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**THRILLING
WONDER
STORIES**



The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

The LANSON SCREEN

A Complete Novelette

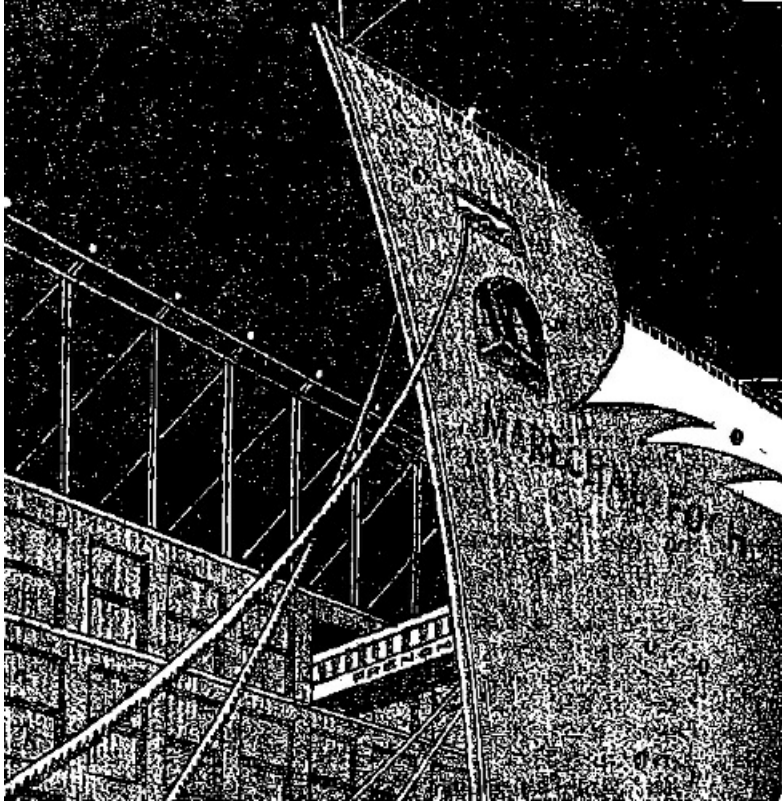
By **ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT**

Author of "The Land Where Time Stood Still," "Spoor of the Bat," etc.

Thrilling Wonder Stories

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CHAPTER I

War Maneuvers—1937

Harry Osborn, First Lieutenant U. S. Army Air Corps, banked his wide-winged bombing plane in an easy, swooping curve. In the distance New York's white pinnacles caught the sun above a blue-grey billowing of twilight ground-haze. A faint smile lifted the corners of his lips as he glanced overside, saw a train crawl along shining rails and come to a halt. Brown dots appeared from the passenger car behind its locomotive and clustered in ordered confusion about the other oblong that completed the train's complement.

What Man Can Do Man Can Undo—Yet No Earthly Power Could Penetrate the Invisible Barrier that Isolated a Great City from the World!

What appeared from his altitude to be a rather large pocket-handkerchief slid from the car and spread out on the grass. A metal tube glittered in the sun, came into motion, swivelling to the east. It looked like a cap-pistol, but Osborn knew it to be an eighteen-inch railroad gun.

He slanted down through lambent air. The terrain below was flat, lushly green. It was entirely vacant save at the very center of its five-mile sweep of marsh. Here a small hut was visible in the middle of a hundred-yard area ringed by a water-filled moat.

Two manikins stood before the structure. One was clothed in o.d., the other in black. The civilian's tiny arms gesticulated, and he went into the house. The army man moved sharply into an automobile and sped in the direction of the waiting artillery train.

"Five minutes to zero, Harry." The voice of Jim Raynes, his observer, sounded in the pilot's earphones, "What's the dope?"

"Target practice, Jim. We're to spot for the railroad gun and then we're to bomb. The target is—Good Lord!"

The plane wobbled with Osborn's sudden jerk on its stick, steadied. "Harry!" Raynes exclaimed. "What is it, Harry?"

"The target's that house down there. There's a man inside it. I saw him go in."

"The hell! What's the big idea?"

"Search me. There's no mistake though. Orders say 'absolute secrecy is to be maintained by all participants in this maneuver as to anything they may observe ...'"

"Maybe it's an execution. Something special. Maybe—"

"... and this order is to be obeyed to the letter no matter what the apparent consequences." Osborn finished. "General Darius Thompson signed it personally, not 'by direction.' Tie that, will you?"

"I can't. But—it's orders." Osborn levelled out, got his eyes focussed on the astounding target.

Suddenly there was nothing within the watery circle. Not blackness, or a deep hole, or anything similarly startling but understandable. It was as if a blind spot had suddenly developed in his own visual organs so that he could not see what there was at that particular point, although the wide green expanse of the swampy plain was elsewhere clear and distinct.

A key scraped in the door of a third floor flat on Amsterdam Avenue. Junior's two-year-old legs betrayed him and he sprawled headlong on the threadbare rug in the little foyer.

