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The Copper Bullet

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym John Wernheim.

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Dr. Henry Bland, chief of the Atomic Research Centre, was in one of his moods again. Probably overwork. Certainly he looked pale and troubled as he paced up and down the laboratory annex wherein he and two members of the staff were working.

‘Death and destruction to millions,’ Dr. Bland muttered, coming to a halt and musing. ‘That’s the thing I can’t get over! Here are we in here, working out the complicated equations necessary for nuclear fission and we don’t give a thought to the deeper issues.’

‘Wouldn’t do much good if we did, sir,’ remarked the younger of his two colleagues—Jeffrey Travers, research scientist. ‘We have experiments to carry out in this pile where we’re all imprisoned, so what more is there to be said?’

Dr. Bland did not reply. The third man did not speak, either. He was essentially a mathematician, cold-faced and pale-eyed. He did not indulge in the scientific arguments that often brought Bland and young Travers to high words and short tempers.

‘I don’t mean the possible destruction an atomic mishap here on earth might cause,’ Bland said presently, ‘though heaven knows that is appalling enough. I’m thinking of the possible effects on other universes every time we indulge in atom-splitting! I’ve thought about it a lot these last few days,’ he continued, rubbing his forehead. ‘Funny thing, but I think about it most when I get these confounded headaches of mine. Never had one in my life until recently.’

‘You surely don’t mean,’ the third man said incredulously, ‘that every time we split atoms we might be destroying other worlds and universes?’ He shook his head. ‘I know that years ago some unscientific people used to think that the atomic world was simply the microcosm, that the electron was analogous to a planet, that the proton was the central attraction like our own sun—and that the atom itself, the molecular structure, could be likened to a solar system. That we lived in the macrocosm, and—’ he smiled thinly, ‘—every time we indulged in atom-splitting we destroyed countless solar systems and maybe millions of living beings, so small that . . .’ he broke off as Bland glared at him.

‘Stop talking such damned nonsense, man!’ Bland demanded irritably, his thin face working. ‘Everybody knows in these days of quantum theory—or they should—that matter as we know it is only a very small portion of our universe, and that if one universe exists, there must be many—perhaps an infinite number of other universes. Our universe is just one component of a vast array of universes, a cosmic mosaic. We’ve no real idea of what happens at the inter-atomic level, and it’s possible that these universes are connected, at the tiny atomic level, through higher dimensional tunnels through spacetime . . .’ he broke off broodingly . . . ‘a kind of cosmic umbilical cord. Who’s to say that the vast energies released by our atom-splitting experiments might not travel along those cosmic umbilical chords into a neighbouring universe? It is the thought of this merciless destruction which worries me.’

The other scientist frowned thoughtfully. 'I take your point, sir, but what about all the atomic fusion going on in the heart of the sun—and all the other stars in the universe?'

Bland waved a hand dismissively. 'A star is an intensely dense concentration of matter—obviously other universes are unlikely to exist within it. I'm taking about here on earth, or in space, where matter is *tenuous* by comparison . . .' He gave a sigh. 'Anyway, gentlemen, I've talked enough. I'm going to my office for a brief rest. This headache of mine is killing me. And Wilson,' he added to the third man, 'just come along with me, will you? I've some papers to give you.'

The lean-faced mathematician gave a nod and accompanied the professor from the laboratory. Left to himself, Jeffrey Travers reflected for a while on the somewhat peculiar things his superior had said; then with a shrug he returned to his work.

After a while Wilson returned. He seemed as though he were making an effort to control himself even though he did not say anything. He went over to the big locker where he, Travers, and Bland kept some of their equipment and personal belongings, then hurried out again. In a matter of perhaps three minutes he had returned once more.

'The old man wants you, Jeff,' he said. 'Special report, or something.'

Jeff gave a nod and slid from his stool, leaving the laboratory swiftly.

Not ten yards from Dr. Bland's private quarters the cleaner was mopping the already immaculate floor that led to the back regions of this heavily guarded atomic-research centre. It was the sound of a gunshot that made him look up abruptly and then around him. Queer noises were numerous in this hive of industry, but there was no mistaking a gun report—and it seemed to have come from the direction of Dr. Bland's sanctum.

The cleaner threw down his mop and began moving swiftly. He arrived in the adjoining corridor just in time to see Wilson gripping Jeffrey Travers tightly. From other doorways down the long, shining length figures in overalls were appearing.

'What on earth's the matter, man?' Wilson was demanding, still holding Jeff tightly. 'What's wrong?'

Jeff pointed back shakily towards Dr. Bland's room.

