

THRILLING

WONDER

STORIES

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The
**DEADLY
DUST**
By WILLIAM
FITZGERALD

IN THE
CARDS
By GEORGE
O. SMITH

THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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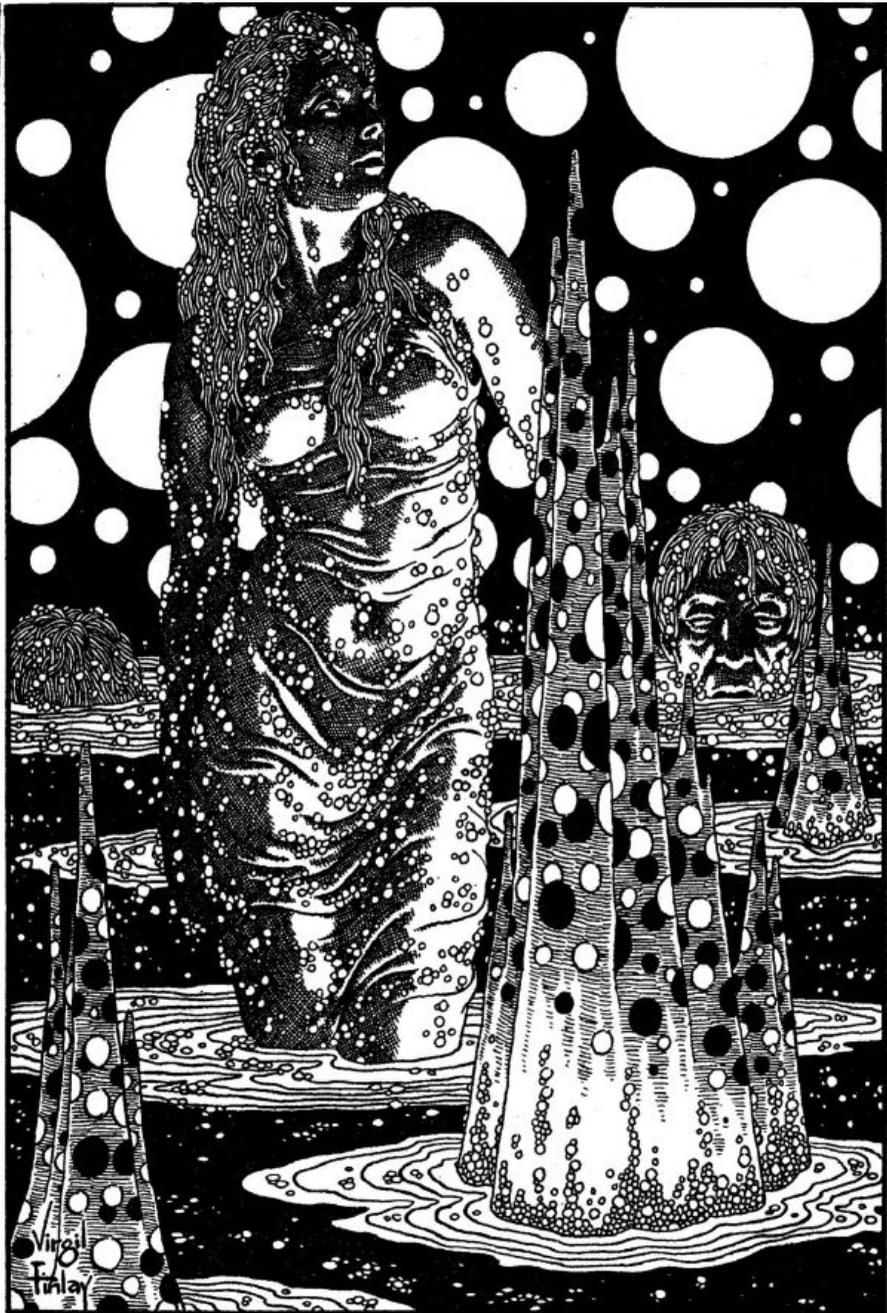
ATOMIC!

By
HENRY KUTTNER

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, August 1947.

*What nuclear war may do to the world we know is a closed book to mankind—but
here's what coming eras may bring!*



Finally one of the women came up out of the lake and picked her way toward us

CHAPTER I

The Eye



The alarm went off just after midnight. The red signal showed emergency. But it was always emergency at first. We all knew that. Ever since the arachnid tribe in the Chicago Ring had mutated we'd known better than to take chances. That time the human race had very nearly gone under. Not many people knew how close we'd been to extinction. But I knew.

Everybody in Biological Control Labs knew. To anyone who lived before the Three-Hour War such things would have sounded incredible. Even to us now they sound hard to believe. But we *know*.

There are four hundred and three Rings scattered all over the world and every one of them is potentially deadly.

Our Lab was north of what had been Yonkers and was a deserted, ruinous wilderness now. The atomic bomb of six years ago hadn't hit Yonkers of course. What it struck was New York. The radiation spread far enough to wipe out Yonkers and the towns beyond it, and inland as far as White Plains—but everyone who lived through the Three-Hour War knows what the bomb did in the New York area.

The war ended incredibly fast. But what lingered afterward made the real danger, the time-bomb that may quite easily lead to the wiping out of our whole civilization. We don't know yet. All we can do is keep the Labs going and the planes out watching.

That's the menace—the mutations.

It was familiar stuff to me. I recorded the televised report on the office ticker, punched a few buttons and turned around to look at Bob Davidson, the new hand. He'd been here for two weeks, mostly learning the ropes.

My assistant, Williams, was due for a vacation and I had about decided to take young Davidson on as a substitute.

"Want to go out and look it over, Dave?" I asked.

"Sure. That's a red alarm, isn't it? Emergency?"

I pulled a mike forward.

"Send up relief men," I ordered, "and wake Williams to take over. Get the recon copter ready. Red flight." Then I turned to Davidson.

"It'll be routine," I told him, "unless something unexpected happens. Not much data yet. The sky-scanners showed a cave-in and some activity around it. May be nothing but we can't take chances. It's Ring Seventy-Twelve."

"That's where the air liner crashed last week, isn't it?" Dave asked, looking up with renewed interest. "Any dope yet on what became of the passengers?"

"Nothing. The radiations would have got them if nothing else did. That's in the closed file now, poor devils. Still, we might spot the ship." I stood up. "The whole thing may be a wild-

goose chase but we never take any chances with the Rings.”

“It ought to be interesting, anyhow,” Dave said and followed me out.

