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FUTURE FICTION

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UNIVERSE IN DARKNESS

by

J. HARVEY
HAGGARD

ALSO —

JOHN COLERIDGE
DENNIS CLIVE
BOB OLSEN



PAUL

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My ability to destroy made my agents loyal to me!

WEDDING of the FORCES

by

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

First published *Future Fiction*, November 1940.

The strange power that flowed through the brain of Ralph Davis was not of earthly origin, and he soon finds his own personality submerged under the influence of an alien enemy with dire plans for the enslavement of a world!

Fortunately, Tarp Gregory was at home. I had never wanted to see anybody so badly in all my life. I had braved a wild night of wind and storm to reach my friend's New York apartment. . . .

As Chalmers showed me into the cozy study, Tarp Gregory looked up from the armchair in surprise, rose immediately and came forward with extended hand.

I had shaken hands with him before I remembered I should not have done it. Tarp jerked his hand away sharply and eyed me doubtfully with his coldly analytical blue eyes. It was obvious that he thought I had one of those buzzer things in my palm. But I hadn't and I showed him as much.

"Hell!" he exclaimed in surprise, elevating sandy eyebrows. Then he frowned, "What's started Ralph Davis playing tricks, anyway?"

He thrust forward a chair, automatically handed over cigarettes. I lit one with a hand that shook violently.

"What's on your mind?" Tarp demanded sharply. "Nerves?"

He eyed his own right hand reminiscently, then his frown deepened as he looked back to me. I guess I looked in a sorry mess, my hair tousled, my eyes wild.

"Tarp," I said slowly, breathing hard, "I think I'm going mad."

"Rubbish," Tarp retorted. "A perfectly solid electrical engineer of thirty-five has no need to go batty. Not on your salary."

"I'm not joking!" I snapped. "Something's gone wrong with me—something no doctor seems able to explain. You're a scientist with nothing to do but spend your money on experiments. I thought that with your knowledge, you might be able to help me."

"Sure, if I can. But what's wrong?"

I hesitated a moment, then got to my feet. I saw Tarp's look of surprise as I unscrewed the single-point electric light bulb from its socket and plunged the room into darkness.

"What's this? A seance?" asked Tarp's dry voice.

"No. *This!*" I announced, trying to keep my tone steady, and a moment later I became visible to him again holding the bulb aloft—and it was lighted! Yes! Every time I pressed my fingers on the lead contact, the lamp sprang into full radiance.

Gregory scratched his untidy head. "Nice going!" was his approving comment. "What else do you know besides the Statue of Liberty trick?"

"Dammit, man, it isn't a trick!" I nearly screamed. "The bulb's lighted by my merely touching it! Look here, too—" I put the bulb back in place, then snatching the plug of the electric heater from its socket, I jammed the brass pins between my teeth. Immediately the cooling bars of the heater glowed red hot again!

"There!" I shouted hoarsely, replacing the plug. "*That's* what is the matter with me! I've become a living dry battery—and I'm gathering power every day! Believe me, Tarp, it's no joke!"

He had lost his flippancy now. He stared at me incredulously, then he said slowly, "So that's what happened when I shook hands with you? I got an electric shock! Say, this *is* something!" He pulled up a chair and straddled it, leaned his arms on the back. "How'd you get this way?" he demanded. "When did it happen?"

I sat down again heavily, shook my head.

"I don't exactly remember. Near as I can recall, it started some little time after I came back from my summer vacation with Eva. Began with cramp, then it passed off. Then later, when I was cleaning an electric torch of some two volts or so, I found I could light the thing! From then on things got fantastic! And now I've been sacked because my presence interferes with delicate electrical instruments. . . . Gosh, Tarp, I'm in a hell of a mess!"

"But there must be a reason!" he insisted. "You couldn't go off like this without a cause!"

I hardly heard him. “Seems to be affecting me mentally, too,” I went on dreamily. “Normally, as you know, I’m pretty sociable and even-tempered; now I find myself getting less and less considerate towards others. Odd ambitions are in my mind—things I hardly dare think about. Dreams of power. . . . All so weird,” I finished, pondering.

Tarp reflected for a moment or two, then he got to his feet and headed for a connecting door. “Come into the lab a moment,” he invited. . . . I followed him into the cool, brightly lit expanse.

In passive silence, I submitted to the tests he made with various complicated instruments. At the end of it all, he rubbed his head and whistled.

