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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Vaunsburg Plague

By JULIUS LONG

Overnight it struck, that dread ray which turned vigorous young men and women into doddering, senile creatures in a few seconds—and lured a great European Dictator to the U. S. to use the ray for his own purposes

I AM only a lawyer, not a scientist, and when the first news of the scourge at Vaunsburg broke upon the world, my reaction was precisely that of any layman. I was frightened. The thing which had happened in Vaunsburg might occur anywhere else. The complete inability of science to discover its origin, the wholesale failure to comprehend the nature of the disease, brought a feeling of abject helplessness to all mankind. Humanity in the face of this catastrophe could not deny that the thing men fear most is not death, nor pain, nor loss of loved ones, but simply old age.

Nothing could be more appalling than the sudden, overnight transformation of a normal city of twenty thousand into a city of the aged. When this happened in Vaunsburg, the world was stunned. It tried not to believe, to discredit the reports. But the thousands of withered and aged victims who streamed dazedly from the doomed city were horrible exhibits in

proof that the thing was actually true.

Whole families of these miserable unfortunates tottered about the countryside in search of food and drink, only to be turned empty-handed from door to door. Ignorance of the nature of the disease, of course, was responsible for this inhumanity. It was not then realized that the plague was non-contagious, that it might be acquired only within the confines of the city of Vaunsburg. This fact was soon made manifest by the fate of those daring investigators of science and the press who went into the city in search of facts. One and all these men came away mutilated by age, victims of the senile sickness that claimed their minds and bodies within an hour after their inhabitation of the dread city.

Many of the foremost scientific minds of our time were sacrificed in this futile search for the genesis of the plague. Scientists found their brains enfeebled, their memories destroyed by senile de-

mentia before they were able to make the least progress in the study of the disease. So great became this increasing loss to society that by Presidential proclamation the city of Vaunsburg was at last shut off from the world by a cordon of National Guardsmen who kept a twenty-four hour vigil to see that no one strayed into the plagued city. Only a handful of people now remained there.

During those early days of the plague the world lived in a fear that was almost a panic. Scare rumors were rampant.

The plague was supposed to have broken out here, there, everywhere, until almost every corner of the globe had given out its false alarms. New York, only a hundred miles from Vaunsburg, was virtually hysterical. Its residents had horrifying visions of a city of seven million aged and withered people groping about the streets with the aimlessness of those who arise from sleep to find their lives spent.

Especially disconcerting was the occasional sight of a family of refugees



"In one minute it was over."

from the city of the plague. Nothing could be more grotesque than the spectacle of a father and a mother, bent and withered, leading by their bony hands children whose shoulders drooped with the decrepitude of senility, whose curls hung in grayed strands about emaciated cheeks and toothless mouths.

Sober minds reflected that these horrible manifestations of the disease veiled its deeper significance. A race overtaken by the senile sickness would not reproduce. Perhaps the end of civilization was at hand. However, the lapse of a few weeks altered the attitude of these pessimists. The plague broke out nowhere else. It seemed to be peculiarly fixed in Vaunsburg.

The world was able to assume a philosophical air. Optimism supplanted fear. Many leaders in both press and pulpit propounded the convenient theory that the plague of Vaunsburg had been a miracle, an act of Providence. They pointed out that when the news of the scourge had paralyzed the world, it had been on the verge of war. In their common fear the nations had sheathed their swords. Perhaps, we thought, the Vaunsburg plague had been an ill wind that had blown a great good. It had served its purpose, and we should fear it no longer. The solution to the problem lay simply in the isolation of the doomed city of Vaunsburg from the outside world.

It was then that I received my phone call from Bronson.

MY FIRST inclination at hearing the sound of his voice was to consign him to the devil and hang up. It seemed perfectly obvious that he and his daughter, Virginia, had played me for a colossal sucker.

The old man had come into my office nearly a year ago, bringing his lovely daughter with him. I confess that if she

had not been along when he consulted me, I would have told him point-blank that he had no case and sent him packing. But my interest in the sweetly beautiful Virginia prevailed over my better judgment.

