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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

World's End

By HENRY KUTTNER

A weird-scientific tale of travel through Time, and the terrible Black Doom, spawned in the heart of a meteorite, that will menace our descendants

KENNETH BLAKE, struggling into a bulky, ill-fitting garment of black leather, glanced up as old Norwood came into the laboratory. Norwood's gaunt, wrinkled face was set in frowning lines, as it had been ever since Blake had announced that the experiment would take place today. It was odd that Norwood, who would be only a spectator, was worried and afraid, while Blake was only anxious to get into the Time Machine and test the theories which had engrossed him for seven years.

Blake smiled as he brushed back his blond hair with a mittened hand.

"Don't look so miserable, Jep," he said, and raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment. "Good Lord, another gun? You must think I'll have to stand off an army."

The other shrugged his narrow shoulders. "It's as well to be prepared," he said glumly, but put the revolver aside and came forward to help Blake, who was fumbling with the fastenings of a transparent helmet. Impatiently Norwood brushed away Blake's gloved fingers, and the younger man, chuckling, watched deft, lean hands fasten the helmet into place.

Blake touched a stud on his suit. His voice sounded, hollow and metallic.

"Can you hear me, Jep?"

"Yes. The phone's okay—try the heat."

Blake flicked another stud. After a moment he hastily pushed it back to its original position. His face, seen through the transparent helmet, was glistening with perspiration.

"Too hot for comfort."

"You may need it, though, Ken. We can't tell what you'll find—even if the machine works."

"If it works! Of course it'll work." Blake's voice was a little uncertain. Norwood had expressed the fear that had been haunting him for years. He turned away to hide his face from Norwood's searching, faded eyes. If he were to fail now!

No, he wouldn't fail—he couldn't! All the tests had succeeded—all but the final one. Yet on that final test the success of the experiment must depend. Suddenly Blake was impatient. He moved across the room, grotesque in his insulated, electrically heated suit, to the Time Machine.

A raised platform of shining metal, eight feet square, with a shoulder-high railing running along its sides—that was the Time Machine. Only Blake and Norwood knew of the long and bitter years that had gone into its making, the endless experiments and the mighty dreams that had made the creation more to them than a machine. The platform, two feet thick, housed a complicated array of machinery—the fruit of seven years' toil. That was the heart of the machine. From the platform's center a thick pillar jutted up, studded with gages and dials. A bakelite lever protruded from a slot in the column's flat top. Blake's eyes were dreaming as they dwelt on the machine.

And Norwood—strange! At first, as enthusiastic as his partner, lately he had grown morose, worried. It was as though

he feared the machine his deft hands and Blake's had created. Sometimes Blake had seen the old man staring at the Time Machine with a brooding dread in his eyes. But Blake himself felt only exhilaration, joyous expectancy at the thought of embarking on the greatest adventure—into time!

Blake ducked under the railing and stood erect on the platform. At his feet was a pile of paraphernalia Norwood had thought he might need—scientific textbooks, a barometer, blankets, tinned food, a large keg of water, and weapons—re-

volvers, several rifles, and even a sub-machine gun. Norwood couldn't seem to realize that the machine itself was the best protection against danger—that at the first warning of trouble Blake could put a dozen years between himself and any enemy.

BLAKE stepped to the pillar and knelt, examining the instruments. After a moment he nodded.

"Ready, Jep?" he called.

"Yes—ready," Norwood said gruffly.



"In the cosmic scheme of things, time was meant to be unchangeable."

But Blake did not touch the bakelite lever. He turned to face the old man.

"Think of it, Jep," he said softly. "When I touch that lever I'll go on the greatest adventure man has ever known. I'll be projected into another dimension, while the years and centuries flow past—and then I'll come back into the three-dimensional world in another time! It's as though I could free myself from gravitation and let the earth spin around beneath me. Lord, the wonder of it! I—I'll bring back one of your descendants to visit you, Jep," he finished, somewhat embarrassed by his outburst. But Norwood did not smile.