'He's—he's dead!' he gasped out. 'Shot through the head, I think. I saw him sitting there slumped at his desk and—and I just panicked.'

'You mean he's shot himself?' Wilson demanded blankly.

'I don't know. I just dashed out to get help.'

Wilson looked at the other laboratory employees. 'Get Security right away. I'll take charge for the moment—We'd better go and see what's wrong in Dr. Bland's room.'

He strode into the sanctum, Jeff following behind him. In silence the other technicians stood looking in. Dr. Bland was in his tubular chair at his antique desk. He had fallen forward so that his head and shoulders sprawled on the blotter. In his high, white forehead was a round hole burned around the edges. That he was stone dead was obvious.

'No sign of a gun,' one of the men said, looking about him.

'No, but—What's that?' Jeff asked, pointing to the antique oak inkstand.

Everybody looked. On the polished woodwork lay a bullet, copper-jacketed, of the type used in a .38 revolver. It had no cartridge cover.

'It looks,' Wilson said slowly, 'as though that bullet has been fired and then put there. The cartridge case should be somewhere around . . .' He gave a vague glance about him and then added sharply, 'Don't touch anything! Leave that to the experts.'

His order was obeyed and in silence the group stood waiting, wondering, until two officials from the F.B.I., permanently connected on patrol work at the atomic centre, came into the room.

Behind them trooped a surgeon, photographers, and fingerprint experts. When each of these experts had done his job the two F.B.I. men went into action. One asked questions of everybody concerned, including the cleaner; the other examined the room in detail. It was not very long before a .38 revolver was fished out from under the desk at which Bland lay dead.

His finger in the revolver barrel, the official studied the weapon interestedly.

‘Why, that’s mine!’ Jeffrey Travers exclaimed, astonished.

‘Oh? Yours?’ Cold eyes studied him. ‘What’s it doing here, Mr. Travers?’

‘I just don’t know. I usually keep it in my tackle in the annexe. It’s licensed. All of us have guns for personal protection since we’re on dangerous work.’

‘Mmmm.’ The official laid the gun on the blotter and removed his finger, then without touching the weapon he sniffed the barrel. ‘Recently fired. And this bullet on the inkstand is a thirty-eight. There should be a cartridge somewhere.’

‘Right here,’ the other man said, and picked it up from beside the bureau . . .

Such was the beginning of things. Almost before he could grasp what was happening Jeff Travers found himself under arrest and committed for trial for the murder of Dr. Bland, bail being refused.

It was during the trial that he realized how hopelessly he was involved. He had been the last man to see Bland alive—for Wilson swore the ‘old man’ had been fit enough when he had left him for the second time—and it was his gun that had been found. The bullet had been fired from it, ballistics had proved, and the shot had come from short range judging from the burning round the forehead wound. The theory was that the bullet had then been quickly removed and put on the inkstand, though just why Jeff Travers had done this was not very clear.

To the defence’s protest that Travers had not had time to do such a thing the prosecution stated that there had been *just* time, and no more. The fact that the hole in Bland’s forehead was larger than the bullet itself showed that the hole had been widened to extract the bullet . . .

Added to this was the cleaner’s statement about a gunshot—which Jeff Travers himself swore he had never heard—and there was also the known fact that Jeff Travers and Bland had often quarrelled violently over scientific issues.

The inference that the jury could draw was obvious and they came in with a verdict of ‘Guilty, with strong recommendations to mercy,’ chiefly because the crime had apparently been one of impulse and not pre-meditated.

The way things looked at the end of the trial Jeff Travers was doomed and Grant Wilson was the new head of the Research Centre . . . but one man was not satisfied. Far from it.

The dissatisfied man was the extraordinary Brutus Lloyd. Strictly speaking, this short-statured, bumptious little man was a research chemist, but with degrees in many scientific fields. However, he preferred to study crime to worrying over research problems. So, having a considerable private income with which to indulge his fancy, he had become a holy terror to all criminal organizations. The intolerably conceited Brutus Lloyd was a friend of the city police, always welcome at police headquarters, his scientific know-how having solved many an otherwise inexplicable crime.

That he knew all the details of the Bland affair went without saying. No criminal trial had ever appeared but what he was present throughout the proceedings. The moment he heard the

verdict on Jeffrey Travers he left the courtroom, jumped into his car, and drove straight to police headquarters in the city. He was welcomed cordially enough by the bull-necked precinct chief, Inspector Branson. However, Branson's pleasantries began to evaporate before Lloyd's rapier looks.

'Let young Travers be convicted,' Lloyd stated flatly, 'and it will be the biggest miscarriage of justice ever! I never heard of a man being accused on such flimsy evidence!'

