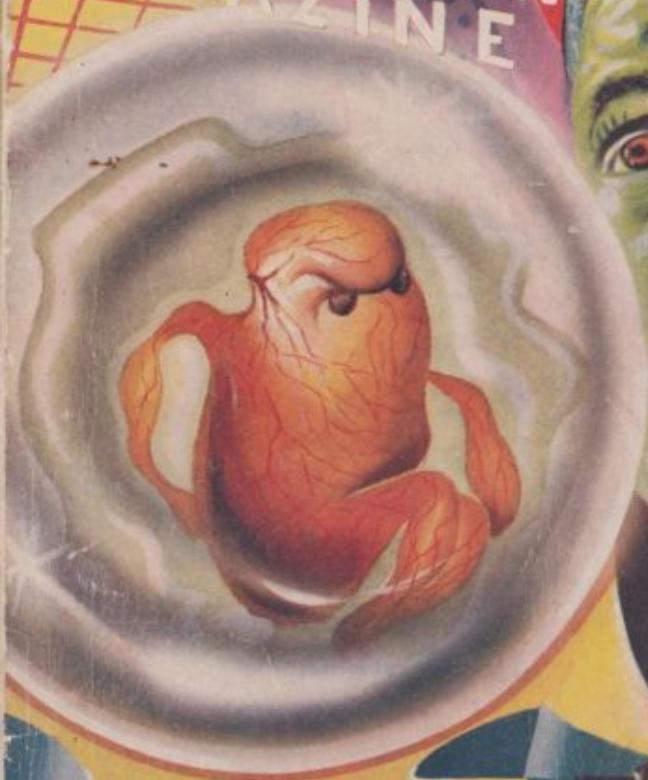


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BEFORE ATLANTIS

By
Vargo Statten

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To a world surfeited with the majesty of advancing accomplishment war had come—and gone.

It had raged for twelve relentless months, decimating everything in its path and leaving but five million survivors out of the three hundred million who had formerly been spread across all parts of the globe. Now the survivors spent their time side-stepping the ghouls of war in the shape of disease, pestilence, famine, and exposure to the elements. Most of them lived almost as troglodytes, using colossal bomb craters as the bases for their homes, stealing food where they could, using whatever scorched and tattered fabrics they could find to create some kind of clothing, with which to protect themselves against the searing winds of winter. The year when this aftermath had come must forever remain unknown, mainly because those who had been left behind had hardly any conception of what year it now was. They had been through hell on earth and they were left dazed, battered, and wondering, lost to all sense of time and the common decencies of normal civilization.

What the war had been about very few could remember, but some seemed to recall it had begun with a quarrel between two nations which had rapidly flared up until the whole powder keg had been ignited. Following that had come the hail of atomic warfare and, lined behind it, all the colossal and shatteringly destructive paraphernalia of destructive warfare. That there were no victors now the struggle had ceased was obvious. There were only losers, and a few amongst the scattered millions who believed they might yet build again upon the ashes of the old. How true was this belief was proven in a matter of two years, for out of the chaos and rubble of the former scientific magnificence there began to arise a new civilization, patterned

very much as the old one had been with tall, stately buildings, wide terraces, canyons of streets and lofty rooftop spaces wherein man could get the benefit of the upper air away from the enervating toxics of the lower levels. Only the genius of man, and the knowledge of past scientific accomplishments, had made this resurrection from absolute ruin possible.

By common consent of the survivors there was now only one ruler for the entire world. He had gained the position through unswerving integrity of purpose, strength of character, and that inborn spark of genius which made him an unquestioned leader of men. His name was Carson Rhodes and there was about him a definitely Nordic appearance in that he was tall, broad-shouldered, blond and in every way an immensely impressive personality. But he did not rely upon his undoubtedly superb physique to make him worthy of the rôle of leader; it was his scientific ability allied to his unquestioned gift for organisation which had placed him at the summit of the men and women who had survived the greatest man-made catastrophe of all times.

Carson Rhodes did not work alone. He knew that one man's opinion can often be wrong so there was always a council of colleagues to determine with him the answer to any great problem which arose among the newly organised community. Such a problem did indeed arise in the third year after the end of the war. In many ways it was a comparatively trivial matter which was brought to Rhodes' notice, but with his usual thoroughness he investigated it. Summed up briefly, the problem concerned the sudden extraordinary behaviour of animals, both domestic and wild. There were at least twenty-seven cases of animals who, according to their owners, were actually clever enough to *reason* matters out for themselves. At first such a possibility seemed patently absurd but since forty-seven people could not possibly all be telling the same tissue of falsehoods it became a matter for investigation, and a very surprising investigation it proved to be when at length the inspectors delegated by Rhodes returned to his headquarters with their report.

"It seems to me, sir," explained Nathan Walsh, who filled the rôle of Rhodes' chief investigator of "peculiar" matters, "that we are up against one of the most unique problems we have yet encountered. I investigated half a dozen of the cases which you handed over to me and in every instance I found the owners had been speaking the truth. There was the case of Joseph Adams' dog, which without a doubt was able to differentiate between coloured cloths without having had any previous training in this respect."

"By which," Rhodes asked, pondering, "you mean that it was not a matter of association of ideas in the dog's brain?"

