

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1942

Cover by Richard Bennett

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# The Victory of the Vita-Ray



By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

*Out of the past, out of their graves, come the ruthless men of all ages . . . summoned to fight again.*

I

CARL VON STORG, the world-famous inventor, made a deep bow, and smiled fawningly.

"Yes, Your Excellency, it does seem strange—impossible. But I will stake my head upon it. If this miracle does not come about—"

"If it does not come about, your head will be the forfeit!" growled Dictator Mal-

litot, bringing his bullish jaws together with an ominous snap. "By my sword! If it was anybody with less reputation—"

"My reputation, Excellency, is nothing to what it will be when this wonder is accomplished."

Mallitot tapped thoughtfully against the golden plush of his great throne-like chair of state. His little black eyes narrowed with such fierce intensity that it was easy to see why he had been secretly nicknamed

"The Frenzy." After a moment, he declared:

"It is my rule, von Storg, never to miss the chance to investigate anything new. If I can find a secret weapon that will give us the edge over our enemies, then I will move heaven and earth to get hold of it. But this so-called Vita-Ray of yours sounds—well, too preposterous! What did you say? You could bring back Caesar, Jenghis Khan and Napoleon?"

"Exactly, Your Excellency! Along with Washington, Grant, Lee, Charlemagne, or any other great commander. It is all very simple, once you have mastered the mechanics of time-space."

And you have accomplished that?"

The sneer in Mallitot's manner indicated his disbelief; his attitude was that of a cat who wishes to play with a mouse before completing the kill.

"Just so, Your Excellency. I will not take up time explaining the mathematics of the process, which only three persons on earth beside myself understand. The essence of it, though, is that I have built a super-dimensional mould, which can take impressions from the fourth and fifth dimensions. In these spheres time exists *in space*; so that if one catches an image of any part of space, one will also catch a segment of time, which may be the remote past or future. I have, moreover, perfected a gauge which can pick out the exact segment of the past or future—"

Mallitot was shifting uneasily in his seat. For a moment he was about to motion to the iron-helmeted guards who stood, rigid as planks, beside the bronze door to his right. Instead, however, he interrupted von Storg brusksly:

"You say you take impressions from other dimensions. How does that enable you to bring us a living man—"

The inventor smiled. "That is simple, Your Excellency. Let me offer an illustration. You listen to a phonograph; you

think you hear the voice of a man long dead. Actually, of course, you do not hear his voice at all. You hear a *reproduction* of his voice, preserved by the markings on the records. In the same way, the time-space mould will not actually bring you the past. But it will bring you impressions from the past, which, given the proper apparatus, can be enlarged into exact duplicates of bygone beings—of men and women dead a thousand, two thousand years."

"And you have the proper apparatus?"

"I have been working on it for twenty years, Your Excellency, and have just now perfected it. Merely as an experiment, I have this very day brought back Homer and Socrates. If you wish to see them—"

Mallitot's right hand shot out impatiently; his heavy brows drew together in a disgusted grimace. "Haven't time!" he grumbled.

"Hereafter, of course, I will concentrate on generals. Have you any preferences, Your Excellency?"

"When you have brought back Tamerlane, Wellington, and Frederick the Great, you may call for me!" snapped Mallitot. "I give you ten days! Otherwise, have a thought for that head of yours!"

## II

IN von Storg's private mansion, ten days later, all was confusion. Footmen and butlers bustled about the fifty-room former castle, which von Storg had purchased from the proceeds of innumerable inventions. From mouth to mouth the excited word was whispered, "Mallitot is coming today! Mallitot is coming!" and whoever heard these tidings trembled, for the dictator was best beloved at a distance. But other rumors, even more extraordinary, were bruited about in the servants' quarters: "The master has twenty lunatics as his guests! He has them all penned up on

the top floor, carefully guarded. They are in truth wild men— They wear swords and armor. They go clanking about, rattling their spurs. They gnash their teeth, and mutter oaths. The looks in their eyes would make a tiger turn pale.

Meanwhile von Storg, busy in his laboratory in the basement, was occupied with a great machine that seemed mostly a mass of large mirrors and prisms, connected with an intricacy of wires, and varied with dozens of foot-long bulbs that looked like magnified radio tubes. But the central part of the apparatus was a ceiling-high globe of frosted glass, in which from time to time a mass of plastic material was placed, and which would open every few hours, to eject a reeling, human-shaped thing, stunned and bewildered, and dressed in the costume of some long-past age.

At length came the announcement that Mallitot had indeed arrived, along with his retinue! By previous arrangement, the inventor met him in a small ante-room, where they could talk without fear of being overheard. The dictator, blunt as always, greeted him with the inquiry, "Well, von Storg, have you done it?"