'But, Dr. Lloyd, everything fits—'

'Don't argue with me!' Lloyd roared, glaring. 'From the viewpoint of little-minded dolts maybe everything *does* fit in—but not to me. And I am Brutus Lloyd, which makes all the difference. I wish to examine the details again.'

'Can't be done. The trial's over and—'

'You listen to me,' Lloyd broke in deliberately, his eyelids drooping insolently. 'I am going to work on this problem for the scientific interest it possesses. I mean to prove how Bland *really* died, and at the same time give science some information which will knock out its academic eye! As for the trial, it can be cited as a mistrial if new and incontestable evidence should be forthcoming, as it will be with me in charge of things. This demands a brain, not a ninny. Well, what about it?'

Branson swallowed his wrath and went purple in the doing.

'Very well,' he whispered, with strangled patience. 'We can't afford to quarrel with you, Dr. Lloyd: you've helped us too much in the past. Just what do you want exactly?'

'First, all statements by the various people; all photographs, fingerprint reports, and doctor's p.m. statement.'

'I'll have them at your house in an hour,' Branson promised, and with that Lloyd slammed his untidy derby hat back on his tuft of jet-black hair, and departed.

Branson kept his word and for the remainder of the day Lloyd spent the time in his large house on the city outskirts brooding over the reports. Towards early evening he went out again and back to police headquarters. He caught Inspector Branson just as he was leaving his office.

'I was just going home, Lloyd—'

'I don't care if you're bound for the North Pole. I want you to get some action for me. As the official brain around here—or do I expect too much?—you are the only person with authority.' Lloyd cuffed his battered derby to the back of his head and added, 'Get whatever official permission is needed for us to exhume the body of Bland right away. I want to study his forehead.'

'What the hell for?' Branson sat down heavily and stared. 'And why do you want to examine his forehead?'

'Because the doctor's p.m. report does not satisfy me. I'm not saying he's a liar, mind you, but I do think he has taken too much for granted. I want to verify my conclusions by seeing Bland's body for myself.'

'Well, I suppose I *could* arrange it,' Lloyd admitted. 'Is there anything else in the reports which you find unsatisfactory?'

The sarcasm was not lost upon Lloyd. He gave his ghostly smile for a moment, then lost it and pinned Branson with ice-blue eyes.

'Taken as reports, Branson, they're logical enough—but they ignore many factors. For instance, Professor Bland suffered recently from violent headaches, during which he kept on

thinking of the tragedy of destroying other universes every time an atom is split. Did the defence make anything of that? No!

‘Could it?’ Branson ventured, mystified.

‘Certainly! But it needs talent. A pity. Sometimes, y’know, I am staggered by my own gifts, Branson. However, I think the headaches may answer many things. Then there was the bullet on the inkstand, so conveniently placed. From the photographs it looks to me as though there is a burn on the stand. That right?’

‘The stand is right here,’ Branson answered, going over to a steel locker. ‘It was a court exhibit and now the case is over it has been returned to my custody.’ He brought the antique oak stand forward and set it on the desk. To one of the wells a tag was tied, and to the copper bullet which Branson put down on the stand itself.

‘Quite intriguing,’ Lloyd commented, looking at the stand intently. ‘There is a burn on this stand, Branson, approximately four inches long, just under where the bullet is lying. The bullet would not be hot enough to cause it—and anyway it isn’t as long as the burn mark. So what did it?’

‘Dunno. Cigarette some time, maybe.’

‘That long!’ Lloyd jumped as though he’d been stung. ‘Have a heart, man! I’ll make one guess that the burn was caused by something resembling a bullet, but longer and wider, and that the heat was caused by atmospheric friction.’

The Inspector opened his mouth and closed it again. Then he scratched his head. The insolent droop had come back to Lloyd’s eyelids.

‘You don’t follow my reasoning, Branson, do you?’

‘Damned if I do!’

‘No more than I expected. Few can, which is why I am in a class by myself. However, I’ve seen all I want to see for the moment, thanks. Now attend to that exhumation for me, will you?’

Branson nodded and turned to the phone, and because Lloyd was Lloyd he got his wish. The body was exhumed that same night, and the following morning, equipped with instruments, Lloyd drove over to the mortuary to make his examination in the presence of deeply puzzled police officials.

It took him three hours, during which time he probed the dead scientist’s skull and used portable X-ray apparatus of his own design. This done he drove back to his home with the puzzled but interested Inspector Branson.

