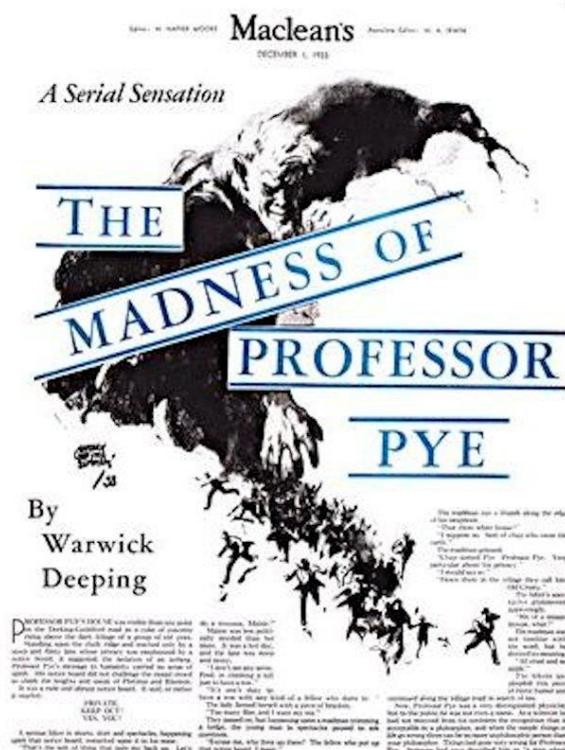


ALBURY HISTORY SOCIETY - alburyhistory.org.uk

THE MADNESS OF PROFESSOR PYE by WARWICK DEEPING

A death ray near Newlands Corner is the focus of this story, published in four parts in *The Passing Show* by Odhams Press in 1934, April 14th: *Professor Invents an Atomic Gun*, 21st: *The Invisible Terror*, 28th: *The World Besieges Its Master*, May 5th: *The End of Terror*; in three parts, Bowdlerised and Americanised in *Maclean's*, *Canada's National Magazine*, 1st December 1933 – 1st January 1934 and published in the book *Two in a Train and Other Stories* by Cassell and Company Ltd. in 1935. Transcription in 2021 by Trevor Brook.



A Serial Sensation

THE MADNESS OF PROFESSOR PYE

By Warwick Deeping

I

Professor Pye's house was visible from one point on the Dorking-Guildford road as a cube of concrete rising above the dark foliage of a group of old yews. Standing upon the chalk ridge and reached only by a steep and flinty lane whose privacy was emphasized by a notice board, it suggested the isolation of an iceberg. Professor Pye's message to humanity carried no sense of uplift. His notice board did not challenge the casual crowd to climb the heights and speak of Plotinus and Einstein.

It was a rude and abrupt notice board. It said, or rather it snarled:

PRIVATE.
KEEP OUT!
YES, YOU!

A serious hiker in shorts, shirt and spectacles, happening upon that notice board, remarked upon it to his mate. "That's the sort of thing that puts my back up. Let's do a trespass, Maisie."

Maisie was less politically minded than her mate. It was a hot day, and the lane was steep and stony.

"I don't see any sense, Fred, in climbing a hill just to have a row."

"It's one's duty to have a row with a fellow who—." The lady fanned herself with a piece of bracken.

"Too many flies, and I want my tea."

They passed on, but happening upon a roadman trimming a hedge, the young man in spectacles paused to ask questions.

"Excuse me, who lives up there? The fellow who put up that notice board, I mean." The roadman ran a thumb along the edge of his swaphook [*sickle*].

"That there white house?"

"I suppose so. Sort of chap who owns the earth."

The roadman grinned.

"Chap named Pye—Professor Pye. Very particular about his privacy."

"I should say so."

"Down there in the village they call him Old Crusty."

The hiker's spectacles glimmered approvingly.

"Bit of a misanthrope, what!"

The roadman was not familiar with the word, but he divined its meaning.

"All crust and no apple."

The hikers applauded this piece of rustic humour and continued along the village road in search of tea.

Now, Professor Pye was a very distinguished physicist, but to the public he was not even a name. As a scientist he had not received from his confrères the recognition that is acceptable to a philosopher, and when the simple things of life go wrong there can be no more unphilosophic person than your philosopher. Things had gone very wrong for Professor Pye. Someone had once described him as "A man whom nobody liked, a piece of cold flatfish," which was both true and an exaggeration. There had been moments in his life when Alfred Pye had been furiously eager to be liked. As a man he had fallen in love with women and friendship and success and the swagger of it, and all of them had flouted him. He possessed a great brain and an unfortunate exterior, a certain resemblance to an undersized grey he-goat.

Women actually shrank from him as from something that was both cold and unpleasantly libidinous. As a young man he had been shocked and wounded and enraged by this shrinking. He could remember sitting on a seat in a moonlit garden, burning to utter the words that other men could utter, and the girl had risen to her feet. Actually, she had shuddered.

"I think it's too cold out here."

And poor Pye's passion had flopped like a fallen angel into bitter and icy waters.

He was strangely repellent to anything with warm blood, women, children, dogs, his fellow men and at one period of his life he had—with bitter irony—made pets of a snake and a tortoise. These cold-blooded creatures had accepted him; they had fed out of his hands. He might have said that they recognized the brother reptile.

II

But one thing Professor Pye did possess, and that was money. The Pyes *père* and *grandpère*, had been Birmingham men, successful manufacturers of hardware, and Alfred had been an only son. Being interested in pure science, he had sold the business on his father's death and retired into his laboratory with two hundred thousand pounds in gilt-edged securities. He was somewhat sensitive about his money. He knew that though the world had no affection for Alfred Pye it would smile upon Alfred's pile of cash.

The making of a misanthrope may be a complex business, and if at the age of sixty Professor Pye hated humanity he had his reasons for this hatred. A man who has lived alone with himself for fifteen years can turn sour in the process, and Pye's incontestable brilliancy made scorn easy. As a younger man he had carried out experimental work as a subordinate, only to have his very suggestive discoveries exploited by his senior. Professor Gasson, in claiming the younger man's researches for the honour of a particular university, had seen to it that much of the honour had materialized as a personal halo. Professor Gasson had an international reputation. He was a facile writer, one of those men who can popularize the abstruse and the mysterious. He was now Sir Philip Gasson.

Pye had never forgotten or forgiven the ingenious fraud. It had taught him secretiveness, made him even more lone and aloof and scornful. He had withdrawn from the world of men, academic and otherwise. He had purchased thirty acres of land on the North Downs and built himself a kind of little concrete fortress, a strong place that was as complete and self-supporting as money and brains could make it. It contained a laboratory; it possessed its own water supply, a powerful electric installation, a refrigerating plant, furnace and radiators, a wireless installation, an oil storage tank, a miniature observatory. Even Professor Pye's dietary was eccentric. He drank nothing but water or strong coffee, and lived on grapefruit, oranges, apples, nuts, bread and cheese. Life in all its details was simplified and subordinated to his work. The laboratory was his holy of holies and in it he functioned like a priest.

He possessed one temple-servant, a curious creature named Hands, an ex-serviceman who had lost his hearing and half a face in the war. Life's disfigurements and frustrations had made Hands as much a recluse as his master. He was a queer, sedulous slave who lived with a small mongrel dog in the kitchen, made beds, stoked the furnace, ran the oil engine and dynamo, controlled the stores, and potted about in a very small garden of his own. There was nothing of the spy about Hands. A large, gentle, tame creature who smoked a pipe and liked to feel his hands licked by his dog's tongue, he could resign himself to his environment. He attached himself like a neuter cat. So attached had he become to the solitary place on the downs that semi-suburban Surrey had become as wild to him as a jungle.

Between these two men there existed the kind of affection that had united Robinson Crusoe and good Man Friday. Isolation held them together. Hands had a disfigured face, the professor a warped soul. Hands hated nothing; to the professor hatred of the world of men had become a sinister inspiration. Pye was so malignantly sober in his scorn for all the follies and hypocrisies and conventions of the social scheme that he was too sober to be sane as casual man understands sanity. Year by year Pye was becoming nothing but a brain, a concentration of pure and merciless intelligence, hostile to his fellows.

If he had any affection for any creature it was for Hands. Hands could lip-read, and being deaf he never heard the rasp of Alfred Pye's voice, nor did he feel the abruptness with which his master spoke to him.

"Hands—turn off that radiator."

"Hands—more bread."

"Hands—the oil's too low in the storage tank. When are those fools coming to refill it?"

Hands would nod his head reassuringly.

"Yes, sir."

He had a flat and toneless voice. His eyes were not unlike the eyes of his dog.

"Yes, sir—I'll see to it, sir."

According to Trade Union standards he was one of the most overworked men upon earth, a meek automaton with a curious capacity for devotion. He was sure that Professor Pye was a very wonderful person, a kind of superman. That, too, was Professor Pye's conviction. The outer world was full of fools, monkeys, mountebanks, people who would be better dead. The professor's egotism had grown like some monstrous fungus, or like a fantastic brain uncontrolled by any of the human reactions. In his younger days—like all normal men—he had wanted to be liked, and the world had not liked him. A bitter and solitary egotism cherished hate.

Sometimes on a summer day he would go up to the little white tower of his house and stand there looking down into that deep, green, beautiful valley. He could command a short strip of the road, and observe the procession of cars passing along the tarmac surface. To the satanic Pye upon his height they looked like tin toys, absurd little mechanisms that crawled and tooted.

"Beetles, ants."

So—that was civilization, a procession of little standardized robots running around in their little machines, people who had no more originality than flies. An insect world, grubs that daily consumed the pulp of a popular press. Professor Pye's scorn was cosmic. If he felt himself to be a creature living in a world of other dimensions to those clerks and shopmongers, he had some justification for his arrogance. He had a wonderful intelligence. He was living on the brink of catastrophic revelations. He had worked for years in that fascinating atmosphere where things physical melt into the seemingly miraculous. Like Professor Rutherford and his disciples, he had been analysing the atom. His dream had been to dissociate the atom, and somewhere he had read that centuries would elapse before men could split and control atomic energy.

Professor Pye had smiled over that particular paragraph in a learned article.

"Damned fools!"

He knew what he knew. The lightning was in his hands. He had but to discover how to control and to project it. And then? No Jove upon Olympus would be so powerful as this little grey man of sixty, alone upon his concrete tower.

The world had misliked him, ignored him, cheated him.

"Damned Fools!"

He would give the world thunder and lightning.

III

It happened on an afternoon in June. Hands had carried an ancient basket chair into his piece of garden and was proposing to enjoy a pipe and a little relaxation. His dog lay at his feet and blinked up at him through the sunlight. It was a warm and gentle summer day, but for Hands it had been a day of toil and trial.

A lorry full of stores had arrived from Garrod's. The professor purchased everything in bulk in London, and Hands had to deal with those stores and pack them away in the store-room.

The oil-tanker had laboured up the lane to recharge the storage tank. Also, it happened to be charging day, and the oil engine had behaved temperamentally. So, in fact, had the professor. When Hands had knocked at the door of the laboratory and attempted to inform his master that the stores had arrived and had been checked and put away, the professor, forgetting Hands' deafness, had screamed at him:

"Get out! Don't interrupt me!"