"Yes, Your Excellency—on the whole. There have been some minor exceptions. I have been unable to locate the Duke of Marlborough, Cromwell, or Alaric the Visigoth. Somehow, they have gotten lost in inaccessible crannies of time-space. Likewise, Timur the Great—"

"That is unfortunate!" sighed Mallitot. "I have always admired his genius for throwing up mounds of skulls. Well, then, who have you located?"

"If you will wait just a minute, Your Excellency, you shall see. To avoid confusion, I shall bring them in one by one."

He pressed a button; and called through a speaking tube, "Send me down Number 13. At once!"

Hardly more than sixty seconds had gone by before the door rattled open. An

imperious figure entered with a stately stride, over five feet in height. Across his shoulders a time-worn military cape was thrown; he wore the frayed and dusty headdress of an officer of the early nineteenth century; his face, sharp-cut and haughty, and his flashing falcon eyes, could belong to only one character in all history.

Spontaneously, Mallitot arose and bowed. For the first time in his life he was awed by a human presence; unconsciously his manner became deferential.

"Where am I, Messieurs? What is the meaning of this indignity?" rumbled the stranger, in a rusty-sounding but recognizable French.

For a moment, as he stared at this replica of the victor of Austerlitz and Jena, Mallitot was without words.

"It is all so strange, I do not understand what has happened. I do not understand," mumbled the Emperor, rubbing his brow in confusion. "It was all darkness. All darkness—darkness. Then I awoke. I seem to have had nightmares—about some island in the sea, where I was a prisoner. Dieu! It is good to awaken from nightmares. But where am I? Where is Josephine?"

"She is dead more than a hundred years, Sire," replied von Storg. "Have you forgotten? She died even before you did."

The great commander shook his head confusedly. "Died—died—yes, she died. Josephine died. So then I too am dead? That would explain it. This—this is the land of ghosts?"

"Not so, Sire. We have brought you back to earth, after more than a century. Do you not wish to live, and fight again?"

The renowned general's hand reached down toward the rusted sword at his side. "On my faith, I do! The English—those hard-headed dolts of English—I must still conquer the English!"

"Exactly, Sire! But first we must make things a little clearer for you."

**F**OR the next twenty minutes Mallitot and von Storg took turns in explaining just what had happened, answering their guest's questions, and trying to overcome his bewilderment.

"I must tell you, Sire, why we are so eager to have you with us," the dictator at last stated. "I, too, am an emperor—the leader of a great coalition of nations in the vastest war of history. Three-fourths of Europe and part of Asia are fighting all the rest of the world. Of late the battle has not gone well. We need new leaders. And who could lend our army more prestige than the great Napoleon? Who could strike more terror into enemy hearts? Who could bring us faster to victory?"

An eager, a savage glitter had come into the eyes of the revived one. "At your service, Messieurs! But first tell me about this war of yours. Is it fought most with infantry—or cavalry?"

Mallitot and von Storg did their best to explain the transformation in warfare. "It will take you months of study, Sire, to catch up with our methods. By present-day standards, your means of killing and destroying were childish. Before giving you command of an army, we must set up a school where you may study, along with your great kindred of all the ages."

Attended by two armed guards, Napoleon was led away to be followed by the old Assyrian warrior-king Assur-bani-apal, who in turn was succeeded by Kublai Khan and Attila the Hun. In all these cases, it was difficult to establish communication, even through interpreters; but it was evident that, by means of sedulous instruction, all these famed leaders could be taught a modern language within a few months; while their natural military genius would swiftly master modern technique.

Grandiose in the extreme were the plans that Mallitot began to form, after he had interviewed ten of the resurrected generals.

"I will make you Minister of War, von Storg, as a reward!" he exclaimed, while enthusiastically striding back and forth, amid a clanking of spurs. "It may take a year to accomplish, but we will produce the sensation of all time. I will appoint Napoleon commander-in-chief—second, of course, only to yourself. As a marshal of the army of the west, I will select Julius Caesar. For the north, Philip of Macedon! His son Alexander will have charge of the army of the south. In the east, Hannibal's father Hamilcar Berca, along with Hannibal himself—"

In this vein Mallitot rushed on and on. "With the best military brains of history behind us, we will conquer the world!" he swore; while von Storg, with a vaguely ironic smile, nodded agreement.

Meantime, in closely guarded rooms upstairs, a score of bristling sworded figures, fierce-eyed and proud of bearing, and clad in all manner of antique uniforms, shields and armor, stalked uneasily back and forth, muttering unintelligibly in many languages and glaring at one another with haughty, hostile glances.

### III

**A** YEAR had gone by. The War of Five Continents, as Mallitot's Herculean struggle was called, was blazing as fiercely as ever, with the issue still in the balance. And as yet the public had no inkling of the great surprise that lay just ahead.