Bronson belonged to that vast multitude of complaining people who, unable to look after their own economic interests, blame their failure upon the wickedness of the laws. Bronson's case is an excellent example of this attitude. For years he had been in the engineering department of the largest electric corporation in the world. He had drawn a straight salary for his services, a clause in his contract providing that for every patent taken out by the company for an invention of his creation, he should be paid the nominal sum of one dollar. For forty years this arrangement had been satisfactory to Bronson. In that time he had served his company profitably, having been responsible for no less than four hundred and eighteen patents, many of which resulted in stupendous profits. For each of these patents Bronson, of course, received one dollar.

He now wished to sue the corporation for compensation commensurate with the value of these patents. He was an old man, he told me, and he was concerned with the fate of his daughter. I saw his point, but was inclined to tell him that a girl as lovely as Virginia Bronson should fare well in this world.

Of course Bronson had no legal claim against the electric company. I told him this, but promised to see what could be done on his behalf. After considerable effort I managed to stage a meeting between my client and the directors of the corporation. It was a touching spectacle, old Bronson sitting there at one end of the table, Virginia by his side, while rows of well-tailored multi-millionaires sat uneasily in his presence. To make a long

story short, I shamed that bunch of plutocrats into giving Bronson what was termed a "bonus" of fifty thousand dollars. I gave this sum in its entirety to my client, not deducting a fee.

I thought I had done a splendid turn, but manifestly Bronson felt otherwise. He accepted the check gingerly, pulled his faded felt hat down over his whitened head and sullenly left my office. Had it not been for Virginia, who was mortified by her father's lack of gratitude, I should have been highly indignant. I had been seeing the girl a good deal since she had first come into my office. One need not be a psychologist to guess why I had exerted myself so much on her father's behalf and refused to accept a fee.

I had a dinner date with Virginia that evening. That afternoon I bought a ring. When I called at the Bronsons' hotel I was told that the girl and her father had left town. They had given the clerk no forwarding address. I heard nothing from them afterward.

Well, I had taken a nice ride, and I laughed it off sourly. All I asked was never to hear from Virginia Bronson or her father again.

And now Bronson was on the phone, calling on a long-distance line.

"WHAT do you want?" I demanded curtly.

"I need your services," he answered quietly. "I need them tonight. It is a matter of the greatest importance, and you can fix your own fee."

I was curious.

"Very well," I said. "Come to my apartment, and I will see you."

"No," said Bronson in that same level tone, "you must come to me."

The devil I would! I had no intention of leaving my comfortable apartment this night. But curiosity caused me to question him further.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Vaunsburg."

"Vaunsburg!" I fairly shouted. I wondered if Bronson had gone mad.

"Yes," he replied calmly, "Vaunsburg. Of course I am phoning from Sanderstown, five miles away. But in a few moments I shall return to Vaunsburg, where I have left Virginia. She——"

"Virginia!" I shouted into the phone. "Do you mean to tell me that you have taken her to that damnable place? Why, you ought to be——"

"Easy!" Bronson cut me short. "No harm has come to Virginia, and no harm will come to you if you follow my instructions. You see, I control the plague."

My brain whirled. Could Bronson be speaking the truth? Though skeptical, I thought it probable that he was.

"Tell me," I said in a tone that was almost pleading, "have you really found a way to put a stop to that horrible thing? If you have, I'll do anything you say to help you, to bring your discovery before the world."

"I told you," said Bronson, a hint of weariness in his voice, "that I control the plague. Now get a pencil and pad so that I can give you detailed instructions as to how to get through the National Guard line."

Hastily I complied, penciled the directions as Bronson gave them to me. He requested imperatively that I carry no searchlight, for fear that I might be observed.

"Are you familiar with the city of Vaunsburg itself?" he asked me, when his instructions with regard to the barrier were complete.

"Yes, I've been there often."

"Good. I shall be waiting for you in the main entrance of the Portage Hotel. Now pay particular attention to what I have to tell you about the element of

time. It is now eight o'clock. You can easily make it from New York to the city limits of Vaunsburg by midnight. If you should happen to get there quicker, wait until midnight before you enter the city. Under no circumstances enter before that hour. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said, though I failed to see why the time was so important.

"Good. I will give you forty-five minutes to walk to the hotel. No longer. If you are not there by that time, I cannot answer for the consequences. Is everything clear?"

I told him it was. But it was with a confused mind that I hurriedly changed clothes and called for my car.