Not hearing the order, Hands had continued to knock at the locked door.

"I've had trouble with the engine, sir."

And suddenly the door had flown open, and Professor Pye, red-lidded, wild as to the head, and in nothing but shirt and grey flannel trousers, had raged at him.

"Get out, you fool! Don't come worrying here. I'm busy."

The meek Hands, watching his master's mouth, repeated his news about the engine.

"Accumulator's low, sir."

"What!"

"I dare say I'll get it going soon."

The professor had gibbered at him.

"You'd better. Most damnably important. Telephone to Guildford for a mechanic."

"Oh, I'll get it right, sir."

"You had better."

And Professor Pye had slammed the door and locked it.

Hands, sucking his pipe, felt pleasantly sleepy. After all, some gentlemen were funny, just as colonels and sergeant-majors had been funny in the army. But this life suited Hands. Professor Pye might be a little grey bit of wire and wisdom, with a tufted chin and red-lidded eyes, an irritable gentleman. But, after all, he was a great man. He paid Hands generously. There were days when the professor was as smooth as silk. The dog was asleep with his head resting against his master's right foot, and Hands himself was on the brink of dozing.

Then something startled both man and dog. Hands straightened in his chair; the dog, up and quivering, gave three sharp barks, and stood whimpering. There had been no sound, but both dog and man had felt a curious vibration like an earth tremor. Hands could have sworn that his chair had moved under him.

He stood up, holding in his right hand a pipe that had gone out. He looked at the quivering dog.

“What was it, Jumbo?”

Jumbo, tail down, whimpered and looked up obliquely at his master.

“I don’t know,” he was saying, “but whatever it was—I did not like it.”

Neither did Hands. He put his pipe away in his pocket. He stared at the white wall behind him. He was a man whose mind worked slowly.

“Anything wrong in there?”

He remembered reading somewhere that strange things sometimes happened to learned gentlemen who experimented in laboratories. Had anything happened to Professor Pye? The suggestion was a sufficient stimulus and Hands became the man of action. He rushed into the house and found himself staring at a glazed door at the end of the corridor. The glass in the door had been smashed, blown out upon the floor.

Hands pushed it back and, crunching broken glass, made for the laboratory. He sniffed the air. No, there was no strange smell. The door of the laboratory was painted white, and down the two upper panels ran dark seams. They were cracks where the panels had been split.

Hands rushed at the door, seized the handle and shook it.

“What’s happened, sir? Are you all right?”

Silence, an inevitable silence so far as Hands was concerned. The door was locked. He put his face close to one of the cracks and tried to see into the laboratory. He could distinguish a table, and he realized that the table, a stout deal bench, was lying on its side. There was a foot visible beside it, or rather, a black boot, toe upturned and everted.

Hands put a shoulder to the door and heaved. It defied him. He drew back a yard and charged it. He was a heavy man. and the lock plate gave, and Hands and the door went in together. Recovering himself, he stood and stared. The laboratory looked as though a bull had been active in a glass and china shop. The windows were smashed; everything seemed on the floor.

Professor Pye was on the floor, surrounded by what appeared to be the glass and metal fragments of some complicated apparatus.

Hands bent over his master. Professor Pye’s face was the colour of old vellum; his eyes were closed, and from his nostrils blood oozed. Hands had seen dead men in the war; Professor Pye looked like death, and Hands was frightened.

He knelt down, and put his head close to the professor’s chest. No, his master was breathing. And Hands lumbered up and off into the dining room. The professor did indulge occasionally in old French brandy. Hands extracted the bottle from the sideboard and hurried back.

But he paused in the laboratory doorway and stood staring. The professor was sitting up, looking bemused, ghastly and bewildered. The fingers of his right hand were stroking his forehead. He gazed at Hands, and his eyes were vacant.

“My God—you gave me a shock, sir!”

The professor’s lips moved, mumbling something. He looked round the shattered room.

“What happened, sir? Something exploded? Have some brandy, sir.”

The professor looked at the brandy bottle, nodded, and allowed Hands to trickle some of the spirit between his lips. He gurgled, he spluttered, and suddenly, clutching Hands' arm and shoulder, he struggled to his feet. He still looked ghastly, but his very ghastliness was exultant.

"Eureka!"

Hands blinked at him.

"Where shall I find it, sir? In your shaving cupboard?"

And suddenly Professor Pye laughed, a strange, creaking and discordant laugh.

"No, I've got it, Hands, I've got it. Eureka! Eureka!"

IV

When the Masters of Science speak of protons, electrons and neutrons, and describe strange bombardments, and streams of particles shooting at high speed through a substance that has every appearance of being solid, the plain man must listen and accept the strange things that these adepts tell him.

At home in the suburbs the plain man may fiddle with his wireless, and repeat some of the jargon of the technical press, but in the matter of knowledge he is but a child. His may be the right to say, "Well—I'm damned! What will these scientific fellows do next?" The marvels of research may leave him gaping, and feeling perhaps vaguely uncomfortable, and certainly had any John Citizen been allowed to peep into the mental workshop of Professor Pye he would have felt supremely uneasy.

For Professor Pye had taken a leap beyond his contemporaries. He had discovered and isolated a little creature that he called the "On". It would not be possible for an untechnical scribbler to describe the manifestations and mysteries of this child of the atom. Professor Pye had brought a little stranger into the world of man's awareness, and with a complex of glass tubes, electrical force, and certain chemicals had caused the On to manifest. That the On or congeries of Ons had nearly killed him was neither here nor there. Professor Pye, working upon certain hypotheses, had taken risks. His idea was not only to isolate the On, but to control and use it.

A minute manifestation of On-force had blown a screen of argonil to atoms, but the protecting tube of palmyrium had withstood the shock. Apparently palmyrium was impervious to the On. That, of course, had to be proved and tested with an increasing stress of On-force, but if a palmyrium box or tube could be produced that could contain and confine the streams of Ons when Professor Pye's process produced them then——!

Professor Pye, standing on his concrete tower and looking out across this peaceful English valley, smiled a truculent little smile and rubbed his beard. He, Alfred Pye, granted that his hypotheses were correct, would have under his hand a strange new force that could be controlled and projected into space. What its ultimate effects would be upon things organic and inorganic he could not yet say. but judging by his experience of a minute release of the On-force, a larger dose would be lethal to creatures of protoplasm. It would annihilate, silently and secretly. It might be potent over a thousand miles. The German gun that bombarded Paris would be a mere crude and barbaric toy compared with it.

For some time after the wrecking of the laboratory Jack Hands was worried and nervous. Apparently, Professor Pye had been immensely excited over the result of some particular experiment, and it was probable that the experiment would be repeated. Hands, simple soul, was more worried about his dog than about himself. He spoke to the professor.

“Are there going to be any more—explosions, sir?”

For Professor Pye was working far into the nights. Hands, worried and restless, had seen the laboratory windows lit up at two in the morning, and fear is more fearful at night.

“You see—I could put Jumbo to sleep in the tool-house.”

Alfred Pye had no sense of humour or any feeling for pathos. Moreover, he was becoming more and more the little megalomaniac, swollen with a sense of imminent and catastrophic power. In fact, Professor Pye was not quite sane in that he represented pure and pitiless intelligence divorced from all emotion and the social urges. He spoke curtly to Hands.

“Don’t be a fool, man. Bring me my lunch in here.”

Professor Pye was in apron and shirt sleeves, and standing by his electric furnace. Hands could see that some queer apparatus was in process of construction, for Pye had so great a contempt for his man’s intelligence that he let him stand and stare. The professor was not only an inspired physicist but an expert mechanic. He had small, strong, delicate fingers, hands of infinite dexterity and precision. He was capable of manufacturing a watch or turning out the most sensitive of instruments. Being a separatist and secretive, he had trained himself to do these things.

Hands went for the professor’s lunch, an apple, six dry biscuits and two wedges of Swiss Gruyère cheese. He was placing the tray on a laboratory table when the professor—who had quick ears—heard the sound of a car in the little courtyard behind the house.

“Who’s that?”

Hands, of course, had heard nothing. Pye, who was beginning to nourish acute suspicion now that his researches were nearing fruition, went to one of the laboratory windows. It was a high window, and Pye had to stand on a stool to look out.

“A woman in a car. Go and see what she wants.”

The professor pulled down the blinds on the side next the courtyard, and Hands hurried out to interview the visitor. She was elderly, plump and pleasant. She looked compassionately at Hands’ disfigured face and produced a little book.

“I am sure you will excuse my calling at this hour, but could I see Professor Pye?” Hands, with his eyes watching her lips, explained somewhat apologetically that the professor was not easy of approach. The lady smiled upon Hands.

“But won’t you go and ask him to see—me?”

“What name, m’am?”

“Mrs. Millard.”

Hands returned to the laboratory where Pye, sitting on a stool, was eating cheese and biscuit.

“A lady named Millard, sir. Her compliments and would you——?”

“What does she want?”

“I don’t know, sir. She’s got a little book.”

“A damned journalist! Go and tell her to go to——”

Hands did not deliver the message as he had received it from Professor Pye. He explained that the professor was busy in his laboratory and could not be disturbed.

Mrs. Millard smiled her social-service smile.

"I—quite—understand. I called to see if Professor Pye would subscribe to the S.P.C.C. I'm collecting subscriptions for our committee."

Hands was puzzled but wishing to be helpful.

"The S.P.C.C., ma'am?"

"Yes, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children."

Hands took the book and ventured once more into the laboratory.

"The lady wants a subscription, sir."

"A subscription?"

"Yes sir, to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children."

The professor was eating his apple. His face registered a curious, twisted little smirk. He cackled, and the sound was sinister.

"Quite superfluous. Sadism is an interesting human trait. Well, I'll give her something. Pass me my coat."

Hands fetched it from the hook on the laboratory door.

"She's quite a nice lady, sir."

"That's not unusual. Hands, when they are after favours."

Professor Pye picked a pound note from his wallet and passed it to Hands.

"Give her that. No, I don't want to put my name in her wretched little book. Get rid of her."

Hands went out to announce the news to the nice lady, and Professor Pye resumed the eating of his apple. His nostrils expressed scorn.

"Prevention of Cruelty to Children! Better that most of the little wretches shouldn't be born. Cruelty! Is an earthquake cruel? Can my intelligence be cruel—to ants?"

V

During the whole of that summer Professor Pye was at work upon what may be described as his Atomic Gun. Externally it consisted of a tube of palmyrium mounted on a tripod stand, and in appearance not unlike a machine gun. Its mouth could be closed by a diaphragm of palmyrium. and to the centre of the tube electric leads were attached. The interior of the apparatus could have been described only by Professor Pye himself, and the description was set down in cypher in a notebook which he kept locked in a safe.

Also, during the whole of August, he kept the laboratory locked, and Hands, brooding over his exclusion, was both a little grieved and tempted. Moreover, Professor Pye's temper had become like the English weather, absolutely unpredictable in its moods and phases. He was extraordinarily taciturn. He emerged from the lab. to munch his biscuits and apples in the dining room, and the lab. key was in his pocket.

