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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"It was obvious to him now that these dead were of the species which had built the city."

The Red God Laughed

By THORP McCLUSKY

A strange tale about the end of human life on Earth

THE city was dead. Nu Yok, the greatest monument mankind ever reared upon the face of Earth, was dead. No creature of flesh and blood moved along her thousands of miles of multiple-tiered streets,

glanced appreciatively and pridefully outward and downward through dizzying azure depths from the gleaming pinnacles of her four-thousand-foot towers, strolled or lounged in her unkempt and silent parks. No silvery air-

craft or fish-shaped strato-ships hurtled purposely above her Himalayan skyline, no birds or insects sang or buzzed in her wondrous hanging gardens. Grass and weeds grew in crevices in her disintegrating pedestrian walks, and fat angle worms crawled unafraid through their lush and fecund tangle.

Dry and chalk-white skeletons littered the streets—the skeletons of men and women and children and birds and domestic beasts. They strewed the dust-carpeted corridors of great buildings; they were even to be found—had any sentient creature been there to search for them—in the huge and hermetically sealed gas shelters beneath the city. The gas had lingered longer than the men who had designed and built those tremendous caverns had believed possible; thirst and oxygen starvation had snuffed out lives the gas had not been able to touch.

It was not only that way in Nu Yok and in the Americas; it was the same all over Earth. Even the yellow men, big and little, who had first perfected the gas and immediately deluged the Americas with it in that last decade of the Twenty-first Century, had also perished. For the gas had been easy to analyze, and easier to manufacture. Dying, the Americas had struck back at the yellow men with their own weapon, and gasping doom had encircled the globe. All races of mankind, all air-breathing creatures, save only the deep-sea fishes and the worms that chanced to be far underground—and, perhaps, a few toads and frogs, encapsulated and dormant in dry lake or river beds—had perished.

The last human creature had been dead for over three years, and the last bird or beast or insect for perhaps an additional six months, when, at approximately eleven o'clock in the morning

on June eighth, in the year—according to occidental reckoning—two thousand and ninety-seven, Thvall the Seeker brought his fourteen-million ton neutronium-hulled space-ship into Earth's atmosphere and, having already observed Nu Yok's towers and minarets from half-way around the globe, set her down as lightly as a drifting feather in a cradle of granite rocks near the southern boundary of that rectangular stretch of greenery men knew as Central Park. And, as he set his ship down gently, careful to avoid crushing the green vegetation, in Thvall the Seeker's curious soul there was a great gladness. For Thvall knew that his quest was ended.

IT HAD been a long and a lonely search, spanning reaches of space that light will not cross in twenty thousand years. It had begun beyond the hub of our stellar galaxy, and the years of Thvall's journeying were to the life of a man as the age of the Pyramids is to a single day.

Spawn of the innermost planet of a blue-white dwarf sun deep hidden in the globular cluster in Messier II, Thvall resembled in no way save one any of the diversified forms of life which have evolved upon Earth down the millenniums since the red heat died from her surface rocks and permitted her seas to form. Because of that single resemblance Thvall had begun his search; only because of it had he finally arrived upon Earth.

Water! Thvall, like a man, required water. The mechanical processes of his existence, and of the existence of his kind, depended upon an unfailing supply of water. And upon Thvall's home world the water was almost gone. . . .

Thvall well knew, when he began his

quest, the odds against his succeeding. To every hundred thousand suns there was but one, and perhaps not even one, with planets. To every thousand planets perhaps, *perhaps* there was one sufficiently supplied with water—and suitable for colonization by his kind. There were a hundred million chances to one of Thvall's finding, anywhere in the galaxy, that which he sought. And the other galaxies, even the big, near one in Andromeda, were too far away. . . .

And now the quest was ended.

Thvall's selection of Sol as a star worthy of investigation had not been haphazard. While still beyond the white star Alpha in the constellation of the Centaur he had noted that this modest yellow-white sun was slightly unstable, slightly variable, a star that fluctuated, though to only a minor degree, through a regularly recurrent cycle.

That periodicity might mean almost anything; it might mean that the star was on the verge of blowing up, it might be caused by the resultant of the gravitational attraction of attendant planets, or it might be merely the subsiding spasms of some ancient solar malaise. From Alpha Centauri, Thvall set his course for Sol.

