

When the Earth Melted

A. Wilkinson, Junior

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I

THE faculty of the Martian University of Archaeology was in conference. Professor Ignatuch arose. "Gentlemen," he said, "we have for discussion this evening a most remarkable natural phenomenon which for years has kept the learned men of this planet in darkness as to its origin. Perhaps you recognize by this that of which I speak, namely the great meteorite and its crater which lies some two hundred miles directly north of us.

"It has remained for us, the faculty of this university, to unravel the mystery which surrounds this great work of nature, or, I might now say, work of man. You all know that about twenty-nine hundred years ago our then nearest neighbor, the earth, was in some way totally destroyed. Our records show this much, but of the nature of the cataclysmic upheaval which resulted in this destruction they say absolutely nothing.

"A few days ago, while watching a great excavation on the new canal, I noticed a large iron box or casket about five or six feet square lying in a pile of dirt and trash which had been taken out of the canal. The box looked interesting to me, and I asked permission to take it home with me and examine it at my leisure. The permission was granted, so I had some of the workmen take the box to my house.

"As soon as I reached home, I went directly to my laboratory, where the box was placed, and with a few well-directed blows of a mallet succeeded in removing the rusted cover.

"There were many papers in the box, all bearing the words:

WAR DEPARTMENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

John Brent, Secretary of War.

"The one paper which attracted my especial attention, however, was a bulky manuscript, which I found in one of the many compartments of the safe, for by now I had determined that this was the nature of the box. This manuscript was written on paper exactly similar to all the rest of the documents, was dated July 15, 2030, written in New York, and signed by John Brent, secretary of war. This signature was at the beginning of the narrative, in the upper right-hand corner.

"As you all know, New York was the largest city on the earth at the time of its destruction, so that is to me conclusive proof that the box and its contents came originally from the earth. As the box was found in the immediate vicinity of the great meteorite, it is only reasonable to suppose that the meteorite is a

portion of the earth, which, in the event of the earth's destruction, was thrown into space and landed on our planet.”

II.

WITH your permission,” the professor went on, “I shall read the manuscript in the English tongue, which language I know we all speak more or less fluently.”

The manuscript was as follows:

I am afraid—I am afraid—I have this day seen the wonders of nature and the works of God, and they have filled my soul with awe and my heart with fear.

I am the only living remnant of the earth, and my time is short, very short. But in that short time I am going to try to set down, as nearly in their proper sequence as my memory will permit, the circumstances which resulted in the destruction of our planet. Perhaps many centuries from now this account will fall into the hands of men; of a new world perhaps, for “There shall be a new heaven and a new earth.” At any rate, it can do no harm and may serve to pass away the tedious and trying time which lies between me and all eternity.

Some months ago Jensen rushed into my office, hatless, his hair flying, and his whole being speaking of some wonderful discovery. Jensen is a great discoverer. He has perhaps discovered more unknown and unappreciated inventors and brought them to the knowledge of the world than any living man. This is Jensen's hobby, and he rides it hard. The sad part about all this discovery, however, is that not one of his inventors ever has had an invention which really amounted to anything. But this does not worry Jensen.

That morning he rushed into my office, and, taking a seat opposite me at the table, leaned forward and said in a whisper: “Brent, I have made the greatest discovery of this age.”

“Rave on,” I said; “that makes just eighteen of the greatest discoveries of this one age that you have brought to my personal attention within the last three years.”

“But this is a sure thing,” he said; “a wonderful invention surely.”

I was struck by the man's earnestness, and at once became consumed with a great desire to see this wonderful thing of which he spoke.

“When can I see it?” I asked.

“Just follow me,” said Jensen happily, for now he was sure that he had me on his side, and as I had that which he had not—money to capitalize the scheme—he was jubilant.

I followed him out of the office and down the street until we came to a cheap rooming house, on the third floor of which dwelt our wonderful inventor. We went up a narrow flight of stairs and knocked on the door to his room. Upon hearing the summons, “Come in!” we entered.

The room was full of interesting objects, probably the products of the scientific research of the inmate, but by far the most interesting thing in the whole room was the man himself.

He was several inches above the medium height, with long legs and arms and ungainly feet and hands.