‘It will certainly surprise you to know, Branson,’ Lloyd said, as he and the inspector refreshed themselves with coffee and sandwiches in the comfortable lounge, ‘that the projectile which killed Bland came from the inside of his skull to the outside, not from the outside to the in.’

Branson nearly choked over his sandwich and only recovered with a purple face after a few moments. Lloyd regarded this near-apoplexy dispassionately.

‘The assumption has been,’ Lloyd continued, ‘that the bullet was dug out and put on the inkstand. I never believed that, in spite of the prosecution saying Travers had time to do it. He wouldn’t anyway: far too risky. My examination of the brain tissue in Bland’s skull shows distinctly that something exploded in his head and went outwards through his skull, leaving an apparent bullet mark. The burning was not from close-range fire but from the heat of the projectile itself. You will recall that the hole was too large to match the thirty-eight bullet?

That was explained as being because the bullet was dug out. Sheer nonsense! The real reason was that the actual missile of death was both bigger and longer than the thirty-eight bullet.'

'But hang it, Lloyd, the projectile—or whatever it was—*couldn't* come from the inside of Bland's head to the outside! It's against all reason and logic!'

'Don't talk to me about logic!' The eyelids drooped. 'We are dealing here with something extremely scientific—to which Bland himself gave the clue when he spoke of the intra-atomic connections to other universes which are being destroyed by nuclear fission on our part. There is something else, too. The ballistics report says that the bullet on the inkstand was as clean as a dog's tooth, even under an electron microscope.'

'I know. What's wrong with that?'

'What's *wrong* with it?' Lloyd hooted. 'Everything! Sweet nitre, why do I have to deal with such nitwits? A bullet dug out of a brain that quickly, as is assumed, could not be cleaned thoroughly because there wouldn't be time. Traces of tissues would have been bound to adhere to it. Yet none did. Why? Because I don't believe it was ever in Bland's head!'

'I give up,' Branson muttered.

'Naturally! Better men than you have faltered before my deductions, Branson. However —' Lloyd got to his feet. 'I have things to do if I'm to clear up this business. I'll tell you what I want you to do whilst I make some preparations in my laboratory. Have young Travers taken to the annexe—which is permitted under police supervision if it may lead to proving his innocence—and have Wilson there too, the new head of the Division. I'll be there around seven o'clock this evening. Get some scientists there also who understand intra-atomic physics and quantum theory. I may need them for verification even though I personally shall not listen to a word they say . . . Now I have got to rush. I've a special model to make. See you later.'

Branson nodded in some bewilderment and stared after Lloyd as he hurried energetically from the room.

The electric clock in the annex was on the stroke of seven that evening when Lloyd entered. He was travelling light, not even carrying a brief case. He nodded to the assembly and pulled off his battered derby, throwing it down on the nearby table.

Present were Travers, pale and worried; the cold-faced mathematician Wilson; and one or two older men who were recognized experts in the field of atomic science. There was of course Inspector Branson and a couple of plainclothes men keeping guard over Travers.

'Well, gentlemen, all of you are scientists—except our friends of the law,' Lloyd said, digging his hands in his overcoat pockets and looking about him. 'It is because I have happened on something so unique in regard to the late Dr. Bland that I require you scientific gentlemen to verify some of my conclusions. I know I am right because I am rarely anything else, but the public in general may not be entirely satisfied with my word alone . . .

'Now, the law has said that Dr. Bland died from a thirty-eight bullet which was afterwards dug out by Travers. *I* say that Dr. Bland was killed by an intra-atomic projectile, which had travelled from the realm of the infinitely small to the infinitely big!'

There was silence, the men glancing at one another. Wilson tightened his lips and a dawning hope crossed Travers' young face.

'Whatever killed Dr. Bland came from inside his head,' Lloyd continued dogmatically. 'That fact is now beyond cavil. I have every medical angle to support the theory. Such a thing could not happen unless it came from some other dimension or some other space. Quantum

theory postulates that our universe is only one of a myriad of other universes. There is no reason why some of those universes might not contain living beings, existing in another dimension. To us, it could have been microscopic in size, in just the same way it is possible that we, in our apparently great universe—though size is relative—are actually a mere speck in the make-up of some titanic creature who inhabits a greater universe—outside *us*.’

Lloyd sat down and began to emphasise with an acid-stained hand.

‘If super-beings outside our universe began to shatter our planetary system by what, to them, would be nuclear fission, we might feel like getting our own back. Were we clever enough we could do it by expanding our size, by travelling in an ever-growing machine which finally would burst through the known universe into a higher dimension, and into a mightier one beyond. That I believe is what happened in this case! From somewhere in the infinite Small intelligent beings set off in a machine to cross atomic space, maybe to find the cause of the constant nuclear explosions occurring in their universe. It is possible they were clever enough to know, by receiving thought waves, that Dr. Bland was at the head of the concern, and so their ever-growing machine was directed into the atomic spaces within his very brain!