"No sir, nothing at all like that. I put three cloths—a green, a blue, a yellow—on the floor and told the dog to select the yellow one. Without a moment's hesitation the dog did exactly as instructed and brought the yellow cloth to me. In another instance I investigated the case of a cat which proved even more sagacious than the dog. I put two playing cards on the floor—one was the nine of clubs and the other was the eight. You will realise what little difference there is between those two cards, sir, yet without pausing to even examine the cards the cat picked up the eight of clubs exactly as I had instructed and, what is more, it placed them on the kitchen table just by my giving the instruction 'place these on the table.'"

Carson Rhodes was silent. Behind him spanned the enormous windows of his office which looked out on to the rebuilt city. The time was summer, the air was soft and warm, the sky was blue and cloudless, for the weather machines were functioning perfectly. In fact everything was now once again ordered, quiet and serene, and yet into the midst of it had come this strange enigma of animals which could reason for themselves—animals which had taken unto

themselves the one prerogative presumed to belong only to human beings. The gift of reason

...

“Naturally,” Nathan Walsh said, after a pause, “there has to be an explanation for such an extraordinary state of affairs.”

Rhodes gave him a brief glance from his deep blue eyes.

“Have you any suggestions to offer, Walsh?”

“At the moment, sir, no. As a matter of fact I haven’t yet recovered from the shock of making the investigation. I thought perhaps you would have some ideas on the subject.”

“Off-hand I have no ideas at all. But what I would suggest you do is obtain one of these animals and fetch it to the scientific laboratory where it can be examined by the experts. It’s perfectly obvious that the sudden gift of reason is caused by some change in the brain and the apparatus which we have in the laboratory should be able to detect what that change is. You see, Walsh,” Rhodes continued, as he saw the inspector looking vaguely puzzled, “we are now living in a world which is totally different from the one which existed before the war. During the war countless radiations hitherto unknown were released, and some were immensely destructive while others may have caused physical changes, the full results of which we have not even glimpsed. It is reasonable to assume that animals would be affected just as much as human beings, but in the case of an animal a physical change is usually obvious long before it appears in a human being, due to their much more sensitive nervous system.”

“Well,” Walsh said, thinking, “I fail to see sir, that human beings can become any cleverer than they are. After all, we already have the gift of reason and there is no other sense that can possibly be developed, is there? What I mean is, if animals are sort of casting their shadows before, and giving a kind of hint to what may shortly happen to human beings, I fail to see that it signifies, because human beings have surely reached the highest peak of evolution?”

“Not by a long shot,” Rhodes replied with a grim smile. “In fact compared to some of the forms of intelligence which must exist in the Universe I would be inclined to consider that we are, as yet, very small fry.”

“Well anyway, sir,” Walsh said, “I will do as you suggest and secure one of these animals for scientific examination . . .”

And Walsh did just this. That same evening an Alsatian dog, which seemed to be gifted with reason even more excessively than any of his fellows, was taken to the down-city laboratories and there handed over to the experts for analysis. Rhodes himself took no part in the examination, not because he was not capable of handling it but because so many other matters were constantly claiming his attention. Nonetheless, towards ten o’clock as he was about to leave, there came a sudden buzzing on the intercom-visiphone. He snapped the switch and looked at the small square of screen upon which the face of one of the laboratory technicians appeared.

“Have you the time, Mr. Rhodes, to come down to the laboratory?” the technician asked, and there was a certain mystified wonder in his voice which made Rhodes raise his eyebrows.

“Yes, I can spare the time, granting it is important enough.”

“I am inclined to think this is, sir.”

To which Rhodes merely nodded and switched off the instrument.

Ten minutes later he had reached the down-city laboratories and the night commissionaire immediately conducted him to the particular section of the great building where the experiment on the Alsatian had been and still was proceeding.

Within the huge brilliantly lighted room, entirely devoid of shadows, Rhodes beheld four scientists assembled, each one of them in his long white coat, and each of them looking, it appeared, particularly puzzled. The man who had done the 'phoning came forward as Carson Rhodes entered.

"I would not have taken up your time, sir, without real need," he apologised, "but in this instance I felt—in fact we all did—that your presence was necessary. We have thoroughly examined the Alsatian without hurting it in any way, and there is no doubt that its brain construction is entirely different from that of a dog before the war. This particular animal, we understand, is only three years old, which means that it was born just after the war ended. We have, of course, specimens of animals, especially dogs, which existed before and during the war years and the construction of their brains is completely at variance with the construction of this particular one."

"Which means," Carson Rhodes said, taking up the thread, "that something that happened during the war caused this dog to be born with a brain different from any dog before it?"

"That," the technician agreed quietly, "would seem to be the case, sir."

Rhodes frowned, reflected for a moment or two, then he motioned briefly with his hand. "I would like to see your reports and the photographic X-ray plates that you have made of this animal."

The technician nodded and in a moment or two Rhodes was in possession of all the necessary plates and reports. Seating himself at the nearby table he went through them slowly, pondering meanwhile, then at length he looked up.

"I gather that you gentlemen appreciate the significance of this extraordinary occurrence?" he asked.

The scientists nodded slowly as they came forward. The technician who had been doing all the talking up to now was the head of the laboratory, and as before he again took up the matter.