Doubts assailed me with increasing force, and by the time I had passed through Holland Tunnel, I was almost tempted to turn back. To go to the plagued city of Vaunsburg merely upon a telephoned request seemed the most foolhardy thing in the world. I had no real proof that Bronson was telling the truth, that he actually was able to control the plague. Yet there was a chance that he had succeeded in mastering the dreaded senile sickness, and my duty was clear. Besides, though I ignored its presence, there was in the back of my mind the thought that I might again see Virginia. I sped on into the open country.

Traffic became increasingly scarce as I drew near to Vaunsburg. Within twenty miles of the city I found the roads deserted. I drove toward my destination with the sensation that I was leaving the world, entering a strange, unearthly land. It was shortly after eleven o'clock when I turned down a side road and headed for the spot which Bronson had told me was unguarded.

I FOUND the place as Bronson had described it, and that gave me hope. Moving in the moonless darkness, I made

my way under an abandoned culvert and passed beyond the circle of National Guard lights which surrounded the abandoned city. It was almost twelve by the time I had stumbled across fields to the city limits of Vaunsburg. I waited until my watch indicated midnight, then crossed into the land from which no man had returned with his youth.

There were no lights to guide my way, and I had forborne to carry a searchlight. In the utter darkness, I moved from vague memory of the city's streets, hurrying toward its center, ever fearful of Bronson's warning that I must reach the Portage Hotel by forty-five minutes after twelve. The silent houses loomed ominously about me, and deserted automobiles littered the streets. There were, according to reports, a few stragglers still left in the city, but wherever they were now, they were deep in sleep. Once a scrawny dog tottered toward me, but faltered in its path and fell to the pavement. I felt an inclination to go toward it and pat its weary head, but memory of Bronson's instructions sent me callously onward. From time to time I could not resist the temptation to rub my hands together, to feel my face to assure myself that there were no newly formed wrinkles there, that the plague had not gripped me. I could detect no change.

As I neared the center of the city I was beset by a new terror. Suppose all that Bronson had said to me had been lies! The man's inexplicable conduct a year before after I had done him a very great favor indicated that his mind was erratic, that he was not to be trusted. Perhaps he felt that I had sold out his interests to the electric company. A year's brooding over a fancied wrong might have caused him to use this demoniacal scheme to avenge his injury. He might have scoured the National Guard line for days to find that unwatched spot

through which he might send me to my doom. But it was too late to turn back now. I must go on to the finish.

Finally, breathless and perspiring, I arrived at the Portage Hotel. Hope failed me as I found it too in darkness. With a sickening sensation at the pit of my stomach I groped into the pitch-black entrance. A voice called to me from the darkness.

"In here. Quickly."

It was the most welcome voice I have ever heard in my life.

"Bronson!" I shouted.

"Quiet!"

I stared in the direction whence the voice had sounded and made out Bronson's outline as he stood there, holding open the inner door. I entered. Bronson closed the door and locked it.

"This way," he said, producing a small flashlight.

He led me to the stairs, and together we ascended seven flights. The corridor of the eighth and top floor was dimly lighted by feebly burning bulbs fed by loosely strung wires. The electric power plant at Vaunsbury had been dead since the beginning of the plague, and Bronson had apparently rigged up his own lighting-system. I had my first opportunity to get a good look at him.

He had changed little. Though he seemed a trifle thinner and more drawn, it was obvious that he had not fallen prey to the senile sickness. I was exuberant, thrilled. Manifestly Bronson had conquered the disease! His accomplishment would not only give him the scientific recognition he had so long been denied, but would bring him wealth as well.

"Where is Virginia?" I asked.

"You will find her down the corridor in No. 822. No doubt you would like to talk to her alone. When you have fin-

ished, I want you both to join me in my laboratory."

He turned down a corridor, and I saw him fumble with a key at a door. I hastened on, found No. 822. My hand trembled as I rapped upon the door.

"Come in."

It was Virginia's voice. I entered.

VIRGINIA stood in the center of the room, her dark hair accentuating the pallor of her gravely composed face. Though still beautiful the girl had subtly matured, and I knew intuitively that for many months past her life had been troubled. I was also keenly aware of the difficulty of my position. I resolved to behave as if nothing had ever happened between us. Abruptly a sound from below broke the awkward silence. I recognized the sound as the low hum of a dynamo. Then I became aware that Virginia had turned deathly pale, was holding her hands to her ears.