John Sims bent to his first-born, tossed him into the air, caught him and chuckled at the chubby, dirt-grimed face. He'd been tired as the devil a moment before. But now—

June Sims was flushed from the heat of the kitchen range, but her black hair was neat and a crisply ironed house dress outlined her young, slim figure. Junior was a warm bundle against her breasts as she kissed John.

"You're early, dear. I'm glad."

"Me too. What's for supper?"

"Pot roast." June's hazel eyes danced. "Johnny, mother phoned. She's going to come over tomorrow night to take care of Junior so that we can go out and celebrate your birthday."

"That's right! Tomorrow is May ninth!"

"Yes. Listen, I have it all planned. 'Alone With Love' is playing at the Audubon. We'll see that, and then splurge with chow mein. I've saved two dollars out of the house money just for that."

"You have! Maybe you'd better get yourself a hat. I saw an ad—"

"Nothing doing. We're going to celebrate! You go downtown."

And so on, and on....

"They're starting, Harry."

Raynes' businesslike crispness somewhat eased Lieutenant Osborn's feeling that something uncanny was happening down there and his hand was steady as he jerked the stick to cope with the bump of the big gun's discharge. A dirt mushroom sprouted in the field.

"Short, two-tenths. Right, four point three," Jim intoned, correcting the range.

A white panel on the ground acknowledged his message. The cannon fired again and slid back in the oil-checked motion of its recoil.

"Over, a tenth. Center."

The target was bracketed, the next try must be a hit. Harry banked, levelled out. The brown dots that were the gunners jerked about feverishly, reloading. Whatever it was that obscured his vision of the shack would be smashed in a moment now.

The gunners were clear. The pilot saw an officer's arm drop in signal to fire. Yellow light flickered from the big rifle. Osborn imagined he saw the projectile arc just under his plane. His eyed flicked to where that house should be.

And nothing happened! No geyser of dirt to show a miss, no dispersal of that annoying blind spot. Had the gun misfired?

Wait? What was that black thing gliding in mid-air, sliding slowly, then more rapidly toward the ground? The shell that could pierce ten inches of armor was incredibly falling along what seemed the surface of an invisible hemisphere.

It reached the grass and exploded with the contact. The earth it threw up spattered against—*nothing*. Why hadn't the shell exploded on contact with whatever had stopped it? What was going on down there?

"I—I can't make a report, sir." There was a quiver in Jim's phlegmatic voice. Even his aplomb had now been pierced. "I think it would have been a hit, but—"

Again and again the great gun fired. Osborn and Raynes got the signal to go ahead, dropped five three-hundred pound bombs point-blank on the mysterious nothingness. The area around the circular canal was pitted, excavated, scarred as No Man's Land had never been.

Aviation Lieutenant Harry Osborn flew back to Mitchel Field in the gathering dusk. His young head was full of dizzy visions. Armies, cities, a whole nation blanketed from attack by invisibility. Spheres of nothingness driving deep into enemy territory, impregnable.

It was good to be alive, and in the o.d. uniform, on this eighth day of May in 1937.

In the tea room of the Ritz-Plaza, the violins of Ben Donnie's orchestra sobbed to the end of a melodic waltz. Anita Harrison-Smith fingered a tiny liqueur glass nervously.

"I'm afraid, Ted. What if he suspects, and—"

The long-fingered hand of the man whose black eyes burned so into hers fisted on the cloth.

"Afraid. That has been always the trouble with you, Nita. You have always been afraid to grasp happiness. Well, I can't make you do it. But I've told you that I'm sick of this hole-and-corner business. If you don't come with me tomorrow, as we have planned, I go alone. You will never see me again."

The woman's face went white and she gasped.

"No! I couldn't bear that. I'll come, Ted. I'll come."

Van Norden's sharp, dark features were expressionless, but there was faint triumph in the sly purr of his voice.

"Have you got it straight? The *Marechal Foch* sails at midnight tomorrow from Pier 57, foot of West Fifteenth Street. You must get away from the Gellert dance not later than eleven-thirty. I'll meet you at the pier, but if there is a slip-up remember that your name is Sloane. Anita Sloane. I have everything ready, stateroom, passports, trunks packed with everything you can possibly need. You have nothing to do but get there. Whether you do or not I'll sail. And never come back."

"I'll be there," she breathed.

"Good girl. Tomorrow is the ninth. By the nineteenth we will be in Venice."

CHAPTER II

The Screen

General Darius Thompson stood at the side of his olive-green Cadillac and looked at his watch. The bombing plane was a vanishing sky-speck just above the horizon, the railroad-gun had chugged back toward its base. He was alone under the loom of that sphere of nothingness against which the army's most powerful weapons had battered in sheer futility. It existed. It was real. Unbelievably.

A man was in the doorway of the flimsy hut that had been the target of the shells. Quarter-inch lenses made his bulging eyes huge; his high-domed head was hairless and putty-colored; his body was obscenely fat. Professor Henry Lanson gave one the impression that he was somehow less than human, that he was a slug uncovered beneath an overturned rock. But his accession to the Columbia University faculty had been front page news and the signal for much academic gloating.