"In the case of one dog," he said, "it would be considered as a freak of Nature and dismissed as such. But we have positive evidence that over forty-seven animals are thus affected, covering various ranges—that is to say dogs, cats, rabbits, even white mice, and in many cases animals of the wild variety which are in the zoos. In every instance there is this peculiar intelligent addition, namely the gift of reason. Up to now Man has been the dominant factor in civilization because he alone—with the possible exception of the ant—has had the gift of reason. But if animals also are going to possess it we might find ourselves up against a very sinister and dangerous problem."

"Exactly," Carson Rhodes said, sitting back in his chair. "That was just what I was thinking. And it does not seem an altogether practical proposition to kill off animals everywhere in the world for the simple reason that thousands of them are probably breeding in places of which we know nothing. No, *that* is not the answer."

"As I see it," the technician remarked, "the answer lies in finding the cause and eliminating it. Once we have done that we can destroy all animals with the assurance that any that are afterwards born, for there are bound to be some no matter how many we may destroy, will be normal."

Rhodes nodded slowly, pondering.

"Yes, that seems to be about the only solution," he agreed finally. "The best thing you can do, gentlemen, is to make tests of the still radio-active deposits left behind from the war and also take samples of the atmosphere to determine if there is perhaps some peculiar gas which

is causing this extra brain formation in animals—in other words make all the tests that are necessary and report back to me at the earliest moment.”

The assembled scientists nodded and Carson Rhodes got to his feet. For the moment he had done all he could: now it was up to the scientists. He had other matters constantly claiming his attention . . .

Within a week the head technician reported back to Carson Rhodes' headquarters, and a particularly disquieting report it proved to be.

“The cause, sir,” the technician said, “is not radio-activity left behind from the war nor is it anything in the atmosphere. We have made the most exhaustive tests in this direction and there is nothing whatever that could cause any change in physical structure. We do find, however, that there is an exceptionally strong increase in the amount of cosmic radiation reaching the earth's surface. Normally—and by that I mean before the war years—it registered somewhere in the region of nought point one per cent. of the total amount of cosmic radiation known to exist in outer space, the amount increasing of course as one goes higher, but our readings now show the cosmic radiations have increased three-fold and we can only think that this is the cause of the physical changes in animals.”

“By cosmic radiation,” Rhodes asked, “do you mean cosmic *rays* as such?”

“Yes sir, that is exactly what I do mean. I am referring to the ultra-short, extremely penetrative rays which have no known source in outer space but which are constantly descending upon our planet—and for that matter every other planet as far as we know. Normally the ionic layer in the upper reaches of the atmosphere absorbs a vast proportion of the cosmic rays, preventing us from receiving the full force thereof, but it would appear that the war and the immensely destructive power of the explosives released during that period, have so weakened the ionic layer at our atmosphere's limit, that cosmic rays are now getting through in much greater quantities than before. There is nothing illogical about it,” the technician continued, “for scientists have always warned us that atomic war would probably cause vast changes in our atmospheric envelope, and such indeed seems to be the case.”

“It would certainly explain matters,” Carson Rhodes agreed, pondering. “To the best of our scientific knowledge cosmic rays are the main cause of evolution. Man has risen from the lowly protoplasmic slime to his present high status purely through the action of cosmic rays, which possess within themselves some catalytic power of changing the aggregates and molecular structure of a human body so that it gradually evolves from the protoplasmic state to the perfection that we see to-day. It can only mean that since cosmic rays are getting through they are speeding up the normal course of evolution. It is quite within possibility that in many tens of thousands of years animals will possess the gift of reason by the natural outcome of evolution, but in this instance the tens of thousands of years are being telescoped because cosmic rays are speeding things up to such an enormous extent. That, as I see it, can be the only explanation for the gift of reason which has suddenly descended upon animals.”

“Yes sir,” the technician agreed seriously. “That is what I think too, and so do the rest of my colleagues. It presents a very grave problem.”

“It means,” Rhodes observed, after a long meditation, “we have no means of destroying the cause of this sudden gift to animals. We cannot repair the ionic layer round the atmosphere: that is obviously impossible. On the other hand we face the prospect of increased cosmic rays affecting human beings as well, because as I told you earlier, we are not by any means at the limit of our evolutive development. What we might grow into in tens of

thousands of years we do not know, but with this excess of cosmic rays descending upon us, we may very soon find out! In other words, it appears that since the war the weakening of the ionic shield around the Earth has produced what is technically called a mutation, that is a milestone in the journey of living things from the protoplasm to the perfect specimen.”

The technician nodded, his face still troubled.

“As yet, sir,” he said, “the shadow over our civilization is no bigger than the tiniest cloud on the horizon, and if it only remains in its present state we can probably deal with it. I would suggest that we destroy all animals everywhere as a safeguard, because it is becoming increasingly obvious that now they have got the gift of reason they are quite beyond control and we are going to get into a very difficult predicament if we don’t destroy them before they form themselves into armies and attack us.”

Rhodes gave a rather grim smile at the fantastic prospect of a perfect civilization, rebuilt with all the knowledge and all the skill science could produce, suddenly being threatened by animals which had developed the gift of reason. And yet the threat was there. It was a very real thing and it had to be dealt with, and it seemed that the only possible way *to* deal with it was to destroy the animals before they could go too far.