‘He complained of violent headaches, set up no doubt by the ever-increasing pressure of the enlarging machine. It at last burst its own space and came into ours, an object slightly bigger than a bullet, a perfectly made but extremely tiny object like a space machine, carrying beings maybe a quarter of a centimetre high. It passed through Bland’s skull and settled on the inkstand, which would appear to those within the machine to resemble a plain. The heat of the energy change and brief atmospheric friction made it hot enough to burn the wood of the inkstand. I also believe that these beings had the power of thought-transference, and because of their thoughts Bland knew in advance what was coming, but he could only interpret it as horror at the prospect of destroying—and having destroyed—so many other universes.’

‘This is ridiculous!’ Wilson protested. ‘What about the bullet?’

‘It is *not* ridiculous!’ Lloyd declared. ‘For here is the atom-ship itself . . .’ And from his overcoat pocket he took a gleaming copper object like a cigar. It had small, perfectly made portholes and a conning tower.

‘Why, that’s mine!’ Wilson exclaimed in amazement. ‘Where did you find it—?’

He stopped, confused, and looked about him. In amazement every eye was fixed upon him. He hesitated for a moment and then swung to a steel locker. Unfastening it swiftly he searched within and brought a second copper cylinder to view, not unlike the one Lloyd possessed. He swung round sharply, to meet a levelled gun in Lloyd’s hand.

‘As a private citizen, Mr. Wilson, I can use a gun to keep you covered whereas the police cannot,’ he explained. With his free hand he tossed down his copper model on the bench.

‘Model work is but another of my gifts,’ he explained. ‘As I imagined an atomic space machine would look. I’m glad you tripped yourself up, Mr. Wilson. I’ll take that.’

He seized the copper cylinder from Wilson’s hand and set it carefully on the bench. Wilson breathed hard.

‘All right, so you tripped me,’ he admitted. ‘I didn’t murder anybody, though, so you can’t hold that against me.’

‘No, but you did your best to get Travers convicted! Why?’

‘Because he is a nuclear physicist and I am just a mathematician. The Board would have elected him as chief of this unit over me after Bland’s death, so I got him out of the way. There was a second reason. I wanted that atom ship for myself. I had intended to examine it

thoroughly and open a branch of atomic science—atom travelling—which would have made me world famous.’

‘Evidently you have a mathematician’s agile brain, Wilson,’ Lloyd commented. ‘From the reports of your actions I will outline what happened—and don’t anybody dare interrupt me! You went with Dr. Bland to his sanctum as he asked. When there you saw him die, saw the projectile land on the inkstand. You are scientist enough to realize what had happened. You thought fast. Here was a new departure in science—atom travel—performed by beings from an unknown dimension. It could mean great power for you if you kept the secret. You returned here, took Travers’ gun from the locker, and went back to the sanctum. You fired a bullet silently somehow, probably by the old trick of smothering it in a cushion, which you afterwards hid. The bullet you put on the inkstand and took away the cooled atom-ship. The revolver you threw under the desk. It had no fingerprints. You must have put your own on it when firing it but naturally wiped them off again—and any of Travers’ also.’

‘Next you told Travers that Bland wanted him. He obeyed. You created a sound like a gunshot in the corridor where it could be heard—possibly by bursting a paper bag or something. The rest was simple. Travers had no alibi: it was known he did not like Bland, and there the thing was. How I arrived at my theory of an atom-ship I have already explained to Inspector Branson—Well, Wilson how right am I?’

‘Dead right,’ the mathematician growled. ‘I’d forgotten such scientific detectives as you even existed. But I did not *kill* anybody and I still claim that that atom-ship is mine.’

‘Not yours exclusively,’ Lloyd replied. ‘It is the property of science as a whole—a revelation of life within the infinite Small. As for you, my friend, your efforts to get Travers accused of murder are for the law to deal with.’

Lloyd turned away and looked at the perfect machine on the bench. With a small pair of tweezers he opened the airlock—with which Wilson had obviously already tampered—and rolled the ship on its side. Queerly dressed but perfectly formed creatures, no larger than a match-head, rolled out. They were stiff in death.

‘A pity,’ Lloyd sighed. ‘The journey killed them, otherwise—with my genius and theirs—what a story there would have been to tell!’

[End of *The Copper Bullet* by John Russell Fearn (pseudonym: John Wernheim)]