"Well." From gross lips the word plopped into the warm air like a clod into mud. "What do you think now, my dear General? Against my Screen your biggest shells were as puffballs. Yes? Your most gigantic bombs as thistledown. You thought me utterly insane when I insisted on remaining within." The scientist grinned, humorlessly. "What do you think now?"

Thompson shook his grizzled head, as if, to rid it of a nightmare. "You took an awful chance. Suppose it had cracked."

"Cracked! In the name of Planck cannot you understand that the Lanson Screen is not matter that can crack?" The other spread veined, pudgy hands. "It is the negation of all energy, a dimensionless shell through which energy cannot penetrate. And since matter is a form of energy—" The physicist checked himself, shrugged. "But what's the use? I cannot expect you to understand. Besides myself there are perhaps a dozen in the world who could comprehend, and none is an American. Enough for you to know that I had to be inside to operate the B machine that cut the negative force the A apparatus set up. From outside it could not be done. The Screen would have remained forever and you would not be convinced there had been no effect of your bombardment within it."

"Could you not have managed some remote control device, some way of working your B machine from outside?"

"Lord, but you military men are stupid!" the physicist burst out exasperatedly. "Don't you understand yet that once the Lanson Screen is erected all within is as absolutely cut off from the rest of the universe as if it were a different space, a different dimension? Nothing can penetrate within—electricity, wireless, the cosmic rays, the sun's radiations. Nothing!"

"Then if a city were covered by it, as you suggest, there would be no means of communication with the outside?"

"That is correct."

"If knowledge of this were universal there could be no more war." Thompson's grey eyes lifted and met the other's. A momentary silence intervened while a message flashed between these two so diverse characters. Then the general went on. "But if it were the exclusive property of a single nation that nation could become master of the world."

Lanson nodded. His voice betrayed knowledge of the *rapprochement* established in that single, long glance. "If I published my results I should gain very little from it. But if I sell it to one power it is worth almost anything I choose to demand. That is why I have worked at it alone. That is why I have never set the details down on paper, to be stolen. After I have sold the invention to you secrecy will be your concern, but till you meet my terms all knowledge of how I produce the effect remains here in my brain." Lanson tapped his clifflike brow. "Here and nowhere else."

"After we purchase it you might still sell your device to others."

"With a million dollars in hand I shall have no temptation to do so. No one could want, or use, more. That is one reason why you should be willing to recommend its payment."

The general shrugged. "I can get it for you when I am convinced that you can veil an entire city as you did this one small house. It seems to me impossible, or so tremendous a task, requiring such huge installations, such vast power, that it would be forbiddingly costly."

The physicist's grating, short laugh was contemptuous. "I'll shield New York for you with the same machine I used here, with the same power—storage batteries not larger than those in your car. Their energy is needed for only an instant, to start the complex functioning of forces whose result you have just witnessed. I'll erect a screen for you about Manhattan Island, an ellipsoid as high and as deep as the least axis of the enclosing rivers. Will that satisfy you?"

"If you can do it, and I cannot blast through, it will. When can you get ready?"

"As soon as I can move my machines to the required location, and set them up. Tomorrow night, if you wish."

"Very well. What help do you require?"

"Only an army truck to convey my apparatus, and, since I will use the rivers as a delimiting guide for the screen, a place near the water to set it up."

The general was eager now, eager as the other. "I'll order a truck out here at once. And there is an army pier at West One Hundred and Thirtieth Street that you can use. I'll see that it is made ready for you."

Midnight of May eighth, 1937. An army truck noses into the Holland Tunnel. On its flat bed are two tarpaulin-covered bulks, machinery of some sort. Its driver is crowded against his wheel by the rotund form of a black-clad civilian whose chins hang in great folds on his stained shirt and whose bulging eyes glow behind thick lenses with a strange excitement. The truck comes out on Hudson Street and turns north.

Tenth Avenue is alive as puffing trains bring the city's food for tomorrow. A herd of bewildered cattle file into an abattoir. West End Avenue's apartment houses are asleep. Under the Riverside Viaduct a milk plant is alight and white tank trucks rumble under its long canopy. At One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Street the army van waits for a mile-long refrigerator car, loaded with fruit from California, to clear the tracks it must cross. The way is cleared. The truck thunders across cobbles and steel, vanishes within the dark maw of a silent pier.

Two blocks eastward a lighted subway train crawls out on its trestle for a breath of air, pauses fleetingly, dives underground again like a monstrous serpent seeking its burrow. Above the southward course of that burrow midtown Broadway is a streak of vari-colored illumination, exploding into frantic coruscation and raucous clamor at Forty-seventh Street. Crowds surge on sidewalks, in shrieking cabs, private cars; pleasure seekers with grim, intent faces rushing to grills, night clubs; rushing home, rushing as if life must end before they can snatch enough of it from greedy Time. Blare of the latest swing tune sets the rhythm for them from a loudspeaker over the garish entrance of a so-called music store.