“It’s got me!” he confessed blankly. “You’re generating about seventy to a hundred volts of electricity. Every part of you is alive with it, but because the buildup has been slow, you have adapted yourself to it gradually. That’s quite possible, of course. But how you got that way has me licked! Normally, a living body gives off a small percentage of electricity, sometimes enough to stop a watch. But as for lighting a lamp and starting up a heater—Hell, man, it’s downright uncanny!”

Uncanny! He was telling me! I got into my jacket in silence.

“You’re *sure* nothing unusual has ever happened to you?” he persisted anxiously. “I mean, have you ever come across anything strange, picked up anything queer, eaten something out of the ordinary, been stung by something, or—”

“Good Lord!” I interrupted him suddenly. Now I came to think of it, I *had* been stung. I wheeled around to him. “Now you mention it, something bit me during the holidays—” I broke off, smiled faintly. “Not worth mentioning,” I sighed. “Only a baby cuttle fish, or starfish, or something. . . .”

“Be more explicit!” he snapped.

I did my best. I told him about the vacation. Eva and I had spent a day at Brimstone Pool, a little bathing place a few miles from Atlantic City. One of the days, while swimming, I had been stung in the arm, but I had thought nothing of it. Anyhow, the lump had soon gone down. . . .

“Did you *see* a starfish or anything?” Tarp demanded, as I became silent.

That surprised me. “Matter of fact, no,” I confessed. “But then, I didn’t look very hard.”

“Hmmm. . . .” He compressed his thin lips. “I don’t like it, Ralph,” he went on, “especially as your change dates approximately from then. I’m not well acquainted with Brimstone Pool, so the best thing we can do is go there the first thing tomorrow. Tonight you’ll stay with me. I’d like to get your general reactions.”

I looked at him gratefully. There was something always masterfully cool about Tarp Gregory.

“Thanks, pal,” I murmured. “I knew you’d help me.”

At breakfast the next morning, Tarp told me that I had slept heavily and talked a lot, mainly about strangely intricate devices which ranged far beyond even his extensive knowledge. Certainly I had no recollection of such vaporings, and told him as much. He said nothing to that, but I guess he thought plenty.

By ten o’clock we were on our way. Some time after dinner, we reached the deserted spot whereon, in summertime, pleasure seekers sought the sun and waves. Without speaking, I led

the way down a rocky declivity to a narrow inlet left by the ebbed tide, finally indicated a deep, smooth pool banked around by curious, porous looking rocks.

"That's Brimstone Pool itself," I explained, glancing up to find Tarp's lean face within two inches of my own. "I dived in from here, swam right across, and back again. Eva followed a moment or two afterwards. . . ."

"Uh-huh," Tarp said pensively, then he stooped and stared into the Pool. It was perfectly clear, but it plainly had nothing in it beyond a few baby crabs and shrimps. Finally he wetted his lips with it.

"Normal sea water all right," he sighed; then as he stared around on the rocks fringing the Pool, he began to frown. "Say," he breathed, "these rocks aren't normal. They're—meteoric!" he finished, kicking one of them. "Large amounts of iron and pumice in them."

I looked at him in surprise. "But I thought you knew that, Tarp! Don't you remember the meteor of 1942 which fell near Atlantic City? It landed here and broke up—wasn't very big. All around this Pool is where it dropped. These very rocks are the exploded parts of it—according to Doctor Grantham, anyway, Eva's father. Hence the name Brimstone Pool."

"Idiot that I am!" Tarp snorted. "I knew the damned name had a familiar ring. Now I remember. . . . A meteor, eh?" he went on keenly. "And suppose something crawled out of this rockery into the Pool and happened to sting you? Suppose that something came from out of space, as it very likely might? Now do you see something forming?"

I certainly did, and the speculation wasn't pleasant.

"You mean that perhaps an interstellar visitor bit me?" I asked him anxiously.

"It's possible," he said bluntly. "You say Dr. Grantham told you all about this meteor? Where does he fit in, besides being Eva's father?"

I shrugged. "He's a private geologist, writes all sorts of treatises on the subject. He was down here with us during the vacation and took some of this stuff home with him for his collection. He collects meteorite chunks, buried coins, old skulls, and all that. Goes abroad a lot too. Plenty of cash. . . ."

"I get it," Tarp nodded. "And he's not the only one to take some of this stuff home. . . ." Stooping, he picked up a loose piece and thrust it into his pocket. "Maybe worth analysis," he said briefly, then turned and led the way back up the slope.

THE STRANGE OBSESSION

Tarp Gregory's analysis revealed nothing beyond the fact that the meteoric chunk was iron ore. Where it had come from in outer space it was impossible to say. But he still clung to his original idea that the meteorite might have contained some strange form of life which, by sheer chance, had gotten into the Pool and bitten me.