“All right,” Rhodes said at length, turning back to his work. “You have my permission to do whatever you think fit in the matter of eliminating all animals before they can become a threat to our security.”

So the technician departed with his orders, and how he intended to deal with the matter did not particularly concern Carson Rhodes at that time, preoccupied as he was with the more important matters of rebuilding trade and finance through the re-built world.

But though the scientists, under the direct orders of the head technician himself, went to work to eliminate animals of every description both wild and tame in every part of the world, they were not entirely successful in their mission, for as Carson Rhodes himself had observed, there were countless places where the animals were breeding and bringing forth their young, and these were the ones which could not possibly be reckoned with. Accordingly, after an interval of two months, which brought the re-built world to a blazing summer, there came the first real sign of trouble.

It began in the equatorial regions where perhaps the heat of the sun had a good deal to do with incensing the wild animals to a fury against their human masters, and thereafter spread rapidly to the temperate climes. The fact remained that observers reported they had seen vast numbers of all types of animals herded together in what were obviously armies, and each army contained several animals at its head who evidently were responsible for directions and plan of attack. Before the atomic war such a sight would have been relegated to the realms of fantasy, but now there was not the slightest doubt that it was happening. Indeed why *should* it not happen since animals were quite capable of thinking and reasoning on a par with human beings, and therefore were determined—quite naturally—to extricate themselves from the subservient position in which they had existed for countless generations? Their main handicap lay in the fact that, physically, they were not enabled to perform the feats common to a human being, except in the case of monkeys and gorillas, whose physique being nearest to the human made them indispensable to this astounding new animal generation which had arisen.

There inevitably came a day when the animals struck with all their force, when they descended in their tens of thousands upon one of the many new towns which had sprung up independent of the capital city itself. The inhabitants of the towns, quite unprepared for this sudden onslaught by animals, were caught unawares and in many cases were torn to pieces

before the situation could be got in hand by using modern weapons upon the invaders. Here, though, there was a difficulty since most of the weapons of war had been jettisoned at the close of the atomic onslaught, in the fond hope that nations would never again rise against each other. In this instance it proved disastrous for it gave the animals a chance to gain the upper hand, at least, in the outlying towns.

Carson Rhodes, however, immediately went into action. He gave orders for all the armaments necessary to be manufactured to deal with the ever increasing hordes which would likely be attacking the capital before very long. Sure enough the attack came, three weeks after the invasion of the outlying towns, but this time the animals were beaten. Destruction rained upon them from all sides and the spotless streets and buildings of the great capital were scarred with flames and stained with animal blood as the terrific massacre proceeded. It ended in the complete rout of the animals and the hasty retreat of those which survived the deluge of death which descended upon them. Whether they had learnt their lesson, and would not attack again, remained to be seen. For the time being the situation was in hand . . .

The menace of the animals was one thing, but there were also other ramifications stemming from this main trouble. Liners at sea were attacked by dense shoals of fish, some of them merely small fish but others from the very depths of the ocean large enough to incapacitate a liner if necessary; and indeed many of them did. Several liners bound upon long transoceanic journeys found themselves overwhelmed by these monsters of the deep and dragged down into the depths with all souls upon board. Immediately the order went forth from the capital that all liners must henceforth be fitted with the most modern defensive weapons to destroy all possibility of attack. In the air, too, the sinister menace lurked where birds—in any case always gifted with that mysterious sense known as the homing instinct—attacked human foes with relentless fury.

The chief danger came from the birds of the eagle variety, their immense size and uncanny intelligence making them deadly foes indeed. Many pilots reported that fighting them was akin to trying to dodge the fastest jet fighter in existence. But here again, man, due to his superior weapons, was again the master and throughout the long hot summer the battle raged on land and sea and air until at last there came a time when no more attacks were reported and investigation revealed that there did not seem to be any particularly large generation of animals, birds, or fish visible. It could only mean that the havoc that had been wrought among their numbers had brought a cessation of hostilities—at least for a while.

Carson Rhodes, however, was looking beyond these preliminary manifestations created by an increase in cosmic rays. He was scientist enough to foresee that if animals, birds, and fish could thus be affected by a mutation in the evolutive scale, then so could *all* living things—including human beings. There were also the other forms of life, from which even more dangerous possibilities might be expected—

“The ants, for instance,” Rhodes explained, to a gathering of scientists that he had summoned to his headquarters. “It has been known ever since scientific records have been kept that the ants, or termites if you prefer, are the cleverest insects known to man. They are intelligent, they have an ordered society, they are experts in battle, and they are absolutely fearless. A soldier ant is probably the most perfect war machine ever contrived by Nature.

“Did you ever stop to think, gentlemen, what is going to happen when the ants have also evolved in the same manner as the animals, birds, and fish have done? Frankly—” he looked about him with grim eyes—“I wouldn’t give a red cent for our chances if the ants really gain the upper hand.”

“And to exterminate them is, of course, impossible,” declared the chief laboratory attendant, shrugging. “There are tens of millions of ant hills throughout the world, and to try to find even a quarter of them and destroy them would be next to impossible. Ants teem in the countless millions, there’s nothing that we can do about them.”

