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GODDESS OF THE MOON

THE CRATERS SPEW A SLIMY GREEN ARMY
BENT ON SMASHING THE MOON GODDESS
AND HER EARTHMAN PROTECTOR.

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THE GIRL FROM INFINITE SMALLNESS

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The Man Who Killed the World

PLANET STORIES Short-Short Story

By RAY KING

**Groff ruled the world through Fear. Fear of his
awful power ... his twisted, mad brain. For one
day that brain would crack. When it did, the
World would dissolve in cataclysmic Chaos.**

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In his little tower, perched at the very peak of the great terraced pile of buildings which was his home and his citadel, Peter Groff sat brooding with hatred. The city, its factories, its vast plowed fields, lay stretched below him. Millions of humans, at play in little games. How he hated them! And they hated him—hated and feared him. It made him chuckle. For all his life he had worked and schemed and fought to make himself a power. The richest, most powerful man in the world—he had attained it. They had called him cruel, in his youth, with his ruthless business methods. He had laughed. Then they had no longer dared call him anything which would anger him. And he had laughed at that, while he had bought their governments and their armies with his money.

He was laughing now as he thought of it. In seventy years he had made the name Peter Groff a thing at which to tremble. Over all the earth, from the heads of his groveling puppet governments down to the lowliest child driving a plow in the fields, there was no one who did not secretly fear Groff, the power of his money, the sound of anger in his voice. Here in his citadel his servants trembled—and hated him. It was funny, because by their methods they had gotten nothing; and he had gotten everything.

Alone in his little tower, he sat and brooded. There was little else to do now, and he enjoyed it—this contemplation of himself and his achievements. The mirror beside which he sat reflected his image. He stared at himself. His trusted companion. His face, thin-lipped, was grim with its power. His eyes gleamed with it—eyes at which everyone shivered with fear. The banked rows of his television tuning knobs were within reach of his hand. And he decided that it would be amusing to look and to listen from some of the newscasters' vantage points at what was transpiring down in the city streets. He chose one in the factory district, over by the river. They were the people who had least.

The little cathode mirror presently was glowing with the scene he had selected. It was a tube-lit city arcade, far down by the lowest level of the Inter-urban railway. Subterranean shops were along its sides—places where people with the tiniest fraction of money might spend it for something which wasn't worth having.

And as he stared, from one of the shops a young couple came—a dark-haired, slender young man and a girl who was pretty, and who was laughing. They were poorly dressed. They had nothing. But they were laughing; and suddenly they were struggling as the young man fastened upon the girl's dress the bauble he had bought, and then was trying to kiss her for his payment. The scuffle was over in a moment; and Groff heard from his microphone the girl's gasping, murmured words:

"Oh, Jac—I'm so happy—"

Groff stiffened. His thin, lined face was grim as he reached and cut off the image and the murmuring voice....

Something happened to Peter Groff that summer night. He wasn't conscious of it; he only knew that he was enraged as though an attack had been made upon him. Atrocious things which menaced him needed crushing. He pondered it, grim with his planning....

Near dawn, some of his servants knew that something had happened. They heard him, with his wild laughter coming in an eerie muffled blur from his little tower. Then young Peller dared go up to see what might be the matter.

"Is there anything you need of me, Master?" he asked.

Groff was staring from his great armchair. "Not now, Peller. But I've just discovered how to solve the situation very quickly. The Master has just made up his mind, Peller."

It was gratifying to see the terror and confusion on Peller's face. Groff's gesture drove the servant away, so that he would go down into the corridors of the citadel and whisper with all the other servants as they trembled, thinking the Master might be displeased with them.

The thing took Groff more than a year. The thousands of men whom he sent secretly throughout the world did as he commanded, and did not know why they were doing it. Poor fools. The great scientist who for so many years had been in Groff's employ gave him the technical knowledge he sought. Fools. All fools. They could not guess what he was really after. The lies he told them which awakened their cupidity were so easy for them to believe. No servant could know what any other servant was doing. No one could piece it together. There was only the masterful Groff in his tower weaving the poisonous threads of his gigantic enterprise into a pattern which only himself could see.

Then at last he was ready. He had tracked down the identity of the dark-haired, slender young worker whom the laughing girl had called Jac. And there came the momentous night when he sent for the young man and the girl, and white-faced, frightened, they stood before him in his little tower.

Groff lolled back in his big chair as he quietly regarded them. "Quite an honor for you, isn't it?" he said. "Seeing me in person."

"What do you want of us?" the young man murmured.

It was pleasing to Groff, to see his terror. "I wanted to thank you," Groff said ironically. "It happened that I saw you two, one night about a year ago. You made me realize what I must do. So I thought I would tell you about it."

They could only stand wordless, frightened. Groff sucked in his breath with anticipatory pleasure. In a moment now they would be more than frightened;

they would be utterly terrified—and their terror would spread like a wave around the world.

Groff was lashing himself into grim anger. "You are going to die," he said. At the girl's sudden little whimpering gasp he raised his hand. "That sort of think won't help you any. You and everyone on earth—this is your last night of health. Tomorrow, at dawn, you will all start swiftly to sicken. In a week, a month—you will be dead."