Time writes its endless tale in letters of fire drifting along a mourning band around Time's own tower.

MARKET CLOSES STRONG TWO POINTS UP
PRESIDENT ANNOUNCES RECOVERY ACCOMPLISHED
CHAMPION CONFIDENT OF VICTORY FRIDAY
HITLER DEFIES LEAGUE
POLICE WILL SMASH DOCK RACKET SAYS VALENTINE
GIANTS WIN....

There is no Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin written on that slender wall for some prophet to read.

Felix Hammond knots the gold sash rope of his black silk dressing gown. His satin slippers make no sound as they cross the thick pile of the glowing Kermanshaw on the floor, of his study to a darkly brooding Italian Renaissance secretary. He fumbles in the drawer for a silent moment, pulls out a book whose tooled leather cover should be in some museum. He sits down, opens the book.

Minuscular, neat writing fills page after page. Hammond reads an entry. Something that might be a smile flits across his ascetic countenance. His bloodless lips wince at another item. He riffles the sheets rapidly to the first blank space, reaches for a fountain pen and starts writing.

May 8: Wednesday. Another day gone. I confess I do not know why I continue this diary, except, it may be, that it serves as a reminder of the utter futility of life. There are, however, certain scarlet pages, and lavender ones also, that still have the power to titillate emotions I thought, long atrophied. I wonder if anyone save I will ever read them.

Aloysia opened in her new show tonight. I have just come from the theatre. She wanted me to join the supper Stahlbaum is giving the company, but I declined with thanks—thanks that I was in a position to decline. Time was that I should have leaped at the invitation, but I no longer need to share her with others. Her part suits her—Norton has given her fully two-thirds of the lines and she trails languid sensuality across the stage to her heart's content. I noticed that she used that trick with the mouth she first developed for my benefit. It was lost on the rabble....

Eleven p.m., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

Item: June Sims hangs on her husband's arm as they exit from the Audubon Theatre. Her eyes sparkle with happiness. She sighs tremulously. Then; "Johnny. Maybe we'd better call up and see if Junior is all right before we go eat."

Item: Anita Harrison-Smith peers over the shoulder of her black-coated dance partner with narrowed eyes. The florid-faced, heavy man in the alcove they are just passing is her husband. His companion is Rex Cranston, president of the A. P. & C.

Without hearing she knows their talk is of debentures, temporary reactions, resistance points on Cumulative Index graphs. Howard Harrison-Smith has forgotten Anita exists, will remain oblivious of her till she comes for him to take her home.

Her small red lips set in a firmer line. He has a long wait ahead of him tonight.

Item: Aloysia Morne lets her ermine cape slide into Felix Hammond's deft hands. He bends and kisses her where a shoulder no less white than the snowy fur melts into the perfect column of her neck. She turns with studied grace, and her throaty voice reproduces the deepest note of a 'cello.

"Do you know, Felix, this lovely place of yours is more home to me than my own so-grand rooms." Hammond smiles thinly, and does not answer.

Item: In the dim light of a decrepit pier jutting into the Hudson Professor Henry Lanson is more than ever like a gigantic larva as he putters about a grotesque combination of steel rods and glittering, lenticular copper bowls out of which a brass cylinder points telescopelike at the zenith.

An arm-thick cable crawls over the pier's frayed boards, and coils over their edge to the water. Lanson turns and checks connections on another, smaller machine.

Far across the Hudson's black surface loom the Palisades. A dash of yellow luminance zigzags against their ebony curtain, a trolley climbing to where an amusement park is an arabesque of illumination against the overcast sky.

To the right the cables of George Washington Bridge dip, twin cantenaries of dotted light, and rise again. A red spark and a green one are the apices of moiré, chromatic ribbons rippling across the water to the pier head from the deeper shadow of an army launch.

Braced vertically, five feet behind that pier head, is a whitewashed steel plate. This is the target for the automatic rifle that will be fired from that bobbing launch as a first trial of the Lanson Screen's efficacy.

Other tests will follow, later. But General Thompson will not yet chance firing artillery into Manhattan.

Henry Lanson calls, in his voice without resonance, "Ready, General. Ten minutes for the first try."

From across the water Thompson snaps, "Ready. Go ahead."

Lanson lumbers back to his machine, thrusts at a lever. There is no sound, no vibration. Suddenly the river, the

Palisades, disappear. The amusement park is gone, the inverted necklaces of pearly light that mark the bridge cables. There is no sky. Lanson looks at his wrist watch.

"Ten minutes," he chuckles. "He couldn't get through in ten thousand years."

He is very sure of himself, this man. But perhaps there is a minute residuum of doubt in his mind. After all, he has never experimented with so vast an extension of his invention's power. He thuds to the steel target, puts one doughy paw against it, leans out to view its riverward surface. Will there be any flecks of black on it to show the impact of the bullets that are being fired at it?

Is he warned by a sound, a creak? One cannot know. At any rate he is too obese, too ponderous, to avoid catastrophe. Under his leaning weight the steel plate rips from flimsy braces. Falls.