"Virginia," I said, "what is it? What is the matter?"

Her lips trembled. Her voice was hoarse and unrecognizable.

"Oh, my God! The machine! It's going again!"

"What machine?"

For a moment Virginia stared incredulously.

"Didn't my father tell you? Didn't he tell you about the thing downstairs, the machine he brought you here to sell for him?"

I shook my head.

"But, Virginia, this must be the device your father has invented to control the plague! Don't you understand? It will save the world from the worst plague it has ever known—and it will make him rich and famous. Certainly you can stand the humming for a little while."

Virginia stared perplexedly into my

eyes. Slowly she advanced and clasped my shoulders in her hands.

"Don't you really know? Didn't my father really tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Virginia released her grip, turned and walked to a lounge, where she wearily seated herself. Her eyes fixed upon infinity, she released her thunderbolt.

"The machine does not *control* the senile sickness. It *causes* it!"

I moved to a chair and sat down. I tried to think. What Virginia had just told me was incredible; yet I believed that it was true. I recalled how her father had evaded my question when I had asked him if he had found a way to stop the plague. He had simply said: "I control the plague."

"Tell me, Virginia, what has happened?"

She avoided my eyes.

"Father will tell you all there is to know. He wants us to go to the laboratory."

I got up from the chair.

"Let us go at once."

We spoke no word as we walked down the dimly lighted corridors. The thing that Bronson had done stunned me, left me incapable of fathoming what his motive could possibly be.

WE FOUND him in his laboratory, engaged with what I took to be an X-ray machine. Though it was an X-ray machine of small size, it looked top-heavy on its slender frame. Bronson left it and lighted a cigarette. His eyes questioned Virginia. She nodded resignedly.

"Perhaps," Bronson said, drawing upon his cigarette, "you are beginning to understand the nature of my control over the plague. I had no time to explain over the telephone."

"Is it true," I asked, "that you are responsible for what has happened?"

"It is."

"My God, man! What motive could you have had?"

"The best in the world," Bronson replied calmly. "My motive is a desire to leave my daughter the wealth she deserves."

"But what of the fifty thousand dollars I got for you?"

Bronson laughed derisively.

"Do you call that wealth? That was nothing! It was only a means to an end. The world owes me a debt a thousand times greater than that.

"I see you are skeptical. Well, let me tell you, there aren't enough adding-machines in the world to calculate the benefits to mankind brought by the inventions I received a dollar apiece for. A laborer is worthy of his hire. If the laws provide me with no way to collect my just dues, I will collect them myself in my own way.

"I have brought you here because you have shown yourself capable of dealing with the one man who can pay the price I ask. Besides, there is another consideration. My daughter will have great wealth, more wealth than that of any other woman in the world. She will need someone to take care of it for her. The solution of the problem is apparent. You love Virginia; she loves you. I am willing that you share the wealth that will be hers."

"Why," I asked Virginia, "did you run away without a word to me?"

"I am afraid I am responsible for that," Bronson said quickly. "I apologize for my seeming want of gratitude. You see, I was impatient. The money you had wangled for me gave me the opportunity I had so long awaited. Let me explain.

"Many years ago in the electric company's laboratory I made a discovery. It

was not one of the four hundred and eighteen patents taken out by the company. It was the result of a bit of disinterested research that the company would never have ordered. My discovery was the result of tireless experiments with the common X-ray tube, at that time but recently invented. An ordinary X-ray, of course, causes the rapid completion of the life cycle of a cell. My modified X-ray, obtained by use of electric current of high frequency and a new gas within the tube itself, causes the rapid completion of the life of an animal up to a certain stage of senility, beyond which the ray seems to have no further effect. After much experimentation I was able to age animal life at will. That first modified ray-tube, which I built many years ago, you see now."

Bronson indicated the thing which I had assumed was an X-ray machine.

"Certainly," I said in wonder, "that thing isn't responsible for what happened to the entire city of Vaunsburg!"

"No, it is not. But let me continue.

"The use of the ray was a problem which at first I could not solve. It seemed to have no practical purpose—none, at any rate, from which I could derive an income. I toyed with the idea that governments might use the ray for penal purposes. How simple it would be to let a convict serve a twenty-year sentence in an hour's time, or in a minute, according to the intensity of the ray! But reflection caused me to abandon the idea. The hypocrisy of society would abhor it. An offender against the law is not merely to be punished, he must be given time to reform! And though my ray could rob a man of his life quite as effectively as a prison, there would be no time in which he could learn respect for the sacred laws.