"I know how you feel, Ken. And——" He hesitated, went on abruptly. "Don't you feel something else, too? That—that man wasn't meant to do this? That in the cosmic scheme of things time was meant to be unchangeable? I feel that, Ken. I—I think we're doing wrong."

Blake stared. "Wrong? Time—unchangeable? Why, we've changed it already! Those models we made—we sent them into time——"

"Into the future, yes. Not the past. Something went wrong there. Why couldn't we send a model *backward* in time?"

"I don't know," Blake said slowly. His face changed. "But I'm going to find out. Get back, Jep!"

His hand closed on the bakelite lever, swung it to the left. Nothing happened.

For a heartbeat there was utter silence. Then Norwood said slowly, "You see, Ken? Something's wrong. According to our calculations you should be in the past now. But you're not. I tell you, man can't transgress against the——"

As he spoke Blake moved the lever, pushing it in the opposite direction. With the abruptness of a thunderclap blackness enveloped him.

Involuntarily his hand released the lev-

er. Then, fearful that he might not be able to find it again in the intense darkness, he fumbled blindly until his fingers closed on the bakelite. He called softly, "Jep!"

Or, at least, his tongue formed the name. But he could hear not the slightest sound. It was as though he had been suddenly struck dumb. He called Norwood's name again, and then shouted it at the top of his voice.

There was no sound.

A surge of exultation leaped up within him. The Time Machine had worked! He had been flung out of three-dimensional space, into an alien dimension in which, apparently, sound could not exist—in which the natural laws might be fantastically warped.

Struck by a sudden thought, he fumbled at his belt, brought up a flashlight. He touched the switch experimentally. The blackness was unbroken. Then—if the flashlight was working—light-vibrations could not exist here.

Panic touched him briefly. How could he read his instruments? For all he knew, he might have already been carried millions of years into the future. Trembling a little, he gripped the flashlight and tapped gently upon the glass that shielded a dial. There was no sound of breaking glass, but presently his fumbling hands touched jagged sharpness. He stripped off a glove and gently touched the needle indicator.

It had not moved, apparently. A mad thought came to him. Suppose time did not exist in this dimension—not time as earth knew it. Or—no, that could not be it. The needle was quivering, as though under the stress of tremendous forces. It had already revolved about its dial, reached its limit—and that limit was approximately a hundred thousand years!

Blind, unreasoning fear gripped Blake as he fumbled for the bakelite lever,

When his fingers closed on it he stood silent for a moment, and then quickly jerked it back. The darkness fell away and was gone.

Instantly angry crimson light lanced into Blake's eyes. He shut them tightly, bringing up his hands in a swift protective gesture before he remembered the shielding helmet. Slowly the pain grew less intense. He opened his eyes, blinking, and stared around.

This was a white world, splashed with crimson. And it was cold—terribly so. Blake switched on the electric heating-coils, but despite them and despite the insulation of his clothing he shuddered with the fearful cold. World of snow, reddened with the rays of a huge, scarlet sun!

Stars glittering icily in a black sky, in which a round red ball hung. The atmosphere must be tenuous, then—but why? After all, a hundred thousand years was only a day in a planet's life. What had brought this untimely death to earth?

An intolerable sense of desolation gripped Blake. Was there no life anywhere on earth? Did the snow blanket lie like a pall from equator to pole? As he wondered he caught a flicker of movement far away, and, remembering that there were binoculars in the heterogeneous pile at his feet, he hastily began to search for them.

But they revealed little. Oddly, it seemed as though the sky, near the horizon, was moving. Little twinkling streaks of light seemed to flicker eerily across the horizon, like fireflies darting across a wall of basalt. How close Blake's simile was to the truth he was soon to learn.

For the horizon marched! Like a sky-towering wall the jewel-streaked blackness rushed toward him, incredibly—alive! It was like a great ramp stretching across the horizon as far as he could see, and inexorably, inevitably, the wall

moved toward him. Blake thought of a wave, rushing across the snow.