“In that I agree,” Rhodes assented, then after a pause he gave a curious smile. “There is one thing that I think you gentlemen should all know; that is that I have been receiving reports that the cosmic rays are now also affecting human beings.”

The assembled scientists glanced at one another in surprise then back towards Rhodes as he lifted a report from amongst the sheaf of papers on his desk.

“I have here,” he continued, “reports from various parts of the world that many men and women have revealed—consciously and unconsciously—traces of intelligence far in excess of the normal. There is amongst these people a change in physical appearance. It would appear that skulls are becoming larger in both the case of men and women, and that can only mean that the brain material is becoming much more expansive than hitherto. Since that is the case there must very soon come a time when every living thing, or should I say when every human being, on the face of this planet, will be affected as are these few at the moment.

“The change has come about in much the same way as it did with the animals—first just a few, then suddenly sweeping like wildfire through the whole species. If it should so happen, gentlemen, that human beings are evolved tens of thousands of years ahead of their time before the ant reaches the same peak of evolution, we shall be well able to deal with them; in that we shall be as advanced as they will be. In the meantime our best course is to have our weapons brought absolutely up to date and manufactured as quickly as possible in order that we can meet any sudden menace which may arise.”

So into this paradise born of the cataclysm of war there had come the strangest menace known in the history of mankind. Man was relying for survival partly upon his weapons and partly upon winning the race in evolution. Carson Rhodes directed the scientists to keep constant watch upon the development of termites whilst he himself still attended to the more mundane matters of commerce and finance, the two inseparable pillars upon which society must always be built.

By the autumn he received reports that microscopic observation of the termite colonies had revealed that ants were indeed rapidly evolving and that their general movements and organisation showed a motivating intelligence far in advance of anything yet observed. On the other hand, across three quarters of the globe man too was rapidly evolving. In most of the towns and cities there were large-headed men and women and their intelligence was commensurate with the enlargement of their craniums. In a word every man and woman was destined to become a genius, that is by comparison with earlier standards.

To Carson Rhodes too, there came this mutational point in his development, a day when he suddenly found that the problems which had baffled him hitherto were now no longer complex. He could solve them in an instant, which could only be explained by a sudden increase in his brain power. He found this mutation interesting, not to say fascinating. It was a new experience to discover that former riddles were riddles no more. He felt able to plan far ahead of the narrow compass within which he had been working. He envisaged enormous engineering changes for the capital which he himself had conceived in the first instance. In fact all over the world men and women were striding ahead of their normal standing and were bending the forces of science to their will as never before. But with this mutational change there also came a price, and it was one which Carson Rhodes—for all his prescience—had not

foreseen. It was Nathan Walsh, his chief inspector of statistics and social order, who brought him the news.

“Genius,” said Walsh, “is one thing, but *sterility* is decidedly another! I think you ought to know, sir, that for the past five months there has been no record of any birth, anywhere. It can only mean that Nature, in giving to mankind the gift of great genius, and evolving him far beyond the normal status, has exacted a merciless price. We are given ever increasing knowledge but no offspring to carry it on after a brief spell of life has ceased!”

Carson Rhodes sat in silence, absorbing the grim news. He was as handsome as ever but the extraordinary cranial development which had now come to him dwarfed the massive strength of his face. His head was truly enormous but still covered with that riotous mass of thick blond hair.

“This,” he said finally, “is something with which we did not reckon. Have you reported it to the scientists?”

“Yes sir, I have. And they have made all the necessary biological tests and experiments but they are satisfied that there is nothing that can be done. The only way that we can ever bring normalcy back to the race, and indeed to the whole world, is to find a way to blot this incessant downpouring of cosmic rays. And in that particular field the scientists are none too hopeful. They are experimenting constantly, making tests upon the atmosphere, but so far have not produced any worthwhile solution.”

Rhodes got to his feet and banged a heavy fist upon his desk.

“But this, Walsh, cannot possibly be allowed to go on! It means in a few years the death of the entire race and what is the use of genius if the race is to die? Somehow these cosmic rays have got to be stopped! We *have* everything else. Genius, progress, a fair sized civilization, and I fully believe that we now have the mastery of insects, birds, fish, animals, and so forth. We’re certainly not going to be baulked by this sudden sterility which has descended upon us. I will see the scientists for myself.”

And this was exactly what Carson Rhodes did. But far from achieving his object he received instead only another shock, and it was the chief technician who dealt it.

“I would like you to look at this, sir,” he said, when Carson Rhodes had explained the reason for his visit to the laboratory. “Just tell me what you think of it . . .”

The technician produced a sheet of shining grey metal from a nearby locker and stood it up on the bench before him. Then at his signal one of the other scientists switched off the light. Rhodes waited impatiently, wondering what all this demonstration was about, then with some surprise he found himself looking still at that sheet of metal even though the room was in darkness. The sheet was glowing gently as though painted with phosphorescence. It hung there uncannily in the dark, a softly glowing rectangle.

“That,” came the technician’s voice, “is a piece of metal identical to the metal which was used to build this city. Of that, sir, you’re doubtless aware?”

“Yes, of course I’m aware,” Rhodes replied irritably. “What about it? Why all the glow about it? Has it been painted with something?”