Its edge thuds against the physicist's head, knocks him down, crushes his skull.

Professor Henry Lanson's brain, and its secrets, are a smear of dead protoplasm mixed with shattered bone and viscous blood.

Eleven-twenty-eight p.m., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

The lights are dim in Foo Kong's pseudo-Oriental establishment. John Sims spoons sugar into a hot teapot.

"I'm going to make a lawyer out of Junior," he says slowly. "He'll go to Dartmouth for his academic course and then to Harvard. He won't have to start working right out of high school like I did."

John is reminded of the days before June belonged to him by the setting, by the dreamy light in her eyes.

"Let's walk down Broadway," he says, "when we get through here." That is what they used to do when all the glittering things in the store windows did not seem quite as unattainable as they did now.

"No, Johnny. I want to go home. I have a queer feeling there's something wrong. Mother isn't so young any more, and she's forgotten what to do if a child is croupy or anything.

"Silly. Nothing's wrong."

"Take me home, hon."

"Oh all right." Petulantly. "It's just like you to spoil things...."

Anita Harrison-Smith slips out of the side door of the old Gellert Mansion on East Sixty-first Street. She signals a taxi.

"Pier Fifty-seven." Her violet eyes are deep, dark pools and a visible pulse throbs in her temple....

Nobody looks at the sky. Nobody ever looks at the sky in New York. Nobody knows the sky has suddenly gone black, fathomless.

Later:

"Nita!"

"Ted!"

"You did come! Here, driver, what's the fare?"

The cab circles in Fifteenth Street, vanishes eastward. Van Norden takes the woman's arm.

"Have any trouble getting away?"

"No." She is quivering. "Hurry darling. Let's get on board before anyone sees us."

"There's some trouble. Fog or something. The pier doors are closed, but the officials say they'll be open again directly. They won't sail without us."

"Look Ted, it *is* a heavy fog. Why, you can't see the river from here. Even the other end of the ship is hidden. But there isn't any haze here. Queer. The ship seems to be cut in half; it's quite distinct up to a certain point, then there just isn't anything more. It's black, not grey like fog ought to be."

"Let's go in that little lunch wagon till we can get aboard. Nobody will look for us in there."

"Let's. I'm afraid, Ted. I'm terribly afraid...."

Nobody looks at the sky except General Darius Thompson, bobbing in a little launch on the Hudson. He is staring at vacancy where New York had been a quarter hour before. Up the river the cables of the great Bridge come out of nothingness, dip, and rise to the western shore.

Toward the Bay there is nothing to show where the metropolis should be. No light, no color. Nothing. Sheer emptiness. He looks at the radiant figures on his watch once more.

"Wonder what's keeping the old fool," he growls. "He should have dissipated the screen five minutes ago."

The night is warm, but General Thompson shivers suddenly. An appalling speculation beats at his mind, but he will not acknowledge it. He dares not.

A hundred yards from Thompson, in another space, a device of steel and copper and brass stands quiescent over the unmoving body of the one man who knew its secret.

Into the dim recesses of the army pier a dull hum penetrates, the voice of a million people going about their nightly pursuits, unaware, as yet, of doom.



CHAPTER III

1997

In his cubicle on the hundred and ninetieth floor of New York University's Physics Building, Howard Cranston watched the moving needle of his Merton Calculator with narrowed eyes. If the graph that was slowly tracing itself on the result-sheet took the expected form a problem that had taxed the ingenuity of the world's scientists for sixty years would be solved at last.

The lanky young physicist could not know it, but the electrically operated "brain" was repeating in thirty minutes calculations it had taken Henry Lanson three years to perform, two generations before. His own contribution had been only an idea, and knowledge of the proper factors to feed into the machine.

A red line curved on the coordinate sheet, met a previously drawn blue one. A bell tinkled, and there was silence in the room.

Breath came from between Cranston's lips in a long sigh. Curiously, he felt no elation.

He crossed the room slowly, and looked out through the glassite-covered aperture in the south wall. Just below, elevated highways were a tangled maze in the afternoon sun, and helicopters danced like a cloud of weaving midges. But Cranston neither heard nor saw them. His gaze was fixed farther away, down there where a curious cloud humped against the horizon, a cloud that was a challenging piling of vacancy; something that existed, that occupied space, yet was nothing.

Beyond it he could see the shimmering surface of New York Bay, and rising from it a tall white shaft. At the apex of that shaft a colossal figure faced him. It was a gigantic woman of bronze, her head bowed, her hands pressed to her heavy breasts that agonized in frustration. The Universal Mother stood in eternal mourning over the visible but unseen grave of millions.

"It might be dangerous," Harold Cranston muttered. "The gases of the decomposed bodies—there was no way for them to escape. Before I start building the machine I must find out. Carl Langdon will know."

He turned away. "But first I'll draw it up. It's simple enough—will take less than a week to build."