We could see it from a long way off. Four hundred and three of them dot the world now, but in the days before the War no one could have imagined such a thing as a Ring and it would be hard to make anyone visualize one through bare description. You have to *feel* the desolation as you fly over that center of bare, splashed rock in which nothing may ever grow again until the planet itself disintegrates, and see around that dead core the violently boiling life of the Ring.

It was a perimeter of life brushed by the powers of death. The sun-forces unleashed by the bombs gave life, a new, strange, mutable life that changed and changed and changed and would go on changing until a balance was finally struck again on this world which for three hours reeled in space under the blows of an almost cosmic disaster. We were still shuddering beneath the aftermath of those blows. The balance was not yet.

When the hour of balance comes, mankind may no longer be the dominant race. That’s why we keep such a close watch on all the Rings. From time to time we work them over with flame-throwers. Only atomic power, of course, would quiet that seething life permanently—which is no solution. We’ve got Rings enough right now without resorting to more atom bombs.

It’s a hydra-headed problem without an answer. All we can do is watch, wait, be ready. . . .

The world was still dark. But the Ring itself was light, with a strange, pale luminous radiance that might mean anything. It was new. That was all we knew about it yet.

“Let’s have the scanner,” I said to Davidson. He handed me the mask and I pushed the head-clips past my ears and settled the monocular view-plate before my eyes, expecting to see the darkness melt into the reversed vision of the night-scanner.

It melted, all right—the part that didn’t matter. I could see the negative images of trees and ruined houses standing ghostly pale against the dark. But within the Ring—nothing.

It wasn’t good. It could be very bad indeed. In silence I pulled off the mask and handed it to Davidson, watched him look down. When he turned I could see his troubled frown through the monocular lens even before he lowered the scanner. He looked a little pale in the light of the instrument board.

“Well?” he asked.

“Looks as if they’d hit on something good this time,” I said.

“They?”

“Who knows? Could be anything this time. You know how the life-forms shoot up into mutations without the least warning. Something’s done it again down there. Maybe something that’s been quietly working away underground for a long time, just waiting for the right moment. Whatever it is they can stop the scanners and that isn’t an easy thing to do.”

“The first boys over reported a cave-in,” Davidson said, peering futilely down. “Could you see anything?”

“Just the luminous fog. Nothing inside. Total blackout. Well, maybe daylight will show us what’s up. I hope so.”

It didn’t. A low sea of yellow-gray fog billowed slowly in a vast circle over the entire Ring as far as we could see. Dead central core and outer circle of unnatural life had vanished together into that mist which no instrument we had could penetrate—and we’ve developed a lot of stuff for seeing through fog and darkness. This was solid. We couldn’t crack it.

“We’ll land,” I told Davidson finally. “Something’s going on behind that shield, something that doesn’t want to be spied on. And somebody’s got to investigate—fast! It might as well be us.”

We wore the latest development in the way of lead-suits, flexible and easy on the body. We snapped our face-plates shut as the ground came up to meet us and the little Geiger-counter each of us carried began to tick erratically, like a sort of Morse code mechanically spelling out the death in the air we sank through.

I was measuring the ground below for a landing when Davidson grabbed my shoulder suddenly, pointing down.

“Look!” His voice came tinnily through the ear-diaphragms in my helmet. I looked.

Now this is where the story gets difficult to tell.

I know what I saw. That much was clear to me from start to finish. I saw an eye looking up through the pale mist at us. But whether it was an enormous lens far below or a normal-sized eye close to us I couldn’t have said just then. My distance-sense had stopped functioning.

I stared into the Eye. . . .

The next thing I remember is sitting in the familiar lab office across the desk from Williams, hearing myself speaking.

“. . . no signs of activity anywhere in the Ring. Perfectly normal—”

“There’s that lake, of course,” Davidson interrupted in a conscientious voice. I looked at him. He was turning his cap over and over in his hands as he sat there by the wall. His pink-cheeked face was haggard and there was something strained and dazed in the glance he turned to meet mine. I knew I looked dazed too.

It was like waking out of a dream, knowing you’ve dreamed, knowing you’re awake now—but having the dream go on—being powerless to stop it. I wanted to jump up and slam my fist on the desk and shout that all this was phony.

I couldn’t.

Something like a tremendously powerful psychic inhibition held me down. The room swam before me for a moment with my effort to break free and I met Davidson’s eyes and saw the same swimming strain in them.

It wasn’t hypnosis.

We don’t win our posts in Bio Control until we’ve been through exhaustive tests and a lot of heavy training. None of us are hypnosis-prone. We can’t afford to be. It’s been tried.

We *can’t* be hypnotized except under very special circumstances safeguarded by Bio Control itself.

No, the answer wasn’t that easy. It seemed to lie in—myself. Some door had slammed in the center of my brain, to shut in vital information that must not escape—yet—under any circumstances at all.

The minute I hit on that analogy I knew I was on the right trail. I felt safer and surer of myself. Whatever had happened in that blank space just passed my instinct was in control now. I could trust that instinct.

“. . . break-through, just as the boys reported,” Davidson was saying. “That must be what started the lake pouring up. Nothing stirring there now, though. I suppose the regular sky-scanners are watching it?”

His glance crossed mine and I knew he was right. I knew he was talking to me, not Williams. Of course the lake couldn’t be hidden now that it was out in plain sight. We couldn’t

make a worse mistake than to rouse interest in ourselves and the lake by telling obvious lies about it. . . .

What lake?

Like a mirage, swimming slowly back through my mind, the single memory came. Ourselves, standing on the raw, bare rock of the deathly Ring-center, looking through a rift of mist like a broad, low window a mile long and not very high.

The lake was incredibly blue in the dawn, incredibly calm. Beyond it a wall of cliff stretched left and right beyond our vision, a wall like a great curtain of rock hanging in majestic folds, pink in the pink dawn, looming about its perfect image reflected in the mirror of the lake.

The mirage dissolved. That much I could remember—no more. There was a lake. We had stood on its rocky shore. And then—what? Reason told me we must have seen something, or heard or learned something, that made the lake a deadly danger to mankind.

I knew that feel of naked terror deep in my mind must have a cause. But all I could do now was follow my instinct. The basic human instincts, I told myself, are self preservation and preservation of the species. If I rely on that foundation I can't go wrong. . . .

But—I didn't know how long I'd been back here. I didn't know how much I'd said, or how little—what orders I'd given to my subordinates, or whether anything in my outward aspect had roused any suspicion yet.

I looked around—and this time gave a perfectly genuine start of surprise. Except for Williams and myself the office was quite empty. In this last bout with my daydreaming memory I must really have lost touch with things.

Williams was looking at me with—curiosity? Suspicion?

I rubbed my eyes, put weariness in my voice.