Meanwhile, Mallitot and his new Minister of War, Carl von Storg, held many an excited conference. "Your Excellency, I have had a hard time talking Hannibal out of the idea of using elephants," he would report. Or, "Alexander is a devil to deal with, Your Excellency. He goes around swinging his sword, and shouting, 'More worlds to conquer! More worlds to conquer!,' until I wonder if he isn't suffer-

ing from a psychosis. And Caesar, Your Excellency, is haunted by a phobia. He can't get it out of his head that someone wants to assassinate him. Why, he turns pale at the very sight of a dagger."

Nevertheless, Mallitot's plans progressed admirably on the whole; until that happy day when Napoleon and the others were skilled enough in modern methods to be entrusted with army commands. The scheme had been thoroughly worked out: a concentrated assault on all fronts on a given day, when the great strategists of all time would overwhelm the enemy in the most frightening blitzkrieg in history. It was Napoleon himself who had plotted the campaign, down to the last bombing attack on undefended villages, and the last Fifth Column planting of bewilderment and terror among the civil population.

There was just one problem that seemed to worry the new Minister of War. "It looks, Your Excellency," he gloomily confessed one day, "as if there is a minor defect in the Vita-Ray. After all, you know, it is difficult to get even a photograph without some distortion. One small ingredient, somehow, has been left out of our generals."

"What is that?" demanded Mallitot, snapping his heavy jaws angrily together.

"Well, Your Excellency, it may be because it's so fragile an element. They all seem to have lost their moral sense."

The dictator's thick features relaxed in open laughter. "Pooh!" he derided. "What use is a moral sense in the new warfare?"

Nevertheless, the time was to come when he was profoundly to regret this lack.

It was planned that, on the day of the blitzkrieg, Napoleon himself would lead the central drive against the chief enemy, Anglia. Simultaneously, Caesar and Alexander would strike in powerful flanking attacks; while Jenghis Khan and Charlemagne, aided by lesser leaders such as

Scipio, Pyrrhus and Rameses of Egypt, would hurl themselves upon Anglia's allies in irresistible assaults. Meanwhile, Hannibal, with such able aides as Charles XII of Sweden, Federick the Great and Chaka the Zulu, would conduct a pincers movement that would catch the foe between the claws of a gigantic vise. In less than ten days, according to Mallitot's exultant calculations, the war would be over.

#### IV

ON THE day of the intended assault, the Dictator abandoned his usual habit of breakfasting in bed. In fact, he was up before dawn; and, decked in clanking military apparel, anxiously ranged the Red Room of his palace, awaiting tidings from the field of battle.

His first intimation that not all was well came to him at just about daybreak, when he failed to receive the expected telegram, informing him of the successful surprise assault upon the Anglian central headquarters. Impatiently he continued to stalk back and forth in his palace room; and his irritation was inflamed by the fact that all attempts to reach Napoleon by telephone had been without result. "What in damnation's the matter with the fellow!" he raged. "Doesn't he know he's subject to my commands?"

"Perhaps, Your Excellency, his headquarters have been bombed," suggested Paul Dockwitter, the Assistant Minister of War, who sat at a far corner of the room, sorting dispatches.

It was then that the dictator's private telephone rang out clangorously. Von Storg was at the other end of the line; and his tones, jerky with excitement, had no regard for the usual courtesies. "Quick, sir! I must come to you! At once! Haven't a second to waste!"

Taking consent for granted, the speaker snapped off; while Mallitot, resuming his

floor pacing, cursed his Minister of War with a variety and savagery of expletives that would have turned a longshoreman green with envy.

Not five minutes had passed before von Storg had burst in. He had the appearance of a man who had not slept all night; his hair was in disorder, his eyes bloodshot, his tie half loose, his face red, his clothes rumpled, and his manner that of one who has just escaped from a fire.

"Your Excellency—Excellency!" he gasped, as he stormed into the room. "I—I wanted to tell you in person. Something—something terrible has happened!"

Mallitot's huge clenched fists swung high in air, and came down as if to pound the defenseless Minister of War.

"What is it?" he boomed.

"Excellency, I assure you it is something unforeseen—quite unforeseen," rushed on von Storg. "There was nothing we could do to guard against it—nothing under heaven! No one is to blame. As I told you, our generals lack all moral sense—"

"Thunder and brimstone!" snarled Mallitot, resorting to his favorite oath. And he took a step forward, and prepared to seize von Storg by the neck. "Are you ever coming to the point? Or will I have to shake it out of you?"

"No, no, Your Excellency—be calm. The fact is—the fact is simply this. There has been a revolt."

"Revolt?" Mallitot's tones were like a lion's. "Who dares revolt against me?"

"No one, Your Excellency. No one. They have revolted against Napoleon."

"How in hell can that be?"

