

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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Deep-cradled were the first faint stirrings of life:
fluted and fragile, like a sighing cocoon caught
in a gust of luminous wind.



He never knew what mystery of time and space had set aside his death, entered him once more on the roster of the living . . . but it hardly mattered, for in either era he had the same mission to perform. Holden, you see, was—



By FRANK
BELKNAP LONG



The Timeless Man

“MAN, YOU must be insane!
To paint *now*—”

The clicking of the Geiger counters almost drowned out the voice. Holden did not turn. He was spreading pigments on a canvas which stood half in shadows, half in flickering light, a strange kind of exaltation swelling within him.

Roger Holden did not want to die. To the artist life is almost unendurably sweet, and Holden was no stranger to fear. But when he painted, his work absorbed him to the exclusion of all else.

It had always embarrassed him, however, to paint in another's presence. Suddenly he found himself resenting Langley's presence, without ceasing to feel grateful to him.

He swung about with a gesture of reproach. “You promised me a few days' grace,” he said. “If you didn't want me to paint, why did you invite me to bring my easel and brushes along?”

“You had to have something to occupy your mind.” Langley laughed harshly. “Any game would do. We could have

sat here playing chess. But when Death does the checkmating chess isn't a very amusing game.”

“This isn't a game,” Holden said impatiently. “Or a gesture of bravado, either. You're amazed because I can still paint—is that it?”

Langley was a powerful giant, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a nervous strength in his fingers that made it easy for him to break things. He twisted his own wrist as he returned Holden's stare, as though snapping it would have been less intolerable to him than trying to frame an answer.

“Not amazed exactly,” he said slowly. “Under stress, human nature is unpredictable. But somehow—I expected logical behavior from you at five to twelve.”

“But my behavior *is* logical,” Holden said. “You know the old saying— Life is short but art is long, or, if you prefer, eternal. It may be a thumping platitude, but I happen to believe it.”

“But no one will see your painting.” Langley protested. “No human eye will

ever look on it again. When your brain dies it will become a meaningless jumble of pigments!"

"It will still be eternal," Holden insisted. "You're confusing duration with eternity. Eternity is timelessness—it's the antithesis of duration. If I paint a masterpiece I'm creating something that will live forever—in the one deathless moment of its creation."

Langley shook his head, a tortured skepticism in his gaze. "That's sophistry, Roger."

Holden turned slowly, as though he were balancing an invisible burden of sorrow on his shoulders, and picked up his palette. He began to paint again.

"Lord Dunsany once wrote a little fantasy to summarize the futility of all human effort," Langley pursued. "He compared humanity to a man falling from a high building, plunging to certain destruction and yet reaching out with a piece of chalk to scrawl something imperishable on the face of the building." Langley's lips twisted in a sardonic smile. "He didn't succeed."

"He tried," Holden retorted. "The effort wasn't futile. It was the man's glory—the one thing that set him apart from the brutes."

Holden seemed oblivious to the clicking of the Geigers, only half attentive to his conversation with Langley. His eyes shone as he bent toward the canvas, as though his vision of beauty had kindled a flame in his brain that nothing on earth could quench. No—not even the terrible spreading radiations which were even now a part of him, a seal of destruction on his flesh and his bones.

Holden's work consumed him as it had consumed Rembrandt, Keats, Mendelssohn, Tschaikevsky. He remembered how Proust, gasping for breath, had staggered to his desk on the day of his death, to finish his last and greatest novel.

Holden told himself fiercely that he

must summon a like courage—must paint until the pain in his arms became unbearable, until the brush dropped from his leaping fingers.

If only his memories were less bewildering in their richness! There were so many of them and they clamored so insistently for expression.

A boy alone with his thoughts, staring across a shadowed brook at a leaping trout. A toy fire engine, rusting in a woodshed choked with dust. Night on a lake in the mountains, a swaying rowboat and the chirp of crickets.

High school. Football in the russet autumn, with woodsmoke rising into the clear sky. The slowly dawning worlds of art and the natural sciences and the deathless song of youth in the early novels of H. G. Wells.

College. Chess and mathematics—and someone arguing about a smelly briar pipe. Was it better to scrape out the dottle or let the bowl alone?

The girl next door—and the one at the other side of town. The girl he'd met at the sophomore prom, walking in a cornfield with the sun in her hair. He'd stopped and kissed her, not quite meaning to.