Hands, who, after all, was human, did make one attempt to play Peeping Tom one day while the professor was at lunch. Undoubtedly, the old boy was up to something, and Hands had not escaped the world's passion for sensationalism. Since the laboratory door was locked and the key in the professor's pocket, he would have to attempt the windows, but when Hands sneaked round with an empty grocery box for a stool he found that the windows were shut and the blinds drawn. Obviously, Professor Pye had something to hide and was not taking any chances.

And Hands wondered. He was not without education in the matter of lurid literature. Like many simple souls and children, he had a fantastic fancy. Now, just what would a very ingenious gentleman create in a lonely and a sexless spot like this? Sex and its bitter and baffled urges vexed Hands not a little. Supposing an old man like the professor had dreamed amorous dreams and was proposing to create a sort of mechanical Venus?

"Damn it," said Hands—"why not?"

The fantastic notion piqued him. He even chortled over it. Certainly, this would be a species of creation that a man like Professor Pye would keep draped and screened. And then Hands had a feeling that somehow his carnal fancy had overstepped the bounds of decency. Eminent scientists should be allowed to transcend the erotic. Professor Pye might be planning to fly to the moon.

Hands felt bothered by a certain personal turgidity, and when the flesh vexed him he dug hard in his garden or took Jumbo for a walk. On occasions he would ramble along the downs for miles, finding solace and solitude, while Jumbo discovered rabbits, imaginary and otherwise. To Hands his dog was a dumb but eloquent preceptor. The little beast had attached himself to a lone man to the exclusion of all canine calls.

"Marvellous!" Hands would exclaim. "Jumbo, you can teach me something."

It was a Thursday in September when Hands asked Professor Pye to grant him leave of absence for the afternoon, and though he did not know it, the request toned with the professor's plans. He was in a state of concealed excitement. He had been wanting to get rid of Hands for the afternoon.

"I'd like to take the dog for a walk, sir."

Pye was affable.

"Certainly, Hands, certainly. You can have the whole afternoon. By the way, you haven't had a holiday since you've been here."

"No, sir."

"You must take a holiday. Hands. Have you any relations?"

"I've a brother in Brighton, sir."

"Well, arrange to take a holiday. I may be going to stay at my London club for a week."

"Holidays aren't much in my line, sir. You see——"

The professor was emphatic.

"Everybody needs a holiday sometimes. Change of environment. You must go for a holiday, Hands."

Hands took Jumbo out on the downs toward Dorking. Now, just what was the old fellow at? Was he really going to London, or did he desire Thomas Hands' absence for a period? Hands had taken a thermos with him, and a parcel of bread and butter and cake. The professor allowed him grocer's

cake, the yellow stuff with cherries in it, but on that day Jumbo consumed most of the cake. Hands was feeling strangely depressed. Almost, he seemed to be suffering from some unpleasant premonition.

Not so Professor Pye. He carried that four-foot tube of alloy with its tripod to the top of the observation tower, and linked it to a power plug by long flexes that ran from one of the laboratory windows and were raised by a cord to the top of the little concrete tower. It was a serene and perfect September day, windless and golden, but Professor Pye had no eyes for the beauty of the landscape. His hands trembled as he attached the wires to the apparatus. He was face to face with his crisis, and he was facing more than a critical experiment. He was confronting death, personal annihilation. He could regulate his current and release what he might estimate to be a small charge of On-force, but he could not swear that the new force would not shatter the apparatus and kill its creator.

But he needed a target, something protoplasmic and obvious upon which he could train the atomic gun. He stood looking down over the low parapet and the target offered itself, some cows in a field in the hollow of the valley. These cows belonged to Mr. Honnisset of Fox Farm, and they were pastured in two different fields separated by a strip of arable. One of the fields was less than four hundred yards away, the other more than a quarter of a mile. Professor Pye trained the gun on the farther field and stood back behind it with his foot on the contact-maker.

For one moment he hesitated. There was a faint click as a flexible wire operated the diaphragm, a second click as his foot pressed the make and break. The palmyrium tube remained motionless; there was no sound, no suggestion of vibration. Professor Pye stood with his eyes fixed on the apparatus. He had been prepared for a possible catastrophe, blackness, oblivion.

Apparently, nothing that could be registered by the senses had happened. Professor Pye kept his foot on the contact-maker for three seconds, released it and closed the diaphragm. A curious little grin seemed to trickle into his beard. What had happened? Had anything happened? He was conscious of furious excitement and a feeling of personal reprieve. He had let the thing loose, and he was alive.

He walked to the parapet and looked down into the valley. The cows in the farther field had been grazing in a group, and every beast in that field was down. Dead? The animals were lying on their sides, legs and heads extended. The cows in the near field were still grazing. Professor Pye's face expressed a kind of demoniac exultation. His hair stood up like the crest of a cockatoo. But were those cows dead, or merely shocked and temporarily helpless? He dashed downstairs for a pair of field-glasses, returned and, crouching behind the parapet, focused his glasses on the field.

He realized that he was looking at carcasses. The flaccid, inert posture of the bodies was unmistakable. He watched them intently for five minutes, and not one of the animals gave any sign of life.

Professor Pye stood up. His face was the face of a man who was not quite sane. It might have been the face of a Biblical Satan, or of a mischievous, malignant and amoral boy who had perpetrated some cunning outrage and gloated over its success. What were a few cows compared with the discovery that he could kill, silently, swiftly, secretly? He possessed power; power such as no other man had ever commanded. He had evolved that power. It was his.

VI

But it was not merely a question of dead cows.

The beasts in the near field had not been touched, and Professor Pye, reflecting upon that fact, realized that for some unknown reason there was a non-lethal zone surrounding his gun. Queer, that! The area of the dispersion of the On-force would have to be studied and tabulated.

What was its range?

THE STORY:—In a gloomy isolated house, back from the Dorking-Guildford Road in Surrey, England, lives professor Pye, a distinguished physicist and a man of great wealth. Of a bitter, scornful, misanthropic nature, hating the world because it had never acknowledged his genius and fancying himself belittled and cheated by his contemporaries,

Professor Pye lives a friendless and secluded life, working intensely in a well-appointed laboratory that in its isolation and sternness has every appearance of a fortress. His household consists of one old deaf servant named Hands, who is devoted to the professor, and a dog.

One summer afternoon Hands is startled by a terrific explosion. Rushing to the laboratory, he discovers the windows smashed, the floor littered with glass and metal fragments, and the professor lying unconscious. As soon as the frightened servant revives him, the professor struggles to his feet and cries out exultantly,

“Eureka! Eureka!”

Professor Pye had succeeded in isolating an atomic ray which he called the “On,” a strange new force that could be controlled and projected into space, with the power of annihilating, secretly and silently, all within its path. Assured of the success of his experiments which had almost cost him his life, he turns to the perfection of the means by which he will be able to project this “On-force”—his atomic gun.

One morning when he has persuaded Hands to take a holiday for the day, he carries the gun to the observation tower of his laboratory. Looking over the pleasant and quiet countryside for a likely target, he sees cattle grazing peacefully in a field in the hollow of a valley some distance away. Cautiously he adjusts the gun, trains it on the cattle, and lets loose the force. At once the cattle fall down and lie as dead.

At the same time Professor Pye sees the crowded highway, a little farther away, strewn with the wreckage of motor-cars.

VII

Professor Pye was like a man possessed. The immensity of the thing intoxicated him. He seemed to shake with a cold rage; the urge to prove his power became a merciless and ordered frenzy. For a little while he stood observing through his glasses that minor catastrophe in the valley. He focused those agitated and active ants on that tarmac road. And then he observed, in particular, two figures; one, that of a police constable, the other that of a chauffeur in a linen coat. They were standing together looking up at his white house. One of them raised an arm and pointed. He was pointing out the white tower and the little figure poised there.

They were pointing at him! How dared they point at him! Did these slaves suspect?

Professor Pye stepped back behind the palmyrium tube. He rearranged the tripod and trained the gun on the road below. He released the diaphragm and switched on the current, and with an air of sardonic glee awaited the result.

There was sudden stillness down yonder. The man in the dust coat was lying on his back in the middle of the road. The police constable had crumpled into an inert blue heap.

They had dared to point at him, had they? He—the great Professor Pye, god of the On-force, the greatest man alive!

His self-exaltation was in full flood. Inevitably he was challenged to prove the extent of his new power. Men were no more than ninepins to be bowled over. Was it not possible for him to efface

humanity or as much of it as he pleased, or perhaps to permit a remnant to crawl to him and hail him as god and master? The passion to prove his power became a frenzy. He must choose some particular ant heap and reduce it to nothingness so far as man was concerned. He stood brooding in the September sunlight, while at Newlands Comer and on Leith Hill hikers and motorists and children played and made love and picnicked in ignorance of the menace.

What ant heap should he choose?

London?

No, London would be too immense, too large and luscious a fruit to begin with. He would prefer gradualness, a subtle crescendo.

Brighton—Hands' Brighton—flashed into his mind.

Why not Brighton?

And then he remembered Hands.

Confound the fellow! He would have to get rid of Hands, and to that deaf and disfigured creature Professor Pye allowed one moment of compassion. Hands had been a good creature. Should he keep the fellow here? But no, that was impossible. He could permit no man to witness his humbling of humanity. Hands must go. He would give the fellow money and tell him to go—but where? Professor Pye's pity shrugged its shoulders. After all—this was fate.

And then he heard the voice of Hands calling to his dog. "Jumbo—Jumbo—come on, old lad."

The dog had loitered, and Professor Pye, crossing to the back of the tower and looking over the parapet, saw Hands standing in the courtyard. The decision was made and taken. He would have to play the autocrat with Hands.

He locked the door of the tower staircase and descended. Hands was just entering the house with the dog at his heels.

"Hands, you must go for your holiday."

Hands stared.

"When, sir?"

"Now."

"Now, sir?"

"Yes, at once."

"But, sir——"

"I'm going to London tonight in the car. I insist on your taking a holiday, Hands. I shall pay for your holiday."

The professor went into the laboratory and opened his safe. When he returned to the hall he had six five-pound notes in his hand. He thrust them at Hands.

"Here's the money. Pack a suitcase. Catch a bus to Guildford. No, better still—I'll drive you to Guildford."

Hands looked bothered. He took the money, and stood hesitant.

“I’ll go to Brighton, sir.”

The professor’s face expressed exasperation. Hang the fellow! He couldn’t go to Brighton. By midnight there might be no Brighton in any human sense.

“Don’t be a fool, Hands. Go and see something. Go to Scotland. Get some mountain air. Good for the dog, too.”

“But where’ll I stay, sir?”

“Stay? Why—at hotels—of course. Enjoy yourself. Eat, drink and be merry.”

It occurred to Hands that the professor would have to be humoured. He could allow the professor to drive him into Guildford and leave him at the station. He could take a train to London and another train to Brighton. Scotland? No, he was not going to Scotland, and the professor need not know about it. Besides, he would be pretty welcome at Brighton with thirty pounds in his pocket. He and Brother Jim could have a bit of a beano on thirty quid. He could buy the kids presents.