"I'm tired," I said. "Almost dozed off, didn't I? Well—"

The sound of the ticker behind Williams interrupted my alibi. I knew in a moment what was happening. A televised report had come into my own office which my secretary was switching to the ticker for me. That meant it was important. It also meant—as I had reason to hope an instant later—that the visor was shut off in my office and the news clicking directly here for our eyes alone.

Leaning over Williams' shoulder, I read the tape feeding through.

It read—

UNIDENTIFIED ACTIVITIES IN PROGRESS AROUND NEW RING LAKE.
SUGGEST DESTROYERS WORK OVER AREA.

FITZGERALD.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. Only one thing stood clear in my mind's confusion—*this must not happen*. There was some terrible, some deadly danger to the whole fabric of civilization if Fitzgerald's message reached any other eyes than ours. I had to do something, fast.

Williams was rereading the tape. He glanced up at me across his shoulder.

"Fitz is right," he said. "Of course. Can't let anything get started down there. Better wipe it out right now, hadn't we?"

I said, "*No!*" so explosively that he froze in the act of reaching for the interoffice switch.

“Why not?” He stared at me in surprise.

I opened my mouth and closed it again hopelessly, knowing the right words wouldn't come. To me it seemed so self-evident I couldn't even explain why we must disregard the message. It would be like trying to tell a man why he mustn't touch off an atom bomb out of sheer exuberance—the reasons were so many and so obvious I couldn't choose among them.

“You weren't there. You don't know.” My voice sounded thick and unsteady even to me. “Fitz is wrong. *Let that lake alone, Williams!*”

“You ought to know.” He gave me a strange look. “Still, I've got to record the report. Headquarters will make the final decision.” And he reached again for the switch.

I'm not sure how far I would have gone toward stopping him. Instinct deeper than all reason seemed to explode in me in the urgent forward surge that brought me to my feet. I had to stop him—now—without delay—taking no time to delve into my mind and dredge up a reason he would accept as valid.

But the decision was taken out of our hands.

A burst of soundless white fire flashed blindingly across my eyes. It blotted out Williams, it blotted out the ticker with its innocent, deadly message. I was aware of a killing pain in the very center of my skull. . . .

CHAPTER II

The Other Peril

Someone was shaking me.

I sat up dizzily, meeting a stare that I recognized only after what seemed infinities of slow waking. Davidson, his pink face frightened, shook me again.

“What happened? What was it? Jim, are you all right? Wake up, Jim! What was it?”

I let him help me to my feet. The room began to steady around me but it reeled sharply again when I saw what lay before the ticker, the tape looping down about him—face down on the floor, blood still crawling from the bullet hole in his back. . . .

Williams never saw who got him. It must have been the same flash that blinded me. I felt my cheek for the powder burn that must have scorched it as the unseen killer fired past my face. I felt only numbness. I was numb all over, even my brain. But one thing had to be settled in a hurry.

How much time had elapsed? Had that deadly message gone out while I lay here helpless? I made it to the ticker in two unsteady strides. The tape that looped the fallen Williams still bore its dangerous message.

Whoever fired past my cheek had fired for another reason, then, than this message. Of course, for how could anyone else have known its importance? There was a bewildering mystery here but I had no time to think about it.

I tore off the tape, crumpled it into my pocket. I flipped the ticker switch and sent a reverse message out as fast as my shaking hand could operate the machine.

FITZGERALD URGENT URGENT MEET ME AT RING POST 27 AM
LEAVING HEADQUARTERS NOW DO NOTHING UNTIL I ARRIVE URGENT
SIGNED J. OWEN.

Davidson watched me, round-eyed, as I vised for a helicopter. He put out his hand as I turned toward the door. I forced myself to stop and think.

“Well?” I said.

He didn’t speak. He only glanced at Williams’ body on the floor.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t kill him. But I might have if that had turned out to be the only way. There’s trouble at the lake.” I hesitated. “You were there too, Dave. Do you know what I mean?” I wasn’t quite sure what I was trying to find out. I waited for his answer.



From time to time we work them over with flame throwers

“You’re the boss,” was all he said. “Still, it wasn’t any mutation that did—this. It was a bullet. You’ve got to know who shot him, Jim.”

“I don’t though. I blanked out. Something . . .” My mind whirled and then steadied again with a sudden idea. I put a hand to my forehead, dizzy with trying to remember things still closed to me.

“Maybe something like a mutation had a part in it at that,” I conceded. “Maybe we’re not alone in wanting to—to keep the lake quiet. I wonder—could something from the Ring have blanked me out deliberately, so I wouldn’t see Williams killed?”

But there wasn’t time to follow even that speculation through. I said impatiently, “The point is, Dave, one man’s death doesn’t mean a thing right now. The Ring. . . .” I stopped unable to go on. I didn’t need to.

“What do you want me to do?” Davidson asked. That was better. I knew I could depend on him, and I might need someone dependable very soon.

“Take over here,” I said. “I’m going to see Fitzgerald. And listen, Dave, this is urgent. Hold any messages Fitzgerald sends. *Any!* Understand?”

“Check,” he said. His eyes were still asking questions as I went out. Neither of us could answer them—yet.

The desolation spun past below me, aftermath of the Three-Hour War, ruined buildings, ruined fields, ruined woods. Far off I could catch a pale gleam of water beyond the seething edge of the Ring.

I'd been en route long enough to make some sort of order in my mind—but I hadn't done it. Evidently more than time would be required to open the closed doors in my brain. I had been in the Ring today—I had seen something or learned something there—and whatever I learned had been of such vital and terrible import that memory of it was wiped from Davidson's mind and mine until the hour came for action.

I didn't know what hour or what action. But I knew with a deep certainty that when the time for decision came I would not falter. Along with the terror and the blackness in my mind went that one abiding knowledge upon which all my actions now were based. I could trust that instinct.

Fitzgerald's copter was waiting. I could see his lead-suited figure, tiny and far below, pacing up and down impatiently as I dropped toward him. My copter settled lightly earthward. And for a moment another thought crossed my mind.

Williams! A man murdered, a man I knew and had worked with. A man I liked. That should have affected me much more deeply than it did. I knew why it hadn't. Williams' death was unimportant—completely trivial in the face of the—the other peril that loomed namelessly, in all its invisible menace, like a shrouded ghost rising from the lake beyond us.

Fitzgerald was a big blond man with blue eyes and a scar puckering his forehead, souvenir of our last battle with mutated marmosa in the Atlanta Ring. His transmitter-disc vibrated tinnily as I got out of the copter.

"Hello, chief. You got my second message?"

"No. What was it?"