People who grew old deliberately were of another breed. He'd wanted to stay twenty-two forever, for his love of life was a pure flame. Well . . . he was thirty-four now, and it was the world that had grown old. So old that the death it harbored was reaching out for him.

The beginning of World War II . . . a hill in Italy . . . the red dawn over Salerno . . .

He'd known Langley a long time. A sound man, Langley, an able physicist, but—literal! Couldn't see a sunset for the trees, and—the spreading dust.

Hiroshima. The End of World War II.

Humanity had known that another war would destroy the dreams of men along with their bodies. But how could men

with warring impulses tame that wild steed, electric with the power of exploding suns?

On the little square television screen in Langley's laboratory, one warning, over and over, like a motif from *Todtentanz*. "The guided missiles are still descending! Stay indoors! Take shelter underground!"

He'd clicked off the screen because he couldn't endure watching despairing fear become a certainty in the eyes of men like himself.

He had to get a timeless perspective to paint at all.

Was that selfish—inhuman even? He didn't think so. Only the dream was eternal. The rest was sound and fury signifying—the end of pain.

Holden was still painting when the roar of the counters became a dirge.

THE BODY of the alien gleamed like an iridescent spiderweb in the waning sunlight. Pictures formed in its mind as it gazed down at the shattered laboratory, the radiation-riddled skeletons, and the painting that had become a problem and a challenge.

When in motion the alien resembled a gigantic scorpion, but when it settled itself in repose it became a weaving blob of light, wrapped in a pulsing aura of thought.

The alien was accompanied by its mate

and others of its kind. The spaceship which had brought the aliens from their home planet in the Sixth Galaxy to the third planet of an unexplored solar system close to the core of space carried instruments of science which could be used for purposes of research or defense.

But the aliens had quickly discovered that only research would be needed here, for the planet had been ravaged by the energy locked up within one of the smaller units of matter.

It seemed unlikely that any of the inhabitants could have survived so terrible a scourge.

Had the inhabitants released the energy themselves?

The problem was to reconstruct an inhabitant, and explore the planet's history through the medium of a living mind.

Could an inhabitant be reconstructed from a visual impression reproduced in pigments—obviously made by the inhabitant?

The alien thought so.

No two living creatures thought alike, and their thought patterns were implicit in their handiwork, their creations in stone and metal, even in gaudy colors on a fabric so flimsy that it could have been destroyed in the alien's claw as easily as a film of mist.

Once the thought pattern had been reconstructed, restoring the physical body would present no problem at all. The

spinning of a matter-rebuilding web would take care of that. For were not all physical bodies reflections of a multi-dimensional thought-pattern in the Eternal Now?

The inhabitant could be brought back to life as surely as though he had never died.

"His skeleton is still intact!" a companion voice said. "We could build on that!"

Flourishing its massive foreclaws, the alien turned to look at its scientist mate.

"We could—but why bother? We'll build a complete new body. The key pattern is there, implicit in his handiwork. The web will fill in the gaps."

The pulsing deepened about the alien's head. "Fortunately the catastrophe which destroyed the inhabitant's body has preserved his handiwork. The radiations have not only energized the pigments—they have altered the physical structure of the fabric itself!"

"It is powerful—that creation!" came the pulsing agreement. "I'm beginning to feel it too—the entire shining fabric of his thoughts. He was a big-brained biped who reveled in the impressions of his senses. He was consumed by the beauty of his world, and he put all of himself into his handiwork!"

"Yes . . . there is tragedy there too. Beauty and compassion and grief. A mist on the hills as the day draws to a close . . . a flaming redness lighting up the dawn. Laughter and gay mockery . . . and a sadness like a great sea, ebbing, flowing. If ever a living form lived and suffered and triumphed over his pain—"

"Have you noticed? He had a complex, subtle brain, but his vision was as limpid as a pool of still water, depth beyond depth. We must see to it that he lives again!"

"But we may have to leave at any moment," the other reminded. "The terrible, destroying fires have burned them-

selves out, but even a faint residue could injure us genetically. If we find that the radiations are still dangerous—"

"The web will complete the restoration. It will take time, of course. We may have to leave before it is done. But we'll know that he has returned to live out his life to complete fulfillment."

"As a replica of himself . . ."

"He won't know that. He'll simply return with all of his memories intact. I'd . . . like that. Wouldn't you? Just knowing, I mean."

"Yes."

For a moment the two aliens remained silent, their thoughts pulsing in close inner harmony. Then they were in motion again.