"Years passed, and I had long ago reached the conclusion that my ray

possessed only academic worth. Then approaching old age opened my eyes to its value. Daily I grew more fearful of that specter. It occurred to me that old age was the most frightful thing in the world. And suddenly it dawned on me that the power to inflict that horror was the most terrible power a man might exercise. I possessed that power.

"In my hands it was feeble. It required a ruthless wielder, a dictator of men. In war-torn Europe that man had arisen. Here, I told myself, was a man who would pay more dearly than any other for the power I held. I resolved to see him at once.

"I QUIT my job at the electric company and traveled to Europe. For months I endeavored to see the one man who more than any other would want my ray. Fear of assassination had flung a multiplicity of barriers around his person. Audience with him was virtually impossible to obtain, and I would reveal my secret to no other man. At last my opportunity came. After haunting his official headquarters for nearly a year I was given five minutes in his presence.

"In that short time I could not explain the full possibilities of my ray. The great Dictator was unimpressed. 'A nasty little toy,' he dismissed it. I had no time to explain how it might be used on a large scale, how huge ray-tubes rotated in dirigibles would age whole civilian populations in a few minutes. I could not convince him that ray-tubes installed in tanks could age armies before them. The Dictator listened with the stupid indifference that military men have always displayed toward improvements in the arms of war. When the five minutes were up I was dragged from his presence. I shouted that he should hear from me again.

"But one thing remained for me to do. I must make a gigantic senility-tube

capable of emitting a ray powerful enough to affect a city with a radius of several miles. This required thousands of dollars, which I did not have. You got them for me. I have built my tube, and you are familiar with the consequences."

"My God!" I said, "do you mean to tell me that you have robbed twenty thousand people of their lives just to demonstrate your ray?"

"That's the idea," said Bronson, thrusting a fresh cigarette between his thin lips.

I simply stared at the man. To argue with him, to evoke reason I knew to be futile. He had a fixed idea, an obsession, and only a fool would fling feeble arguments against that stone wall. He believed that his services to mankind justified anything he might do to it.

I turned to Virginia. "You didn't try to stop this?"

"You know I did! But I could do nothing with him."

"Yes," interjected Bronson, "she tried hard enough to talk me out of my rights. She is like most children who do not appreciate what their parents do for them."

"Tell me," I said, "where is this senility ray?"

"On the floor below. It rotates at the rate of sixty revolutions a minute. If the ray were to be left stationary, it would dry a man to skin and bones in a minute's time. I chose to place it here because this is the tallest building in the city. The ray is focused upon all below the level of this floor and covers a radius of three miles. I warn you not to venture downstairs so long as you hear the dynamo which feeds the ray-tube. I will turn it off at three o'clock when he comes."

"When who comes?"

"The man to whom you are to sell the secret of the ray."

"Who is that man?"

Bronson enjoyed the effect as he uttered a name.

"What!" I exclaimed. "Not he, himself?"

"Yes. The mountain has come to Mahomet. The very man who had me dragged bodily from his presence has come all the way across the ocean to pay me the price I shall ask for my 'nasty little toy'."

"But that's incredible! If his people knew that he had left the country they would rise and turn out his band of bloodthirsty butchers!"

"Nevertheless he is in this country. I talked to him on the phone only a few minutes before I called you. Two days after my so-called plague broke out I cabled him. He immediately cabled back that he was ready to talk business. He tried to trick me into bringing my portable ray-tube into his country, but I held out, and now he is coming here. Think of it! I have the greatest tyrant in the world at my feet!"

I was not so sure.

"You have a formidable opponent," I said. "And the mere mechanical end of such a huge transaction presents tremendous difficulties. How much do you intend to make the man pay?"

"Not less than a half-billion dollars in the best issues of the bonds of the United States, England and France."

I sat back in my chair and eyed Bronson fixedly.

"Just exactly how much do you think these bonds will be worth a month after your ray is in the hands of the Dictator?"

"What do you mean?" asked Bronson naively.

"Simply this: Once your ray is in the hands of the Dictator, the bonds of all other governments will not be worth the paper they're printed on. All governments will collapse before the Dictator if he is given control of the ray."