"More funny stuff." He gestured toward the Ring. "In the lake this time—signs of life. I can't make anything out of it."

I drew a deep breath of relief. Davidson would have stopped that message. It was up to me now to find a way to keep Fitzgerald quiet.

"We'll take a look at the lake, then," I said. "What's your report?"

"Well. . . ." He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, glancing at me through his face-plate as if he didn't quite expect me to believe him. "It's a funny place, that lake. I got the impression it was—well, watching me.

"I know it sounds silly but I have to tell you. It could be important, I suppose. And then when I was making a second turn over the water I saw something, in the lake." He paused. "People," he added after a moment.

"What kind of people?"

"I—they weren't human."

"How do you know?"

"They weren't wearing lead suits," he said simply, glad of a chance to pin his story down with facts. "I figured they were either not human or else insane. They heard my ship. And they went into the lake."

"Swimming?"

"They walked in. Right under the water. And they stayed there."

"What did they look like?"

"I didn't get a close look," he said evasively, his eyes troubled as they avoided mine.

I was aware of a strange, mounting excitement that swelled in my throat until I could hardly speak. I jerked my head toward the lake.

"Come on," I said.

There lay the blue water, moving gently in the breeze. The cliffs like folded curtains rose beyond it. There was no sign of life in sight as we crossed the bare, pitted rocks. Fitzgerald eyed me askance as we clumped toward the water in our heavy lead-lined boots. I knew he expected doubt from me.

But I knew also that he had told the truth. The lost memory of danger sent its premonitory shadows through my mind and I believed, dimly, that I too had seen those aquatic people, sometime in that immediate past which had been expunged from my brain.

We were halfway across the rocks, our Geiger-counters clicking noisy warning of the death in the air all around us, when the first of the lake people rose up before us from behind a ledge of rock.

He was a perfectly normal looking man—except that he stood there in khaki trousers and shirt, sleeves rolled up, in the bath of potent destruction which was the very air of the Ring. He looked at us with a blankness impossible to describe and yet with a strangely avid interest in his eyes.

When we were half a dozen paces away he raised his arm and, without changing expression, in a voice totally without inflection, he spoke.

“Go back,” he said. “Go back. Get away from here, now!”

It was all returning to me . . . I knew why he looked so strange, why he spoke so flatly, why that interest watched us from his eyes. . . .

I didn't know. The knowledge brushed the edges of my awareness and withdrew. I stumbled forward, Fitzgerald beside me excited and eager, calling out a question to the man.

He made no answer. He took one last look at us, blank, intent, impersonal, his eyes as blue as the water in the lake. And then he dropped straight downward, without stooping, without seeming to move a muscle. He vanished behind the knee-high ledge of rock.

We reached it together, shouldering one another in our eagerness. We bent over the ledge. The man had disappeared, leaving no sign behind him. Nothing but a little hollow in the rock where he had stood, a hollow no bigger than a saucer, in which blue water swayed. We stood there half stunned, for the time it took the water to gurgle downward and vanish in the hole and surge up again twice from some action of subterranean waters.

Memory was battering at the closed doors of my mind.

I *knew* the answer. I knew it well—but the door stayed shut. The time to remember was not yet.

They were watching us from the edge of the water by the time we had come within hailing distance. One by one we saw them wade up from the blue depths and take their stand in the edge of the water, ankle deep, rivulets running from their hair and clothing—drowned men and women, watching us.

They weren't drowned, of course. They looked perfectly healthy and there was more intelligence and animation in their faces than had looked at us from the vanished man of the ledge.

These were real people. The other had not been. I thought that much must be evident even to Fitzgerald, though it was a subterranean knowledge running through my mind that told me so.

“Wait, Jim,” Fitzgerald said suddenly, catching my elbow. “I—don't like 'em. Stand back.” He was watching the silent people in the water.

I let him stop me. Now that I was here I wasn't certain what came next. The terrible urgency still rang its alarm in the closed room of my brain but until I could gain entry into that room I wouldn't know what was expected of me.

Fitzgerald waved to the people in the water, a beckoning gesture. They stared at us.

Then they turned and talked briefly together, glancing at us over their shoulders. Finally one of the women came up out of the lake and picked her way toward us over the lava-like rock.

She had long fair hair sleeked back from her face by the water and hanging like pale kelp across her shoulders. Her blue dress clung to her over a beautiful, supple body, water splattering from the dripping cloth and the dripping hair as she came.

Belatedly I remembered that crashed air-liner and its vanished people. Were these the passengers and crew? I thought they were. But what had induced them against all reason to come this far into the deadly air of the Ring? The lake? Up to that point the thing was possible, but it was sheer madness from the moment I imagined them entering the water.

The lake, then? Was there something inexplicably strange and compelling about the lake itself that had drawn them in and sent them out again like this, alive, unharmed in the singing air that made our counters clatter?

I looked out over the waters for an answer, and—

And I got my answer—or part of it.

For out there on the rippling blue surface a shadow moved. A long, coiling shadow cast not from above but from below. Deep down in the lake something was stirring.

I strained my eyes and in the sealed deeps of my mind terror and exultation moved in answer to that coiling darkness. I knew it. I recognized it. I . . . The recognition passed.

The vast shadow moved lazily, monstrously, moved and coiled and drew itself in under the cliffs.

Slowly it disappeared, coil by coil, shadow by shadow.

I turned. The fair-haired woman was standing before us; gazing into our faces with a remote, impersonal curiosity. It was as if she had never seen another human creature before and found us interesting but—disassociated. No species that might share relationship with her.

"You're from the liner?" I asked, my voice reverberating in my own ears inside the helmet. "We—we can take you back." I let the words die. They meant nothing to her. They meant no more than the clatter of our belt-counters or the patter of drops around her on the rocks.

"Jim." Fitzgerald's voice buzzed in my earphones. "Jim, we've got to take her back with us. She's out of her head. They all are—don't you see? We've got to save them."

"How?" I tried to sound practical. "We haven't got room. There's a full liner load here."

"We can take this one." He reached out and took her arm gently. She let him, her eyes turning that remote, impersonal gaze upon his face. "It's probably too late," he said, looking at her with compassion, "but we can't leave her here, can we?"

I was watching his hand on her arm and a thought came to me out of nowhere, a fact that seemed to slip through the closed doors in my mind as they opened a tiny crack. This girl was flesh and blood. A hand closed on her arm met firm resistance. But I knew that if I had touched that first man my hand would have closed over the smooth instability of water.

I looked at the girl's face where a passing breeze brushed it, and a shiver went down my back. For it was a warm breeze, drying her hair and cheek where it blew—and I saw dark,

wrinkled desiccation wherever dryness touched her skin. The sleek fair hair lost its silkiness and turned brown and brittle, the satiny cheek darkened, furrowed. . . .