His sensuous mouth was twisted in a repulsive sneer, and his eyes spoke eloquently of his evil nature. I at once conceived a very violent dislike for the man, but was determined to stick out what I had promised to do.

Jensen introduced him as Mr. Crozier. After the introduction, Crozier lost no time in coming to the point.

“I presume,” he said, “that you have come to see me with regard to my machine?”

I assented with a single “Yes.”

“Then the best that I can do,” he went on, “is to give you a very bare explanation of it and a demonstration of its work.

“Come over here,” he continued, as he walked to one corner of the room. “This is it,” he said, his voice swelled with pride. “With this machine I am the ruler of the world.”

I stood aghast. My mental faculties refused to work. The very audacity, the stupendous significance appalled me. I saw a great, high throne, and on it was seated Crozier. On his left was seated Jensen, and on his right I saw myself.

I was recalled to my senses by the voice of the inventor. “And now for the explanation,” he was saying. I looked at the machine for the first time. In shape it reminded me very much of a small telescope. The telescopic tube in the front of the instrument, when extended to its full length, was about four feet long, and there was a similar tube in the rear, which was, however, only about three feet in length.

“That long tube which you see in front,” said Crozier, “is what I call the receiver. The one at the rear is the transmitter. In the middle there you will see a boxlike affair. In that box there are two dry-cell electric batteries to furnish a spark for the operation of the machine. In another compartment of the box there are two tubes of different liquids, of which only I know the secret. When I release this switch the spark passes through the two tubes and forms a certain ray, the ultra-conductor ray I call it.

“This ray,” he went on, “passes out of the receiver and on to any object to which it may be directed. If that object is without heat there is no effect. If, however, the object is possessed of any heat that heat is transferred from the object down the ray to the receiver. From the receiver it passes to the transmitter, where, by a series of lenses, also of my own invention, it is multiplied a hundred thousand times. Perhaps by now you begin to see the great possibilities of my machine,” he concluded, his ugly face twisted with his crooked smile.

I most assuredly did see the possibilities of the machine, and I said so in a very emphatic manner.

“Now for the demonstration,” said Crozier. I waited in silence for him to begin. “You see this?”

What he showed me was a ball of steel about an inch in diameter.

“I shall put this in the crucible, put the crucible in direct line with the transmitter, and we shall see what we shall see, and, by the way, this crucible is made from the only material known to science which will withstand even the weakest efforts of my machine.”

He placed the ball of steel in the crucible and turned the end of the transmitter directly in its mouth.

“Now strike a match,” he said.

I did so.

“Hold the match about a foot from the mouth of the receiver.”

I did this also. He threw the switch which formed the electric spark, and then, for a fraction of a second only, opened the shutter, which allowed the ray to pass from the receiver to the match. There was a blinding flash. The room became insufferably hot, and then all was quiet.

Crozier was still his old calm self. “Look in the crucible,” he said.

I did so, and recoiled at what I saw. In the bottom of the receptacle there was nothing but a little pool of molten metal, now rapidly hardening.

“I am convinced,” I cried as I shook his hand, “and if you need capital just depend on me.”

III.

FOR the moment I had forgotten the instinctive dislike which I harbored for the man, but at the touch of his hand it all surged over me again with renewed force.

I turned away in disgust, and walked out of the room. I found, however, that I had forgotten my hat and gloves, and I walked back to get them. Jensen and Crozier were engaged in earnest conversation when I entered, but when they saw me the conversation broke off very abruptly. I said nothing about it then, but resolved to keep my weather eye open, as it could do no harm and might possibly result in some good.

When I left I had, much against my better judgment, asked Crozier to come and dine with us at my home that night. I had a very beautiful daughter and a lovely wife, and, while I did not exactly fear the consequences, the thought of his proximity was not at all pleasing to me.

However, as he had accepted the invitation, I could not very well withdraw it or change my mind.

That night Crozier appeared on the scene, looking very well indeed in his evening clothes, but all the clothes which he might put on and all the finery which he might affect could not erase from his face that sneer, that sensuous look which proceeds from a tainted soul.