He was fifteen billions of miles beyond the orbit of that planet men have named Pluto when the steadily increasing intensity of Sol's illumination, actuating certain mechanisms, awakened him from the state of completely suspended animation in which he voyaged from star to star. He awoke instantly, feeling neither refreshed nor enervated, and lacking any recollection whatsoever of the passage of time. His first, and almost automatic activity, was to reduce the velocity of his space-craft from a hyper-Einsteinian, interstellar

speed to a pace more suitable to interplanetary cruising.

During those first brief, waking moments his ship traveled Solward a billion miles.

Immediately he had slowed the rush of his ship toward the yellow sun, he applied himself to his instruments, and saw at once that the slightly nervous star was plagued with a swarm of planets. The outermost planets were too cold to support life; their atmospheres were raging seas of ammonia and methane. The planet nearest the luminary was without atmosphere; the next was heavily blanketed with an atmosphere, which was, however, full of carbon dioxide; the third planet—the one with the pear-shaped moon—had an atmosphere dripping with water-vapor.

Thvall, looking upon Earth, knew that his quest was ended.

HIS ship safely landed on Sol's third planet, Thvall began a series of routine tasks. He analyzed the luminary's radiation and the planet's atmosphere with highly encouraging results; his kind could adapt themselves to life on Earth. Next he attempted communication with the green growing life, but, although he quickly learned that Earth's vegetation possessed a dim, vague consciousness, it was obvious that its intelligence was too meager, too instinctive for the development of original thought. Obviously Earth's vegetation could not have constructed the aimless sprawling city in the midst of which Thvall's space-ship lay. It was probable therefore that the city's creators were temporarily absent. Perhaps they were nocturnal creatures, who lived during the day in underground recesses and came to the surface of the planet only at night. Perhaps they

were migratory. There were any number of plausible explanations of their absence.

His preliminary scrutiny of the immediate environment satisfactorily concluded—and no motile form of Earth-life having yet appeared to inspect his ship, attempt communication with him or perhaps dispute his peaceful invasion of the planet—Thvall determined to inspect one of the buildings which towered skyward only a quarter of a mile away, to the southward. Prudently burdening himself with a variety of apparatus and weapons, which he distributed among several of his smaller tentacles, he emerged through the airlock in his ship's hull and crawled rapidly and with a slight tingling of anticipation toward the nearest of the buildings.

He had proceeded only a short distance when he came upon a bleached mass of human bones, half hidden in the rank grass. Examining them, he realized at once that they had lived, but—as his own amorphous race lacked rigid skeletal structure of any sort, and any conception of motile life being hampered by rigidity was alien to him—he had difficulty in imagining what the creature had been like in life. He concluded that it had been nowhere near as motile as himself—perhaps little more motile than the vegetation.

He also noted, however, and with considerable approval, a number of fat gray earthworms, and he paused and attempted to communicate with them, quickly discovering, however, that, though they knew fear and hunger, they were incapable of abstract thought.

Continuing onward, he ascended a long ramp which debouched upon a broad street. On the opposite side of the street the buildings began. The

street was littered with a large number of small, egg-shaped wheeled mechanisms. Examining one of these through its windows of fused silica and metallic oxides, Thvall saw that it contained two skeletons.

It was obvious to him now that these dead were of the species which had built the city. Why were they dead? And had all of their kind throughout the city perished? Or were some left alive?

Uneasily Thvall, who realized only too well that the unknown doom which had snuffed out this bony form of Earth-life might also be inimical to himself, paused and made additional tests. Reassurance of a sort returned to him as he determined that Earth's atmosphere was remarkably stable and that there were no electrical or atomic mechanisms operating within the field of his apparatus. Nevertheless, he determined to proceed with extreme wariness.

Crossing the broad street, Thvall approached the base of the nearest building and examined as much of the interior as he could see through the dusty though still partly transparent windows. The structure was internally subdivided into many small cubicles profusely equipped with furnishings which were, for the most part, incomprehensible to Thvall; he would have to see those objects in use before he could understand their purpose.

His bulk was too great to permit him to enter through any of the windows, but there were large doors which, after a brief examination, he easily opened. Entering the building, he found himself in a chamber of considerable size, which, like the smaller cells, was luxuriously furnished. The walls of this room were profusely paneled with mirrors, which created the illusion of a

chamber twice as large as actuality; why this illusion should be necessary or even desirable was utterly beyond Thvall's comprehension. Reflecting surfaces in utter dissociation with any recognizable form of apparatus whatsoever were a complete enigma to him.