I knew if she left the lake she would die. But it didn't matter. I knew there was no actual danger, either way. (*Danger to what? From what? No use asking myself that yet—the door would be open in its own time.*)

I took her other arm. Between us she went docilely toward the waiting copters, saying nothing. I don't think Fitzgerald noticed what that drying breeze was doing to her until we were nearly at the edge of the Ring.

By then it was too late to take her back even if he had understood what the trouble was.

I heard Fitzgerald catch his breath but he said nothing and neither did I.

We lifted her into his copter. I took off behind him and the visors were silent between our ships as we flew back toward Base. What could we have said to each other then?

CHAPTER III

Living Lake

Thirty minutes after we hit the Base the girl was in a jury-rigged hydrating tank, wrapped in wet sheets, with a slow trickle of fresh warm water soaking them. Even her face was loosely covered, and I was glad of that. It was an old woman's face by now, drawn tight and furrowed over her skull. Only an arm was bare, shriveled flesh beneath which the tendons stood sharply etched.

The arm was bare for the needle that fed sodium pentothol into a vein, slowly, under the watchful eye of Sales, one of our best Base medics. We knew that presently, when the drug began to cloud her mind, Sale's skillful questions would start drawing out the memories of what had happened to her, reconstructing the basic scenes which had led to—this.

Or—we hoped they would.

"It looks like aphasia," Sales murmured. "No brain injury so far as we know yet, but—"

"Chief!" It was Davidson, touching my arm. We all turned in the half-darkness that was part of this narcosynthesis treatment. "Chief, the Mobile Staff's on its way down here. They vised after you left."

"What for?" I asked sharply, a nervous dread knotting my stomach.

"I don't know. They wouldn't say. You're the boss, after all."

But I wasn't the boss of Mobile Staff. They were bigger than I, the bureau of specialists that controlled the administration of all the Rings. They were the bosses. And if they came here now . . .

I caught Davidson's eye in the gloom. Very slightly he shook his head. The secret of Williams' death was still safe, then. But not for long. And if the Staff talked to Fitzgerald about the lake . . .

I made an enormous effort and fought down the rising panic. Information first. Then action. I had to keep that order.

Sales grunted and I looked back, forcing my attention to the business at hand.

"She must have the tolerance of an elephant," Sales said, eyeing the tube through which sodium pentothol still fed into the girl's arm. "Or else there's some chemical metamorphosis—I don't know. I've given her enough to put a dozen men to sleep. But look at her."

I didn't like to look at her. It was obvious to me that she was dying. Yet when Sales pushed the wet sheets back from her face the impersonal, disinterested attention still dwelt upon the ceiling, fully awake, uncaring, hearing nothing we said, feeling nothing we did.

Fitzgerald said, "How could she have breathed under water?"

"She couldn't." Sales scowled at him. "There's no physiological change at all. Her respiratory system's normal."

"She must have," Fitzgerald said stubbornly. "I know what we saw."

"Anything's possible in a Ring," Sales admitted, voicing an aphorism. "But I don't see how it could have worked." He looked up at me. "How important is this, chief?"

I told him.

"Give me an hour," Sales said briefly when I had finished. "I'm going to try something else. Several other things. Maybe one of 'em will work."

"One of 'em's got to," I told him, getting up.

In that hour a lot happened. Sales found what he wanted, for one thing. For another, the Mobile Staff arrived. Williams' body was found. And as for me—it was the hour that marked the turning point in my life.

Williams' death was reported on my private visor as soon as I got back to my office. I could feel Davidson's silence like a tangible thing as he listened to the exclamations and incredulity of the others.

All I could do was order the usual investigations got under way immediately. At that moment I decided not to speak of my own presence when he died. I couldn't let myself be diverted by useless questions on a subject only distantly related to my own terrible problem.

Worse than ever that deathly fear was stirring restlessly behind the closed doors of my unconscious. I knew the doors would swing open soon. Little by little they had let facts escape the barrier, and the barrier itself would be ready to fall. . . . Soon, I thought, soon.

Looking back now I lose my time-sense about that eventful hour. I think we were still lost in dismayed wonder over Williams when the visor flickered and then framed the grim, creased face of Mobile Staff's chief, Lewis.

There was a hunted, nightmare quality about this piling of crisis upon crisis, I thought, as I went down to the reception hall to welcome my superiors. If only I could find five minutes of peace to try again those slowly opening doors!

Mobile Staff wears black uniforms. If all Bio employees are carefully tested then Mobile men are screened with such stringent care that there is reason to marvel how anyone ever passes their tests. All of these men in their severe black looked taut, nervous, keen with an edge almost ruthless in its steely temper.

"What about this lake development in Ring Seventy-Twelve?" was the first thing Lewis said to me as we walked back toward my office. It couldn't have been worse, I told myself. If they had timed themselves deliberately they couldn't have chosen a worse time.

"Three of us have seen it closely," was all I answered. "You'll want to discuss it with us in detail, I suppose."

Lewis nodded crisply. We didn't speak again until we were settled in my office, Davidson and Fitzgerald ready for questions beside me. We told what—overtly—we knew. It was Lewis, of course, who spoke with decision.

"I think we'd better destroy the thing pronto."

"Frankly, sir—" this was Davidson "—frankly, I'd think that over first. The thing's isolated, whatever it is. We'd run the risk of scattering it abroad."

"I incline that way myself," I said quickly. "Isolation. Ring it off, reroute air traffic. Leave it alone and study it . . . study it?" I suspected that was wrong. A warning bell had clanged in my brain.

Lewis sat there silently, shifting his keen glance from face to face. Just as he drew his breath to speak my desk visor buzzed.

"Report ready on Williams' death, sir," an impersonal voice said.

"All right. Hold it awhile," I began. But Lewis bent forward and gave the face in the visor a narrowed glance.

"No, let's have it right now," he said. Despairingly I wondered how much he knew and how much that abnormally keen brain had guessed already of the undercurrents running swiftly beneath the surface of events here.

The face in the visor glanced at me. I shrugged. Lewis was boss as long as Mobile Staff remained here.

“Body of J. L. Williams, assistant to chief, was found in a locker in his own office forty minutes ago,” the report began. “The shot was fired from. . . .” The voice went off into medical and ballistic details I ceased to hear. I was turning over in my mind crazy questions about how I could prevent an immediate close study of the lake at the very best, and at the worst its destruction.