He took the binoculars from his eyes and involuntarily gasped. The great wall was menacingly close—perhaps thirty miles distant, and apparently hundreds of feet high. Still Blake could not identify it. Smooth, glistening blackness, shot with tiny, darting sparks and streaks of light. And Blake sensed life in the thing—malignant life.

It was rushing toward him with amazing speed, faster than the swiftest airplane. In a few moments now it would reach him, overwhelm him. At the thought Blake's hand went out to the bakelite lever.

But he did not touch it. Amazingly, the scene had changed. The red-splashed snow, the onrushing ramp of blackness, were gone! They had faded and vanished like mist, and in their place had grown another scene, utterly different, utterly—alien.

THE platform of the Time Machine rested on a floor of white stone, and far above was a dome roof of the same substance. The circular room was vast—nearly half a mile in diameter, Blake judged. Here and there were curious machines, the purpose of which he could not guess. Save for the machines, the great chamber was empty. The penetrating cold was gone, and Blake switched off the heating-coils in his suit.

A little spot of light began to glow in the air near the platform. Blake stopped to snatch up a revolver, and for a moment his eyes were turned away. When he looked again, a man was standing where the light had been.

A strange man, indeed. Blake's eyes went wide as he stared at the stocky, dwarfed body, the slender hands, with fingers that seemed almost like tentacles—and the astounding head of the being.

At first Blake thought the man was a hunchback, and then he realized that the sack-like object that hung down and rested on the dwarf's back was actually a part of his skull. The head, seen from the front, seemed normal, although the eyes were abnormally large, and the mouth little more than a tiny slit; but the back of the skull was elongated into a two-foot-long cylinder of pulpy white flesh that hung down almost to the floor. And yet that was the logical evolution of the brain-case, Blake realized, for the man's slender neck could scarcely support the weight of a huge, globular cranium. Any misstep would, in such a case, topple the top-heavy head to one side and result in a broken neck. Logical—but fantastic, strange beyond imagination!

The stocky body was clothed in glistening, metallic mesh. One of the slender arms swung up, palm forward, in the immemorial gesture of peace.

Blake thrust the revolver into his belt, but said not relax his wariness. He said, "Who are you?"

As he had expected, the other gave no sign of understanding. A gulf of a hundred thousand years separated the languages of the two. Yet the future-man bridged the gulf in a way that was astounding in its simplicity.

After a pause a voice said, "I am called Nak."

Blake's eyebrows shot up in bewilderment. He had been watching the dwarf's lips, was sure that they had not moved. And, strangely, he could not distinguish the voice's tone—whether it had been flat, shrill, or harsh.

Again the voice, "I am Nak. I am not speaking—not orally. It is my mind you hear."

Blake gasped, "Your *mind*?"

"Yes. Thought-transference — telepa-

thy. The vibrations of my mind impinge upon yours."

"But I *hear* you——"

"No, you do not. That is habit. Your brain transmits my thoughts to the auditory nerves, where they are translated into your tongue. When you speak, your words alone would be gibberish, but I receive the thoughts behind your words as well—and automatically translate them into my own language. Our race has conversed thus for thousands of years."

Blake said, "Are you—a friend?"

"Yes. You are puzzled. Your mind is confused. I can see—you have come through time." There was a flicker of expression on the narrow face, with its great eyes. "From the past . . . but I thought there was never any successful time-projector built."

"I was the first," Blake said, "so far as I know—but that was very long ago."

"The date?"

Blake told him. The other shook his head in a gesture of bewilderment. "In all history there is no record of such a success. Not even when the Doom brought about the Renaissance of Science——"

"The Doom?" Abruptly Blake remembered the marching ramp of blackness. "The—how did I get here? How did you——"

"I transported you here, by means of a physical process I do not think you could understand. It is a matter of warping space—as a sheet of paper can be folded until opposite edges touch. For a moment the Seventh Circle—where you were—and this room were touching, in hyperspace. It was a development of the old radio transmission of matter."