THE floor of this chamber was littered with no less than twenty skeletons. Some were still partly clothed in garments of vegetable, mineral and animal fiber; some wore loose-fitting circlets of metallic alloys around their tinier appendages; many of the circlets held geometrically carved bits of crystallized carbon in claw-like sockets. Lifting and examining a small, glass-dialed mechanism which lay beside one of the skeletons, Thvall discovered that it was operated by an internal spring which had, however, lost its tension; he rewound the spring by turning a ratcheted pin provided for the purpose, and discovered that the mechanism produced a regular pulsation, while three small indicators beneath a transparent portion of the mechanism's shell revolved at proportionate though greatly dissimilar velocities. Correctly assuming that the mechanism was a device for measuring the passage of time, Thvall replaced the watch beside the skeleton of its owner and glided toward the deeper recesses of the chamber.

Here he discovered a number of doors arranged in an orderly row, and, investigating one which was not fully closed and which slid open easily, he found that it opened upon a chimney-like well. Within the well were a number of taut steel cables, which supported a square metal cage at a level slightly beneath the door. Thvall had opened the cage, Thvall saw at once, was designed to be raised and lowered from level to level of the building. Far

above, a tiny pinpoint of brilliant light told Thvall that the well extended to the top of the building; he instantly determined to ascend the shaft and view the city from that vantage-point.

He squirmed up the elevator shaft like a gargantuan knot of writhing serpents, and, reaching the elevator motors, squeezed upward past them and into a small, many-windowed chamber. Here an iron door provided egress to the roof of the building. Thvall opened the door and squirmed through.

On the roof of the building, in the clean, sharp sunlight, Thvall put down his instruments and weapons and sedately capered. This world was so fair, so bountiful—and, as yet, so undeveloped! There was no doubt now that its ruling race were exceedingly primitive, but they possessed intelligence of a sort, too; if they proved peaceable and friendly Thvall's people could teach them so much—so much!—in return for a bit of the planet's desert land and a single lake of water. Probably the first boon Thvall's kind would confer upon this world's people would be conquest of the plague which had slain this city's inhabitants. Yes, that would certainly be done first. . . .

The roof on which Thvall stood was flat, and surrounded by a low parapet. It was encumbered by only two objects, the small structure which housed the elevator motors and a huge torpedo-shaped, steel cylinder which lay near a corner of the parapet. Some of the parapet bricks were broken, and there was a long, dull scar on the roof. Obviously the cylinder had been dropped from a low altitude, had struck the parapet a glancing blow, and had then slithered across the roof.

What was the thing, and why had it been dropped on this roof?

THVALL slowly circled the object, scrutinizing it intently. He saw that, except for a short stubby rod protruding from its pear-shaped nose, it was utterly without external moving parts of any kind. But the rod looked like a control of some sort. Thvall first rotated the rod; then, when nothing happened, he tugged on it, and finally pressed on it. That brought results. The rod moved inward easily, and instantly four small valves opened in the cylinder's circumference and a thick gray gas poured forth and mingled with the atmosphere.

For an instant Thvall hunched there motionless, watching the gas ooze viscidly from the metal cylinder and vanish in the clean, still air. Then, in a lightning-flash of utter comprehension, he understood the whole cryptic pattern—the silent city, the dead everywhere, the significance of the gas-bomb that was now pouring its lethal fumes into the surrounding atmosphere. Instantly he darted for the open door and the elevator shaft. . . .

He never reached that gaping well. He detected no odor; there was no warning pain, but abruptly the flat roof was heaving and billowing like a swirling sea.

Vertigo danced in his alien brain, an intense blackness deepened before his single, thousand-faceted eye, and strength and life went swiftly together from his boneless tentacles.

Thus Thvall the Seeker died, and the knowledge that on Earth — the third planet of a minor sun deep sunk in the thinning haze of stars twenty thousand light-years beyond the galaxy's axis — were the environmental conditions and the water his people required so desperately, died with him. And on Earth the frogs and fishes were now the highest remaining forms of sentient life.

But Mars, the Red God, laughed—for though on Earth the men who had deified him and honored him with a name no longer lived to speak that name, he had just claimed his last and perhaps his most significant, sacrifice.