“No sir—that is the point! That glow which you see is *inside* the metal itself. We have examined it through electron microscopes and it is perfectly obvious that the molecular structure itself is mutating just the same as everything else. Living matter in the shape of human beings and animals and so forth is not the only form of life to evolve. When you come to think of it, metals *also* evolve. Take the simple case of lead which changes in time to radium: that also can be called a mutation. In this case this metal is basically radio active and

it means that it too is influenced by cosmic rays, is mutating into something else. There must come a time when its molecular structure will break down and it will alter into some new form entirely. What that will be we don't know, but the warning is there! Eventually, sir, this whole city is liable to come down round our ears and everything made of this metal—and I shudder to think of the number of things which *are* made of it—will lose their present constitution.”

Rhodes clenched his fists helplessly and looked at the impassive scientist.

“But this means that our whole civilization is built on shifting sand!”

“That, sir, seems to be the case,” the technician acknowledged, sighing. “Not only are we faced with sterility but also the breaking down of the very foundations of the civilizations which we have built up. The ghastly part is that we know of no way to circumvent the tragedy. Or, at least, not from the ground here. . . .”

Rhodes looked up sharply. “And what do you mean by that?”

“I mean, sir, that between us we have evolved a plan which might put a stop to the trouble. Obviously since it is the cosmic rays which are responsible for all our trials it is the *blocking* of these rays which must be accomplished if we are ever to get things back on an even keel again. We have acquired great genius through the cosmic rays which have reached us recently, and from the look of things we shall go on acquiring genius. For that reason it has not been difficult for us to evolve a plan which formerly would never have occurred to us.

“It is this: That we journey into space in specially-designed machines and harness the energy of the sun. We have evolved a system by which the sun's outpouring of electrical energy can be trapped and then re-radiated into what one might call a cocoon of electrical energy. Given enough machines and 're-distributors' as I will call them, it should be possible to form a shell of energy entirely round the Earth which, according to our calculations on paper anyway, ought to provide the Earth with a new ionic shield. By that means the cosmic rays will again be diverted so that only the normal quantity of nought point nought one per cent. of them descends upon the Earth. I am willing to make the experimental trip into space to view the possibilities of this theory if you will grant me the permission to go.”

“Permission!” Rhodes cried. “This is not a case where one asks *permission*; it is for you to depart immediately and see what you can find! Everything depends on it! I never realised that the position was so desperate. Go at once, waste no time. . . .!”

Three days later the head technician departed alone on his journey into the void to test the possibility of his theory. He went in a machine which had been miraculously constructed in less than twenty-four hours, so extremely efficient were the machine tools which newly acquired genius had produced. The machine contained within itself all the necessary instruments for making the solar tests which the technician required. So it was with a high heart that he fled from the imprisoning toils of Earth's gravitation and into outer space. He absorbed the initial shock of the take-off without harm since his evolution was now so complete that his mind was the absolute master of his body and refused to allow it to be subjected to any of the strains and stresses which normally would have been experienced.

Once he was twenty thousand miles beyond the limit of Earth's atmosphere the head technician surveyed the void and then the instruments around him. For some reason, however, he found it impossible now to concentrate upon the task for which he had come, and hard though he strove, he could find no explanation for the sudden blanking out in his powers of mental absorption. It was the effort he made to pin his mind down to the task on hand that made him oblivious to certain physical changes taking place within him, both internally and

externally. Anybody who had been with him would have noticed that age was spreading over him like a mantle.

He had left Earth as a big-headed, comparatively young man, yet now he looked at least eighty—then ninety—then a hundred. Within a matter of seconds he leapt from middle age to old age, and beyond old age to extreme senility. Before he even had a chance to apprehend what had happened his life energy had completely burnt itself out in one exploding fury of racing years. As he died, a withered, incredibly aged man, the thought flashed through his mind that out here in space cosmic rays were even more powerful than they were on Earth, for the ionic shield, though badly weakened, was providing *some* kind of a screen.

But out here the naked force of them was overpowering, and never before had a venture been made into space to test the conditions reigning in the void. Therefore he had received the full impact of evolutive radiation and had burnt out his life in one mighty spurt. Insulated though the ship was, it had not proved sufficient to save him from destruction. Such were the thoughts that flashed through his mind as he collapsed to the floor—and died.

And the machine with its priceless instruments hurtled on into the depths of space. A great idea had come and gone. Defeated because no thorough knowledge of space had been gained before the project had been attempted.

And back on Earth Carson Rhodes waited desperately for news from outer-space. The hours became days and still he waited, till at last it was unwillingly forced upon him that something unforeseen had overtaken the head technician. What, then, was the position now?

Rhodes' only hope was immediate consultation with the scientists, which of course he held without delay. But the scientists could only confirm his own opinion, namely that the head technician had met with unexpected difficulty, been killed, or found the machine in which he had travelled uncontrollable when it had reached outer space. The fact remained that



the great idea of using solar energy to resuscitate the Earth's atmosphere was now out of the question. There had to be some other solution to the relentless problem pressing in on all sides. Upon Rhodes, as leader, practically the whole onus of responsibility rested. It was up to him to think of a way out of the desperate predicament. And with every day it became even *more* desperate, chiefly because the biologists reported that there would be no end to the worldwide sterility until the cosmic rays were shielded, and also because the entomologists were of the opinion that ants were now commencing to enlarge their size.