The professor himself opened the doors of the garage and backed the two-seater into the yard. Hands hurried in to pack. Years of intimate experience had taught him that when some bee buzzed in Professor Pye’s bonnet, it was necessary to let that bee buzz itself to death. Besides, thought Hands, as he tossed his belongings into an old fibre case, the Brighton idea with thirty quid to blow was a bit of all right. He could take Jumbo down to the beach and introduce the dog to the sea. Jumbo had never seen the sea.

He hurried out to the waiting car. The professor, hatless, was sitting in the driving seat. It struck Hands that Professor Pye’s hair looked more turbulent and fierce than usual.

“Do you want your hat, sir?”

Professor Pye looked contemptuous. Need the world’s god and master be reminded of the conventional hat?

“Get in, Hands. Better nurse your dog.”

Hands slung his suit-case into the dickie and got in, holding Jumbo in his arms.

The private lane struck the main road about a quarter of a mile from where the On-force had acted, but even here cars were strung out and people were standing talking. Professor Pye threaded his way through the crowd. He took the Merrow Road, and on the long hill to Newlands Comer they met a couple of ambulances.

Hands was interested.

“Must have been an accident, sir.”

“Probably, Hands, probably.”

“A pretty bad smash, I should say, sir.

“Road blocked, and two ambulances.”

“The roads are full of fools, Hands.”

“Must have been a motor coach, sir.”

“Perhaps two motor coaches, Hands.”

The professor drove into Guildford, and in his state of mental exaltation he drove rather carelessly. He ignored or did not observe the signal of a policeman on point duty, and the constable whistled to him and came and said rude and sarcastic things to the professor. He was a tall and superior young man with thin lips and a Roman nose.

"Careless driving—dangerous driving. Ignoring signals——"

The professor went red.

"I didn't see you."

"You were not looking, sir."

"I've something more important to do," said Pye, "than look for fools in uniform."

That put the official back up. The professor had to produce his licence. The policeman took notes and told Mr. Alfred Pye that the case would be reported.

The professor smiled a little sneering smile.

"Think so, do you? Poor idiot!"

The policeman waved him on.

"You might watch your manners, sir."

Manners, indeed! The professor drove on to the station and deposited Hands, dog and suit-case. He was abrupt with Hands.

"Enjoy yourself. Go and see Loch Lomond."

Hands saluted the professor as he drove off. Gosh, but the old lad had put it across the policeman! Would he, Hands, be hailed to court as a witness? Probably, but not till after he had completed a classic week at Brighton. He watched the two-seater disappear and, with Jumbo on the lead, he walked into the booking-office and took a third-class ticket and a dog ticket for London.

The professor left Guildford by the Shalford Road. He had no desire to repass that insolent young officer, but so poor a thing was his philosophy that it pleased him to think that all such insolent and obstructive fools would soon be effaced, with all courts and cross-roads. Alfred Pye's return was without adventure. Certainly, he did pass a number of cars whose occupants had the serious and subdued faces of people who had seen some strange and rather terrible thing. In fact, by the Albury fork a scout signalled to the professor and shouted a warning to him.

"Better go slow, sir—there's been a bad accident along there!"

Professor Pye, head in air, smiled at him.

"Thank you. I will be exceedingly careful."

VIII

Professor Pye left his car parked at the bottom of the lane and walked along the high road to observe in a proper scientific spirit the results of his experiment. There was still a considerable crowd here, and both the crowd and the traffic were being controlled by the police. Professor Pye wormed his way as far as the nearest policeman, but when he attempted to pass the officer he was ordered back. There were some twenty tenantless cars along that section of road. Police, ambulance men and volunteers

had had to extract the dead motorists and lay them on the grass beside the road. Some of the bodies were still there.

It was a shocked, sober, quiet crowd. The whole business was a mystery, and Professor Pye was able to savour the elements of the sensation he had produced. He was not shocked by the tragedy. He was immensely curious as to the lethal effects of the On-force on the human body.

He listened to two men talking, educated men.

“It couldn’t have been carbon monoxide. How could it have been?”

“Well, what else? People just dead in their cars. The doctors tried artificial respiration.”

“No use. Something extraordinary, sinister and strange. Apparently, there was no explosion of any kind, nothing to be seen or heard. Just as though poison gas had been released.”

“Could there have been anything in one of those first cars?”

“What’s the idea?”

“I’m not a chemist, but supposing one of those cars had contained a carboy of some chemical that vaporized easily, and the gas was lethal?”

“It’s possible—I suppose.”

“People just collapsed where they sat or stood. Something very potent and deadly.”

“Anyhow, it’s pretty ghastly.”

Someone was shouting in the field above the road, a farm hand who had come to collect those cows for milking, and had found them dead. The hedge happened to be a high one, and no one in the road had seen those dead beasts. The farm hand ran down to the hedge and shouted to one of the policemen.

“Hi—come and look! All our cows dead!”

People scrambled up the bank and tried to peer through the hedge. The driver of a van found a gate and climbed over it. The crowd followed him, and suddenly some premonition warned Professor Pye of possible complications. He hurried back to his car, drove it up and into the garage, and locking all doors, ascended to the top of the tower.

He crouched and looked over the parapet. The lower field was stippled with human figures. He saw faces turned toward the house on the hill. Someone was pointing and sweeping an arm as though to indicate the direction and drift of a gas cloud. People were arguing.

“If you take that house on the hill, and these dead cows and the road—they line up, so to speak. What is that place up there?”

Someone pointed to the live cows in the upper field,

“What about those beasts? If your gas idea——”

“I’m thinking of that affair in Belgium when people were gassed by the emanations from a factory.”

“But that was foggy weather. Besides, who would emit a lethal gas on the top of the downs?”

“Yes, but supposing someone was experimenting? A heavy gas would roll downhill on a still day like this.”

“But, my dear sir—those other cows there are none the worse.”

“That’s so. Anyway, it’s a pretty ghastly puzzle.”

“The autopsies on those poor devils ought to show something.”

“I suppose so.”

Professor Pye was thinking rapidly and logically, and for the first time his demoniac egotism was tinged with fear. He had let death loose. He had stirred up the social hive, and these angry insects would be buzzing hither and thither, seeking—what? No, the simile of the hive and the insect swarm did not apply. He and mankind were at war. and man was a creature of intelligence who could think, reflect and explore. His wits were at war with the wits of mankind.

At any moment he might have that crowd pouring up the hill to investigate. His experiment went to prove that for some unexplained reason his On-force did not exert its effect until it had travelled four hundred yards. If those people advanced into the non-lethal zone, he and his discovery would be at their mercy.

His ruthlessness was reinforced by fear. After all—this was war, Alfred Pye *contra* Mundum. Was he—the new Jove—to flinch with the lightning in his hand? He stood up. He trained the atomic gun on the people in the field. He opened the diaphragm and switched on the current. With a kind of cold and frozen glee he saw that death was there—painless, sudden death.

For some minutes a kind of frenzy possessed him. The gun was mounted on a ball and socket joint and roller bearings, and could be slewed in any direction. He swung it south, west, north, east, keeping the hypothetical range low. He would create about him a circle of silence and security. He would efface any near possible interference. He must have time to think, time to act.

Was he aware of the silence that fell upon all that part of Surrey, such a silence as had not been known since the glaciers of the ice age piled up their deposits of gravel and sand? Motor-cars, suddenly released from control, ran on till they ended in hedges or ditches. Guildford High Street with its chaos of cars and of shoppers was a place where people seemed to have fallen asleep in cars and on pavements. At the foot of the steep hill runaway motors had piled themselves. Shop assistants lay dead behind their counters. There was not a sound to be heard, save perhaps the ticking of hundreds of clocks. Even the dogs and the cats and the birds were dead. At Newlands Comer the turf was covered with the figures of men, women and children who seemed to sleep. Spectral trains ran for a while past signal boxes and through stations where life had ceased. In a thicket not half a mile from the white house, two lovers lay dead in each other’s arms.

Professor Pye walked down to the field where the dead lay. There was no anguish here, no distortion, merely the semblance of sleep. It would appear that the On-force acted upon the central nervous system, producing shock and syncope. The human heart ceased beating.

Professor Pye looked at the first dead in the war between a mad scientist and humanity. Almost, he felt kindly toward these victims. Had they not helped to prove his power? Moreover, might he not be regarded as a beneficent being? He could give peace and sudden painless oblivion to a world of disease, of futile little strivings, discontents, poverty, bitterness. The class war, votes, the dole, the common people, stupid and arrogant, politicians orating, the sensational puerilities of the press! He could put an end to all this. He could cleanse the earth, efface all the fools and mental deficient, and leaving perhaps a hardy remnant in some comer of Canada or Japan, renew the human experiment on scientific lines. He, Professor Pye, would be its god and dictator.

Returning, he crossed the upper field where those live cows were still grazing. One of the beasts raised a head and stared at him with large, liquid eyes.

Professor Pye raised a hand as though blessing the beast.

“Behold your god, my dear. You shall be retained in his service.”

His madness had reached its zenith. It transcended even a great man’s folly. It was egotism that forgot both the bull and the cowherd. Who would milk those beasts? Or did Professor Pye propose to live in a desert on wild apples and honey? But even the bees were dead. The only survivals were the trees and the grasses and all green things, and certain low forms of life whose central nervous system was not sufficiently sensitive to be shocked by the On-force.

IX

But the alarm was being sounded.

Professor Pye had silenced everything within a radius of fifteen miles, but into that reservation other humans were beginning to penetrate. Waterloo Station was all crowds and chaos. Telephone operators, tired of calling “Hello, Guildford,” and finding themselves repulsed by a most strange silence in all that part of Surrey, left their instruments and became part of a London that stood in the streets and listened to monstrous rumours. The bus depots were disorganized. Such and such a bus had never returned. Scared motorists, who had passed through that zone of death, pulled up when they rediscovered people who were living, and with white faces spread the incredible news.

“Half Surrey’s dead.”

“Miles of derelict cars and buses.”

“At Addlestone a train had stopped at the level crossing. Full of dead people. Signaller dead in his box. We couldn’t get through that way.”

The thing seemed too ghastly and immense to be true.

But already police cars, pressmen, adventurous motorists and agonized city men were penetrating into that circle of death. The Prime Minister had called an emergency meeting of the Cabinet at No. 10, Downing Street. Scotland Yard was at work. The press rushed out alarmist editions. Almost, they were fought for by the crowds in the streets. Press agencies were telephoning from all over the world.

“What Has Happened in Surrey?”

“Is it an Attack from Mars?”

Police cars, returning from the dead area, had to force their way through scared and eager crowds. Rumour became actuality, and as the news spread a shocked and bewildered silence seemed to spread over London. People were inarticulate. The thing was too vast, too terrible, too astounding. It was said that the P.M. himself had hurried down into Surrey. Aldershot had been wiped out as well as Guildford and Godalming. Woking, Byfleet and the districts along the river were full of dead people. The Guards were being paraded. The whole of the available police were being mobilized.

