

The Death-Cloud

by Arthur Leo Zagat, 1895-1949

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The epic exploit of one who worked in the dark and alone,
behind the enemy lines, in the great Last War.

WE SAT, Eric Bolton and I, at a parapet table atop the 200- story General Aviation Building. The efficient robot waiter of the Sky Club had cleared away the remnants of an epicurean meal. Only a bowl of golden fruit remained—globes of nectar picked in the citrus groves of California that morning.

My eye wandered over the scene spread before us, the vast piling of masonry that is New York. The dying beams of the setting sun glinted golden from the roofs of the pleasure palaces topping the soaring structures. Lower, amid interlacing archings of the mid-air thoroughfares, darkness had already piled its blackness. Two thousand feet below, in the region of perpetual night, the green-blue factory lights flared.

On three sides, the unbroken serration of the Empire City's beehives stretched in a semicircle of twenty miles radius. Long since, the rivers that had made old Manhattan an island had been roofed over. But, to the east, the heaving sea still stretched its green expanse. On the horizon a vast cloud mountain billowed upward from the watery surface, white, and pink and many shades of violet.

„That's just the way it looked,“ Bolton muttered, as he drew my attention to the cloud mass. „See that air-liner just diving into it? Just so I saw the NEW YORK—five thousand men—pride of the Air Service—dive into that mountain of smoke. And she never came out! Gone—like that!“ And he snapped his fingers.

He fell silent again, gazing dreamily at the drifting rings of pipe smoke. He smiled, the twisted smile which was the sole indication that one side of his face was the master work of a great surgeon-sculptor. A marvelous piece of work, that, but no less marvelous than the protean changes that Bolton himself could make in his appearance. It was this genius at impersonation that had won Bolton his commission in the Intelligence Service, when, in 1992, the world burst into flame.

„Would you like to hear about it?“ The obtuseness of the man!

„If you'd care to tell me.“ I spoke off-handedly. This was like hunting birds on the wing: too abrupt a movement of the glider, and the game was lost.

This is the story he told me, in the low, modulated voice of the trained actor. He told it simply, with no dramatic tricks, no stressing, no climatic crescendos. But I saw the scenes he described, dodged with him through black caverns of dread, felt an icy hand clutch my heart as the Ferret stared at me with his baleful glance; was deafened, and stunned, and crushed by that final tremendous down pouring of the waters.

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I was standing—he began—on one of our rafts, watching the installation of a new ray machine. A storm was raging, but the great raft, a thousand feet long, and five hundred wide, was as steady as a rock. We were 700 miles out; the great push of '92, that drove us back to within 150 miles of our coast and almost ended the war, was still eleven weeks off.

Suddenly the buzzer of my radio-receiver whirred against my chest. „2—6—4“—my personal call. „2—2“—„Go to nearest communications booth.“ „A—4“—„Use Intelligence Service intermitter 4.“ The secret of that was known only to a half-dozen men in the field. Headquarters wanted to talk to me on a supremely important matter.

There was a booth only a short distance away. I stepped to it and identified myself to the guard. In a moment I was within and had swung shut and sealed the sound-proof door. I set the intermitter switches to the A—4 combination. Not even our own control officers could eavesdrop now. Then I switched off the light, and waited.

A green glow grew out of the darkness. I was being inspected. Headquarters was taking no chances. Out of the green haze before me the general himself materialized. I could count every hair in his grizzled beard. The little scar at the corner of his left eye fascinated me with its distinctness.

I saluted. „Captain Bolton reporting, sir.2

„At ease!“ General Sommers' voice snapped with military precision. The general was standing in his private office in Washington. I could see his desk in

the corner, and the great operations map on the wall. There were new lines of worry in the general's grim face.

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He went straight to the point. „Captain Bolton, we are confronted with a problem that must be solved at once. While our information is meagre, the Staff is convinced that a great danger menaces us. Of its precise nature, or how it is to be combatted, we are unaware. I am assigning you to secure the answer to these two questions.

„A week ago there appeared, ten miles east of the enemies' first line, and directly opposite our raft 1264, what seemed at first to be merely a peculiar cloud formation. It rose directly from the surface of the water, and was shaped roughly like half an egg. The greatest dimension, lying along the water, parallel to the battle line, was about 5 miles; the height approximately a mile.

„When two or three days had passed, and no change in the shape or dimensions of the strange mass had taken place, although wind and weather conditions had been varied, we determined to investigate. This was undoubtedly an artificial, not a natural, phenomenon. It was then that we discovered that there was a concentration of defenses along this portion of the front. Our scouts were unable to find any of the usual gaps in either the ray network in the upper air, or the gyro-knife barrier beneath the surface. At the same time, from scouting parties and deserters at other points we learned that rumors are rife throughout the enemy forces of some scheme now on foot that will overwhelm us within a very short time. No details have been given, but so widespread is the gossip, and so consistent, that we have been forced to the conclusion that it cannot be reasonably dismissed as mere morale-supporting propaganda.

„We have secretly developed a method of so equipping aircraft as to render them immune to the enemy death ray. The device is complicated and requires time to manufacture and install. After careful consideration, we decided that the situation was sufficiently grave to warrant revealing to the enemy our possession of this new device.

„The battle-airship NEW YORK has been equipped with the new protective equipment. To-morrow at sunrise she will make an attack in force on whatever lies behind that screen.

„Your orders are these. You will proceed at once to raft 1264. You will observe the attack made by the NEW YORK. If she fails, you will then find some way to enter that area, discover what is going on behind the screen, hamper or destroy the enemy plans if possible and report back to me personally.“

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The general's face suddenly softened. His tones lost their military precision. „I am afraid, Captain, that I am sending you to your death. But—we must know what is going on. If the NEW YORK fails, the task will appear impossible, but you have already done the impossible.“

The grim mask dropped again over the chief's features; again he became the perfect military machine. „You will call on any officer of our forces for whatever you may need. Here is your authority.“ He stepped aside, and I heard the low burr of the tel-autograph at the side of the screen before me. A moment, and the general was again visible.

„That will be all.“ Once more the momentary softening. „Good luck, my boy.“ A final exchange of salutes, and the screen went blank.

I switched on the light. There in the little machine was a slip of paper. I extracted it. The lines of type, the scrawled signature, burned into my brain like letters of fire.

„To: All Officers of the Military Forces of the Americas.

Subject: Military Assistance. Eric Bolton, Captain M.I.S., M.F.A. is authorized to call upon you for any assistance. You will comply with his requests.

Alton Sommers, Lieut. General Commanding M.I.S., M.F.A.

By authority of the Commander in Chief.“

In the corner appeared my thumb-print.