The dinner passed off well, and Crozier seemed to have made a very good impression on both my wife and daughter. One could see, however, that there was an instinctive distrust of him in the hearts of both, and, as with myself, this distrust grew.

Crozier, however, if he noticed this at all, took no heed of it, for after this his visits became more frequent and his attentions to Margaret more and more marked.

Her feeling of repulsion toward him was evident, but at no time did she come to the point where relations with him were broken. This was very strange to me, as Margaret always had been a very independent girl, given to speaking her mind freely and of brooking no interference or familiarity on the part of any one. However, I said nothing about it, feeling that she was well able to take care of herself.

At last there came the time when Crozier approached me one morning to request my consent to his and Margaret's marriage. I was completely taken aback, and incredulously asked if Margaret had agreed to

this. Great was my surprise when he told me that Margaret had consented to become his wife on the condition that he could get my consent to the marriage.

I could not believe that this could be so, and, suspecting some underhand work, I flatly refused, and told him furthermore that I never wanted to hear him mention my daughter's name again. He left without a word.

That night I talked to Margaret, when, to my surprise, she joined Crozier in his plea for my consent. There was a lack of sincerity in her tones, however, and again I refused to allow the marriage to take place. Margaret left me in tears, and I retired to a night of sleeplessness. I could come to no definite conclusion, however, and so resolved to let events take their course.

Nothing more was said to me on the subject by either Margaret or Crozier, though it was plainly to be seen that neither had forgotten it.

IV.

THREE days ago the papers were blazoned with the report that the Chinese fleet was lying just off the coast and had been sighted from a little promontory back of my house.

I went to the little bluff, and, looking out to sea, I saw that the report was true. There, only a half mile out on the blue water, lay the largest fleet afloat; the fleet which, in the secret of its empire, China had been building for years. There lay a vast number of large battleships and countless numbers of smaller transports, all loaded with soldiers of the tremendous army which the Orient was pouring upon us.

My heart sank. It looked as if all was over. True, our army and navy were by this time being rapidly mobilized; but all the men and ships which we could muster were but a handful when compared with the mighty array which the Orient was pouring upon us.

I looked around. Some one was speaking in a low tone. An old man, his face distorted with rage, was looking upon the scene. "May the fires of hell descend upon them, and may the jaws of hell open to receive them!" he muttered through clenched teeth.

"The fires of hell shall fall upon them, old friend!" I cried, for my mind was intent now upon only one thing, and that thing was to find Crozier and his machine as quickly as possible.

Without a word I ran down the slope toward the house. When I arrived at my home I telephoned to Crozier at his room, telling him that I would be over as fast as my legs would carry me.

When I arrived I told him the facts of the case and asked his help and the use of his machine.

"Ah!" he said. "You come to me asking for help, and yet you treat me as if I were a gutter pup. I am not worthy to marry your daughter, but of course I am worthy to help you and your country out of a difficulty. You—you who have treated me with the utmost contempt, you have no right to ask a favor of me, but since you maintain such an attitude toward me I shall repay in kind. I shall take my machine and will completely destroy this fleet, which is even now in readiness to seize your land and your freedom, but I will do this only on one condition—that I get your written and signed consent to my marriage to your daughter.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "Man, are you a monster, a beast, or are you simply a specimen of the

most depraved humanity in all the world?"

"Perhaps I am both," he said with his ugly, twisted smile. "But to business. Shall it be your country, with its millions of defenseless citizens, or shall it be the simple giving up of your daughter to a man who will, I promise you, take the best of care of her?"

"Here," I cried, "give me a pen, and for Heaven's sake be quick about it."

It seemed to me that his cruel, sensuous lips quivered and curled and writhed as I wrote out my consent.

When I had finished it he looked at it and smiled. "Now you have in truth saved your country," he said.

I shuddered.

When that unpleasant duty was performed we lost no time in taking the machine out to the promontory and setting it up with the transmitter pointing to the spot where the hostile fleet lay.

From a power line near by we drew current for the operation of a powerful electric furnace, which we set up directly in line with the receiver, so that the intense heat which was generated by the furnace should be thrown full into the mouth of the receiver.

V.