People rushed to their wireless sets. What had the B.B.C. to say?

The little voice of the announcer was official.

“The Prime Minister appeals to everyone to remain calm. He asks you to mistrust all wild rumours and to avoid panic. All the possible causes of this unprecedented and terrible tragedy are being explored.”

Night.

Professor Pye had been sitting at his wireless set. It had an extensive range and he could listen in on London, Paris, Berlin, Milan. He picked up fragments of Continental agitation. Paris was commenting upon the incredible cataclysm in England. Had there been an escape of some strange subterranean gas through a crack in the earth's crust? No seismic shock had been recorded. Milan was speculating as to cosmic dust. Or had the lethal atmosphere of some passing comet brushed across a portion of Great Britain? Eminent scientists were being asked to give their views upon a catastrophe that was of startling significance to the whole world.

Professor Pye went up to his tower. He looked out over Surrey. He heard the lowing of those abandoned and un milked cows in the field below. He heard the sound of a car in the valley, and saw its headlights cleaving the darkness. That ingenious and irrepressible insect, man, was buzzing back into the death zone. The car stopped in the valley. And then Professor Pye heard the drone of an aeroplane overhead.

His madness became cunning. He had left the lights on in the laboratory, and he hurried downstairs and switched them off. If he showed a light—especially a stationary light—his enemies might infer that someone was alive. Life itself would inspire curiosity—suspicion. He had other brains pitted against his.

He returned to the tower. He had hurried up the staircase. He was agitated. That aeroplane was droning overhead, and its sound was angry and menacing. He would have to deal with aeroplanes. Just before dusk he had taken his bearings and left the atomic gun trained upon Brighton. Yes, he would try more current. It was a risk, but he would have to take that risk. He stood in the darkness behind the tube and released a larger volume of On-force.

The gun had stood the strain.

But just how far would its lethal effect carry? Supposing that the range was limited by the size of the apparatus? What then? Yes, he would have to experiment and discover how far this power extended. By listening in, he would be able to define the dead zone from the living. If Paris remained vocal he would have discovered the limitations of his gun. What then? To maintain about him a zone of death, to repulse all penetration, until he had built a more powerful apparatus.

Ruthlessness, a kind of Satanic ruthlessness was inevitable.

Meanwhile, these explorers, these angry human insects in cars and aeroplanes were beginning to buzz about him. They would have to be dealt with—and that instantly. He must make his desert so deadly that no human creature would dare to venture into it. It was necessary for him to have leisure, breathing space, security. He had food and water, electricity, oil.

Inexorably, but with a slight and significant tremor of the hands he slewed the gun this way and that. There had been voices in the valley, but suddenly these were stilled, though the cars' headlights continued to blaze. Crouching, he pointed the gun skyward toward the sound of the cruising plane. The drone did not cease, but it seemed to slip and to descend. There was the sound of a crash in the valley, and presently a knot of flame sprang up.

X

Terror upon terror, sensation after sensation.

The Prime Minister had not returned from Surrey. None of those who had hurried down to investigate had returned.

Heston Aerodrome, which had sent out two scouting planes, reported both machines as missing.

Moreover, doctors in the area surrounding that centre of darkness and of silence were being summoned to hundreds of people who had fainted and remained unconscious for short periods of time. The On-force, lethal over a definite field, weakened upon dispersal until it produced nothing more than syncopic attacks, giddiness, nausea.

A telephone operator, speaking to the Brighton exchange, was left stranded in sudden silence.

“Hello—Brighton, hello!”

Brighton did not reply.

Other people who were speaking to friends in Brighton experienced the shock of that same silence. Voices died away, and did not return.

Trains that had left Brighton after dark, or were in the Brighton area, failed to arrive.

Horsham, Cuckfield, Hassocks were equally silent. So were Peacehaven and Shoreham, Steyning and Lewes. Worthing and Eastbourne reported hundreds of cases of people fainting in the streets, on the sea front, in theatres, hotels, houses.

The area over which the On-force was active had the shape of one elongated egg. It spread gradually from its point of origin, reached a certain extreme width, and then contracted. Earth contours, hills and valleys, appeared to have no obstructing effect upon the force. It penetrated wherever there was air. People were killed in tunnels, subways and cellars.

During that first night very few people slept. A venturesome aviator, flying in the early morning over Surrey and Sussex, returned safely to Croydon Aerodrome. He and his observer had the stark faces of men who had looked upon some horror.

“Brighton’s a vast morgue. Yes, we flew low along the Brighton front. Thousands of people lying dead there.”

The Cabinet, sitting at No. 10 Downing Street, received the news of this latest cataclysm. Already they had called in scientific experts, among them Professors James and Beddington. Maps were spread. With such facts as they could command these ministers and experts attempted to define the area of death, and to arrive at some explanation of the mystery.

There was the problem of a public panic and the Press.

“Better stop all the morning papers.”

“Wouldn’t that be more likely to produce a panic? Press has been asked to refrain from publishing too much detail.”

Professor Beddington, bending over a map, was shading certain portions of it with a blue pencil. He had a police report beside him.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer bent over Beddington’s shoulder.

“Any theory, Beddington?”

Beddington was a dispassionate, large headed man who had the appearance of a farmer.

“There seems to be a definite focus. Our information goes to show that the focus is on the North Downs between Guildford and Dorking.”

The Leader of the House, standing by a window and smoking a pipe, asked the question that was at the back of every mind.

“It might happen—to London?”

Professor Beddington looked up.

“Yes. Obviously—so.”

Somewhere in the room a voice sounded a note of fear.

“What—is—the damned thing? My God—we must find out.”

“Any views on the Martian theory, Beddington?”

The man at the table tapped his teeth with the end of the blue pencil.

“Not very likely. If Mars were bombarding us with some kind of cosmic ray—there would be more dispersion. I mean, I think the area covered would be larger. We have had no reports from the Continent, have we, of similar happenings?”

“No.”

The Leader of the House, his pipe in his right hand, came and stood at the table.

“Then the thing’s—human?”

“Inhumanly human. Satanic.”

“Well?”

Professor Beddington leaned back in his chair.

“Supposing some individual who was antisocial and not quite sane had discovered how to control and use such a thing as— shall we say—atomic energy?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Is that possible? Of course, Beddington, you are one of the few men——”

“It is what we have been working for— but beneficently so.”

“Then the inference is that if some malignant genius had evolved something of the kind he could wipe out humanity?”

“Exactly.”

“Good God! How would one deal with him?”

Professor Beddington smiled.

“Ah—how?”

Professor James had been scribbling on a writing-pad. He raised his head suddenly and spoke.

“I have been jotting down names, Beddington, alphabetically. I have just come to Pye. Did you ever meet Pye?”

“Once.”

“Rather a poisonous little person but infernally clever. I happen to know that Pye lives in Surrey. He had a grievance against everybody and everything. He was supposed to be researching on his own. Now, supposing, for argument’s sake, a man like Pye——?”

Professor Beddington nodded his large head.

“That’s my feeling, too, James. I think we have to deal with some infernally clever super-megalomaniac. One ought to try and put one’s hand on every physicist in the country.”

Said the Man with the Pipe: “Why not begin with this fellow—Pye? He can be located; he can be——”

Once again Professor Beddington smiled his quiet smile.

“Yes—but supposing Pye to be the man—Pye will be—unapproachable. We cannot raise Pye to the teeth—by—just deciding to do so. Pye can elevate us all to Paradise—before——”

“Good God!” said the frightened voice— “we are like a lot of doomed rats in a ship.”

The Man with the Pipe relit it.

He said: “I never felt less like a rat.”

XI

Professor Pye had not slept. He had been listening to the aerial voices of the earth.

Soon after dawn he carried a chair to the top of the tower and sat down beside his infernal gun.

He was like a little grey spider in the midst of a web of silence.

Brighton—human Brighton—had ceased to be. He had picked up that news from French sources. He was able to infer that his On-force had not reached the coast of France.

He sat with a map on his knees. He looked haggard, and his eyelids were red. If London shivered on the edge of panic, Professor Pye was not very far from strange terror. His discovery was catastrophic, but in the clarity of that September dawn he confronted his limitations. Obviously, the range of his atomic gun was lethal up to perhaps a hundred miles, but beyond that point society was safe. The problem posed him. Either the gun as it was designed would have to be made mobile, or a larger and more powerful apparatus constructed. If he mounted the gun on a car and lorry, he would need more current than a portable battery could supply. He might connect, of course, with local generating stations. But when he had dealt with England, Wales and Scotland, he would arrive at the sea. A fast motor-boat, and a dash across the Channel! But he could infer that the air would be thick with patrolling aeroplanes waiting for “It” to emerge from England. He would have to clear the sky as he went.

He began to shrink inwardly from the vastness of his war upon society. It began to scare him. He went below and heated some coffee, and into it he poured some of his old brandy. A little knot of warmth hardened in his stomach. He lit a cigar, and with a faint suggestion of swagger, walked up and down the laboratory. How silent the world was! Sounds that he would not have reacted to on a normal day now impressed themselves on him by their absence. No trains, no traffic in the road, no birds, no Hands, no dog. Even those few live cows had stampeded in a panic, crashed through hedges, and had ceased to be. He heard nothing but the ticking of the laboratory clock, and the sound of his own footfalls. When he stood still to listen he could hear his own breathing.

But what was that?

THE STORY:—Professor Pye is a distinguished and wealthy physicist, but bitter, scornful and misanthropic. He lives in Surrey, England, working in a laboratory that in its isolation and sternness has every appearance of a fortress.

One afternoon Professor Pye's only servant is startled by an explosion. He finds the windows of the laboratory smashed, the floor littered with glass and metal fragments, and the professor unconscious. As soon as the servant revives him, the professor cries exultantly: "Eureka! Eureka!"

Professor Pye has succeeded in isolating an atomic ray which he calls the "On," a strange new force that can be controlled and projected into space, with the power of annihilating, secretly and silently, all within its path. The means by which he is able to project this "On-force" is his atomic gun.

One morning when he has persuaded his servant to take a holiday he carries this gun to the observation tower of his laboratory. He sees cattle grazing peacefully in the hollow of a valley some distance away. He adjusts the gun, trains it on the cattle and lets loose the force. The cattle fall dead. At the same time, a little farther away, the highway is strewn with the wreckage of motor-cars. The motorists are dead. Brighton is destroyed and other near-by towns and cities.

In London, scientists try to solve the mystery of the new and terrible menace. Pye's name is mentioned and aeroplanes are sent out to spy upon him, but he brings them down with their pilots and passengers dead.

The thought that he is suspected rouses Pye to new frenzy. He determines to wipe out London; to cleanse the whole earth of its vile inhabitants and permit it to start anew and breed a better race. He can do it; he is the new demigod!

CONCLUSION

Professor Pye's ruthless sanity may have been inspired, for those who have vision look for an autocracy of science, a just and beneficent tyranny exercised by the enlightened few over the inferior many. Science will mount its Olympus and rule, holding perhaps the menace of lightning in its hands. But Professor Pye had no Olympian smile. He was both ruthlessly sane and malignantly mad. He was a megalomaniac in a hurry to impress a destructive ego upon a society that opposed him.