I stood there for a long time, mulling the thing over. The Staff was laying tremendous stress on the enemy's strange cloud formation, even to the extent of disclosing the secret of the new defensive device. The Easterners, too, had something novel, something that would cut off absolutely the transmission of ether waves. Nothing either side had yet produced would do that. What was happening behind that screen? Would they break through our defenses at last?

A vision arose before me. Hordes of yellow men, of black, of white renegades from the nations where the red flag waved dominant, pouring over the Americas. The horrors that Britain had undergone, the last European nation to hold out against the Red horde, flashed into my mind. I shuddered. Never. It must not be.

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I was hurled from my feet by an electric shock. A great flood of sunlight burst in on me. A corner of the booth, three-foot concrete, had been sheared away, whiffed into nothingness! I arose and dashed into the open. A raid was in progress. The air was electric with the clashing of opposing barrages. The terrible silence of the pitched battles of that war oppressed me. I saw a squad, caught in the beam of an Eastern ray-projector, destroyed. The end man must have been just on the edge of the beams—half his right side lay twitching on the ground. The rest of him, and the seven others, were smoking heaps of blackened cinders.

High over No Man's Land—queer how those old phrases last—a covey of enemy helicopters hung, waiting for the barrage to lift. A black hulk broke the surface of the water, split open: then another. Enemy sub-surface craft. The fight was being waged under water, too. A green mass spilled its contents as it leaped over the waves and fell back. One of ours.

A huge buzzing came from behind me. A cloud of wasp-like forms flew high overhead. It was reserve aircraft, hurrying up from the second line raft, ten miles west.

But this was no affair of mine. I had my orders. I must be in the North Atlantic by daybreak. I looked around. There at the further edge my little Zephyr rested, intact. I hurried to her and sprang into the cockpit. I was off the coast of Chile. Twelve thousand feet would clear the highest range between. I set the height control. Today you don't have to do that, but Mason hadn't perfected his automatic elevator then. The starting indicator was already set for my position. I adjusted the direction disk. The little green light showed that the

power broadcast was in operation. I snapped over the starting switch and the whir of the helicopter vanes overhead told me all was well. The machine leaped into the air. Nothing to do now till the warning bell told me I was within a hundred miles of my destination. The battle shot away from me, far below.

Darkness came swiftly. I was shooting into the eye of the sun at three hundred miles an hour. I swallowed a few pellets of concentrated food, then curled up in my bunk. There was no knowing how many hours would pass till I slept again.

I fell asleep at once.

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The strident clamor of the alarm bell woke me. Dawn was just breaking. Far below me I could make out the heaving Atlantic, calm and peaceful. A long line of the huge second-line rafts just underneath, stretching north and south till it curved over the horizon. A bugle's clear notes came drifting up to me, reveille. Then I was hovering over my goal, raft 1264. The black rectangle was alive with activity unwonted at this early hour. I took over the controls from the mechanical pilot, sent my recognition signal and drifted downward.

The Zephyr settled on the raft with a soft hiss of the compressed air shock absorbers. A guard came hurrying up. My credentials passed upon, I alighted. Momentarily, it was getting brighter. I was just in time.

I looked eastward, toward the enemy rafts. Beyond them, there it was, just as General Sommers had described it—a mountain of vapor, gleaming white in the gathering light. Not at all disquieting; merely a shifting, billowing cloud mass. Rather pretty. The rest of the sky was clear, unspiced.

As I gazed a line of red fire ran around the edge of the cloud. A violet glow suffused the whole, faded swiftly into pink. The sun was rising. Behind me I heard a huge whirring. Turning, I saw her, just rising, all the beautiful trim length of her. The NEW YORK! Pride of our air fleet!

Fifty paces to my right a little knot of officers caught my attention. I recognized Jim Bradley. I remembered, someone had told me he was a major, and was commanding a raft. Good. Jim would work with me as he had in the old days at Stanford U., when I coached the air polo team that he captained. I walked over.

Time for only a hurried handclasp. The signal corps sergeant, earphones clamped to his head, was intoning the airship's messages. „We have reached the thousand-foot level. Will now head for the objective. All well.“

We watched her. She was through our barrage-line. A snapped order from Jim restored the barrier, momentarily lifted to let her pass. A curious shimmering blurred the ship's outlines. I called Jim's attention to it. „That's the new device, a network of fine wires, charged with neutralising vibrations. Worked like a charm in the tests. But there's no telling how effective it is in actual service.“

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A cold shiver ran up my spine. Many a fine ship I had seen strike that invisible network of rays, and puff into smoke. Was that to be the NEW YORK's fate?

„We are about to pass through the enemy barrage. All well,“ came the sergeant's unemotional monotone, repeating the voice in his ears. I knew that voice was being listened to in Washington by a little group whose every

shoulder bore the stars of high command. My thoughts flashed to them, gazing breathless at the screen that imaged the very scene before us.

My breath stopped. Now! She must be in it now. The next second would tell the tale. A faint coruscation of sparks ran along the network, but the craft kept steadily onward. Thank God!

„We have passed through the enemy first-line barrage. All well.“

A faint whistling of released breath came from all about me. I was not the only one who had agonised at that moment. The first test had been passed; would the other be as successful?

„We are increasing our speed to the maximum. Objective dead ahead. All well.“

I saw the ship fairly leap through the sky. Five hundred miles an hour was her greatest speed. Another moment—

„We are entering the cloud. Bow is invisible. All—“

She was in it. She lurched. Plunged forward. She was hidden. I turned to the sergeant. Tremendous concentration was on his bronzed face. He reached out, twirled a dial in the set before him, and shook his head slightly. Twirled again. We were knotted around him, our faces bloodless. He looked up. „The last sentence was cut off sharp, sir. I can hear nothing more. Even the carrier wave is dead.“

Jim ripped out an oath, snatched the phones, and clamped them over his own ears. Dead silence.

At last he looked up. „Nothing, gentlemen.“

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We looked at each other, appalled.

Bradley handed the apparatus back to the sergeant. „Remain here, listening carefully. Let me know at once if you hear anything.“ The sergeant saluted.

Out there the white cloud billowed and gleamed in the sunlight. But there was something ominous in its calm beauty now.

A thought struck me. I spoke, and my voice sounded flat, dead. „Perhaps it's only the radio waves that are cut off. Maybe she's all right, fighting there inside, smashing them.“ But I knew that it was all over.

„God, I hope you're right. Five thousand men aboard her.“ Bradley's lips were white, his hands trembling. „Come to my office, Eric; we'll wait there. To your posts, gentlemen. Each of you will detail a man to watch that cloud bank, and report to me any change in its appearance, even the slightest.“

We walked back to the concrete command-post. We didn't talk, though it had been years since we had seen each other. My brain was numbed, I know. I had seen plenty of fighting, watched many a man go to his death in the seven months since the war began. But this, somehow, was different.