Approaching the canvas, they busied themselves with their exacting task, twitching and weaving about until a thin, gleaming transparency floated from them over the ravaged soil.

The transparency wavered and changed shape, becoming conical and then spherical. Like a great, rainbow-hued water bubble it settled to rest directly in front of the canvas, its base flattening as the aliens continued to knead it with their minds.

Deep-cradled were the first faint stirrings of life; fluted and fragile, like a sighing cocoon caught in a gust of luminous wind. A twisting and a swaying and a hungry reaching out for a nourishing flame that was both breath and substance.

Breath and more life . . . and ever more life . . . until there came into view in the depths of the web the outlines of a human shape.

THE BURST of flame was incredible—a white and dazzling flare crossing Holden's returning vision, burning into his brain.

He was lying flat on his back, staring straight up at the sky. He could see the red disk of the sun, sinking into clouds

that seemed to be writhing in the glow of some great fire from the depths of space.

Were the clouds explosions, shaking the earth? Something in Holden's mind rejected that. The clouds were mushroom-shaped, but they floated high above the earth and seemed to trail off from a long, cylindrical shape which was dwindling skyward directly overhead.

The light seemed to fuse with the clouds, to blend with them, as the receding cylinder plunged deeper and deeper into the sky.

The cylinder was gone.

Holden sat up. For an instant his mind seemed to seesaw back and forth across black gulfs of emptiness. Then his faculties steadied and the curving surface above him resolved itself into a glowing web, veined and rainbow-colored.

He thought for a moment before moving again. There was no yardstick he could apply to a thing so incredible. Had the laboratory collapsed? Was he staring up through a curving, heat-fused pane of glass wedged in the debris, but open to the sky? It seemed unlikely, for he could see the entire wide sweep of the horizon, stretching away on a level with his drawn-up knees.

Holden was suddenly aware of a stirring in the gleaming convexity which arched above him. A swirling and a bubbling, as though the sunlight had turned it molten.

He opened his eyes wide. The surface above him was melting, whipping away and evaporating as he stared—like a cobweb vanishing in a blast of heat.

Memory had returned now in a full, rushing flood. He remembered the agony in his limbs, the brush dropping from his stiffening fingers. He remembered Langley dragging himself along the floor, smiling a little despite his torment.

He was free now to get up, to walk in any direction. But he did not get up. With a hoarse cry he dragged himself forward

until he was stopped by a vision of horror—stark, mind-numbing.

The two skeletons seemed to grin up at him in the reddening sunlight. He was swaying on his knees directly above the fleshless eye-sockets of one, and by simply stretching out his hand he could have touched the long bones of the other.

After the first flush of realization died away, Holden found himself staring at a single bright object. A small object, trivial in itself.

A gold ring, oddly lumpish now, welded into a mass of radioactive isotope, but still recognizable. The ring was on the second finger of a skeletal hand.

As Holden stared down at it, the blood drained from his face, leaving it ashen.

Slowly, like a man in the grip of an overmastering compulsion, Holden stared at his own firm-fleshed hand.

The ring he wore wasn't lumpish. But the two were identical . . . and identical . . . and identical . . .

It seemed to Holden that his mind had become a vast, echoing vault. A whispering gallery, filled with shadows that plucked and tore at his sanity.

No man was meant to endure this and live.

FIRST DAY. He was deathly calm now—as calm as the distant ruined cities, mouldering into dust. As calm as the night of stars which arched above him, and the waste which stretched around him.

Fortunately hunger had not touched him yet; only the goading reality of his rebirth. He had returned to a world that had died, had been reborn in Time in some strange and unfathomable way. Not as an infant in a recurring cycle of eternity, but as a grown man with all of his faculties intact.

Far to the east the outlines of a vast ruin rose against the sky, but some instinct warned him to avoid the cities.

Here in the open countryside there was no detectable radiation, but when he knelt to drink at the edge of sluggish streams which mirrored his haggard features he could not repress a shudder. How could he be sure that the water wasn't contaminated? How could he be sure . . . of anything?

Second day. Hunger was a goad now. No animal cry broke the stillness, but there were a few berries, growing on dwarfed, pallid shrubs which hugged the ravaged soil like little white ghosts.

Were the berries tiny carriers of death? Was there a hidden, grinning skull at the heart of each berry, waiting to be laid bare?

In sudden desperation he plucked one and crushed it in his palm. The juice was sweet-scented. Summoning courage, he picked a handful of berries and devoured them greedily, like a famished wayfarer in a parched and intolerable wilderness.