The theory did not comfort me, I can tell you! It was all too possible for my liking. Besides, I was feeling stranger every day, though I said nothing to my friend. He was, I knew, doing all he could—but even he had his limitation. I had the feeling that all my natural, personal control was slipping.

One evening while Tarp was uptown on business, I came to a decision. I sat down and wrote a brief letter to him. In the interests of this history of my strange experience, I record it in full as best my memory serves me—

"My Dear Tarp,

“Out of justice to you, I am leaving. In these past days my condition has grown steadily worse. I realize that I shall soon be a danger to have around. Any unexpected contact with me may, in time, produce fatal consequences.

“I am obliged to go away alone where nobody can find me, where I am away from living beings, there to work out my destiny as best I can until I am either released from this strange electrical bondage, or else die.

“Believe me, I do thank you for all you have done—but even you cannot save me.

“Always your sincere friend,
“Ralph Davis.”

I left the letter with Chalmers, packed my few belongings, and left. I was quite convinced in my own mind that I had taken the right course. I did not stop long at my own apartment in New York, either. I paid the rent up to date, then set off for the quieter regions beyond the city. At length, in the darkness of the winter evening, I walked up the drive of Dr. Grantham’s great, isolated residence.

As I had fervently hoped, Eva Grantham was at home—but as usual, her father was away, in Europe this time, hunting for fossils.

I kept well away from her as I followed her through the hall into the roomy, comfortable library. She looked at me curiously, the light catching the gold of her hair, sharpening somewhat the anxiety in her blue eyes.

“Ralph, what is it?” she asked quickly. “You haven’t been to see me for weeks—and now you have come you won’t speak. You didn’t even kiss me. What’s wrong? Are you ill—or what?”

“Nothing like that,” I muttered. With a burning stare, I gazed around the opulent room with its curio cases against the walls. It seemed an odd thought to me then that I was seeing the familiar room for the last time. The best thing was to be brutally frank.

“Eva, something’s happened,” I said slowly, looking at her steadily. “I’ve got to go away—No, don’t ask me why, please! I can’t give a reason. You’ll just have to trust me, that’s all.”

“But you’re surely coming back?” she demanded, amazed.

She stepped forward as she spoke. I saw her frown as I took a guarded step backwards. I could not dare let her touch me. She halted, eyeing me.

“Look here, what *is* wrong?” she demanded. “You can’t deceive me, Ralph. What have you done, if anything? I’ve the right to know.”

“I’ve done nothing,” I said flatly. “It’s just that I have got to leave town—and quickly. Some day, perhaps, I’ll come back. . . .”

I hesitated, looked at her young, sweet face gazing at me. I felt a mighty struggle, an intense bitterness at my fate, pass through me.

“Good by,” I said, as curtly as I could, and turned for the door.

But I never reached it. Before I realized what had happened, Eva had run forward and seized my hand imploringly.

“Don’t,” I screamed hoarsely. “Don’t touch me—!”

God! Shall I ever forget that moment! I saw her tear-dimmed eyes suddenly sharpen with pain. Her slender body stiffened—Then with a savage, frantic movement, I swept her backwards, tore free that prisoning handclasp. She slammed violently into the slender cases against the wall, collapsed motionless amidst a shower of glass.

For what must have been a full minute, I stood staring down on her fallen body. She was not cut. . . . I was powerless to help because I dared not touch her in case life was still within her. I had, I knew, unwittingly done the very thing I had sought to avoid; I had driven at least two hundred volts of electricity through her. . . .

Shaking, weeping so much that my vision was blurred, I thudded to my knees and leaned my ear towards her heart. I could not hear it beating. Nor was there any apparent life in her ashy face.

Mutely I stared at the shattered case, at the bits of stony metal lying about the carpet.

“Dead,” I whispered at last. “Oh, God, I killed her! The only thing in life I loved. . . .”

I screamed at and reviled all creation. I do not know how long it was before I sobered up a little. Shaking, I got to my feet. I turned and ran blindly for the french windows, hurled them open and raced like a madman into the darkness.

I forgot everything. I must run, and run, and run. . . . I was an outcast—a murderer!

By no conceivable effort can I possibly recall what happened to me after I fled Eva Grantham’s home. I lost all track of my own personality and wandered like a dream-man in places which I can only recall as blurred and unreal. I believe weeks elapsed. At the end of that time, I felt the compelling urge of something that was not the *real* me, but which dominated me, nevertheless. I became, quite against my will, a dynamic personality about whom the whole of America was soon talking.