Cases had been noticed of ants measuring at least six inches in length, which could only mean that as their evolution rapidly increased they were also enlarging in size, and that meant that there would come a day—and perhaps before very long too—when they would reach human or ultra-human size and would constitute the greatest foes that mankind had ever faced.

Somehow amongst these emergencies Carson Rhodes kept his head and still continued to direct the destinies of commerce, finance, and social order, but even he could not prevent the rumours that were constantly flying round and there began to rise an even more insistent public clamour that the scientists do something really definite to stop the cosmic rays which were gradually eating the heart out of this new, magnificent civilization.

It was on a winter's night some four months after the ill-fated departure of the head technician into space that the crisis really came. It showed itself not in a sudden invasion of termites but in a monstrous, glowing building at the southern end of the capital. Passers-by noticed that it seemed to be shining with an unearthly pearly lustre, as though it were bathed from apex to base in St. Elmo's fire. It was generally accepted by the populace as an unusual electrical phenomenon and nobody thought any further about it. Except the scientists. They reported the matter instantly to Carson Rhodes and he personally hurried through the city streets to survey the building in question. There was no doubt about it as the men looked at it that it was apparently phosphorescent throughout its entire structure.

"It's that damned mutation," one of the scientists muttered. "I'd suggest, sir, that we get away from here as quickly as possible . . ."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before the pearly lustre bathing the building suddenly seemed to explode outwards in a vast coruscation of soundless, creamy light. And the building itself literally vanished into thin air leaving behind the enormously deep foundation which had been dug into the earth to form its base. Down there was darkness and an empty crater of rock and soil. Of the building itself there was no sign. Evidently the metal being of a highly radio-active type had evolved into a totally different form—one so rarified that it could no longer be classed as a material structure but instead had become gaseous and dissipated.

The actual dissolution brought no harm to Rhodes and the assembled scientists beyond causing them to stagger slightly before the pressure waves generated by the mutation. The moment they had straightened up and looked about them they noticed that other buildings were similarly affected. All down one side of the immense street in which they stood, and along which normal city folk were passing to and fro, buildings were commencing to gather to themselves that unholy glow.

Such was the beginning of the great mutation which swept through the city, and since all the buildings and the power houses, and the machines within the power houses, were constructed of identical metal they all suffered the same fate and, disastrously enough at approximately the same time. In one night of panic practically the entire city disappeared and

with it the immense power machines which had made it the most scientifically governed city which had ever been upon the face of the Earth.

Dawn found a few odd buildings still standing, buildings which had been made of ordinary iron or in some cases of wood, but of the splendid paradise which it had taken so much labour to create, there was no trace.

Homeless, cursing the scientists and their leader for not having foreseen such an astounding calamity, the populace was left to fend as best it could, whilst Carson aroused himself to confer with the scientists to find some way out of this new problem. If ever a man was surrounded with monstrous problems that man was Carson Rhodes, and for all his newly acquired genius he was but human and needed rest and time in which to sort out the chaos into which he had been plunged.

It seemed that even this was not to be permitted him, for with the collapse of the weather machines, which had inevitably come when the special metal had mutated itself, there came a gradual and threatening change over the formerly perfectly balanced climate. By the afternoon of the day following the city's collapse, the sky had thickly clouded and a strong wind had whipped up from the nearby ocean.

This new capital city had been constructed a matter of no more than ten miles from the sea in order to make ocean journeys more simple, but now it was from this very sea that danger threatened—for as the afternoon deepened into the winter evening the strength of the wind increased until by the time twilight had arrived there was almost a hurricane tearing through the vast open spaces where the city had stood.

It sent the people scurrying for shelter, even as they had done in those tragic days that had followed the onslaught of war. They took the only way out of the dilemma and went underground, finding their way down into the great underground railway system which had existed under the city and which indeed still did exist since most of it was fashioned within enormous tunnels of specially tested steel which had survived mutation which had affected the so much more refined metal used for surface work.

In scurrying, tumbling hundreds of thousands the people hurried down into the depths. They even descended below the underground railways, down into the deep mine shafts from which the very metal that had made the city above had been produced. All contact with Carson Rhodes had been lost. Indeed all contact with any form of leadership had been abandoned. It was a case of every man for himself, driven by dire necessity and hurricane and flood into the nearest region of safety which offered itself. Not that Rhodes wanted to be leader any more; he had enough to do to preserve his own life, as indeed had his scientific colleagues, so they followed the example of the masses and also plunged underground into the mine shafts where, at least, they would be safe from the elements, and also where an emergency system of lighting was still in operation since mining was always proceeding both night and day, providing the necessary ores for a power-hungry city, a city which had now ceased to exist.

What happened above after the weather machines had collapsed could only be left to the conjecture of the thousands who had imprisoned themselves below, for they had no television equipment or any scientific appliances whatever with which to view surface conditions. They were just glad of sanctuary and the chance to herd together, until they could form some definite plan—or until some definite plan could be formed *for* them.