London?

Yes, London was the enemy. London must be destroyed, for its destruction would send such a shudder over the earth that civilization would fall on its knees and surrender.

He would hear aerial voices appealing for mercy.

"O Thou Unknown God and Master, have pity on us. Spare us and we will serve you."

His face was the face of a man in a frenzy. He trained the atomic gun on London, and then suddenly he paused. He had a sardonic inspiration. He possessed a small portable wireless set which he used when the more powerful apparatus was not needed. He went below and carried the little cabinet up on to the tower. He placed it beside the gun.

Was London speaking?

He switched on. London was speaking. He heard the little, refined and carefully standardized voice of the B.B.C. announcer. It was telling England that Mr. Percy Haldane—the Leader of the House—was about to broadcast on the crisis. Mr. Haldane wished to appeal to the country for calmness and courage. There must be no panic. The Government and its body of experts were convinced that they were on the brink of locating the origin of the catastrophe and also its originator.

Professor Pye moistened his thin lips. So, they thought, did they—that he would wait to be located? Fantastic fools! But he would hold his hand for a moment and listen in to that prince of platitudinarians, Mr. Percy Haldane. It was Mr. Percy Haldane's Government that had presented Sir Philip Gasson with his knighthood. A tribute to science! Gasson a scientist? He was just an academic sneak-thief.

The announcer's voice ceased. There was a short pause, and then the deliberate and slightly sententious and rolling voice of Mr. Haldane was heard.

"I am speaking to England. I am speaking to those who, in a crisis, have never failed to meet it, however acute and ominous that crisis has been. Within the last forty-eight hours this country has experienced a series of mysterious catastrophes. But may I say at once that the mystery is on the point of being—resolved. We—the cabinet and our body of experts—are confident—that there is—in this country a monstrous offender against—civilization and humanity. We believe and are sure—that we can deal—with this evil spirit in our midst. I have just left a conference in which several eminent scientists, Professors Beddington and James, and Sir Philip Gasson——"

Professor Pye's head gave a jerk. A little malevolent smile shimmered over his face. So, Gasson was there, Gasson the slimy and debonair, Gasson of the black velvet coat and the cerise-coloured tie, Gasson who, when lecturing, posed as though all the women must think him Zeus. Professor Pye licked his lips. Mr. Haldane's voice was still booming.

Click! Professor Pye switched on the current. The wireless cabinet produced four more words from Mr. Percy Haldane.

"We English are people——"

Silence! Not a murmur. The little wooden cabinet was mute, and Professor Pye's face malignantly triumphant. Exit London. Exit Mr. Percy Haldane, and Philip Gasson, and Whitehall, and Somerset House, and Lambeth Palace, Whitechapel, all that suppurating sore which fools called a great city. Eros, on his pedestal in Piccadilly Circus, would be posing above an exhibit of corpses.

Professor Pye's cold frenzy continued. He swept the whole horizon with his gun. He would efface everything within the limit of its range, and then wait for the earth to surrender.

He would listen in to Europe's terror and anguish.

Soon, they would be appealing to the Unknown God for mercy.

America, Asia, Africa, Australia, all would be on their knees to him in their transmission stations.

The world would surrender to him by wireless.

XII

Over the whole southeast of England, a large portion of East Anglia, the Midlands and the West there was silence. The death zone covered Bournemouth, Bristol, Gloucester, Birmingham, Leicester, Peterborough, Ipswich, Dover. Exeter, Cardiff, Derby, Nottingham and Norwich were alive. Calais and a small segment of the French coast had been affected. Just beyond the zone, life had been shocked but not effaced. There had been the same symptoms of nausea, giddiness, and, in a number of cases, temporary unconsciousness.

For some days panic prevailed. A few adventurous or anguished souls attempted to penetrate the lethal zone, only to be effaced by Professor Pye's drenching of that area with On-force. Once every hour the atomic gun covered every point of the compass. Half Somerset, Devon and Cornwall were isolated between the Channel and the Irish Sea. From villages and towns near the borderline the

population fled, pouring into Wales, Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire. Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield were flooded with refugees. During those first few days organized government, the very social scheme itself, seemed in danger of dissolution.

It was in Manchester that resistance hardened. The Lord Mayor of Manchester and the City Council formed themselves into a species of provisional government. The crisis was unprecedented, and improvisations were urgent and inevitable. The mayors of all the Yorkshire and Lancashire towns were gathered in. York proposed that the centre of authority should be located at Edinburgh.

Meanwhile, the whole world was in agitation.

Moscow both trembled and gloated. Middle-class England had received a death-blow.

New York was all headlines. Crowds filled the streets.

France, wounded at Calais, so near the terror, was arming with all its expert intelligence to combat the horror.

A deputation flew from Manchester to Paris to discuss with the French Government the confrontation of this crisis. Europe's international quarrels were forgotten for the moment. Berlin, Prague, Rome, Madrid, each sent a body of representatives and experts to Paris. Signor Mussolini flew in person to the French capital, bringing with him a little Italian physicist from Turin, Professor Pirelli. The discussions were informal and held at the Elysée. It was Mussolini's little professor who was in a position to bring forward data that might explain the cataclysm. He, too, was working on the atom. He had released from it certain energy that when controlled was lethal to mice and rats. His work was as yet an affair of the laboratory, but he postulated that the earth was being assailed by some inspired lunatic who had discovered how to release and control atomic energy.

The English members could produce certain facts. London, before its destruction, had telegraphed confidential information to the municipal authorities in the provinces. The source of the mysterious force was centred in Surrey, and probably on the North Downs, within a few miles of Guildford. It was known that a certain eccentric scientist had a house there, and that he lived the life of a misanthrope and a recluse. Professor Pye was under suspicion.

Europe's Council of War debated the problem. It was evident that the field of force was limited. The death area had not extended. It was like a spider's web, and in the centre of it crouched the spider.

Signor Mussolini was for instant action.

“Aeroplanes—bombs.”

Reminded that the air was controlled over that area, he was not to be dissuaded.

“We must attack. Let our aeroplanes go out by the hundred, swarm after swarm, to observe and to make sure. We must take risks, every risk.”

Those round the table looked to Professor Pirelli. Had he anything to suggest? He smiled whimsically. No, he had nothing more subtle to propose. Crude explosives, or perhaps gas bombs, were the only retort science could provide at the moment. Even if one aeroplane survived, and discovered one live human being in that death area, it might be assumed that that one live man was the monster who was attacking humanity.

One German delegate suggested the construction of long-range guns that could be mounted on the French coast to bombard Surrey.

The French President, with certain unhappy memories in his mind, asked the German to say how long it would take to manufacture those guns, and the German was silent.

No, action must be instant and coordinated. The terror might spread. They must make what use they could of the instruments that were to hand. Every country must supply its quota of planes. It would be better to call for volunteers to act as aviators and observers.

Signor Mussolini flew back to Rome, the Germans to Berlin. Orders were issued to the French Air Force. To begin with, the air squadrons would patrol the outskirts of the death zone, observe and report, before attempting to locate and destroy the enemy.

XIII

Professor Pye waited for the earth to broadcast its appeal for mercy. The aerial voice might be English, French or German, but Alfred Pye spoke both French and German, and perhaps he expected the voice to be French.

Meanwhile, he had not had his clothes off for three days, nor had he slept, save in brief snatches. He was looking distinctly worn and dishevelled. He had omitted to shave that part of his face that was accustomed to be razored, and his eyes were the eyes of a man short of sleep.

He had carried a mattress and bedclothes to the top of the tower. He took his perfunctory meals there beside his gun, with the portable wireless switched on. and a pair of binoculars slung round his neck. A dispassionate observer would have described him as a scraggy little man who was both scared and irritable, a grey rat on the alert. Professor Pye was feeling the strain of playing the part of Jupiter.

He was becoming more and more aware of the dreadful silence. He looked out upon a green world that was empty of all sound and movement save the movements of the clouds and the trees. He was surrounded by a ghastly, stagnant greenness, and at night he was alone with the stars. Almost, he began to hunger for the sound of a human voice. The craving was illogical and absurd, but so strong was it that he carried a gramophone up to the tower and played Bach and Beethoven.

Moreover, the air was unaccountably silent. Even his large installation could pick up no voices. What was the earth doing? Had his On-force gradually penetrated over the whole globe, and had man ceased to be? But if so, he himself should be dead, for the force would have circled the earth and returned to destroy him.

Most strange—this silence.

Or was it deliberate? Was civilization conspiring to isolate him? Were all the earth's transmitting stations wilfully mute? Paris and Berlin and New York might be conferring by cable.

Now and again he would patrol the top of the tower and tum his glasses on the green emptiness of Surrey, and scan the whole horizon. There were moments when he imagined movement upon some hillside, or fancied that he could spot an aeroplane in the distance. He would rush to his gun and apply On-force to the imagined menace.

He was beginning to look very wild about the eyes.

September continued warm and sunny. A gentle breeze blew from the east, and at noon the mercury stood at seventy.

It happened that Professor Pye had gone below to make himself some tea. He was using tinned milk. He carried the tea tray to the top of the tower, and as he reached it he became aware of a faint odour, sickly and strange. It was as though the whole atmosphere was tainted. He put the tray down on a table, and stood with his nose to the wind.

An odour of death, of decay? Yes, that was it—millions of dead bodies swelling in the September heat. He was scenting London, greater London, all those towns and villages, the dead cows in the field below, the dead men and women in the valley. And Professor Pye's face looked suddenly bloodless and ashy. Almost, it was the face of a corpse. He left his tea untouched. He had not seen the horror he had perpetrated, but he could savour it.

Nausea attacked him. He went below and poured out two ounces of brandy.

XIV

Would nothing happen?

This silence was becoming unbearable.

He was possessed by a febrile and busy restlessness. He went out and walked along the downs—but that sickly smell of decay was everywhere. Even in green and solitary places he blundered upon death, bodies lying around a cloth with cups and plates and cushions, a dead lad and a girl, an old man with a book, a child and, not far away, a man and woman. He saw a dead dog lying in some rough grass. Was he himself alive or dead? More than once his fingers went to his throat. War, yes, war, but the silence and stench of a field after battle! He slunk back to the white house. He found himself hungry for the face of Hands... yes, even for a disfigured face.

And what had become of Hands?

He fell into a kind of frenzy. He drank more brandy. Where were his enemies? Why did they not attack?

But the war of the world against Professor Pye was developing. To begin with, the reconnaissance in force was crudely conceived. A hundred aeroplanes flying in a vast half circle crossed the Channel and passed over Sussex. The hour was about noon on a clear day and the planes had the sun above and behind them. Professor Pye heard the faint roar of the massed machines as they crossed the South Downs, for his ears had been straining to catch some sound that might break the stagnant silence. He turned his field glasses on that stretch of sky. He saw the little black silhouettes strung out across the horizon. The planes were flying fast and low.