My methods were strange, inhumanly logical, surprising even me though I was the perpetrator. From a point in New York which I knew would effectually defy all efforts at location, I gathered to myself all the former big shots of the criminal world, and they—incredible though it seemed to my squashed inner personality, obeyed all my orders without question.

I had unquestionably become a master criminal, but with rather different ideas to the average criminal genius. I did far more than just destroy if my orders were disobeyed. I started to gain a hold over economic conditions, cornered markets, clamped down an invisible but ruthless hand on the freedom of the American people. My influence was everywhere, steadily growing, subtly taking over control of this and that business with a total disregard for the ruin and suffering occasioned thereby.

In a month I had gained a pretty good percentage of power in most walks of life, and my ability to destroy by the strange electric powers governing my body made my agents fanatically loyal to me. . . . America began to appreciate that I was going to turn the country inside out before long unless they found a means of finding my whereabouts. That, somehow, amused me immensely.

From what I learned over the radio, Tarp Gregory was apparently the only man who knew the real truth—who knew that the Unseen Dictator—as I had come to be known—was really me, Ralph Davis. . . . But not the Davis who had worried over his strange electrical powers. Here, declared Tarp Gregory, was a man who was relentlessly bent on mastering the world, who inevitably *would* do so unless a cleverer mind could defeat the aim.

Somehow I got the idea that Tarp was not sure of himself, that he needed more facts before giving the real truth. Strange indeed, that I should be as anxious to know the truth as anybody. . . . *Why* had all this happened to me? What was it that was driving me on night and day to greater and more inhuman conquests?

In an endeavor to trace my experiences from the beginning, I set about writing this history at odd moments. The tale is not yet told. When at last it is, maybe it will become clear that I was in no way to blame. . . .

It was inevitable that America should get to wondering what was going to happen next. Deputations to the White House demanded that something be done, that the powers that be get to work and apprehend the hidden genius strangling the life blood of a nation.

Congress, though, could do nothing. Neither could the law. I had tightened my hold; then, just as Americans were beginning to wonder where it was all going to end, there came a sudden change in events. An opposer to my regime appeared—or at least was known to be in existence! And this time it was a woman . . . a woman of inhuman fearlessness, I was told, but motivated by ideals similar to my own. She too wanted world control, and would go to any lengths to get it.

At first I was contemptuous, but that unknown woman had a way with her. I found myself compelled to listen to her demands. You see, she had powers just as powerful as my own. She too was electric in her makeup! Between us, we had a continent paralyzed. We had both cornered every market and launched parallel schemes for the absolute control of the Americas. For that very reason neither of us could move. It was stalemate.

I was debating the advisability of co-operating with this woman, when to my surprise I found that the morning papers all carried one glaring headline:

THE TWIN DICTATORS MUST MEET!

The context told me nothing I did not already know, but that same evening Tarp Gregory followed things up with a radio speech. I sat in my hidden abode listening to his fervent words. . . .

“In the interests of humanity, of America, of the world itself, these two soulless dictators must *meet*!” he cried, in a fervent voice. “We demand it! And if they are listening to me now—the man dictator most of all—I say this to him. . . .”

I looked up in sudden interest at the loudspeaker.

“Ralph, this is your old friend Tarp speaking. I’m still trying to help you. You shouldn’t have run out on me like you did. I have your whole case doped out and know exactly what has gone wrong with you. Listen . . . This woman who has risen against you is no stranger. She’s Eva Grantham! Meet her—I beg of you!”

That news brought me to my feet. For a long time, I stood fighting with that other self of mine, then for a while at least, Ralph Davis got the upper hand. I grabbed hat and coat, left my abode by the secret entrance and stalked out into the night. Naturally, not one of the thousands of people I passed, at a discreet distance, knew who I was. . . . Only one thought was mastering my brain at that moment—to find out what *was* wrong with me.

I reached Tarp’s apartment without much trouble, saw the amazed look in his eyes as he himself opened the apartment door. Quietly, I waved him back. He nodded understandingly, watched me from a little distance as I walked slowly to the center of the room.

“I heard your radio speech,” I said, trying to bring some tone of friendliness into my harsh voice. “I’ve risked a good deal to come here and find out the truth. . . .”

Tarp smiled faintly, straddled a chair at the other end of the room. He sat looking at me for a long time.