Perplexed, Bronson shrugged.

"In that case, you must convert the

bonds and invest the proceeds for me where it will be safe."

"That is a large order. But even if I were able to do what you request in the time allowed, do you think the world would be a fit place for you and your daughter? Why, Virginia might be one of the Dictator's first civilian victims."

"No," said Bronson confidently, "the world will be a better place with so much power in the hands of one man. Which was the more successful in maintaining peace, the Pax Romana or the League of Nations? I look forward to a world state where fear of one man's power binds all peoples together."

I recognized the futility of arguing against such idle speculation. I chose a more practical line.

"How do you intend to arrange the exchange of your ray for the bonds? You are dealing with a dangerous man."

"I have anticipated the obstacles involved," Bronson replied. "I want to familiarize you with my plan during the next two hours so that you will understand it thoroughly when the Dictator arrives."

I looked Bronson squarely in the eye.

"I refuse to help you and will prevent the sale of the ray if it is in my power to do so."

BRONSON regarded me as if I were a stubborn child.

"I want to assure you right now that there is nothing you can do to stop me. Virginia will bear me out. I alone know where the control switch to the ray-tube is located. The ray-tube cannot be reached unless the switch is thrown. If you were to try to pass below this floor you would be rendered a doddering old man without even the capacity to remember what you had come to do. And if you reached the door with all your faculties intact you would find it locked by a com-

ination lock which only I can open. I hope you realize that I am complete master here."

"I doubt that very much," said a low, alien voice.

The three of us turned quickly, saw a squinting little man standing in the doorway. He held his hands clasped together in a pious fashion and might have been mistaken for an elder in a church. But there was no mistaking the features of the squinting little face. It was a face known and despised over the civilized world.

Bronson breathed a name.

"Yes, it is I. Please forgive my early arrival. I was so impatient to renew our acquaintance."

Europe's hated Dictator stepped into the room. Immediately behind him followed two formidable figures who had been invisible in the dim light. They towered well over six feet in height and manifestly were members of the Dictator's famous Gray Guard. Each held a heavy Luger pistol as if it were part of his hand.

When Bronson spoke, his voice was strained and incredulous.

"Tell me how you got by the ray and into the building. I thought the ray was impassable."

The Dictator regarded him with a patronizing smile.

"That we were able to come here is no reflection on your ray," he said. "It is merely a reflection on your good judgment. Did you think for an instant that I was prepared to purchase the ray upon your own terms? Do you think that is how I rose from the slums to become the savior of my people? No, my friend, I will deal fairly with you, but on my own terms."

Bronson stared perplexedly.

"I don't understand."

"You erred in communicating with

Norton here. For weeks, ever since you cabled me, my operatives in this country have tapped the wires of every man and woman with whom you have ever come in contact. Your call to Norton tonight was reported to me, and when your friend entered the city he was not alone as he thought."

I started.

"Yes, young man, we crossed into the city only a short distance away from you. We made better time. We were able to enter the hotel at the rear and make our way up the stairs before you arrived at the front entrance. We have been in no hurry to make our presence known, and our patience has been well rewarded. For some time we have been entertained by Mr. Bronson's fascinating story. So, my friend, you have the greatest tyrant in the world at your feet?"

"You will never get away with this!" Bronson said hoarsely. "I alone know where the switch to the ray downstairs is, and I will never let you pass below this floor!"

The Dictator regarded him smilingly.

"That is a little detail which we have taken care of," he said. "Indeed, the reason for our haste in reaching this place was to locate your age-dealing machine and put it out of business. The dynamo still runs downstairs, but you may be assured that the ray-tube does not function."

Bronson tried to maintain a firm countenance, but I saw, and the Dictator saw, with a malicious little twinkle in his squinting eyes, that Bronson was a defeated man.

"That is a better way to look at it," he said. "As for my part of the bargain, I am prepared to be generous."

From an inner pocket he produced a slip of paper which he handed to the armed guard on his right. Carefully holding his Lüger, the man approached Bron-

son and handed him the paper. Bronson's lips trembled as he read.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" he exclaimed. "Why, it cost me that much to build the big ray-tube!"

"I surmised as much," said the Dictator. "That is why I am willing to reimburse you. I believe in nothing if not fair play."