An hour passed. Jim busied himself with routine paper work. At least he had that relief. I paced about his tiny office. Already I was making plans. Force had failed. Strategy must take its place. I must get in there. But how?

Bradley looked up from his work, his face grim. „No news, Eric. If you were right we should have heard something from the NEW YORK by this time. They're gone, all right.“

„Yes, they're gone,“ I answered. „It's up to me, then.“

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He stared in surprise. „Up to you? What do you mean?“

„Just that. I’m going in there, God helping.“ I made sure the room was shut tight against eavesdroppers. Then, briefly as I could, I told him of my orders, showing him the document I had received the day before. He shook his head.

„But it’s impossible. Their ray network, and the undersea barrier, are absolutely solid here. I don’t think even a mouse could get through. And even if you did get behind their lines, how on earth are you going to get into the area underneath that devilish cloud. You saw what happened to the NEW YORK, protected as she was.”

„Yes. I know all that. Nevertheless it’s got to be done.“ Just then I got the glimmering of an idea. „Tell me, Jim, are they doing much scouting here. Undersea, I mean.“

„The usual one-man shell, radio-propelled. We get one once in a while. Most of them, however, even if we do smash them, are pulled back on the wave before we can grab them. It’s a bit easier than most places, though: our depth’s only about six hundred feet.“

„What! Why, I thought the bottom averaged three thousand all along the line.“

„It does. But what would be a mountain ridge, if this were dry land, runs out from the mainland. We’re over a big plateau here. It goes on east another twenty-five miles, or so. See, here’s the chart.“

A warning bell seemed to ring somewhere within me. Had this peculiar formation of the ocean bed anything to do with the problem at hand? But I kept to the immediate step. My plan was rapidly taking shape in my mind.

„What are the scouts—black, yellow, or—“

„Russians, mostly.“

„Good. Now listen, Jim. Send down word that the next scout-sub that is caught is not to be ripped, but simply held against the attraction of the return wave. The television eye is to be smashed at once, and radio communication jammed. Can you do it as if something had happened to the shell?“

„Sure thing, but what’s the big idea?“

„You’ll see. I’ve worked the thing out now.“

Just then a red light on Bradley’s desk winked three times. „There’s one between the lines now!“ he exclaimed.

„Quick, man, shoot my orders down.“

He pressed a yellow button and spoke quietly but emphatically into a mouth piece. „O.K. They understand.“

„Now take me down.“

He looked at me as if I had taken leave of my senses, but complied.

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The door of the elevator that lowered us from the surface clanged open. We stepped out on a balcony that ran around a large, steel-lined room. The walls were dripping, and on the floor, twenty feet beneath, a black pool sloshed about with the heaving of the raft, in whose interior we were. Rubber-clad soldiers moved about in the blue glow of the globes sending down their heatless light from the ceiling. One sat at a desk near the elevator. As I spied him a green light glowed in front of him twice.

„They’ve got him, sir, bringing him in.“

A low-toned order. The soldiers sprang to their post. A whirring signal. At the other end of the room the steel wall began to move upward, and water rushed

in. A tremendous vibration shook the chamber: a ponderous thudding. The water rose to the level of the balcony and stopped. I looked at Bradley.

„We're beneath the surface, aren't we?“ I asked. „How is it that the water doesn't fill the room?“

„Pumps,“ he replied. „Tremendous pumps that draw the water out just as fast as it comes in, and shoot it out again into the sea. We can maintain any desired level in here.“

Then I noticed that the black flood was rushing by beneath me at a terrific rate.

Something bulked in the opening. Two tiny subs drew in, a black and a green. The steel wall rushed down again, and the vibration ceased. From the green craft heavy grapples extended, clutching the black, enemy scout. I saw a gaping hole in the black boat's nose, where its eye had been smashed.

Men were clambering over both vessels' hulls, tugging at the hatchway fastenings. The black one flew open. I leaped to the deck. Bradley after me, and jumped down into the hold.

In the little cubby-hole that was all the machinery left space for, a pale-faced form in green-gray crouched against the wall. His eyes stared in fear. A Russian, praise be. And not far from my size and build.

„Off with his clothes, quick!“ I yelled, stripping mine as I spoke. Bradley looked at me queerly, and shrugged his shoulders. „Quick, man! Everything depends on speed!“

He shook his head, as one who listens to the vaporings of an imbecile, but turned to obey. I was standing there—naked, studying the Easterner's face, his body. No scars. Good.

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Jim turned to me, the prisoner's clothing in his hands. An exclamation burst from him. He looked back at the trembling Russ, then at me. „My God, Eric, how did you do it?“ he asked.

I smiled. „All right, is it?“

„You're his twin; no, you're himself! If I'd had a drink to-day I'd be sure I was seeing double. How on earth—you had no make-up, no time—“

I was sliding into the Red's gear as I talked! „I've trained all the little muscles in my face—muscles you others don't even know you have. Started when I was a kid, then made a good living at it, acting. Comes in handy now, damn handy. I can make anything of my face, and hold it forever if I have to. Chink, Russ—anything. Distort my limbs too, and change my voice. That won't be necessary now. Simple, but it takes a lot of practice.“

I was dressed by then, a counterpart of the enemy officer—I hoped. If I wasn't—well, I wouldn't live much longer.

„Now, out with the Russ and my clothes. Don't leave a bit, if you value my life.“

A light of comprehension illumined Jim's face. „You're going to pass yourself off as this man? You've got your nerve with you!“ he exclaimed.

„Exactly.“ The cubby-hole was clear now. „Now take that spanner, and bang me over the head. Not too hard; I don't want a cracked skull, only a splashed scalp. Then pile me where it will seem I crashed against a projection of some kind when the grapples took hold. That bunk edge will do. Batten the hatch, and cast off the grapples. I hope their automatic control is still working, otherwise my scheme's gaflooy.“

Jim stuck out his great paw. „Good luck, Eric,“ he said, simply. Then he clutched the spanner. I saw it go over my head...

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Voices around me, harsh, guttural voices. Russian! By the Nine Dogs of War, I had pulled it off! But what were they saying? I was inside the lines, but was my deception successful? Or had my face relaxed with the shock of the blow? I thanked my Russian grandmother then for all the time she had spent teaching me her mother tongue.

„Boszhe moi, the poor fellow must have had an awful smash. He hasn't come to yet.“

„The doctor will be here in a minute. He'll revive him.“

I breathed a prayer of gratitude. They didn't suspect! But I didn't like this doctor business. Well, I'd have to stall through that as best I could.

I seemed to be lying on hard rock. I opened my eyes, staring blankly, straight up. A bearded face was bending over me, the captain's crossed sickles on the shoulder straps just within my vision. Behind, and above him, towering straight up—my God!—what was it? A green wall, a vertical green wall, going up and up! It looked like—but no: how could water stand straight up like that, for hundreds of feet?