Von Storg stared his chief steadily in the eye, then continued, "It is God's truth, Your Excellency. Caesar and Alexander hatched the plot together. They were jealous of Napoleon. Resented your putting the High Command in the hands of an upstart, as they called him—a man two thousand years their junior. At this very

minute, Alexander and Caesar are closing in on Napoleon. Your armies of the west and south have launched a blitzkrieg against the armies of the east and north."

Mallitot reeled; then steadied himself.

"But what of Anglia?" he groaned. "Are they not fighting Anglia and her allies?"

"No, Your Excellency. As I have pointed out, your new generals have no moral sense."

**F**URTHER details of the attack were soon revealed. Alexander had set out at the head of a squadron of dive bombers, while Caesar had followed with a charge of heavy tanks. Hannibal, still vowing eternal vengeance against Rome, had promptly taken sides against Caesar, and was doing his best to save Napoleon's lines from being breached. But two Panzer divisions, ably led by Pompey the Great, had driven a spearhead ten miles into the Napoleonic ranks; and the resistance of Vercingetorix, the crafty Gallic chieftain, had not yet sufficed to stem the tide. Moreover, mechanized reinforcements, under the command of King Alfred—

But Mallitot could not bear to hear more of the story.

"Stop!" he cut von Storg short, with an angry pounding of his fists. "I'll have those traitors Caesar and Alexander executed! I will go to the front in person—yes, in person—"

But the insistent clanging of the telephone interrupted him. It was von Storg who took up the receiver; and his face turned pale as he listened. "Heaven help us!" he ejaculated. "Heaven help us all!" And then, after an interval of listening, "What! Are you certain? Is that all confirmed?"

"Your Excellency," he announced, hesitantly, while his whole form trembled, "I have just received bad news. Hannibal—poor devil!—has been mowed down by

machine-gun fire. Richard Coeur de Lion is wounded by shrapnel. And Napoleon is a prisoner again."

"What is that?" roared Mallitot. "Napoleon a prisoner of Caesar?"

"No, Your Excellency. A prisoner of the Anglians. The damned foxes! They took advantage of the quarrel among our generals to start an offensive. Meanwhile, some fifth columnists have stabbed Caesar to death. Alexander is reported missing in an air attack. Attila the Hun, who led Napoleon's mechanized cavalry, was last seen in full flight. Peter the Great is feared gassed, along with Cortez and Pizarro. The battle, however, is still raging, with Darius of Persia trying to rally his forces against the Anglians—"

Before von Storg could finish a commotion from just outside broke in like a thunderstorm. A tumult of shouts and yells, mingled with clattering and crashing sounds and the booming and rumbling of explosives, burst over them in sudden fury. And, rushing to a window, they saw that which made their knees turn weak and their voices temporarily fail them.

A vast conclave was approaching, thousands strong. Helmeted men, with out-thrust bayonets and grim faces, were pressing forward. Overhead the airplanes wheeled, offering protection to the advancing troops; ahead of them rumbled the tanks, amid spouts of smoke; while multi-colored banners, lettered in many languages, waved challengingly above the men. In the vanguard, swinging a glittering sword, strode one whom von Storg instantly recognized.

"It's Leonidas!" he cried. "Leonidas, the Spartan!"

Mallitot's heart sank as he gazed at that redoubtable king of antiquity, the valiant Greek who had held the hordes of Xerxes against overwhelming odds.

Proudly through the air rang the battle cry of the approaching hosts. "Down with tyrants! Down with tyrants! A free world for free men! A free world for free men!"

On and on, without a pause or break, the assailants swept. Their uniforms, Mallitot saw, were the olive-green of Anglia. Their weapons were the weapons of Anglia. But they all did deference to Leonidas, who, taking advantage of the strife between Caesar and Napoleon, had offered his services to the enemy, and now, by a strategic march, had advanced toward the dictator's palace in an enveloping movement.

Instantly Mallitot perceived that all was lost. He was surprised, trapped beyond possibility of escape. His empire was in enemy hands! The war, for all practical purposes, was ended! No choice remained to him except to become a prisoner, or take his own life.

As he reached for the dagger that always lay concealed against his left side, he took time to shout angrily at von Storg:

"Pig! Imbecile! Traitor! Couldn't you foresee that these vile creations of yours would turn against me?"

"No, Your Excellency. Again there was some little kink in the time-space mould. How could I know that Leonidas, alone of all the generals, would come back with a moral sense?"

Triumphantly the cries of the approaching multitudes rang out, "Down with tyrants! Down with tyrants! A free world for free men!"

The arms of the besiegers were already hammering against the outer walls of the palace as the right hand of Mallitot, arch-dictator and war lord of more than half of Europe and Asia, came down with a desperate lunge, and the slim blade of the poignard buried itself in his heart.