Here—at last—was something tangible to deal with. The earth was alive, and it had not surrendered. Those planes were coming to attack him. Anger and hatred revived. Insolent fools! Did they imagine that an aerial cavalry charge could contend with his On-force.

He sat by his gun. He waited until that half moon of flying folly was within a mile of him and then, slewing his gun from left to right, he shot the machines down. They seemed to falter and fall one after another like so many crows. Once more there was silence.

The attack was repeated twice that day on the same unimaginative lines, but the second assault came from the north. Professor Pye might be dishevelled and wild of eye, but in annihilating those aerial enemies he recovered a kind of malignant exultation.

When would the fools realize that they had to deal with a superman who was their master?

This was the world's Waterloo. Flying cuirassiers charging a little cube of concrete that was invulnerable! He would teach humanity that its salvation could be secured only by surrender.

There followed more than twenty-four hours of silence, and the next night Professor Pye dared to sleep. He was urgently in need of sleep. Wrapped in a greatcoat, he sat on the tower till two o'clock in the morning. It was too cold here. He dragged the mattress and bedclothes down into the laboratory. He would allow himself two hours sleep on the laboratory floor.

He slept, but half an hour after the break of day he was awakened by a rush and a roar overhead. Something had passed with the speed of a shell, and set the glass bottles and jars in the laboratory vibrating. For some seconds Professor Pye sat sodden with sleep, wondering whether the thing had happened or whether he had dreamed it. But a distant and diminishing roar warned him of the reality.

In brief, the Italians had brought a couple of flying boats to Dunkirk, machines built for the Schneider Cup and capable of flying nearly four hundred miles an hour. It was one of these swift machines, which, trusting to its speed, had roared over Sussex and Surrey, and was now making for the Bristol Channel. Professor Pye grasped the significance of the machine's rush across his safety zone. It could enter the lethal zone, traverse its two hundred miles in half an hour, and escape to report.

He was in his pyjamas. He rushed upstairs to the tower. He shivered in the cold morning air. He saw a great yellow sun hanging above the Surrey hills. That screaming hydroplane was more than thirty miles away. In another ten minutes it would be beyond his reach. He ducked down behind his gun, slewed it round, and released the On-force. The hydroplane was over Reading and following the Thames when the force struck it. The machine crashed on a roof in Friar Street and burst into flames. It started a conflagration that blazed for hours.

Professor Pye stood shivering.

"That fellow might have bombed me."

He realized that with such machines in action against him his margin of safety had been reduced to fifteen minutes. This was serious. It suggested that he would have to sweep the air every quarter of an hour.

But had they located him? Were these machines merely groping for the enemy? Moreover, he could assume that there were not more than half a dozen machines in the world capable of such speed. Let them all come and crash, and the proof of his power would be all the more catastrophic.

But it was cold on the tower. There had been a slight ground frost. He regretted that warm bed. And that morning he mixed brandy with his coffee.

XV

In Paris there was gloom and consternation. Not an aeroplane had returned. The death zone had swallowed them up. and mocked the world with a malignant and ominous silence.

Was humanity helpless?

It was a delegate from Manchester University, a gawky and rather reticent young man with a squint, who brought psychology to bear upon the problem.

Said the Mancunian:

"Granted, there is something inhumanly human behind this devilment. That's to say, we have to deal with a man. He is using atomic force or some sort of ray. Let us presume that he has to function, eat, sleep, remain alert. Now, an apparatus or a machine may be more or less infallible—man is not. The flesh can fail, and so can concentration. Let him stew in silence for a week."

The French President nodded.

"You suggest—that silence might unnerve him."

"It might fool him. Imagine a man making war on the world. Silence, solitude, a ghastly and fantastic solitude. He might go potty."

Continental gentlemen had to have “potty” explained to them.

“Mad? But yes, we understand——”

“Surely—the creature cannot be considered sane?”

“He’s most damnably sane,” said the Mancunian, “but he must have sleep. Imagine a man sitting by some apparatus, listening and watching for days and nights. He won’t stand it for ever. He’ll break down. He’ll fall asleep. He might commit suicide.”

The shrewd common sense of Manchester was accepted, and the conference at Paris decided to blockade Professor Pye with silence.

For the first twenty-four hours Professor Pye examined the silence and its various and possible implications. His enemies had been profoundly discouraged, or perhaps they were trying to fool him into overconfidence. None the less, this silence worried him; it kept him on the alert— especially so at night. It was so profound and so inhuman. It chained him to the top of the tower. He had connected flexes and ear-phones to his larger installation, and for hours he sat on the tower listening and listening—to silence. Every quarter of an hour he had to sweep the horizon with his atomic gun.

Once more the silence began to frighten him. It was as though nothingness possessed powers of attrition, like dropping water or blowing sand. There was pressure in this silence. It became almost like a heavy hand upon the top of his head, bearing more and more heavily upon his brain. The stillness was both so alive and so dead. He began to long for sound, even for some hostile sound that was human.

The landscape had become a painted scene, the sky a kind of hard blue ceiling across which artificial clouds floated. It seemed to be pressing nearer and nearer. His eyes ached. Almost, he was conscious of his tense and overstrained eardrums. He had aged; he looked haggard and grey and dishevelled.

Three days and three nights of that silence.

His brain was beginning to manufacture sounds, and sometimes these auditory hallucinations were so real that he would jump up and look over the parapet. Surely he had heard voices down there? Or he would switch on his gun and sweep the horizon.

He had fed in snatches and slept in snatches. He fought sleep. His desire for sleep was as terrible as the silence. It menaced him like a dark wall of water. He fought it off. It would be fatal for him to sleep for any length of time.

Why had he not thought of this before? He should have been prepared with some mechanism that would keep his gun revolving while he rested.

Why did not those fools flash him a message of surrender?

He was becoming less and less of a superman, God Pye *contra* Mundum, but a little dishevelled ape of a man who was beginning to chatter to himself and to react to imaginary noises.

On the third night he was convinced that he heard a dog barking outside the house. Hands's dog— Jumbo? Had the little beast been near him all the time? But no, he had driven Hands and the dog to Guildford. Nevertheless, he rushed out in a state of strange excitement. He called, he appealed to the ghost dog in a wheedling voice.

“Hello—doggie! Come here, good dog. Come along, old man. Nice bone for nice doggie.”

He whistled and wheedled and called, but the silence was like grey rock.

He cursed: "Go to hell, you beast!"

He slammed the door and burst into sudden tears.

XVI

Mrs. Hector Hyde's landing at Le Bourget was not fortuitous. The famous airwoman had been engaged in one of her adventurous escapades over Asia, finding other hazards to conquer, when she had picked up an aerial message from Tashkent. This piece of world news had been sufficiently wild and improbable to pique Mrs. Hyde. She had turned the nose of her plane westward, and, on landing at Bagdad, had asked to be enlightened.

"What is this absurd rumour?"

Bagdad could assure her that this was no rumour but very terrible reality.

Mrs. Hector Hyde ate, slept for two hours, had her machine refuelled, and took off for Paris. She arrived at Le Bourget late in the afternoon, and asked to be driven at once to the English Embassy. Mrs. Hector Hyde, being both a gentlewoman and a world figure, was treated as a person of some significance. In fact, she was to be supremely significant. If some nasty little male was—as usual—making a horrid mess of civilization, it was time for woman to intervene.

The ambassador gave her five minutes. He was due to attend a conference at the Elysée at six. Mrs. Hyde listened to all that he had to tell her, and then asked to be allowed to attend the conference with him.

"I would like to come as a volunteer. I might be of some use——"

She was calmly yet passionately determined to be of use. She had lost things in England, irreplaceable things—relations, friends, a home, dogs who were waiting for her.

"I want to be of use, Sir Hugh. No, there is nothing more to be said."

The ambassador took her with him. She was the only woman in the conference-room, and she sat and listened. Particularly did she listen to the young man from Manchester, Professor Cragg. His name, his appearance, his insurgent hair and strabismic eye might be somewhat uncouth and provincial, but he impressed her. These very eminent gentlemen, politicians, diplomats, savants, sat round a table and conferred. They were dignified, formal, and a little helpless. Professor Cragg was combative, and logically so. He had no oratorical gifts. He was a doer, not a talker.

He argued that the hypothetical enemy in Surrey had been dosed with a week's potent silence. He might be mad or dead or lulled into a sense of false security. Or he might be preparing further horrors. The psychological moment had arrived for a raid upon Surrey.

"Just one plane, and an attempt to land on the downs and explore them. Yes, a night landing if possible."

Professor Cragg's was a rational suggestion, but who would undertake this forlorn hope?

"I'd rather like to go myself," said he, "if anybody will fly the plane."

Mrs. Hector Hyde stood up.

"Gentlemen, I ask to be given the duty. There is a full moon tonight. I know that part of the country very well. I was born in Surrey. If Professor Cragg will accept me and my plane——"

Professor Cragg jumped up and gave her an awkward, boyish bow.

“Delighted. Now—we can do something.”

Professor Cragg and Mrs. Hyde were driven to Le Bourget. The weather reports were favourable, an anticyclone covered England and the north of France; there was little wind or cloud, but a danger of ground fog at night. Mrs. Hyde inspected her machine in person and superintended the refuelling. The professor was fitted out with a bag of bombs and a flying suit. Le Bourget gave them a meal, and Professor Cragg borrowed from the French an automatic pistol and a pair of glasses. They waited for the moon to rise before taking off. The aerodrome gave them a cheer.

Mrs. Hyde had laid her course. She proposed to fly straight across the Channel, strike the South Downs, and crossing the Weald, land on the North Downs. She knew the country from the air. She was sure that she could pick up St. Martha’s and the high ground beyond round Newlands Comer. She had danced at that most comfortable and pleasant of hotels at Newlands Corner. As a girl she had explored the Pilgrims’ Way and ridden along the Drove Road. Her plan was to bring her plane down on that broad, sweet stretch of rabbit-nibbled turf. It would be outlined for her by the wooded Roughs and the scrub and yews on the hillside. Her face was as calm as the face of the full moon.

XVII

Seven days of silence and of sleeplessness had reduced Professor Pye to a state akin to senile dementia. He chattered to himself; his saliva ran into his beard; hands and head shook with a senile tremor. He was suffering from hallucinations. Imaginary voices threatened him; he was startled by apparitions.

Yet his intelligence retained an edge of sanity. A kind of coldly impersonal Professor Pye could consider and comment upon the figure of a dishevelled and tremulous old gentleman with a dewdrop hanging to his nose. Pye, the physicist, admonished Pye, the man.

“What you need, my friend, is sleep—ten hours sleep.”

Obviously so. The human mechanism that was Pye cried out for sleep. Had it not sat on that tower, hour by hour, sweeping the horizon with that gun? Sleep suborned him; it was more than a temptation; it was like the sea coming in. It was irresistible.

Sleep became a tyrant. It said: “No—I shall be satisfied with nothing but completeness. You will take that mattress and pillow and bolster and those bedclothes and place them on my proper kingly bedstead. No—I refuse to be fobbed off with a shakedown on the floor. See to it that my commands are obeyed.”