I almost betrayed myself with a gasp! A dim bulk showed in the translucent depths of the wall. It rushed toward me, took form. A fish, a huge, blind fish, its cavernous mouth stretched wide. It came straight for me, just above. In a second it would leap through. A scream of terror trembled in my throat. Then it hit the edge of the translucent green wall—and vanished! Was I dreaming? Had Jim hit me too hard?

Something stirred in the back of my mind. I sensed dimly that here lay the explanation of the disappearance of the NEW YORK, the very mystery that I had come to solve. Almost I had it; then it slipped away.

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„Here's the doctor!“ someone said. There was a little stir of activity about me. I allowed my eyes to close, as if in utter weariness.

„What's all this? What have you got here?“ A gruff voice, intolerant.

„One of our sub-sea scouts, sir. Just come back, after some delay. Her eye was smashed, and there are grapple marks on her. Must have been caught, and then slipped away. She was leaking badly. We got her through the lock just in time.“ Jim had evidently added a few touches of his own. „Comrade Pauloff seems to have been seriously injured. He's got a bad cut on his scalp, and was unconscious till a moment ago. Opened his eyes just as you came along.“

„Hm. Let's see.“ I felt a none too gentle hand finger my wound. It throbbed maddeningly. The doctor spoke again. „A nasty crack, but no fracture. Here, you—wake up.“ I made no move. „Come on, wake up!“ I heard the plop of a cork being drawn from a bottle; a pungent odor assailed my nostrils, choked me. I writhed, pulled at the hand holding the bottle to my nose and opened my eyes.

„That's better. How do you feel now?“

I raised a hand to my injury and muttered, in Russian. „Hurts, papashka.“ I kept my expression as blank, as uncomprehending, as I could.

The doctor flashed an understanding glance at the captain, then turned back to me. „What's your name?“

Memories of my grandmother's tales of her youth came flooding back to me. „Pavel, son of Pauloff.“

It was the formula of the Russian student, in his teens.

„Your rank?“

„Second year. Petrovski Gymnasium.“

The physician turned away. „No use bothering him now. A clear case of amnesia.

„He's been thrown back to his high school days. I've had a number of cases like that among your scouts lately.“ Blessed inspiration! „Only cure is rest. Get him over to the infirmary. We'll evacuate him to a base hospital to-morrow.“

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I was in a cool white bed, in a low ceilinged room, white painted. There were other beds, vacant. A uniformed male nurse puttered around. There was an elusive green tinge to the light that poured in through the one window.

The door opened and a sergeant came in. „Comrade Alexis!“

„Well, what is it now? Have they found another gold-bricking officer to mess up my clean beds?“

„A party from corps headquarters will be here in fifteen minutes for inspection.“

„Let them come. They won't find any specks of rust on my instruments, like they did on Comrade Borisoff's.“

„They'd better not. You know what happened to him.“

„Yeah. Chucked into the ray. Well, he didn't give the burial squad any work.“ And the two laughed, a laugh that had more than a hint of sadistic cruelty in it. „If I had my way,“ the nurse went on, „I'd do the same with all these nuts that come back from the scout ships raving of home and mother. It's my idea that they're all bluffing. It's a good way to be shipped to the rear, where the captured dames are. Say, did I tell you about the last time I was on leave—“

The two whispered, their heads close together. My brain was working frantically. Things had gone well so far, but I had to get out of here before the morning, or I'd be sent to the base and lose all that I had gained by my daring.

The door snapped open. „Smirnow!“ (*Atten-shun!*)

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I was on my side, facing away from the wall. I remained so, staring blankly across the room. I hoped the inspection would be over quickly. The fewer the enemy officers I had looking me over, the better. Someone back there was snapping questions. That voice—where had I heard it before?

„Your patient. What's his trouble?“

„Amnesia, sir. One of the scouts.“

„Oh, yes. Let's look at him.“

Someone was walking across the room, then standing above me. His hand was just at the level of my eyes—a hand with the little finger twisted queerly into the palm. I knew that hand: it was the Ferret's! A cold shiver ran up my back. I almost stopped breathing.

Of all the infernal luck in the world, to have the Ferret walk in here! He was chief of the Red's Intelligence Service, the shrewdest, sharpest, cruelest of them all. Many of our best men had gone west because of his uncanny instinct for piercing disguise. They said he could smell an American. And many of our most strictly guarded plans had been smashed through his infernally clever spying.

Only a month before I had him in my clutches; saw the very rope around his neck. But he had slipped away, and left me empty-handed and kicking myself for an ass.

I held my breath as I felt those gimlet eyes of his boring into me. Would he sense who I was? Surely he could hear the pounding of my heart. How long he stood there I don't know. It seemed like hours. I tautened, waiting for him to call out, determined to sell my life as dearly as I could.

But for once the Ferret was fooled. He turned away. „Take us into your kitchen,“ he snapped at the nurse, then there was the tramping of feet and the slamming of a door.

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The breath whistled from me in relief. I turned cautiously. I was alone. Now was my chance. I jumped from the bed and started toward the window. Once out, I'd find some place to hide. I let my face relax; there was no use for that particular disguise any longer. The window was up. I was on the sill. Another second and I'd be out in the open.

„Just where do you think you're going?“ came the Ferret's silky, cruel voice. I whirled. There he was, just inside the door. His little black eyes glinted dangerously over his hooked nose and sharp chin.

„Oh—Bolton! Something made me turn back. Glad to see you.“

His hand flashed to the ray-tube in his belt. At the same moment I left the window sill in a desperate leap. Clear across the room I sprang, and before he had time to pull his weapon I had one hand clamped around his wrist, the other clutching his throat. We crashed to the ground.

I was in pyjamas, barefooted, he fully clothed. His leather shoes drove into me viciously, even as his face turned purple. The pain was excruciating, but I dared not cry out. His left thumb found my eye, was digging in.

The crash of our fall must have been heard outside; another moment and all would be lost. I was momentarily on top as we rolled across the floor. With a supreme effort I pulled his head away from the floor, then crashed it down. He slumped; lay still.

The door knob was turning as I jumped frantically through the window. I heard a cry behind me. Rough, uneven ground. No one about. To my right was a rocky cliff, and at its base what looked like the mouth of a cave. Any port in a storm: I dived into it.

It was a cave, all right, or rather a narrow tunnel winding some distance into the cliff. I ran back at top speed, till I crashed into the end of the passage.

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I crouched there, panting. It was beastly cold, and the dampness struck into my bones. I shivered, then laughed grimly. I wouldn't shiver long. When the Ferret came to and revealed that Eric Bolton was around, there wouldn't be a stone left unturned till I was found. Those birds had good cause to want me rubbed out.