The future-man, Nak, had been eyeing the Time Machine curiously. Now he came forward, fumbling at his belt. Blake retreated a step.

"I mean no harm," the strange telepathic voice said. "Your coming has brought hope to the world—where I am one of a dozen survivors. But—you cannot understand. I must show you. Watch that machine."

He gestured, and Blake stared at a huge machine forty feet distant—a creation of gleaming metal and softly glowing lights. Abruptly the lights flashed out blindingly. Then in the place of the machine was a screen of lambent radiance, oval, twenty feet tall. Shadows crawled across it. They grew clearer. They became—pictures!

A CITY flashed into the foreground, seen from the air—New York, in Blake's day. Yet Blake recognized odd discrepancies—an airplane flew past, and it was an awkward machine of pre-war days. A ship visible in the harbor was an old-fashioned sailing-vessel. The buildings were windowless.

"It is a reconstruction," Nak said. "Histories are not always accurate, especially when dealing with times so remote. Watch."

The scene shifted. There was a glimpse of racing green water. Another city grew—Sydney, Australia, Blake thought. It faded; there was only the white expanse of a sun-parched desert.

Abruptly there was a blinding flash of light—soundless. When it passed Blake saw a great crater, still smoking, gouged out of the desert.

"A meteor," Nak said. "The seed of the Doom."

The scene changed again. Now the desert seemed less arid, as though dozens, perhaps hundreds of years, had passed. At the bottom of the crater was visible a little splotch of black. It glittered in the glaring sunlight.

"That is the Doom," Nak said, and

W. T.—6

there was hatred in his voice. "That entity, from intergalactic space, has wiped out all life from earth—all but a few hundreds. What it is we never discovered—not though we experimented with it for thousands of years. It is alive, but it is matter of an entirely different atomic type from matter that we know. It is not crystalline, nor mineral, nor organic at all—yet it is alive. And it eats. It ingests all matter—stone and sand and water, and even air, are all alike to it. Watch."

On the screen there appeared suddenly a great boulder, on which a tree, rooted in a little cup of soil, grew precariously. Into the picture a finger of blackness crept. It moved forward slowly, engulfing the stone and the tree. They were swallowed in the blackness.

"Earth had nothing that could stop it. It moved outward from the Australian desert—and downward too. Through the centuries it has grown until the solid earth, save for one 'island,' consists of nothing but that substance. Like an infection, it has eaten its way through steel and solid rock. It grew very slowly at first. Then faster and faster—perhaps forty thousand years ago man realized that it was a menace. It had covered only eighty square miles then. Its rate of growth increased tremendously, and there was nothing that could stop it.

"It has eaten earth, all but a small island, where the last remnants of humanity are gathered. In a circle about this central doomed city are the Outposts. This is an Outpost—one of a group of towers scattered about the edge of the island, to battle the Doom."

"You—battle it?" Blake asked.

The other nodded. "Yes. Now that it is too late, we have discovered how to destroy it. Through atomic destruction we disintegrate it—shatter the atoms of which it is composed. But we have so

little power. For a hundred years now we have been losing ground. Our fuel is rapidly becoming exhausted. Soon the Doom will sweep onward unchecked, and man will go for ever.

"I have told you this because it is in your power to save mankind," Nak went on, his voice tense. "For you can move in time, and that——"

A warning throbbing went through the great room. A hidden bell was clanging out a muffled warning. Abruptly Nak swung about, raced to a machine. His slender fingers flickered swiftly over a switchboard.

"Look!" he commanded.

On the oval another picture grew—a great tower, monolithic and huge, set on a plain of empty snow. In the distance a black wall marched. The Doom, sweeping inexorably onward to claim earth for its own.

"The tower—it is the one in which we stand," Nak said.

From the tower's summit a pale finger of light reached out. It swept down, bathing the black ramp. Little flaming sparks flashed and glittered. And suddenly the jet wall was gone.

It had vanished, disappeared into thin air. In its place was a deep gorge, from which boiling vapors seethed up.