The design that presently took pictured form under Harold Cranston's flying fingers was strangely like that which 60 years ago Henry Lanson had called his B machine. But there was a difference. This one could be used from outside the Screen.

With the aid of this, by expanding the radius to include the original barrier, it would be a simple matter to destroy the hemiobloid of impenetrable force that was a city's tomb, to release the force which Lanson had set up.

Rand Barndon's flivver-plane settled before a graceful small structure of metal and glass. He swung his rather squat body out of the fuselage, crunched up the gravel path.

The door opened, irislike, as he stepped into the beam of the photo-ray. Somewhere inside a deep-toned gong sounded, and tiny pattering feet made running sound. "Daddy! Daddy's home!"

Blond ringlets were an aureole around tiny Rob's chubby face. The father bent to him, tossed him in the air, caught him dexterously. Ruth Barndon appeared, taller than her husband, her countenance a maturer, more feminine replica of the boy's. Rob was a warm bundle against her breasts as her lips met Rand's. "You're late, hon. Supper's been ready twenty minutes."

"I know. We were talking about what they found down there." He gestured vaguely to the south. "One of the fellows flew down last night. They wouldn't let him land. But he saw enough, hovering on the five thousand foot level, to keep him awake all night."

Ruth paled, shuddered. "What an awful thing it must have been. You know, nobody ever thought much about it. The cloud had been there all our lives and it really didn't seem to mean anything. But seeing all those buildings where people just

like us once lived and worked, seeing those ..."

"Afterward, dear." Ruth caught the signal of the man's eyes to the quietly listening child and stopped. "I'm hungry. Let's get going."

The soft glow of artificial daylight in the Barndon living-room is reflected cozily from its walls of iridescent metal. Rand stretches himself, yawns. "What's on tap tonight, hon?"

"We're staying home for a change."

"I thought this was Matilda's night."

"It is. But Mrs. Carter asked me to change with her, she had something on. And I would rather stay home. There's a new play by Stancourt. I think they call it 'Alone with Love.' Fred Barrymore is taking the lead."

"That gigolo! I can't see what you women find in him!"

"Rand! That's just a pose. You know darn well you turn him on every time."

"Oh all right. But let's get the magazine viewcast first. They always have something interesting." He crosses the room, touches an ornamental convolution on the wall. A panel slides noiselessly sideward, revealing a white screen. A switch clicks, the room dims, the screen glows with an inner light. Rand twirls a knob.

The wall-screen becomes half of an oval room, hung with grey draperies, grey-carpeted. There is a small table in the room, behind it show the legs and back of a chair. Like the furniture in the Barndon's own place, table and chair are of lacquered metal, but these are grey. The drapes part, a tall man comes through. His face is long, pinched, his blond hair bristles straight up from his scalp, and his brown eyes are grave. The impact of a strong personality reaches out from the televised image, vibrant with a stagy dominance even over the miles of space intervening between actuality and reproduction.

"Oh, it's Grant Lowndes," Ruth breathes. "I love him!"

"Shhh." Barndon is intent. "Shhh."

The Radio Commission's premier reader moves with practiced grace. An adept at building up interest in trivialities by pantomimed portentousness, Lowndes is weaving a spell about his far-flung audience that will assure him concentrated attention. As he sinks into the seat his eyes stare from the screen with hypnotic penetration. He places a book on the table before him. Its covers are of tooled leather, but there is a smudge of green mould across them concealing the design. He opens it.

The pages are yellow, frayed-edged. Faded handwriting is visible; minuscular. An old diary, perhaps, picked up from some dusty second-hand display.

"Good evening, friends." His voice is mellow, warming, vibrant with a peculiar tensivity. Ruth's tiny, stifled gasp is a tribute to its art. "The manufacturers of General Flyers Helioplanes have honored me tonight with a great privilege and a sad task. I bring to you a voice from the past, a voice long silent, speech from a throat long mouldered into dust, thoughts from a brain whose very molecules are one with the snows of yesteryear. I bring to you the palpitant, living agony of the greatest catastrophe the world has ever known." His eyes drop to the volume on the lectern, and his slim, white hand presses down upon its face.

"My colleagues of the viewcast service have informed you of the rending of the veil that sixty-two years ago cut off Manhattan Island from the world. They have brought into your homes the awful vision of dead buildings; dead streets strewn with twisted skeletons. You have, I am sure, tried to picture what must have happened there in the tragic days till eternal silence fell and the entombed city had become a vast necropolis. Today, my friends, the searchers found an account of one man's experience, a painstakingly written chronicle of that time. General Flyers is sponsoring the presentation to you of this human, pitiful tale. I will quote from the diary."

CHAPTER IV

The Doom Within

May, 9, Thursday: It is four in the morning. Aloysia came here with me from the theatre.... I have just returned from escorting her to the place where she resides. She does not call it home—that name she reserves for these rooms. "Home, Felix," she said, "is the place where happiness dwells." I recognized that, it is a line from one of her earlier appearances. Her mind is a blotter, seizing the thoughts, the ideas, the mental images of others and becoming impregnated with them. No. Molding itself to them. Perhaps that is the secret of her arts—dramatic and—amatory.