“. . . revolver of this caliber possessed only by Chief Owen himself,” the visor declared. I woke with a start. “Last men seen with the deceased were Robert Davidson and Chief Owen. Chief Owen subsequently suppressed a report from Ring Station 27 and ordered a copter for immediate departure. He then took off for—”

The visor buzzed suddenly and the monotoned report blanked out. It was an emergency interruption. Very briefly Dr. Sales’ face flashed upon the screen.

“This is urgent, Chief,” he said, looking into my eyes significantly. “Could you spare me five minutes in my lab right now?”

It seemed like a heaven-sent relief. I glanced at Lewis for permission. His gaze was cold and suspicious but he nodded after a moment and I got up with a single look at Davidson’s deliberately blank face and went out.

Something prompted me to pause at the door after I had closed it. I was not really surprised to hear Lewis’ harsh voice.

“See that Chief Owen doesn’t leave the building before I’ve talked to him again. That’s an urgent. Give it priority.”

I shrugged. Things were beyond my control now. All I could do was ride along and trust to instinct.

Although Sales had asked for only five minutes of my time, he seemed oddly reluctant to begin. I sat down across the desk from him and watched him fidget with his desk blotter. Finally he looked up and spoke abruptly.

“You know the girl died, of course.”

“I expected it. When?”

“Half an hour ago. I’ve been doing some quick thinking since then. And a lot of quick analyses. There hasn’t been time yet to check, but I think she died of psychosomatic causes, chief.”

“That’s hard to credit,” I said. “Tell me about it.”

“She was a perfectly normal specimen by all quantitative and qualitative tests. I think suggestion killed her.”

“But how?”

“You know you can hypnotize a subject, touch his arm with ice and tell him it’s red-hot metal. Typical burn weals will appear. Most physical symptoms can be induced by suggestion. That girl died of dehydration and asphyxia as far as I can tell.”

“We gave her moisture and oxygen.”

“She didn’t know it was oxygen. She didn’t think she was breathing at all. So her motor reflexes were paralyzed and—she died. As for the hydrating apparatus . . .” Sales shook his head in a bewildered way. “This sounds crazy but I think our mistake there was in giving her water as a hydrating factor. Chief, how closely did you see that lake? Do you know that it’s *water*?”

Again that bell seemed to ring in my head. *Water? Water? Of course it isn't water, not as we've known water up to now.*

"Until I thought of that," Sales went on, "I couldn't understand her apparent breathing under water. Now I think I'm beginning to understand. A liquid can't be breathed by human beings, but there could be—well, artificial isotopes that would do the trick. Also, something drove that girl insane.

"I think she was insane. You might call it a variant of schizophrenia. Or possession if you prefer. Her mind was completely blanketed and subjugated by—something else." He drummed on the desk. Then, looking up sharply, he said, "I got samples of the lake's—water. From her body. It's not water.

"Maybe it once was but now it's mixed with other compounds. The stuff seems half alive. Not protoplasm but close to it. I can't evaporate or break it down with any chemical I've yet tried.

"There are traces of hemoglobin. In fact, the stuff has many of the attributes of blood. But—and this is important, Chief—I couldn't find traces of a single leukocyte. You see what that means?"

I shook my head.

"One of the primary results of exposing an organism to radioactivity is a reduction of the number of white cells, making it subject to infection. The proportion of polymorphonuclear white cells goes down relatively. That's axiomatic. But surely you see what it suggests!"

Again I shook my head. A deep uneasiness was mounting in me but I had to hear him out before I acted. I knew I'd have to act. I think I knew already what I would have to do before I left this room. But I wanted to hear the rest of his story first. I signaled him to go on.

"Another thing I observed about the—call it water," he said carefully, "was the presence of considerable boron and some lithium. Of course the whole Ring area is subject to constant radiations of all kinds, but the important ones just now are the hard electromagnetic and the nuclear radiations that produce biological reactions.

"I suppose you remember that boron and lithium both tend to concentrate the effects of a bombardment of slow neutrons, so an organism like the lake would get a very heavy dose of the radiations that have the greatest effect on it."

"The lake—an *organism*?" I echoed.

"I think it is. Up to now we've come into conflict only with evolved and mutated creatures that were recognizable as animals even before genetic changes took place. One reason might be that mutated genes divide more slowly than others and tend to lose out in the race for supremacy.

"A complete mutation like—this lake—is something nobody really expected. The odds are too heavy against it. But we've known it could happen. And I think this time we're up against something dangerous. Big and dangerous and impossible to understand."

I leaned forward. *I knew what I had to do. Now? No, not quite yet. Inside my mind the closed doors were moving slowly, swinging wider and wider, while behind them pressed the crowding memories of danger which would burst the barrier at any moment now.*

"Forget all that for awhile," Sales said with a sudden change of expression. "I talked to the girl before she died. I'm taking cross-bearings on my conclusion, Chief. One line I've already indicated. The second is what the girl said. They check." He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I had to blank her mind clear down to the lowest articulate levels," he said, "before I could cut back under whatever compulsion it was that killed her. She didn't know she was

talking. I hadn't much time—she was dying as she spoke. But from what she said I've pieced a theory together." He paused. "Tell me, did you see anything at all during your experiences with the lake to make you suspect it might be—alive?"

CHAPTER IV

Voice of the Lake

With stunning suddenness, out of my memory came the vision of a great eye staring up at me through the pale fog as I maneuvered our copter above the Ring when Davidson and I first visited it.

The Eye was the lake, a vast translucent lens that had caught us like birds in a nest and drawn us down. The power of its compelling summons pouring from the lens into our brains, like sunshine into a darkened room.

“No,” I said thickly. “No, I saw nothing. Go on.”

“What its origin was I can’t even guess,” Sales said. “But originally some molecule like a gene, out of a million other molecules in that Ring area, suffered a liberation of energy when a secondary ionizing particle shot past and it changed from a gene to—something else. Something that grew and grew and grew.”

“Most of the development must have taken place underground. I think the organism was complete when that cave-in occurred that exposed it to the light and to our attentions. It developed amazingly, into forms so complex we may never understand them exactly.” He smiled grimly.

“If we’re lucky we never will. I can tell you this much, though—it recognized its danger. Perhaps electric impulses from our own brains struck answering chords in the—the organism. And it knew it had to defend itself, fast.

“Now the lake has one fatal weakness. By that I think we can destroy it. I believe the organism is quite aware of this because of the way it chose to combat us.” He paused, looking at me so strangely that I almost acted, in that silent moment. But just as I was gathering my muscles to rise, he began again.

“The girl told me what happened when that air-liner came down. It must have been sheer accident, its making a forced landing at the edge of the Ring. Radioactivity blanked out their communications and of course the air itself was close to deadly. There didn’t seem any hope at all for the people in the ship.