How well they knew that his threats were never empty. They were huddled together now, with trembling arms around each other as they stared at him. He lashed himself further into anger as he told them that he realized how millions of people were conspiring to the end that Groff might suffer misfortune. A menace which he could no longer tolerate.... How those millions would squirm as they saw death coming upon them! The supreme power of Groff at last demonstrated to its ultimate. Queer that he had never thought of this logical climax to his great career—not until that little incident a year ago when this young couple had caused him to envisage it.

He was telling them now what he had done.... The little depots all over the earth, compressed with caged bacteria. Little time-bombs—all to explode within thirty minutes of this present instant. The women and children, the aged, would die first. But the polluted air, the contagion spreading everywhere—in a week, a month, the swift and deadly bacteria would leave no one alive.

"You—are going to do this to us?" young Jac murmured at last.

"Why not? It is my destiny." Never had Groff felt so quiet and comfortable a thrill as now; and this was only the beginning. "Others before me have tried their little conquests," he said with his grim smile. "Men who wanted power, and got it, just in a small way and for a little while. There was one—I recall reading about him—one who was so foolish to disclose all his plans by writing them in a book, years before he had a chance to accomplish them. I am not like him. I tell you now, when there is a scant thirty minutes before your inevitable annihilation begins."

"You hate your fellow men so much," Jac murmured impulsively, "you would kill yourself, just for the pleasure of killing the rest of us?"

To die. It sent so strangely a queer little shiver over Groff. He had always felt it; but no one could ever know it, save himself. How many times his vaunted reckless bravery had awed his fellow man! He sat very straight now, and his eyes flashed.

"I have never been one to fear death," he said.

But, as always before, he knew now that he was safe enough. His armed citadel here was wholly safe from outside attack, even if the stricken multitudes should find brief strength to try and assail him. His retainers, thinking they were safe, would remain at their posts. Poor fools. At the last, even they would be stricken and Groff would retreat up here. Impregnable, here in the tower and its neighbor little rooms, he could maintain his unpolluted air, and eat the food and drink the water which he had stored here in such abundance. Perhaps even, nature would let him live the longer for his isolation.

Master of the earth. The man who owned everything. Pride swelled him again as he thought of that poor little fool who had only wanted to make himself the titular leader of the earth, and in his own fatuous conceit had written it all down in his little book.

"You have good reason to fear me," Groff said. "You realize it now?"

The young couple were white-faced and trembling as they clung to each other. And suddenly the girl murmured,

"I—I pity you."

Groff caught at it, with his sudden wild rage flooding him. "You lie!" he rasped. "You are frightened. You are terrified of me and my revenge."

"Revenge?" young Jac muttered. "I wonder what we have done to you—except that we live and breathe and try to be happy." His arm held the trembling girl closer; and he turned and gazed into her face, her moist red lips quivering, her eyes like misted stars as she regarded him. "If we are both to die," he murmured, "still we will have each other, Manya."

"Yes," she whispered.

Then it seemed that the youth was not quite so afraid as he straightened and fronted Groff. "Your revenge, when you kill us both, is not quite complete," he said with a twisted smile.

They turned at Groff's gesture of dismissal. At the head of the great staircase which went down from the tower, dominant with his power, Groff stood with his heavy ornamented robe tossed over one shoulder and all his

emblazoned insignia dangling on his chest. The young couple were still clinging to each other as they descended. Then they were a little blob, dwarfed by distance, dwindling into total insignificance. It was only a trick of lighting of the great staircase, of course; but suddenly, just before they vanished, it seemed that the light had magnified them into something gigantic....

The thing was over at last. It was a week? Two weeks? Three weeks? Groff had kept no track of the time. Exhausted with exulting he lay back in his chair with his instruments around him. How wonderful it had been. The ultimate conquest. The power of Groff and Groff alone. So many times it had made him think of those other conquerors—those little men of history who had been thrilled by their trips of triumph into some petty land their armies had devastated. That little man in his aircar, gazing in triumph, swelling himself with his pride as he gazed at the death and destruction he had brought to just one petty nation in three weeks....

Groff's triumph was over now. He had seen much of it, with his telescopes ranging the city, and on his television mirrors before the television went blank. It had been queer, how people, stricken so that they knew they had only a few days to live, had rushed around bringing their families together. Queer that then they had not really seemed afraid. Queer how the churches had been crowded, with doomed people who clung together and had a strange look on their faces as though they were not afraid to die....

Then it was over. From the immense height and safety of his little tower Groff sat surveying his conquered world. The man who had everything. The ultimate of personal power. And what would he do with it now? Queer thought! It was so queer, so whimsical a thought that he chuckled, and then was laughing at it—laughing for so long that it left him breathless. There was nobody here to hate. That was another queer thought.

Was it days, or weeks or years, that now he sat alone in his little tower, surveying his empty world? There was nothing to do but gloat with pride at the greatness of himself; and to laugh at the whimsicality of his hungry need to be angry at his enemies who now did not exist. He had tired of that. Then there were times when he thought it would be satisfying if he killed himself, like the man who had written the book and who could not live when he

realized that the time had come when no one feared him. But Groff found that he had not the courage to do that.

It tired him to laugh so much, so that often now he sat, just anguished with emptiness. It was queer how that vision of the young couple going down his staircase seemed always here to haunt and to puzzle him. What had been about them that was so gigantic? The thought enraged him, because he knew now that it was something he might have wanted—something he had failed to get.

[The end of The Man Who Killed the World by Cummings, Raymond King]