Already I could hear faint shouts from without. The chase was on. I was caught, right enough. Trapped like any rat.

I felt around me in the darkness and my hand lighted on a round stone. It just fitted my fist. Well, I'd get one of them, anyway, when they found me. Cold comfort in that, but I didn't feel like giving in tamely.

Footsteps sounded out at the tunnel end. So soon! I gripped my rock tightly, and waited.

But—it sounded like only one man. I drew myself together. Maybe I had a chance. A dim glow showed where the passage curved, then a disk of light flashed on the wall and flitted about. The fool!

The steps came on, slowly, stumblingly. The disk of light grew smaller as its source drew nearer. Then he was around the corner, bulked for a moment against his own light as it was reflected from the wet wall. That moment was enough! The stone left my hand with all the force I possessed. It went straight to its mark: a sickening thud told me that. The form dropped, and the flashlight clinked on the rocks.

I listened. Still the shouts from without, but no steps inside. I was safe for a time. But the searcher would surely be missed, and others would come looking for him. I had only one chance. I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't lose anything. If I stayed here my goose was cooked.

By the light of the flashlight I examined my quarry. A renegade Frenchman, apparently. A private. In a trice I had his uniform on me and had twisted my features to match his. Little did I think when I acted under the Klieg lights that the fate of two continents would some day depend on this gift of mine.

He stirred; groaned. I hesitated. Then—well, I couldn't chance his crawling out. His ray-tube was newly charged. I left a heap of ashes there as I walked away...

* * * * *

I was outside the cave. I darted a glance around. My refuge was not the only hole in sheer rock; it was literally honeycombed. From one, then another of the cavern mouths a soldier emerged. Each strode across the uneven, rocky plain to where an officer stood with what was apparently a map in his hand. As each searcher saluted and reported, the officer made a mark on the map. Someone came out from the cave-mouth next to mine. I fell in behind him.

„No one in cave twenty-one, sir.“

„To your post.“

The private turned on his heel and marched off to take his place in a company formation that was rapidly taking shape near by. My turn was next. What was the number of my cave? A mistake now, and I was through.

I saluted. „No one in cave twenty, sir.“

„To your post.“

Had I hit it? When the final check-up came would there be two reports for one cave, none for another?

A front rank man moved aside. Good: that meant my place was just behind him. My luck was holding. And never did a man need luck more!

Now was my first chance to look about, to discover what sort of place this was. It was an oval plain, roughly a mile wide by five miles long. Buildings, squat structures of corrugated iron, were scattered here and there. In the distance, to my left, what seemed a great hole in the ground glowed; a huge disk of light.

Dry land, here, where there should be nothing but a waste of waters!

* * * * *

Puzzled, I strained to see what bordered the plain. It was a tall cliff, running all around, and towering high in the air. But it wasn't rock, for it glowed

strangely green in the flood of light that illumined the place. And it was clean cut, rising sheer from the unevenness of the ground.

Then I remembered. The vertical green wall that soared above me as I lay dazed from Jim's blow. The translucent green wall in whose depths I had seen the blind fish rushing toward me. Water! The sea! Impossible! There were scientific miracle-workers in the enemy's ranks, but they couldn't have hollowed out a pit such as this in mid-ocean; forced back the very ocean to create this amphitheatre, this dry plain on the Atlantic's very bottom: held back the unthinkable weight of Earth's waters by a nothingness. Incredible!

Yet the accomplished fact stared me in the face.

My eyes traveled up that impossible wall. It must have been at least six hundred feet high. At its summit, in a murky haze that heaved and billowed, I made out strange, dim bulks that hung, unsupported. A long line of them, a long ellipse following closely the curving of the cliff. Underneath the nearest, barely perceptible, I could make out a lens-shaped cage of wire. I began to understand.

Overarching everything was a great dome of heaving cloud.

„Smirn-ow!“

The long line snapped into immobility.

„By the left flank, march!“

We were moving, marching. Then my ruse had succeeded. I had chosen the right cave number. I breathed a sigh of relief.

* * * * *

The command for route order was given, and at once a buzz of talk broke out around me. „Damn them, they're sending us right off to work! We missed our mess, hunting for that damned spy. But that don't mean anything. It's back to the tunnel for ours.“

„Oh, quit your bellyaching, Andreyeff. Another week, and we'll be in New York. Just think of it, the richest city in the world to loot! And women! Why, they tell me the American women are to the Frenchies and the cold English-women as the sun is to the stars. What's a meal more or less when you think of that?“

An obscene laugh swept through the ranks. Guttural voices boasted of past exploits—black deeds and sadistic cruelties that had marked the trail of the hordes sweeping over Europe from the windy Asiatic steppes.

As we marched, I noticed a peculiarity of the rocky floor. There were no sharp edges, no sudden cleavages in the uneven terrain. It looked, for all the world, as though the stone had been melted, then frozen again in a moment. An unbelievable pattern was forming itself in my mind. If what I thought were true—!

The command came to halt.

We had reached the blazing disk I had seen from afar. It was a tremendous shaft, dropping straight into the very bowels of the earth. Two hundred feet across, a blinding glare streamed up from the pit. From far beneath came shoutings, the clank of machinery, a growling roar.

Other companies marched up and halted at the pit edge. My outfit were whites—Russians, French, Germans. But the others were black, brown, yellow—all the motley aggregation of races that formed the Red cohorts, the backbone of the Great Uprising. As the „At ease“ order snapped out a babel of tongues rose on the air. Every language of Earth was there save English. The

Anglo-Saxons had chosen tortured death rather than submission to the commands of their conquerors.

A huge platform rose slowly up in the shaft and came to a stop at the ground level. It was solidly packed with another throng of soldiers in the gray-green of the enemy. They marched off and we took their place.

* * * * *

Down, down, we went, till it seemed that our destination was the center of the earth. Louder and louder grew the growling roar, the ponderous thud and clank of huge machines.

We were in a huge chamber, hollowed out of the solid rock. Thousands of men bustled out among great piles of lumber and steel rails. Huge cranes rolled here and there, swinging their ponderous loads. Officers shouted crisp orders. Green-uniformed privates sprang to obey.

But no time was given me to get more than a glimpse of all this activity. From out the gaping mouth of a hundred-foot-wide tunnel a long train of flat cars came gliding. It halted and swayed on the single rail, and the whir of the gyroscopic balancers filled the cavern. A sharp order, and my companions leaped for the cars, lay prone on the steel car-beds, and passed their belts through projecting loops. I wondered, but imitated them. I buried my face in my arms, as the others were doing.