Professor Pye procrastinated. He climbed to the top of the tower. He saw the face of the full moon staring at him like a vast countenance that had just appeared above the edge of the world. He gibbered at the moon.

“How dare you stare at me like that!”

He turned the atomic gun on the moon. “Take that, you insolent satellite.”

But the moon frightened him. It was like the cold and accusing face of humanity. Yes, he would sleep. He blundered down the stairs, and dragged mattress and bedclothes from the laboratory into his bedroom. He made his bed. He had left all the lights blazing in the laboratory and the blinds up. He was conscious of nothing but the crave for sleep. He closed the door of his bedroom, turned off the lights, and got into bed. He slept like one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

XVIII

Mrs. Hector Hyde turned her plane to the left about a mile from the wooded crest of the North Downs. They were somewhere over Farley Heath when she spoke to Professor Cragg.

“Do you see those lights?”

Professor Cragg saw them, and realized their significance.

“The only lights in Southern England. If someone is alive there, it means——”

“That’s the inference. And we are still alive. Those lights are windows on the downs.”

“I think so. I am going to land near Newlands Comer.”

She brought the plane down perfectly on the broad and moonlit stretch of turf. They climbed out and stood side by side in that world of the dead. There was the most profound silence. Even here the faint odour of death and decay permeated the air. Almost, they spoke in whispers.

“We had better not waste any time.”

She shivered slightly.

“No, no—psychoanalysis. Those lights.”

Professor Cragg laid a hand on his bag of bombs.

“Yes—that’s our—objective. We are humanity’s forlorn hope. One can assume that life and electric light advertise—the enemy. If my theory holds—the devil has fallen asleep and left the lights burning.”

They followed the downland track under the full moon, nor had they gone thirty yards before they came upon the first dead, a man and a girl with a picnic basket between them. Professor Cragg turned his electric torch on the motionless figures. He said nothing, but quickly switched off the beam of light.

Mrs. Hyde’s voice sounded stifled. She had seen the faces of those dead.

“Let’s get on.”

He understood her. She was compelling herself to control instinctive terror. They passed on, having to step aside or diverge to avoid those dark objects on the grass. The moonlight made the scene more ghastly and macabre, those derelict cars, the tea tables in the tea gardens, the odour of death. Mrs. Hyde spoke.

“And to think I have danced over there.”

“Where?”

“The Newlands Comer Hotel. Such a pleasant place.”

Her voice came like a little cold wind.

“Do you know how to use those bombs?”

“Yes. The French showed me.”

“You won’t hesitate?”

“Is it likely?”

They crossed the main road to Shere, and followed the downs.

There was silence between them. The tension was so acute that time became relative. They might have been walking for an hour or for ten seconds when they emerged from the shadow of a grove of beech trees, and on a bluff of the chalk hills saw those lights shining. Mrs. Hyde paused, her hand on her companion's arm.

“Windows.”

Professor Cragg looked at the lights.

“I'll go on—alone.”

But she would not hear of it.

“No. I don't think I could bear to be left alone here.”

“I—understand. We had better not speak.”

She nodded.

The track forked in a hollow space below the beechwood, one path ascending, the other descending. Professor Cragg chose the upper path, but on the edge of the plateau a stout fence of netting and barbed wire closed the path. It was Professor Pye's boundary fence erected to keep out hikers and picnic parties, and since Professor Cragg had no wire cutters and the five-foot fence was unclimbable, they had to retrace their steps and explore the lower path. It brought them out into Professor Pye's private lane whose rough and flinty surface had been loosened by a spell of dry weather. In fact, Professor Cragg trod on a loose flint, and the stone went rattling down the slope. He stood very still for a moment, inwardly cursing. If the house with the lights could be assumed to be the house of the ogre, then it was more than probable that its ingenious owner had installed some apparatus for the registration and amplifying of sound.

He spoke in a whisper.

“That damned flint may have betrayed us.” But his companion was in no mood for loitering. Hesitation and delay might rupture an overstrained self-control. Professor Cragg saw her face in the moonlight. She pointed upward, like some pale figure of fate urging him on. The lane had a narrow grass verge on either side of it, and taking to the grass they pressed up and on. The lane ended in a cindered space outside the gates of the courtyard, and the white gates were closed.

Mrs. Hyde and Professor Cragg stood and looked at each other for a moment. He made a gesture with his right hand. He was telling her to sit down. She shook her head and remained standing, and Professor Cragg, realizing that her courage had to be humoured, sat down on the grass and removed his boots. He left the pistol and the field glasses at her feet. He advanced on his socked feet to the white gates. Very cautiously he tried the latch. The gates were not locked, and Mrs. Hyde saw him swing one leaf back and disappear.

There was not a sound. In less than a minute she saw him reappear carrying what appeared to be an empty deal box. He moved round the house and along a terrace of grass and weeds under the front windows. She changed her position so as to be able to watch his movements. She saw him place the box under one of the laboratory windows. He unhitched his bag of bombs and lowered it to the ground, and, climbing on to the box, raised his head with infinite and deliberate caution.

He was looking in at one of the laboratory windows. They were casements, opening outward, and Professor Cragg raised the casement stay from its iron peg, swung the window back, and put his hands

on the sill. She held her breath. She saw the long, gawky figure raise itself and slip through the window. He disappeared.

Silence.

Professor Cragg was prowling like a cat round the laboratory, examining its contents. He came to the laboratory door; it stood ajar. Inch by inch he pulled it open until he could slip through into the corridor. He had pushed up the button of his torch before entering the laboratory, and with the electric torch in his left hand he crept along the corridor. He came to another door which also stood ajar. He listened.

A sound of life, a most unmistakable sound; the heavy breathing of someone asleep. Professor Cragg put his hand to that door. So gradual was his pressure that the door hardly seemed to move. Very cautiously he shone his light into the room. The ray rested for a moment on a figure lying on a bed.

Professor Cragg very quietly drew back. He stood in the corridor for a moment listening to the sleeper's heavy breathing. There was no break in the rhythm, and Professor Cragg crept step by step back into the laboratory. The bedroom was next to the laboratory, and he had noticed that the window was open and the blind down. He slipped out through the laboratory window, and shifted his box and his bag of bombs along the house.

He took a bomb from the bag, stood on the box, pushed the blind back with his lighted torch, and gave one glance into the room to make sure. He dropped the torch on the grass, pulled the bomb pin, and, lobbing the bomb into the room, crouched down behind the wall. There was a moment's silence, then the crash of the explosion. Fragments of broken window glass flew upon Professor Cragg's head and shoulders.

He bent down, picked up two more bombs, and hurled them one after the other into the room.

A profound silence seemed to surge back like water that had been troubled by an explosion. Mrs. Hyde saw Professor Cragg standing on the box and shining his torch into that room. He gave a leap from the box to clear the broken glass, and came across the grass toward her. His face was very pale, and a streak of blood showed on his forehead.

He spoke.

"There was life—in there. I've effaced it. One had to be ruthless."

She nodded.

He went for his shoes, sat down, put them on, and rejoined her.

"We'll wait five minutes. He may have an understudy. Then—I'll explore."

They waited, motionless, voiceless. Not a sound came from the white house, and with a glance at his companion Professor Cragg went forward to explore.

"Better stay there. One has to remember that there may be other devilments—live wires, traps."

She watched him climb in through the same window. The minutes went by in silence, and then she saw a flash of light up above and heard his voice.

"Eureka !"

She saw his head and shoulders in the tower, silhouetted against the moonlit sky.

“There’s a contraption up here—rather the sort of thing I expected to find. I daren’t touch it. It is better that nobody should touch it. I’m coming down.”

He rejoined her on the hillside, and his face was grim.

"Genius gone mad. In one’s imaginative moments one has postulated the case of some anti-social intelligence making war on humanity. My God, but what a war! We little fellows who dabble in mysteries will have to be watched in the future.”

She looked up at the tower.

“So—your theory was sound.”

“Yes, even a super-scientist is human. He had to sleep. Sleep saved us. Well, let’s spread the news and prepare the funeral.”

“Funeral?”

“Yes, of Professor Pye and his infernal creation.”

They made their way along the moonlit hillside to Newlands Comer. The silence was still profound but it had lost its ghastly menace. They talked, and the sound of their voices seemed to fill the silence with a vibration of life reborn. The dead were there, but their destroyer was dead with them. The moonlight seemed to play more mysteriously in the branches of the old yews and beeches.

Standing beside the motionless plane, Professor Cragg pulled out his watch.

“Another hour and the dawn will be here. I should like to fly over that place.”

She nodded.

And then he glanced at the spread wings of her machine.

“I rather think that this plane of yours ought to be preserved—say—in St. Paul’s Cathedral, or a bronze model of it set up on these downs.”

She smiled faintly.

“I think I’d rather have some sandwiches and hot coffee. They are in the cockpit. Of course—I never knew—whether—we should need them. I’ll fetch the thermos.”

XIX

Mrs. Hector Hyde’s plane took off as the sun cleared the horizon, and with the level rays making the machine glow like some golden dragonfly, it climbed and, gaining height, made a left-hand turn over the downs. Professor Cragg was leaning over the side and observing the white house below. He could see the white parapet of the tower like a marble plinth surrounding a grave.

He thought: “Yes, better to take no chances. I shall suggest that they drop bombs on that hillside until nothing is left of Professor Pye and his machine and his discovery. The world is not yet ripe for so much knowledge.”

Mrs. Hyde headed south. They saw the shimmer of the sea and then the outline of the French coast. She laid her course for Paris, and at Le Bourget men were watching the sky, and when they saw that aeroplane coming out of the north, an indescribable excitement infected the aerodrome. Those two adventurous souls had dared the death zone and had survived.

When the plane bumped along the landing ground and came to rest, a crowd rushed toward it—politicians, diplomats, savants, pilots, the aerodrome staff. What had happened? What news did they bring?

Professor Cragg, one leg hanging over the side of the plane's body, waved his airman's helmet.

“We found one live man in Surrey, and he's dead. Satan was sleeping, and we bombed him.”

The crowd went mad. Almost, it seemed ready to carry the plane and its crew in triumph round the aerodrome. It shouted and cheered and behaved quite foolishly, only to realize that Mrs. Hyde was still sitting in the pilot's seat, and Professor Cragg standing up as though to address them.

Professor Cragg held up a hand, and there was gradual silence.

“Gentlemen, we are going back. A little breakfast and then—the final ceremony. I want a dozen bombing machines. We will show them their target.”

Telephones and wireless stations became busy. Signor Mussolini, who had just arrived from Rome, was one of the select few who were permitted to go as passengers. The squadron of huge machines roared northward, led by Mrs. Hyde's plane. It was Professor Cragg who dropped the pilot bomb on the white building above the Shere valley. Mrs. Hyde swung her plane clear for the big fellows to come into action. Plane after plane flew low over the house of Professor Pye. The hilltop seemed to spout flame and smoke and débris. In a little while the work was finished. That which had been a building was a crater field over which little tattered flames flickered. Even the grass and the trees were alight. Professor Pye and his atomic gun—and his notebooks full of cypher—were ashes and particles of shattered metal.

The End