Bronson allowed the check to slip from his fingers as he sagged back against a work-bench. In impotent despair his head shook from side to side.

"Now that I have done my part of the bargain," the Dictator announced curtly, "I will ask you to do yours. First we must have a demonstration of your small ray-tube. I did not come this far to carry away a defective product."

"I—I have no more guinea-pigs," Bronson faltered.

The Dictator's brows arched, then he looked from one to another of the three of us until his eyes fell on my own. He smiled at me in a way that made my spine freeze.

"Perhaps Norton will oblige us. Hans, bring the lawyer forward."

The armed man at the Dictator's left approached me, the Lüger pistol aimed in his hand.

I won't attempt to describe my feelings when the Dictator's purpose sank into my skull. I do know that in the fraction of a second it took the man called Hans to reach me the shirt on my back became soaked with icy sweat. I had always thought that I feared death by fire worse than any other torture that could happen to man, but I would gladly have plunged into a blazing volcano before submitting to the fate that the squinting little devil had planned for me. I knew that it was no use to plead for mercy. For the first time the psychology of the Dictator was thrust home to me. It was easy now to comprehend how such an unprepossess-

ing, contemptible little man had gone so far. Here was the man Machiavelli wrote about, a man utterly indifferent to all standards of private morality, sacrificing all human feelings to gain his end.

Hans had reached me now, and I was determined to smear his wooden face with at least one blow, though his bullets would rip out my heart.

"No, no!" Bronson cried hoarsely. "I won't have it! I'll destroy you all before I deliberately focus the ray on this man!"

The Dictator reflected. He had won his victory over Bronson, he knew. To madden him further might cost him all he had won. Only Bronson understood the ray, and once he got to the controls, in blind desperation he might make good his threat to destroy all in the room.

"Hold on, Hans," the Dictator said, "I have changed my mind."

He turned and surveyed the other armed bodyguard thoughtfully. His thin lips pursed womanly as he came to a conclusion.

"Boris," he said, "it is necessary that the ray-tube be demonstrated. You will please subject yourself to the ray."

THE giant foreigner listened dumbly. Slowly his eyes widened as comprehension came to him. For a second he stared helplessly about, his eyes even beseeching Virginia and me as if we were able to intercede for him. Then abruptly his heels clicked together, and he came to attention. The Dictator relieved him of his gun.

"Proceed with the experiment," he said to Bronson.

Bronson cast an inquiring look at the Dictator, saw only vain triumph in his squinting eyes. With an almost imperceptible shrug he moved to the machine and adjusted the control dials.

"No tricks, if you want your daughter to live," the Dictator warned.

"Stand over here," Bronson said to Boris, without looking at him. His manner was as casual as that of a photographer about to take a picture.

Boris moved obediently to the spot indicated. His heels clicked as he came to attention. The smug gleam of pride lighted the Dictator's eyes as he watched this amazing exhibition of blind devotion. I saw Virginia turn her back to the scene. Hans looked on dumbly.

"I will make it as quick as possible," Bronson told Boris, who eyed the ray-machine with grim fixity.

Boris saluted sharply as the switch was thrown.

"To the Fatherland!"

In one minute it was over. In sixty seconds we saw a powerful man in the prime of his life crumble into decrepitude. The lines of time formed about his face, which lost its strength in ghastly flabbiness. The hair of his head whitened, and his magnificent body shrank and bent. But most horrible of all was the piteous stare of the age-mutilated creature when the ordeal was over and the switch was thrown open. He looked about feebly, his faded eyes passing over us as though he had never seen us before. Lost, stunned, he groped to a chair. He sat there, held his wrinkled head in his bony hands and stared with rheumy eyes into space.

The Dictator made a statement.

"Boris was a brave man and a patriot. I shall see that he is awarded the Cross of Victory, First Class."

I looked into the eye of the gigantic Hans, who still covered me with the Lüger. Did I only imagine that I saw doubt in that obedient face?

"Well," asked Bronson wearily, "are you satisfied?"

The Dictator nodded.

"There remains but one difficulty. If I leave now with the ray-machine I have

no assurance that you will not sell its secret to someone else. Therefore I must eliminate that possibility."

The Dictator did not wait for the puzzled Bronson to comprehend the full import of his words. He simply raised the gun in his hand and fired point-blank at the inventor.