"It is annihilated," Nak said quietly. "But it will come again, as it has always come. And eventually the power of the ray will be gone. Then——"

He did not finish. He touched the switchboard, and the picture faded. Again he faced Blake.

"Don't you understand? I have told you this—shown you the Doom—because you can help us."

"Help you?" Blake said hoarsely. "God

—if I could! But we had no science compared to yours——"

"You can move in time. If we had known the secret of the annihilating ray when the Doom first came to earth—when the meteor first struck in Australia—we could have destroyed the seed before the infection had a chance to spread."

"And I can take you back in time," Blake interrupted. "That's what you mean, isn't it? I can take you back to the day when the meteor struck, and you can destroy it with your ray! But can I transport the ray——"

NAK brought out a gleaming metal cylinder from his mesh garment. "This projector has sufficient power. The meteor was a small one. You will do it, then?"

"Of course! Get what you need, and we can go—now."

The dwarf smiled. "I need nothing but this projector," he said as he came to the platform. Awkwardly he clambered through the railing.

Blake, his finger on the bakelite lever, hesitated. Nak glanced at him inquiringly. "Is something wrong?"

Blake had remembered the plunge into the other dimension, where physical laws were so strangely altered or suspended. He was not sure, now, that he could find his way back to his own time. He explained the problem to Nak.

The dwarf chuckled. "Can you open this platform—show me the machinery?" he asked.

Blake nodded. He lifted a panel in the metal flooring, and Nak peered down. After a moment he nodded, thrust an arm through the gap, and made a hasty adjustment.

"That will do it," he said. "Simply

move the lever. Your machine is remarkably simple in its construction and theory. I cannot understand why we have no record of successful time-travel."

"Ready?" Blake asked.

The dwarf, clutching the metal cylinder tightly, nodded. Blake moved the lever.

Instantly the dead blackness of the other dimension closed around him. Although he had expected the metamorphosis, he shuddered nevertheless.

"Nak!" he called. "Can you hear me?"

There was no sound. Blake extended a tentative hand, groping in the darkness. But he could not find the dwarf. As he hesitated he felt the bakelite lever move under his hand, snap back into its former position. Light blinded him.

And at that moment a curious darting pain went through Blake's head. He had an utterly indescribable feeling of *change*, as though some strange metamorphosis had taken place within him. Then it was gone.

He heard Jepson Norwood's voice finishing the sentence he had begun when the lever had been moved to fling Blake forward in time. The familiar walls of the laboratory were around him.

"—the laws of nature. They can't be set aside, Ken. And you can see that the machine doesn't work—in the past or the future."

"I can't understand it," Blake heard himself saying. "It should work, Jep. But—it doesn't."

"I think I understand why you can't go into the past," Norwood said. "The past can't be changed, and you can't do an impossibility. You can't go back be-

fore you existed—or even back a few years or a few minutes, because if you could, you'd remember seeing yourself spring out of empty air on the Time Machine. And you haven't any such memory."

"But the future?" Blake asked. (The strange ache in his head—the odd feeling of something lost—was disappearing.) "Your argument doesn't apply there."

Norwood shook his head. "I don't know. But the universe has its laws, Ken—and they can't be broken."

"The law of compensation," Blake said softly, and then stared at Norwood. "I wonder—could it be possible that I *have* gone into the future—and can't remember it, simply because memories were erased when I returned to a time-sector previous to the time when those memories were recorded on my brain? After all, one can't remember a thing before it's happened. Why"—his eyes were suddenly bright with interest—"I may have gone into the future, brought back someone with me—or tried to and failed, because he couldn't exist in a time prior to his birth! I've the most curious feeling that I *have* forgotten something—something vitally important—"

And then Kenneth Blake shrugged and vaulted the rail of the Time Machine.

"Oh, it's rot, of course, Jep," he said, clapping Norwood affectionately on the shoulder. "It's too fantastic for belief. If I had gone into time I'd have remembered it. We've failed, that's all. Our theories were right, but they didn't work. There may be no such thing as time traveling, after all!"