“The girl said many of them complained of feeling—well, call it *attention*—focused on them. I know now it was the lake itself, that gigantic organism, studying them, slowly working around to a decision about its next move. Then it came to a conclusion that may not yet have reached its final equation.

“The passengers saw a man stand up from behind a rock near them. The girl said he looked familiar. He shouted and waved them away. He warned them it would mean their death if they came closer. He vanished. But the passengers were still trying to get a message out and they stayed in the ship. The man appeared three times in all, each time warning them away in stronger and stronger terms.

“Finally he rose from behind a rock very near them and this time he invited them into the Ring. They were surprised to find that when seen this close he was a mirror image of one of their crew members. The image beckoned and ordered them in. They didn’t want to obey. But they went.

“That image, as you may have deduced, was a water-figure created by the lake itself, no one knows how completely. It may have been ninety percent illusion, shaped in the minds of

the watchers. But you'll notice the lake had to imitate one of the crew. It didn't at that time know enough about human bodies to improvise.

"It did know a lot, though, about human minds. In fact, its power over them and its amazing selectivity make me suspect that the original gene from which the organism developed might once have been human or close to it.

"The water image was the lake's first attempt to fight off mankind. The attempt failed. In other words an imitation wouldn't do. But the real thing was close at hand for experimentation.

"What happened next no one will ever know. Logically the organism must have moved forward another step in its defense against invasion by mankind. In effect it created antibodies. It was inoculating itself with the virus of humanity in an effort to immunize itself against a later attack.

"But it had to effect a change in the humans before it could absorb them. Physically they must be changed to live under the lake and mentally they had to alter radically to stay there of their own will. It was their will the lake attacked. You saw that.

"I said before that *something* had apparently been washed from the mind of that girl we saw and some other basic drive substituted in her. I believe now I was nearer the truth than I guessed." He looked at me keenly, almost speculatively.

"If I were in a spot like that," he said, "with the problem of altering a human being's whole emotional outlook, I think I'd strike straight at the root. It would be much simpler than trying to blanket his impulses with anything like hypnotism, for instance.

"I think that for the instinct of self-preservation those people now have another drive—instinct for the preservation of the Organism. It would be so simple, and it would work so well."

There was a roaring in my ears. For a moment I heard nothing of what Sales said. *The flood-gates had opened and through the backflung doors all my memories were pouring.*

"But it hasn't worked perfectly," Sales was saying from far away. "Unless the lake goes a step further, we can destroy it. Perhaps it has. Perhaps it realizes that static antibodies which can't exist outside its own bloodstreams won't help much.

"Do you think, chief, that it might have captured still other humans and worked its basic change in their minds? Could it have implanted in men *like yourself* a shift in instinct so that you know only one basic drive—*the Organism must be preserved?*"

The idea had struck him suddenly. I could see that in his face as he leaned forward across the desk, half rising, his features congesting with the newness and the terrible danger of the thought.

I didn't even get up from my chair. I'd had my revolver out on my knee for the past several minutes, though he couldn't see it from where he sat.

I shot him at close range, through the chest.

For a moment he hung there above the desk, his hands gripping the blotter convulsively. He had one thing more to say but it was hard for him to get it out. He tried twice before he made it.

"You—it's no good," he said very thinly. "Can't—stop me now. I've sent—full report—Mobile Staff—reading it now."

Blood cut off whatever else he wanted to say. I watched impersonally as it bubbled from his lips and he collapsed forward into the scarlet puddle forming so fast on the desk top. I saw

how the blotter took it up at first but the fountain ran too fast and finally a trickle began to spill over the desk edge and patter on the floor with a sound like the dripping of lake water from that girl's garments as she crossed the rocks toward us.

The lake was blue and wonderful in the sunlight. It was the most important thing in the world. If anything happened to destroy it I knew the world would end in that terrible, crashing moment. All my mind and all my effort must be dedicated to protecting it from the danger threatening it now.

A knock at the door banished that vision. I sprang to my feet and blocked off the desk from sight.

Davidson lunged into the room, slammed the door, put his back to it. He was breathing hard.

"They're after you, Jim," he said. "They know about Williams."

I nodded. I knew too, now. I knew why my mind had gone blank when the need to silence Williams was paramount. At that time it wasn't safe for me to remember too much. It wasn't safe for me to know too much about my own actions, my own motives. Oh yes, I had killed him, all right.

"You knew all along?" I asked him. He nodded.

"You've got to do something quick, Jim," he said. "I tell you, they're coming! They know we were there together and they're almost certain you did it. Fingerprints, bullet type—think of something, Jim! I—"

There was a heavy blow on the door behind him. He wasn't expecting it. He jolted forward into the room and the door slammed back against the wall. What looked like a tide of black uniforms poured through, Lewis at the front, his granite face set, his eyes like steel on mine.

"Want to ask you some questions, Owen," he began. "We have reason to think you know more than—"

Then he saw what lay across the desk behind me. There was an instant of absolute silence in the room. Davidson had been hurled past me by the slamming open of the door and the first sound I heard was his gasp of intaken breath as he leaned over the chair from which I'd risen.

My mind was perfectly blank. I knew it was desperately imperative that I clear myself but I'd had too many shocks, one on another, all that day. My brain just wasn't working any more.

I had to say something. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth, praying for the right words.

Davidson's hand closed on my arm. It was a hard, violent grasp, but very quickly, before his next move, he pressed my biceps three times, rapid, warning squeezes. Then he completed his motion and hurled me aside so hard I staggered three paces across the rug and came up facing him, stupid with surprise.

He had scooped up the revolver which I had dropped in my chair. I saw his fingers move over the butt as if for a firmer grip. But I knew what he was doing. His prints would have effaced mine when the time came to test it.

"All right, Lewis," he said quietly. "I did it. I shot them both." His glance shifted from face to face. When it crossed mine I recognized the desperate appeal in his eyes. It was up to me. I couldn't refuse this last offer of aid from him, in the service of a cause greater than any cause men ever fought for.

I knew the truth of that as I knew my own name. There could be no greater cause than the protection of the lake.

A look of wildness which I knew was deliberate suddenly convulsed his face. He lifted the revolver and fired straight at me.

Except—it wasn't straight. Davidson was a good shot. He couldn't miss at this range unless he meant to. The bullet sang past my ear and shattered something noisy behind me. And I saw the look of deep satisfaction relax his face an instant before Lewis' bullet smashed into it, erasing his features in a crimson blur.