"If I didn't know the facts about you, I'd say you were a different man," he said quietly. "Anyway, here's the low down. . . . When you left me I got to wondering where you'd go. I fancied you'd first pay a visit to Eva Grantham's, so I hied myself there. I found the place empty of servants with the windows of the library swinging wide. Dr. Grantham is away in Europe, as you know . . ."

"I killed Eva Grantham," I said stonily.

Tarp shook his head. "No you didn't, Ralph. In the library I found lots of clues. A case against the wall was smashed, glass lay on the floor and on the hard rubberoid of the surrounding shelves. Pieces of gray metal were strewn about the carpet. Amongst those metal fragments I found the case's identification card and it read—'Section of Brimstone Pool Meteorite, 1941.' Among other things I found your hat, hastily left on the library desk. Skipping the whole thing, I also found that the carpet had rubberoid underneath it. . . .

"I pieced things together," Tarp went on slowly. "You went to see Eva. You touched her, and Eva dropped under the terrific shock. You imagined you had killed her, but you were wrong. The rubberoid undercarpet would absorb a great deal of the current. She was stunned. You couldn't investigate for fear of making things worse. You fled. But in that library where you'd left Eva, there was a section of the identical meteorite that had affected you in the first place. Apparently, when Eva fell, she smashed open the case containing it. It broke apart along smooth, formerly hidden seams. Out of it there emerged a small creature similar to the one that had bitten you in the Pool, but of the opposite electric charge—negative! The thing bit Eva and she absorbed it. She recovered. Her less strong constitution reacted far more quickly than yours. As I see it, she must have dismissed the servants, then she left home filled with sudden mighty ideas, was motivated by schemes similar to yours . . ."

"But *what* bit Eva and me?" I demanded.

"In the first place, a meteorite came from a world unknown. It was not an ordinary meteorite, but some kind of space-machine. Inside it were two beings whom I can only assume were pure force—a type of life we cannot comprehend, though at root we too are motivated force. Anyway, male and female in these beings was expressed by what to us would be plus and minus electric signs. They were positive and negative. . . .

"I believe something went wrong when they landed," Tarp mused. "The meteorite—space ship—exploded, but one of the creatures, the positive one I believe, escaped. It found a habitat in Brimstone Pool. It was, I imagine, extremely minute. You went into that Pool. The creature not only bit you—it assimilated itself into your system.

"By degrees that powerful positive charge was absorbed by you, in step-up stages, and with it was bound to come a certain percentage of the mind or brain force of this incredibly intelligent little being. You became obsessed with ideas that were not your own, that had formerly belonged to the creature you had absorbed!

"The same thing happened to Eva when the mate escaped from the rest of the meteorite in the Grantham library. . . . Now do you understand?"

I nodded very slowly. "Yes, Tarp—I understand. And I need her as she needs me. Nothing can keep us apart . . . yet that very meeting will bring destruction," I finished, pondering.

"It will destroy both of you." Tarp said steadily. "Positive and negative will meet each other and cancel out in free energy. It is either that, Ralph, or this perpetual striving for a something you do not understand, together with the fight against Eva's irresistible electric attraction. You wanted each other when you were normal. If you take each other now you can both be assured the world will be a better place without you. . . ."

I got slowly to my feet. “You’ll find the records of my entire experiences at my headquarters,” I said quietly, and added the exact situation for his benefit alone. . . .

I write these words upon my return from Tarp. I have issued a request to Eva that we should meet. We shall, in an hour’s time, at a place well away from people and buildings, in case the explosion of our unity should produce far-reaching havoc.

I am not sorry I am going to die—perhaps start again. Nor, I believe, is Eva, who is now in possession of the facts. . . . But I have added certain facts to Tarp’s analysis that I *know*, from the knowledge the being I have assimilated, to be correct. I state it here—

Originally, the beings were pioneers of their race. They planned to come to our world as the most likely place for starting life anew. Mischance upon arrival separated them. They entered living flesh to gain sustenance, but died in so doing because of the toxics therein, but not before they had passed on their grim heritage to the recipients. Normally, I understand, the unity of positive and negative in their own correct environment brings not a cancellation but a surge of energy, which becomes a new creature. But, housed in the fleshy structure of Eva and me, unity will bring cancellation. . . . Possibly these two did not mate in space because of lack of room for more than one or two offspring. . . .

I wonder, as I write these last lines, what Dr. Grantham will think of it all—I believe he is hurrying home from Europe. He will learn of the strangest marriage in earthly history. . . .

But my tale is told. And the hour is up.

[The end of *Wedding of the Forces* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]