There came the eery shriek of a siren: the train was moving. Swiftly it gathered speed till it seemed as though my protesting body was being forced through a wall of air grown suddenly solid. Myriad fingers pulled at me, seeking to hurl me to destruction. Even through my protecting arms my breath was forced back into my lungs, choking me. The wind howled past with the wail of a thousand souls in torment.

Just as the limit of endurance was reached the terrific speed slackened, and the long train ground to a halt. „All off! Lively now!“ came the command.

* * * * *

We were at the rail-head, and before me was the face of the tunnel. Queer, hooded figures were there bending over wheeled tripods, manipulating what appeared to be searchlights. But no shafts of light leaped from the lenses. The tripods were rolling steadily forward.

I looked at the tunnel face again, then, startled, back to the hooded men. I rubbed my eyes. Was I seeing things? No, by all that was holy, it was so! The distance between the machines and the end wall of the passage had not changed, but men and rock were ten—fifteen—twenty feet away! They were boring; boring into the solid rock at tremendous speed. And the rock was melting, vanishing, disappearing into nothingness in the awful blast projected from those machines!

I gaped—my pose, my danger, forgotten. Almost as fast as a man could run, the tunnel extended itself. It was phantasmal, incredible!

A rough hand seized me from behind. I whirled, my heart in my mouth. It was the burly sergeant. „What the hell are you dreaming about, Renaud? Hop to it. Over there, on that shoring job. Get busy now, or—“ The threat in that unfinished sentence chilled me by its very vagueness.

My squad was hauling heavy timbers, setting them up where a fault showed in the rocky roof of the tunnel. I joined them but my thoughts were a madly whirling chaos.

The pattern was complete now. The long, curving under-water ridge on Jim's chart—this tunnel was boring through it. Whatever it was that those tripods projected—a new ray it must be—it was melting a passage six hundred miles long. Under our rafts, under our fleets, under our coast defenses—to come up far behind our lines. The ridge joined the coast just south of New York. Some night, while our generals slept in smug complacency, all that gray green horde of wolves would belch forth—from the very earth.

And the Americans would follow Europe into hell!

* * * * *

Five minutes passed. I looked again at the face of the tunnel, drawn by an irresistible fascination. It had advanced a full quarter of a mile. Like fog before a cloud-piercing searchlight, the age-old rock was dissolving before the ray. At this rate America's doom would be sealed in a week. And I, alone among these thousands, was helpless to avert the climaxing menace.

A howl of rage came from the sergeant. I turned. A diminutive German, his face pale green with fatigue, had stumbled and fallen under the weight of a heavy timber.

The swarthy non-com was kicking him with a cruel boot. „Get up, you; get up before I brain you!“

The sprawling man looked up, fear staring from his deep-sunk eyes. „*Aber, ich bin krank.*“—„I am sick; I can't stand the work; it is too schwer, too heavy,“ he faltered.

„Sick?“ the Russian roared. „Sick? I'll sick you! You're lazy, too damned lazy to do a little work. I'm tired of this gold-bricking around here. I'm going to make an example of you that the rest of you dogs won't forget in a hurry.“ His face was purple with rage. He bent, seized the fallen man and dragged him out from under the crushing bulk. Then, raising the struggling wretch over his head as lightly as though he were an infant, he ran forward, toward the ray projectors.

Shriek after shriek pierced the hot air, such howls of utter fear and agony, as I hope never to hear again. The little figure, held high in the huge paws, writhed and tossed, to no avail.

The sergeant reached the nearest tripod. His brawny arms flexed; straightened. The German swept up and over the head of the operator, and dropped in front of the machine. Then—he vanished. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was there between projector and rapidly retreating wall!

A horrible retching tore my stomach; I swayed dizzily. The utter brutality, the finality of the thing! „And any more of you carrion that I catch slacking will get the same thing,“ the Russian said. „You, Renaud, I've got my eye on you. Watch out!“ The sergeant's voice rasped through the mist about me. I shoved my shoulder under one end of an eight by eight and plunged into the back breaking labor. But one thought hammered at my reeling brain: „The NEW YORK! That's what happened to her!“

* * * * *

The long hours of toil at last ended. We were again in the entrance cavern, waiting for the elevator platform. It was unaccountably delayed: the last batch had gone up fifteen minutes before. The men about me chafed and swore. They were impatient for mess and bed.

Bit by bit I had reconstructed all the elements of this unprecedented operation. The ray, the blasting ray that whiffed into non-existence all that it

touched, was the keynote. The great plain had been cleared by the ray. The dim shapes floating high in that far-circling ellipse were pouring down the dreadful vibrations, thus holding back the sea in a marvelous green wall. I remembered the sea-monster that had dashed at me and vanished. That proved it. The dome of cloud was camouflage, or the product of the processes of destruction going on underneath: it didn't matter. What mattered was that it was interlaced by a network of ray beams. It was an impenetrable wall, a perfect defense. Boxed in on all sides by such a barrier, how was I to get out word of the menace? How was it to be combatted even if our forces knew of the danger? A hundred plans flooded my wearied brain, to be rejected one by one.

A mocking, ribald cheer arose from the men around me. The platform was ascending. Why the long delay? A premonition of disaster chilled me. I shrugged it aside.

We were at the top. A long line of soldiers curved about the mouth of the pit. The next shift waiting to go down? No—they made no move to approach. And each one was holding his ray-tube at the ready. This was the guard. At a table nearby a knot of officers was gathered. Papers of some sort were piled high on it. Again the icy finger of dread touched me. One of the officers moved aside, revealing the profile of his companion. The Ferret. Then I knew I was done for!

My eyes darted here and there, seeking escape. No hope—the heavily armed guard was all around; the platform blocked the shaft mouth. A dash would be self-betrayal—suicide.

* * * * *

Mechanically I obeyed the sergeant's barked commands. We were in single file. We were moving toward that ominous table where the Ferret stood, a sardonic smile on his sharp-featured face. I could make out a livid weal across his throat. I had left my mark on him. That was some satisfaction.

The head of the line reached the table. They were fingerprinting the leader! A lieutenant extracted a paper from the pile and handed it to the Ferret. He made momentary comparison of something on the paper with the mark the soldier had just made. Then the next man stepped up, while the first made off across the plain.

Of course! Simple: how very simple! And yet it had caught me! The service records of the men had their fingerprints, just as in our own forces. And each man in the area was being checked up. Trust the Ferret to think of that. He knew that I'd be somewhere in their ranks, impersonating one of their men. Well, I was in for it. The last trick in our long game was his.

My turn. No use going through the motions. I bent down a moment, then straightened. „Oh, hello, Bolton,“ the Ferret said, thrusting out his hand, the one with the twisted finger. I had resumed my own visage. „Didn't think you could get away with it, did you?“

Chagrined as I was, I put a good face on it. The Ferret and I had run up against each other many many times. Cheerfully, either of us would have cut the other's throat. But—we played the game.