I am restless, uneasy. There is a peculiar feeling in the air, a vague sense of impending catastrophe. Even the recollection of the past few hours with her does not drive it away.

I thought music might fit my mood. But the radio is out of gear. Tonight nothing but silence. Strangely enough the police talk was roaring in. There seems to be some trouble along the waterfront....

It ought to be getting on to dawn, but it is still pitch dark outside. There isn't any breeze. The sky is absolutely black. I have never seen anything like it in New York. Clouds at night always reflect the glow of the city lights. And if there are no clouds there should be stars, a moon. Can there be a storm coming down on the big city—a tornado? That would explain the way I feel.

May 10, Friday: There has been no daylight today. The only illumination is artificial. Somehow that seems the worst of what has happened to the city. For something has happened. Manhattan is surrounded by an impenetrable barrier. Nobody, nothing can get in or out. There have been no trains at Grand Central or Penn Station, the subway is operating only within the borders of Manhattan Island.

I have been driving around with Aloysia all day. In spite of the darkness things went on very much as usual in the morning, children went to school, toilers to their work. It dawned only gradually that more than half the staffs in offices and stores had not shown up. Those who do not live in Manhattan. At noon the newspapers came out with scare headlines. Every bridge out of the city is closed off by the veil of—what can I call it? Every pier. A cover has shut down over us as if Manhattan were a platter on which a planked steak was being brought from the kitchen of the Ritz-Plaza. Even the telephone and telegraph have been affected.

By three in the afternoon the whole city was in the streets. My car was forced to move at a crawl. There was no sign of fear, though. The general consensus was that the phenomenon was something thrilling, a welcome break in the humdrum of daily existence. The mayor's proclamation, in the newspapers and over the few radio stations located within the city, seemed quite superfluous. He urged the people to be calm. Whatever it was that had shut us in was only temporary, it would vanish of itself or a way would be found to get rid of it. He has appointed a committee of scientists from Columbia and the City Colleges to investigate and make plans. The best of them all, however, is unavailable. Henry Lanson. He was found crushed to death on a Hudson River pier, killed in some obscure experiment.

Aloysia left me in time for the evening performance. The theaters and movie houses are crowded—they have had the best day in their history.

At ten o'clock tonight I went to take a drink of water. None ran from the tap. I called the superintendent and he said the mains had been shut off. There was no longer any pressure. Police orders are that water is to be used only for drinking and cooking. It is being pumped from the main by fire engines stationed at the hydrants and a rationing system has been devised. I have two or three cases of Perrier—they should be sufficient for my needs till this thing is over. There is plenty of wine and Scotch, but I have no desire for alcohol.

May 11, Saturday: The darkness still continues. No milk was delivered this morning. Prices for food have begun to go up. There is very little fresh meat to be had, practically no vegetables or fruits. Evaporated milk is being sold at a dollar a can. I am afraid the children are going to suffer a great deal....

May 12, Sunday: Church was packed. There have been several riots in the poorer sections of the city. Grocery stores were raided, a warehouse gutted. The militia has been called out, and all stocks of food taken over by the authorities for

rationing.

Aloysia has just appeared, bag and baggage. She says she feels safe only here. I am going out to see what is going on.

Two p.m.: There is no longer any water in the system! The lakes in Central Park are being emptied, the fluid taken to breweries and distilleries nearby, where the water is being filtered and chlorinated. The little thus obtained, and canned fruit juices, furnish the only drink for children. Adults are drinking beer and wine.

My car was stopped by a detail of national guardsmen in uniform. No gasoline engines are to be run any longer. There is no escape for the carbon monoxide fumes being generated, and they are poisoning the atmosphere. There already have been several deaths from this cause.

A fire started in an apartment house on Third Avenue. It was extinguished by chemicals. I wonder how long that will be efficacious?

I thought I was fairly well stocked up for at least a week. But with Aloysia here, her maid and my own man, my stock of food and drinkables is rapidly disappearing. For the first time I have sent Jarvis out to the food depots, with an affidavit setting forth the size of my "family," my residence, etc. I understand that each adult is being allotted one can of meat or vegetables, and one pint of water, per day.

Three p.m.: All house lights have been turned off to conserve coal. I am writing by candle. Street lighting is still maintained. There has been no gas since the Darkness fell, the plant being in Astoria. As my own kitchen has an electric range this did not impress me, but I understand those not so taken care of had been displaying remarkable ingenuity. Several families had upended electric laundry irons and used those as grills. That is ended now. However, there is so little to cook that the lack of heat hardly brings added hardship.

Jarvis has not yet returned.

Midnight: From my window I can overlook quite a large portion of the city. A vast black pall rests over us, relieved only by the network of glowing lamps outlining the streets. Even these seem to be growing dimmer.

My valet, Jarvis, is still among the missing. He has been with me for ten years, I thought him loyal, honest. He was honest with respect to money. I have trusted him with large sums and never found him faithless. But money is worth nothing today, while food ...