So it was that inevitably Carson Rhodes came back into the picture in that he was compelled to mingle among the people whom he had ruled upon the surface. Under his

directions a certain amount of order was extracted from the chaos and the people were distributed as evenly as possible, mainly in families, throughout the vast reaches of the underground workings. Clearly though this could only be a temporary expedient, and a return to the surface would have to be made as soon as it was announced that it was safe to ascend again. Down here the only food that existed was a very little that a few had snatched and brought with them. Rhodes promptly took it over and rationed it out as well as possible, only too well aware that at best it could not last the survivors above twenty-four hours.

When he had done all these things, arranging everything through the scientists and men who were still loyal to him, Rhodes made a special point of appearing in the midst of the people in the gigantic man-made cavern which formed the main headquarters of the underground working. Here, on a rising pillar of rock, he surveyed the countless, weary, hopeless faces turned towards him in the harsh glare of the artificial lighting. It was fortunate indeed that emergency lighting existed down here, and that it ran from its own battery system, for all sources of power which had existed in the city had naturally been completely destroyed.

“That we face the biggest crisis in our lives is more than obvious,” Rhodes cried, raising a hand and addressing the hundreds who were turned towards him. “We do not know how the inhabitants of other towns and cities have fared, but it is a reasonable assumption, since their cities and towns were built of the same metal as ours, that they too must have suffered a fate similar to ours. Certainly their cities will dissolve around them if they have not already done so, and it is also possible that the breakdown in their weather machines will bring to them the hurricane and flood which descended upon us before we sought sanctuary down here.”

“It was for you to have foreseen what would happen,” somebody shouted in fury.

“In that, my friend, I agree,” Rhodes answered tiredly, “but with the many responsibilities I have upon me I cannot possibly hope to cope with all of them. Many plans were formulated, of which you know nothing, to try and save us from the effect of cosmic rays descending upon us, but in every case the hand of fate seemed to be turned against us. Now that same fate has driven us down here. It has robbed us of our city, of our possessions, of our control of the climate. It has produced deadly danger in the shape of evolved insects, it has produced sterility so that the race cannot continue anywhere on the face of this Earth. Those are the problems which confront us, but because we are humans and because we are geniuses, of which there is no longer any doubt—we shall yet again master the smashing blow which has been dealt us. We must return to the surface, build anew with ancient metals which we know will never mutate under the force of cosmic radiations, and so laboriously climb up the ladder once more to the peak of eminence which we had achieved before this present catastrophe had come upon us. Above all, we shall master sterility.”

“And what of the evolving termites?” somebody demanded. “What happens when they reach human proportions and attack us in their tens of thousands, as they most certainly will?”

“When that comes,” Rhodes answered. “We shall face it as we have faced this—and what is more, we shall win! I have nothing more to say to you now; I ask only that you sleep and rest and trust in me. I will send scouts above to observe what conditions are and, when the time is propitious, I will advise you that a return to the surface can be made . . .”

But while Carson Rhodes was setting forth his plans with invincible spirit to his people strange changes were taking place on the surface of the Earth above. When wind currents and atmospheric pressures which had been held in place by machines for many long months

suddenly collapse, something is bound to happen in the atmosphere. And it was happening now, for throughout the world—and weather machines had been in operation throughout the world—there now raged the most unholy tempest ever known in the planet's history since its early days.

Screaming winds and lightning bolts destroyed what remained of the vanished cities and drove the panic-stricken inhabitants underground to what shelter they could find. In the upper atmosphere electrical explosions far in excess of anything produced by atomic warfare were raging, converging and exploding, re-patterning afresh indeed that ionic layer which man's foolhardiness had almost destroyed. Nature in her inscrutable way was restoring the balance now that the hand of man had been removed. In time there must be a complete re-formation of that ionic shell which surrounds the Earth to form a great protection for the generations to come.

For generations *would* come. All unknown to Carson Rhodes cosmic rays had already begun to diminish upon the Earth, and even amongst his own group, to say nothing of the groups of people in other parts of the world who had fled underground, there was being removed the sterility which had descended upon Mankind. It could only mean that children would come with the passage of time, and would creep out of their underground shelters to gaze upon a new, strange world patterned afresh after the hurricanes and tempests produced by the final fling of the atomic age. Indeed for Carson Rhodes and his gathered thousands there was destined to be no escape, for the onrushing sea, driven by a tempest exceeding two hundred miles an hour, crashed inwards upon the land and down through the rocks, smashing even the rocks themselves and shifting with the colossal impact of an earthquake the great island on which the metal city had once stood.

There could only be one end to the tumult. The entire island sank beneath the screaming waves, descending down, and down, and down, straight into the depths of what must one day become the Atlantic Ocean. The descent continued until finally the great mountains which had reared up at the back of the ill-fated city were submerged to their absolute peaks.

Generations hence seamen would pass those peaks and name them the Azores Islands, and scientists would look over their faded records and wonder what was the real truth about Atlantis? Why did it sink? What happened to the land which in later years became known as Mu—or Land of Disaster—and above all what happened to the scientific race which had presumably existed there?

There would be none to say that, in a year that was nameless, atomic catastrophe had left behind survivors who had only marched into an even greater catastrophe.

[The end of *Before Atlantis* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]