his voice trailed away.

Anders turned slowly. "Why do you want to stop me? What is your purpose now? What does it matter now, Captain? Are you going on—destroying worlds? For whom?"

The captain leaned against the grill mesh of the wall. He slowly licked his lips.

Anders said, "You see what's happened? Historically, it happened before in Earth's history, very long ago. The armies of the Huns. They started on a campaign of conquest, and years later, in attacking an army, found they were attacking the descendants of their own people whom they had left behind. We've done the same thing, Captain. You might call it retribution—the sins of the fathers—"

Captain Jackson stared at the wall. His mouth twitched. His eyes were wide and shabby with strain. Anders said, "It isn't your fault, Captain. It's man's fault if there's any fault anywhere at all. We sowed the seeds of our own destruction long ago, and the seed grew to fruition that thousand years back when your grandfather's ship went into space with the command: 'Go—man is almighty, and he must prove it to the Universe!' And what we really meant was, 'I am man and I feel so unimportant, so worthless, and so lost. Somehow out there perhaps I can find an identity with the Universe; somehow, if I expand and conquer enough, I shall feel a true importance and a sense of everlasting power.'"

"What else is there?" the captain blurted. "If there is no desire to conquer and destroy and gain mastery, what reason is there to live? What philosophy could lead a man to assume such a thing as life free from conflict?"

"You destroyed the reason, Captain. And now there may be no way to show you."

"I—don't know," he whispered. "I don't understand. We have had a dream on this ship. For generations we have had it, never expecting it to come true of course. But we have thought that some day perhaps we, or our descendants, or their descendants, would some day come back to Earth. It was to be a return to Paradise. None of us really expected to return to it. It was a dream." The captain covered his eyes with the palms of his hands. He swayed on his booted feet. "One thing we were sure of—that if ever we did approach Earth—we would know it when we saw it."

A GAIN in pressure suits, Anders and the captain and a soldier stood in the airlock, and the door was open to the Lunarian landscape. Anders scanned the bitter harshness of the angles and shadows. "Mary," he said into the emptiness. "Mary, are you there, can you hear me?"

Silence, washed by the ghostly whispering of static. Then a voice, far away.

"You were in the ship."

"Yes, Mary, listen to me," said Anders eagerly. "They're men, do you understand—they're the lost expedition. Mankind isn't destroyed—there's still a chance for us!"

Silence.

"Mary!"

How could he possibly explain to her, Anders thought. Humanity wasn't finished. Perhaps it never would be. And

(Continued on page 129)

THE SURVIVORS

(Continued from page 111)

it deserved another chance, always. Survival was the important thing, always survival. No matter what the odds, no matter what the obscurity or confusion, a man had hope while he lived.

He stepped out of the lock, started walking forward through the pumice, looking for her. If he could only stop her, make her see. . . .

Anders had said to the captain, "This was a terrible thing, more terrible than you can comprehend. But no fault lies with you, or anyone on this ship. It lies in the past. You must realize that. You mustn't develop a feeling of guilt so overpoweringly strong that you stop hoping and living. You on this ship are the last hope of man's future. You must go on. I can show you how . . . I can teach you. . . ."

Abruptly there was motion in the sea of pumice. A helmeted head appeared, a puffed torso, arms holding a bulky machine.

Mary. She didn't look at him. She raised the weapon and pointed it.

In that last instant Anders saw the soldier standing in the porthole bring up his coiled weapon sharply. There was one moment in which he could have leaped forward to join Mary, and he remembered afterward the unutterable poignancy of that wish. But he did not.

He saw her face—a white damp blot against the flickering lights—straining, eager, frozen in a mask of hatred. And then the area erupted in a great soundless geyser.

For a long time Anders stood looking at the crater where his wife had been. Then he turned and walked slowly back to the ship. In the doorway, the Earthmen were waiting for him.