Stress reveals the inner nature of the human animal. I met the Harrison-Smiths today, walking along Park Avenue in the foreboding restlessness that is keeping all New York on the sidewalks. The usually iron-visaged banker presented a countenance whose color matched the clammy hue of a dead fish's belly. His heavy jowls were dewlaps quivering with fear. Even while we talked his eyes clung to his wife, who was erect, a bright white flame in the Darkness. Her eyes were answering the appeal in his. She had strength enough for both, and was keeping him from collapse by sheer, silent will. The gossips, this winter, were buzzing about Anita and Ted Van Norden, the wastrel who reminds me so much of my own youth. There could not have been any truth in the rumors.

May 13, Monday: Noon, I went out at five this morning to take my place in the long line at the food station. I have just returned with my booty. One can of sardines and a six-ounce bottle of soda—to maintain three adults twenty-four hours! On my way back I saw a man, well-dressed, chasing an alley cat. He caught it, killed it with a blow of his fist, and stuffed it in a pocket.

The air is foul with stench. A white hearse passed me, being pushed by men on foot. Someone told me that Central Park is being used as a burying ground.

I stopped to watch the passing hearse near a National Guardsman, a slim young chap whose uniform did not fit him very well. He spoke to me. "That's the worst of this thing, sir, what it's doing to children." Under his helmet his eyes were pits of somber fire. "Just think of the babies without milk. The canned stuff gave out today. My own kid is sick in bed, he can't stand the junk we've been giving him. June—that's my wife—is clean frantic."

I wanted to comfort him, but what was there to say? "How old is your youngster?" I asked.

"Junior is two. And a swell brat! You ought to hear him talk a mile a minute. He's going to be a lawyer when he grows

up."

I listened to him for a while, then made some excuse and got away. I had to or he would have seen that my eyes were wet.

Later: Aloysia has slept all day. All the windows in the apartment are open, but the air is heavy, stifling. It is difficult to move, to breathe. The shell that encloses us is immense, but eventually the oxygen in the enclosed air must be used up. Then what?

Unless relief comes soon death will be beforehand, the mass death of all the teeming population of this island. One must face that. Just what form will it take? Starvation, thirst, asphyxiation? Queer. I, who have so often babbled of the futility of life, do not want to die. It is—unpleasant—to contemplate utter extinction, the absolute end of self. I wish I believed in immortality—in some sort of future life. Even to burn eternally in hell would be better than simply—to stop.

There is a red glow to the south. Is it a thinning of the Darkness?

The city seems hushed with all traffic noise stopped. But another sound has replaced it. A high-pitched murmur, not loud, but omnipresent, insistent. I have just realized what it is. Children crying. Thousands of them, hundreds of thousands. Hungry children—thirsty children...

May 14, Tuesday: The clock says it is morning. It is not dark outside any more. A red light suffuses the scene, the light of the gigantic flame that has enveloped all the lower end of the Island. There is no wind. The conflagration is spreading very slowly, but it is coming inexorably. Overhead are vast rolling billows of smoke, edged with scarlet glare. Below there is a turbulent sea of human beings. The roar of the fire, pent-in and reverberant, mingles with the crash of breaking glass, the rattle of rifle shots, a growling animal-like sound that is the voice of the mob. They are engaged in a carnival of destruction, a blind, mad venting of protest against the doom that has overtaken them. I had a dog once that was run over by some fool in a truck. When I went to pick it up it snarled and sank its teeth in my hand. That is like those people down there. They do not know what has hurt them, but they must hurt someone in return.

Where they find the strength to fight I do not know. I can scarcely move. My tongue fills my mouth. It is almost impossible to breathe.

Aloysia has just called me. It was the ghost of a word, her "Felix." In a moment I shall go in to her and lie down beside her.

Grant Lowndes looks up from the book.

"That is all," he says simply. "In an inner room of the apartment where this was found the searchers discovered two skeletons on the mouldering ruin of a bed, a man's and a woman's.

"General Flyers bids you good night. I shall be with you again at this same hour on Friday."

He turns and goes slowly out through the grey curtains. The diary remains on the little grey table. Shadows close in from the edges of the screen, concentrating light within their contracting circle. The book is the last thing visible. That, too, is gone....

There is silence in the living-room for a long minute. Rand Barndon reaches to the radiovisor switch, clicks it off. The screen is blankly white in the glow of the room light.

"You know," Barndon says slowly. "The city wasn't all burned up. Guess the fire burned up all the oxygen and put itself out. That was what killed the people too."

Ruth sighs tremulously. "Rand, I was thinking about that one thing he said, about that soldier that was worried about his sick little boy. Just think if anything like that were to happen to our Rob."

"Say, I noticed that too. The fellow had a good idea. That's what we're going to make of the kid, a lawyer. Big money and not too much hard work. We'll send him to Dartmouth first, and then to Harvard. A fellow was telling me they've got the best law school in the country...."

[The end of *The Lanson Screen* by Arthur Leo Zagat]