Bronson clutched his chest, eyed the Dictator in dumb bewilderment. Then, as a convulsion seized him, he turned his piteous gaze to Virginia. He regarded her with abject humility. His eyes sought forgiveness, seemed to implore that she try to understand that all he had tried to do had been for her.

Virginia, too stunned at first by the rapidity of the Dictator's cruel action to utter a sound, now gave a low moan as she rushed to her father. As she reached him he collapsed to the floor. She dropped to her knees and took him in her arms.

My action was spontaneous, without thought. Before I was aware of what I was doing, my arm swept down upon Hans' wrist and knocked the gun from his hand.

The man's recovery was instant. He lunged toward me, swinging. I ducked to one side, let him go by off balance and drove a rabbit punch into the back of his fat neck. He went down. I stooped for the gun, got my fingers on it. Then I was thrown from my feet as Hans, still on his knees, flung his arms around my legs. The gun went off in my hand. Hans released his grip and lay still.

Sprawled on my back, I shot a glance upward. The Dictator, anger distorting his little eyes, held his automatic in a bead on my head. It would go off, I knew, before I could bring my gun-hand around. With a horrible certainty that I was about to die, I waited.

I wondered why it didn't come as I returned the Dictator's angry, vindictive

glare. And then I saw that something was happening to him. The features of his face became subtly transformed. Though the look of anger was frozen there, inner puzzlement was manifesting itself. Did I imagine that the Dictator looked older, grayer?

He let his gaze waver to one side, then uttered a shrill, womanly scream. Instantly I swung my gun-hand around, got to my knees.

But there was no need to fear the Dictator now. He was a contemptible figure of abject terror, and as my eyes followed his own, I saw why.

An age-mutilated figure stood beside the ray-machine. It was the figure of Boris, who must have summoned his last remnant of strength to reach the thing that had left him a gray husk. With one hand he held the machine, to support his weight. With the other he directed the ray-tube at the man for whom a few moments ago he had sacrificed his life. A look of horrible disillusionment which seemed to reflect the ultimate revolt of a browbeaten people shone with holy fury in the avenger's eyes.

THE Dictator shrieked a vain plea, then with trembling, ill-responding fingers aimed the Lüger and fired. He fired not once but a half-dozen times into that aged body. The bullets seemed to have no effect as the specter-like figure absorbed their steel. Screaming, the Dictator hurled the weapon at the ray-machine, missed. He turned, started in frantic flight to the doorway.

In the doorway he fell. Struggling desperately to crawl away, he merely writhed ineffectually, whimpering in protest against his fate. Before my eyes he became transformed from a ruler of men to a horribly repulsive creature with a livid, degenerate face that spewed with its distorted lips a squeaky, childish gib-

berish in impotent despair. Fascinated, I stared until the writhing thing, whimpering almost inaudibly, lay back and was quiet.

I turned my eyes to Boris. He surveyed his victim a brief, triumphant second, then clutched the ray-machine with both hands as blood oozed from a half-dozen holes in his body. The top-heavy machine tottered, then fell over with a crash. A dead man, Boris fell clear of it to the floor.

I moved toward Virginia, who still held her father in her arms. A sheet of flame burst between us. I stepped backward, saw that, in crashing, the ray-machine had been shorted. I smelled burning insulation as flames shot from its interior.

Rapidly I skirted the flames, got to Virginia's side. I took Bronson's wrist in my hand. There was no pulse. The blaze behind me seared my back. I seized Virginia firmly by her shoulders and lifted her to her feet. She sobbed, struggled to loosen my grip.

"Don't you see?" I pleaded. "The

place is on fire. We can't stay here."

I did not exaggerate. The flames from the ray-machine had ignited the inflammable materials in the laboratory. A whole section of it blazed furiously, and the single doorway was threatened.

"But my father——"

I held Virginia close.

"I'm sorry. We can do nothing for him now."

By main force I got her to the doorway, stumbled over the body that lay sprawled there. Impatiently I bent over it, found it dead. I hurried Virginia to the stairs.

In the street a wind swirled vigorously. Without a fire department the city would be razed in a matter of hours. All traces of the mad ambition of Bronson would be destroyed. The fate of Europe's tyrant would be a mystery never to be revealed.

It was with a certain satisfaction that I led Virginia from the doomed city, never permitting her to glance backward as I held her close.