Third day. Life! Animal life! In the air, in burrows opening on a bleak sea wall. Something huge and lobsterlike moved on a shining beach, dragging itself sluggishly over the sand. He saw a gull, far out, skimming the waves. In deep rock pools sea anemones unfolded their flowerlike fronds, and the badly grown cucumber bodies of sea gherkins pulsed with the pulsing tides.

Had all life retreated to the sea?

Turning shakily, he moved inland again.

In a valley of shadows he saw a humming bird. A flash of brilliance, the incredible whirring of a tiny, air-borne mite a yard from his face. He saw it clearly for an instant as it settled to rest on one of the dwarf shrubs.

A wedge of turned-up earth gave the mole away. Using his hands as a trowel, Holden widened the excavation, and caught the little beast as it scurried into the sunlight.

It was a hammer-headed mole, as blind

as a bat. He hated killing it, but he knew that his life would be forfeit if he did not eat.

That night, replenished, he sank to rest beneath the only tree he'd seen in a two-day search. A scrub oak, filled with little animal whisperings. There was more life up there. Tomorrow he'd set a few snares!

FOURTH day. The cave rose bleakly at the edge of a rock-strewn waste, but Holden's thoughts were the opposite of bleak as he approached it with a brace of brightly-plumed wildfowl dangling from his waist.

It was a little wonderful that he could have brought two birds down with a slingshot. Wonderful, too, that there should be a cave so close to the scene of his triumph.

If he could get a fire started—he'd be dining on roasted quail!

Holden straightened his shoulders. The old visions were coming back, surging back now like a singing flame. A man who loved life as he did could never stay wretched.

True, loneliness could leave a torturing ache. But there had been joyful hermits before in the world.

A girl walking in a cornfield, with the sun in her hair. He'd stopped and kissed her, not quite meaning to. . . .

Well . . . he'd have to get over that, he told himself fiercely. But now the flame was dwindling again, sweeping from him in gusts of chill mockery.

With an angry shrug he quickened his stride and entered the cave.

They stood in flickering firelight—five men and three women and a girl with wide dark eyes who didn't seem quite a woman yet. Not quite eighteen, Holden thought. Then—startlement exploded in his brain! A dazzling burst of startlement and a high-leaping wonder that held him rooted to the earth.

Living men and women, solid as the animals he'd trapped—uncouthly clad in the skins of animals, but not uncouth in their primitive human dignity and bronze-limbed strength; standing about a rude fire like a stone-age museum group, with straggly hair on their shoulders, leaping shadows at their backs!

The new barbarians—the ones he'd scoffed at, refused to believe in. The survivors, sinking back into barbarism, living by their wits, by sheer animal cunning, as the terrible spreading dust lost its power to cripple and kill.

No, no—he was imagining this!

But if he was imagining it why were they all about him now?

Why were they exploring the strength of his arms with iron fingers and making strange signs in the air before his face, as though he'd brought something evil into the cave with him?

Suddenly Holden knew that the cave dwellers were no illusion, for their angrily muttered words made sense.

He was a stranger, an outsider. Did he come as an enemy or a friend? If he came as a friend did he come as one wishing to throw in his lot with a tribe of proved courage—a great and fearless tribe with many talents?

If so—what could he do? What was he *good* at? Was he a mighty hunter, a trapper of beasts? The birds he carried—how had he caught them? He carried

no weapons, so perhaps he was not a hunter. Was he then a fire-maker? A healer?

Holden retreated a step before the press of gleaming bodies and the faces he had ceased to fear now, though some were still etched with a sharp hostility and others with dread. He smiled and made a deprecatory gesture.

But his voice, when it rang out in the shadows, was vibrant with pride. "I am an artist!" he said.

THE CAVE wall was high and smooth.

A flickering stone lamp stood at Holden's feet and his palette was a crude one, fashioned of birch-bark. Crude too were the pigments which covered it—the distilled juice of berries and red and yellow ocher drawn from the earth.

But the vision in Holden's mind was as bright as ever. He was putting all of himself into his work, bringing an imperishable dream to fulfillment again. Shadows flickered on the walls of the cave and danced on his bare, bronzed shoulders and the animal skin which hung in loose folds from his lithe torso.

Holden knew as he painted that he was creating something that would live forever in one deathless moment.

For Roger Holden was living at the top of his bent, shutting out Time as he struggled to surpass himself.