„Hello, Rubinoff,“ I responded. „You seem to have me, just now. But try and hold me.“

The Ferret threw back his head and laughed. „Oh, I think you'll find it a little difficult to get away this time.“ I thought so, too, but did not voice my thought.

The smile left Rubinoff's face. He snapped an order. A squad advanced from the guard. Handcuffs clicked around my wrists, the mates of each were

fastened to the arms of two guardsmen. I was securely chained. They were taking no chances.

„Take him to the special cell in the guard-house.“ The lieutenant saluted. I was marched off. Then I was not to be summarily executed. I was not as much relieved as you might think. You see, I knew the Ferret. We had raided one of his hangouts once; just missed him. But we found an M.I.S. man there whom Rubinoff had been—questioning. We thanked God when he died.

* * * * *

We tramped across the plain. My eyes kept roving about: there wasn't much hope for me, but miracles have happened. Most of the scattered structures were hastily thrown together sheds of sheet iron. Barracks, they looked like. But, every so often I spied spheres of concrete, the wide open doors revealing yard-thick walls. What could be their purpose?

Something bothered me. Something about the ray projectors and the other machinery I had seen. I glanced up at one of the balloons floating high above. All these needed a power supply; tremendous power to accomplish what the ray was doing. And there were no cables running to them. How did the power get to them?

There was only one answer. Radio transmission. The required energy, perhaps the very ray vibrations themselves, were being broadcast to the points of projection. That meant a power-house and a control room somewhere in the area. The vulnerable points! Where were they?

I stumbled, and was jerked roughly to my feet. The lieutenant slapped me. „Scared, Americansky? You well may be. We'll have rare sport when they throw what the Ferret leaves of you into the ray.“ I shuddered. To go out that way! I'll be honest—I was horribly afraid. The men to whom I was shackled laughed.

A dull throbbing beat at my ears, a vibration just too low to be sound. I looked about for its source. It came from my left—a concrete building, low lying, about a hundred yards long by as many feet wide. At the further end a squat smokestack broke the flat line of the roof. Guards, many guards, were pacing their slow patrol about it. From the center of the side nearest me, cables thick as a man's trunk issued forth. I followed them with my eye. They ended in a marble slab on which rested a concrete sphere, somewhat larger than the others. The door of this one was closed. On the roof of the queer edifice was a peculiar arrangement of wires, gleaming in the artificial daylight. This building, too, was heavily guarded.

I had found what I sought—the power-house and the transmitting station. Much good it did me—now.

* * * * *

My warders turned sharply to the right. I glimpsed another concrete structure. A heavy steel door opened, then clanged shut, behind us. The fetid odor that means only one thing the world over, folded round me.

I sprawled on the steel floor of the cell into which I was thrust. A wave of utter fatigue engulfed me. I felt great weariness of body and despair of soul. I had failed in my mission. The fate of my country had been entrusted to me—and here I was in a steel-floored, steel-walled prison cell. And that tunnel was rushing toward New York at three miles an hour; over seventy miles a day.

I think I slept from sheer exhaustion. But something startled me into awaking. The dim light filtering in from the tiny air-hole high up on one wall

showed me that I was still alone. I lay, listening. There it was again, a wailing scream of agony that rose and fell and died away.

I heard a grating sound at the door, and it opened and shut. Rubinoff, the Ferret, had entered. „Comfortable, Captain Bolton?“ he asked, and there was more than a hint of mockery in the velvety voice. In the hand with the twisted finger was his ray-tube. It pointed steadily at me.

I got to my feet. I was in no mood for trifling, for that scream had shaken me. „Cut the comedy, Rubinoff.“ I growled. „Kill me, and let’s have done with it.“

He raised a deprecating hand. „Oh, come now. There’s really no absolute necessity for that. You can save yourself, very easily.“

„What do you mean?“

„I can use you, if you’re amenable to reason.“

„I don’t understand.“

„You’re the cleverest of the American Intelligence men. The rabble they give me are well-nigh useless. Cast your lot in with us, and in a week you’ll have the riches of your greatest city to dip your hands in. It’s easy. There is certain information we need. Give it to us. Then I’ll get you back into your lines: we’ll cook up a good tale for Sommers. You can resume your post and send us information only when it is of extreme importance. Come, now, be sensible.“

* * * * *

At first blush this was an astounding proposal. But I knew my man. He needed to know something. Once he had extracted the knowledge he sought from me, I should be disposed of. He’d never let me get back into our lines with what I had found out. It might have been policy to play him—but what was the use?

„No, Rubinoff. You know I won’t do it.“

He sighed. „Just as I thought. Honor, country, and so on. Well, it’s too bad. We should have made a wonderful team. However, you’ll tell me what I want to know. What are the defenses within fifty miles of New York?“

I laughed derisively.

„You’ll save yourself a lot of trouble if you tell me, Bolton. After all, death in the ray isn’t so bad. Whiff—and you’re gone. Don’t force me to other measures.“ There was a grim threat in his voice. But I simply shook my head.

„Stubborn, like all the other Anglo-Saxons. Well, I’ve got something to show you.“ He raised his weapon and glanced at it. „Pretty little thing, this. Not the ordinary ray-tube. Only field officers have these. Look.“

He pointed it at the wall from behind which that scream had come and pressed the trigger button. A tiny round hole appeared in the steel.

„Neat, isn’t it? Utilizes the same ray you saw at work in the tunnel. The Zeta-ray we call it. Just think what that would do to human flesh.“ I said nothing.

„But that isn’t what I had in mind. Just look through that hole.“

* * * * *

I wanted to see what was on the other side, so I obeyed. The Thing that lay on the floor within—could it ever have been a man? I whirled back to the Ferret in a fury, my fists clenched.

His infernal weapon was pointing straight at me. „Softly, Bolton, softly. You’d never get to me.“ I checked my spring, for he was right. „How’d you like that?“ he purred.

„Some of your work, I suppose,“ I growled.

„The poor fool was fomenting a mutiny. We wanted to know the other plotters. He was stubborn. What would you? Necessity knows no law... What are the defenses around New York?“ He advanced menacingly.

No answer.

„Why be a fool? This ray hurts, I tell you, when it's properly applied. How would you like to be melted away, piece by little piece, till you're like that in there?“

I shrugged my shoulders, but kept silent.

„I tell you it hurts. You don't believe me? That in there is unconscious, seven-eighths dead. Listen.“

He bored another hole in the steel, keeping his finger pressed on the trigger. Again that heart-rending scream of agony rang out, tearing its way through me. My brain exploded in red rage. I leaped for the fiend, reckless of consequences. My fist drove into the leering face with all the force of my spring, with all the insane fury that his heartless cruelty had roused in me. Smack!—he catapulted across the floor and crashed into the wall! I was on him, my hand clutching for his tube. But there was no need. He was out—dead to the world. So sudden, so unexpected was my mad attack that even he had not had time to meet it.