EVERYTHING was now in readiness for the supreme test of the instrument, and for the first time I began to doubt its power to operate successfully from the distance of half a mile. Crozier, however, was calm and self-possessed, confident in the power and perfection of his machine.

When all was in readiness he carefully went over every little detail, and saw that nothing was out of place which might result in the failure of his wonderful apparatus.

He finished his inspection, and stood by his machine, in readiness to complete his work.

He threw the electric switch, and the blue spark flashed through the glass window in the box. Then opening the shutter, he swung the transmitter over that portion of the horizon where the Oriental fleet lay.

For an instant nothing happened, and I had begun to think that my fears were verified, when suddenly there was a rumbling, hissing sound as of a huge pot boiling. I looked, and behold!—the sea for miles around was boiling and lashing itself into a frenzy. Dense clouds of steam arose, and then all was quiet.

I looked out over the ocean. Not a ship was in sight. Only a huge mass of smoking, steaming wreckage. Our success, or rather Crozier's success, was complete. I was elated; I was jubilant.

Crozier was still his old calm self, although his face wore a contented expression, which was very unusual. He called me over to where he stood beside his machine. "And now," he said, "we will go and attend to our little affair."

I said nothing, but half the joy of victory was taken from me by those few words.

We went back to my house, but I succeeded in getting him to put the wedding off for a few days at least, telling him that he would be so busy with his machine that he could not find time to do so solemn a

step justice. He consented, and we went about our ways.

That night I interviewed Margaret concerning her desire for the wedding, and upon my pressing her severely she broke down and told me all.

She had gone one night with a woman friend of hers to a gambling hall, and, playing recklessly, she lost to the extent of about three hundred dollars, this money she had borrowed from her friend, who, when she found that payment would necessarily be slow, threatened her with the disclosure of the affair if the money was not paid within the next three days. Poor Margaret did not know where to get the money, being afraid to ask me for it and not wishing to borrow from any one else. She had told Crozier of her trouble, and he had offered to give her the money and to keep quiet on the condition that she would marry him. In her desperate condition she accepted this gladly. I knew the rest.

I was furious when I heard this side of the affair, and resolved to get back my written promise to Crozier if I had to murder him to do so. I said nothing about it to him then, however, preferring to wait a while and to strike when the time was ripe.

Two days later my time came. We were out on the little knoll behind my house together, trying out the machine on small objects. Crozier walked over to where I was standing.

“Brent,” he said, “it’s about time, isn’t it?” I looked at him, and saw that in his hand he held the piece of paper which I had written for him.

My anger boiled over. “Confound you for a dirty hound!” I cried. “The time shall never come, so long as there is life in my body, when you shall marry my daughter!” And with that I snatched the paper from his hand and tore it into a thousand pieces.

“Then you and all the world be damned!” he screamed as he threw the receiver of his machine full into the face of the burning July sun and pointed the transmitter to the ground.

VI.

THERE was a low, rumbling sound, increasing gradually in volume, until it seemed as if a thousand of Jove’s thunderbolts were bursting in my ears. I felt a strange, floating sensation; then all was a blank.

When I awoke I still felt the same sensation. I looked around for my companions; they were nowhere to be seen. Then I came to the full realization of my awful position.

The inconceivable heat of a hundred thousand suns had split the earth, and I was then lying on the brink of the smallest portion. I could even look out over the edge into the limitless space below. Directly under me was the rest of the earth, a mass of flames, rapidly being destroyed. The inhabitants were by this time all consumed, and I was the only living man.

Fortunately my house had been left standing on my little plot of ground, and, going to it, I went into my library and sat down. It is here that I am writing this account.

My term of life is drawing to a close. The roaring grows nearer—yet nearer. It is all about me. It envelops me like a heavy cloud of mist or vapor. It is the end. May God in His goodness have merc——

The little group of Martians were silent. Then Professor Ignatuch spoke.

“Brothers,” he began, “let this be a lesson to us. Let this man's story guide our footsteps in the right. From this terrible catastrophe let us learn the lesson that the attempted usurpation of the power of the Supreme Being means death, and that civilization, when practiced to a moderate degree, is altogether good, but when carried to excess can lead only to disaster.”

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