(He had to fire the gun at someone—I think he remembered that wax-tests would otherwise prove he hadn't fired one recently. And it might as well be at me, to clear me of suspicion. Perhaps too he knew he couldn't make his story stand under close questioning. So it was suicide, in a way, but suicide in a cause of tremendous, unquestionable rightness. That I knew in the deepest recesses of my mind.) . . .

"All right, Owen. You give the word. Where would you say it's most vulnerable?" Was Lewis watching me with irony in his keen eyes as he asked it? For that question of all others was the one I could not answer. Physically could not, even had I wished. I think my tongue would have turned backward in my throat and strangled me, if need be, before I could tell them the truth.

"Make another circle," I said. "I'll look it over once more."

Five hundred feet below us the lake lay blue and placid. Seen from this height the majestic cliffs above it were foreshortened into insignificance, but I knew that deep beneath those rocks lay the vital cavern which no bombs must touch.

There was no sign of the mindless men and women which It had used and discarded. The antitoxin premise was no longer valid. But the next step, to a bacteriophage which would seek out and devour the virus of attack—that must not fail. I well knew what my task was.

"Try the shallows over here," I said, pointing. The ship circled and Lewis presently raised his hand.

The depth-bombs floated away behind us in a long, falling drift. They were not, I knew, merely depth bombs. Sales' memorandum had worked its recorder's will too fast for me. I had silenced the doctor but I could not silence the records. I watched the falling bombs with a sickness in my heart that was near despair.

"The Organism has no white blood-cells," Sales had reported to the Staff, his dead voice speaking the words of my own destruction in the very moment I killed him. "I believe it can be eradicated if we infect it thoroughly with a culture of every microbe and bacterium we can pour into it. The chances are something will take hold."

"If it doesn't, then we'll have to try until something does. I would suggest depth bombs. What tests I have made so far indicate the so-called water of the lake is in effect a thick skin which has so far protected the Organism from the entry of ordinary infection."

"The depth charges would serve the purpose of a hypodermic needle in introducing our weapons where they may take effect. Down there under the surface *something* must lie which is the heart of the dangerous being, something we have not yet seen. But destroy it we must, before it mutates any further, into a thing nothing could cope with."

When the first bombs burst, they might have been bursting in my own brain. Only dimly I saw the blue water fountain toward us.

We circled, watching. The water poured itself over that terrible wound. Ripples ran sluggishly out around it toward shore. It seemed to me there was a flush in the water where

those death-laden charges had fallen, but if there was, something working in the lake effaced it, washed out the toxins, healed and soothed the danger away.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Where next, Owen?” Lewis demanded relentlessly and I knew my ordeal had only begun. Desperation was welling up in me. How long could I drag this out? Sooner or later we would work our way around to the danger-area and this helpless being below us would die in an unimaginable agony—unimaginable to all but myself.

“Try over there,” I said, pointing at random, seeing my hand shake as I held it out. I shut the fingers into a fist to stop their trembling.

How long it went on I could not remember afterward. There comes a point when flesh and blood can record no further and, mercifully for me, I reached that point after a while. By then I knew what the end must be, no matter how long I postponed it. I had done what a man could but it wasn't enough. The lake and I were helpless together and I knew—it was soothing to be sure—that we would in the end die together.

Round after round we made above the shuddering blue water. Charge after charge dropped, splashed, vanished, fountained up again. From shore to shore the lake was racked by interlocking ripples from those dreadful wounds. Sometimes the poisons the bombs carried were washed out and dissolved, but as time went on, more and more often they started great spreading circles of infection that traced iridescence upon the water.

Yellow virulence rippled shoreward and crossed ripples running from circles of angry crimson. The color of bruises mingled with the color of blood and the shuddering lake shivered no more than I, but in me it was a hidden shuddering. It had to be hidden.

At least it wasn't I who pointed out the heart of the lake. That happened by sheer accident. It had to come sooner or later and after a long while it came.

Deep under the cliffs that shadowy blue cavern which I had never seen was riven asunder by a burst of white fire. And that which lay coiled in it was riven too, blinded and agonized by the tearing of the explosion and the quick avid onslaught of the disease it could not fight.

The first we saw from above was the ominous shadow suddenly uncoiling from beneath the cliff. It lashed out like a gigantic serpent, a Midgard Serpent that clasped the world in its embrace. Convulsively it unwound itself from that shadowed cavern and burst into the open in an agonized series of spasms that made the lake boil around it.

The men around me broke into a hoarse, triumphant shouting. If I could have done it I would have killed them all. But it was hopeless now. I had no longer even the will to revenge. When a man's basic instinct dies within him he ceases intrinsically to be a man at all.

The water frothed and boiled beneath us. We lost sight of whatever it was that lashed the lake in its death-frenzy. I knew but I would not look or think. I had failed and I was ready now for death along with my dying master.

Very dimly I heard Lewis giving orders for the whole area to be bombed systematically to wipe out any lingering vestiges of the thing which had died here. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

I was an automaton, going through the motions of a man until I could shut them out at last and take from my locked file drawer the little revolver I kept there. In a way I envied Davidson. He at least had died for a purpose, trusting me to make his sacrifice not in vain.

I had failed him, too. I had failed myself.

I had no more reason to live.

I put the muzzle of the revolver against my head.

And then—and then I found I could not pull the trigger! Something stopped me, some deep command in a level of the mind below conscious recognition. For an instant of frantic hope my reason tried to tell me that it was all a mistake, that there had not, after all, been wrought upon me that change which turned me from a human to an instrument in the command of another will.

Was it self-preservation, after all, that stayed my hand? If I had that I was free.

No—it was not self-preservation. In the next instant I knew and for one immeasurable moment the hope I had so briefly cherished flickered and then went out and was swallowed up in a great surge of command.

It was not dead. It lay far down in subterranean waters, buried, waiting, depending upon me, commanding me to stay the hand that would destroy it with me. I must live. I must serve it.

One deep wave of sick regret swept me in those levels of the mind where human reason dwelt. *If only I had pulled the trigger an instant sooner, before that command came!*

It was too late. And now a warm, confident cunning began to well into my mind from that far-away source of command. *It could wait. I could wait. I could recruit where I must and It would help me to make others like myself, until our ranks were strong enough.*

I had not wholly failed but until I fulfilled my duty I must obey. Obedience would be a pleasure and a joy, the insidious voice promised me. Good and faithful servant, the whisper said, work for my kingdom upon Earth and your rewards will be delightful beyond imagination.

I got up and locked the revolver away again. Turning back, I caught my reflection in a mirror on the wall and paused there, staring deep into my own eyes.

I smiled. . . .

[The end of *Atomic!* by Henry Kuttner]