I worked fast. In a minute I was in Rubinoff's uniform and had assumed his face. I was a little taller; no matter. But the finger—that would be noticed immediately. There was only one thing to do. I stuck my little finger through one of the holes he had made in the wall and twisted. Crack! Beads of agony stood out on my forehead, but the break was just right. By bending the other fingers slightly I could hold that one in just the position of his.

I picked up the ray-tube with my left hand. If I went out through the guard-house entrance I might meet other officers and be engaged in conversation. That might lead to discovery. My cell was on the side of the prison away from the road; I had noticed no buildings behind it: I'd chance it. Luck had been with me so far.

* * * * *

I carved out a hole in the wall pierced by the air-hole. It was like cutting through butter with a red hot knife. I stepped out.

There was no one about. I walked carelessly around the corner of the building, my hand, holding the tube, buried deep in my pocket. Not far away was the spherical structure I had spotted as the control room. I returned salutes. No one stopped to talk to me. Would the guard before that building require a pass-word?

I heard a shout behind me. My escape was discovered! At once I broke into a run and dashed past the guard, shouting: „Prisoner escaped! Came this way!“ The man gaped. The shouting behind me grew louder. I heard the thud of many feet, running. I flung open the door, slammed it shut behind me, and turned the key.

A long row of giant electrode bulbs, as tall as a man, stretched before me—the source of the Zeta-ray. From here came the power that held back the waters, that bored the tunnel. A thunderous knocking shook the door. Someone at a huge switchboard turned toward me. Instantly my hand was out of my pocket, and the ray-tube leveled at the nearest bulb. I pressed the trigger. The bulb crashed. I swept down the line. Crash, crash, crash—they were all gone.

I whirled to meet the expected attack. It was wholly instinctive, for in a second we'd all be dead anyway. The waters would be down on us.

But the switchboard operator wasn't springing at me. Instead, he was tugging frantically, at a long lever that came down from above. There was a clang, and a steel shutter dropped across the door.

* * * * *

Then came a sound of crashing thunder that split my eardrums with its unbearable clamor. Then a mightier roar, as the mountain-high sea, held back so long by the invisible ray, poured its countless millions of tons of deep green water down into the man-made hole.

The impact was terrific. The yards-thick concrete shuddered and strained. The tremendous pressure forced trickles of water into the concrete shell: the roaring of the elements was indescribably deafening.

I was in pitch darkness, expecting every moment to be crushed under miles of ocean, when suddenly I was thrown from my feet. The floor was heaving drunkenly beneath me. In a moment I was slammed breathlessly against the shattered remnants of a huge vacuum tube. The jagged glass slashed my arms and face. I grabbed with my hand to steady myself; came in contact with an iron bar: clung like grim death.

For a huge concrete sphere was whirling, tossing, gyrating in a welter of waters. The din was terrific. I rolled over and over, my arms almost pulled out of their sockets. Then, like a ton of brick, something collided with my head. There was a blinding flare in the black void, and I knew no more.

* * * * *

Slowly I came out of a hideous nightmare.

My head ached frightfully, and my wounds smarted and stung. It was dark, but a faint luminescence from somewhere enabled me to faintly discern my surroundings. I was wedged between a steel cable-bracket and the curving wall. Across the glass strewn floor a body lay, sprawling queerly.

The room was swaying in long undulations, or was it my head? I lay helpless, unable to move. A leg dangled uselessly. There was a bump, the sound of scraping. I heard confused sounds penetrating the walls, and the jar of steady impacts.

A half an hour passed so; maybe an hour: I had no means of telling. I was weak from pain and loss of blood, and slightly delirious.

A faint whirring noise, a sudden intensity in the illumination caused me to turn my head. The steel shutter was glowing red, then a shower of white sparks broke through. The heavy steel was melting away into incandescence. It crashed.

A group of men stumbled cautiously in. Now I was sure I was delirious. For the men wore khaki uniforms! Americans! Then, in my fever, I thought I heard a familiar voice cry out my name. It was Jim's voice. A roaring curtain of blackness shut down on me.

* * * * *

When I awoke again I was lying in a clean-sheeted hospital bed. Jim was sitting at the side, staring at me with gloomy eyes.

„Hello, Jim,“ I gasped weakly. „How did I get here?“

It was touching to see the instantaneous delight on his weathered countenance.

„So you came to at last, you old son-of-a-gun! Thought you were cashing in on us for a while. How did you get here? That’s just what I want to know. How in hell did you get here?“

I was still pretty weak. „You pulled me out. What happened?“

„We’re still trying to puzzle it out. Wouldn’t be surprised if you had a hand in it, you blighter. We were watching that damned cloud, worrying ourselves to death. What with the NEW YORK going out like a light, and not hearing anything from you, we were pretty low.

„Then, suddenly, there was a tremendous detonation. The whole cloud mass collapsed like a pricked bubble, and a bottomless pit yawned underneath the ocean—and, next thing we knew, our raft was yanked from under our feet, plunging and bucking in a swirl of waters.

„I just had time to grab hold of a stanchion, when we were sucked down into a whirlpool such as I never hope to see again. Round and round we spun, the tumbling waters mountain high above us. I was buried most of the time in crashing billows; my arms were almost pulled out of their sockets.

* * * * *

„I never expected to see daylight again,“ Jim went on. „My hold was being broken when at last we were spewed out somehow onto a sea that looked as if a thousand hurricanes were blowing down.

„I managed to get my men together—what was left of them. There were pitifully few. Later, I heard that our losses were enormous. Over seventy-five per cent of our rafts on a 50-mile front were lost, and the enemies’ were almost totally wiped out.

„When the mile-high seas had toned down a bit, we saw a huge concrete ball tossing about like a cork. Couldn’t make out what the devil it was. Then someone noticed a door. We got that open, but there was a steel one inside. We had to slice it with an oxy-hydrogen flame. Inside, snug as a bug in a rug, were you.

„Now come on, tell me how in blazes you got in there. If you don’t spill it quick, I’ll bust.“

I sat up in my excitement. „Don’t you see, they were afraid the ray might fail. They had those concrete balls stuck all around so that the officers at least could escape, if it did. Their best technical men must have been running the control room. They made sure to have that specially strong. And the wave caused by the water pouring into the hole swept me right over here, just where I started from.“

Jim had both hands on my shoulders, was pushing me down. „Whoa, baby, whoa. That’s just as clear as a darkness-rayed area. Count up to ten, and start all over again.“

„Ten-shun!“

The general himself strode into the room. And then I had to tell my story straight.

