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After Worlds Collide

By EDWIN BALMER and PHILIP WYLIE

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Under the leadership of Cole Hendron, noted American scientist, over 200 persons escape in two space ships just before a cosmic collision that will destroy all the earth, and land on Bronson Beta. After a short period of rest, the party makes an investigation of their surroundings. A smooth, straight metal roadway, is discovered, indicating that whoever once lived on Bronson Beta had swift moving vehicles. That night thousands of giant meteors hurtle through the sky, but none of Hendron's colonists are hurt. The meteors are fragments of the earth's moon, destroyed before the earth was wiped out.

CHAPTER II.—Hendron says the space ship is to be dismantled and all its metal used. Tony Drake, Hendron's daughter, and Professor Higgins, disturbed botanist, discover a river bottom green with vegetation. Higgins leads an exploring party which finds great forests of dead trees, preserved for a million years by the absolute cold of space after Bronson Beta broke away from its sun and before it invaded our solar system. The colonists are startled by the sudden appearance at night of what looks like an airplane. It disappears almost immediately. Later, the fact that the occupants made no attempt to communicate with them, appearing rather that they were spying on the camp, leaves a feeling of alarm. They realize that they are not alone on the new planet, and that their visitors may be enemies.

CHAPTER III.—Tony Drake and Elliot James, English writer, and the pilot of the expedition, begin an exploration airplane flight. They are astonished by a marvelous city that greets them after clearing a high mountain range.

CHAPTER IV.—They have come upon a wondrous city, enclosed under what seems like half an iridescent glass bubble six miles wide and half a mile high at its center. Among their finds, when they make an entrance into the city, is an edible grain—millions of bushels. When they start back, in the plane, they find a strange ship, the shape of a searchlight, and come down five circuits in the top of a ridge.

CHAPTER V.—Delighted that they find they have stumbled upon the camp of other human beings, and not a second Space Ship piloted by Hendron, Tony accepts a proposal that she be refused and it is refused, many being killed and injured. Randell goes to Hendron's cabin, finding Tony, who is madder his jealousy when Dave Hendron, who he hopes to make his rival, insists that Dave remain with her and her father while Tony tells the camp of the Sealed City, in one of the towering buildings there Drake and Eliot James have seen the likeness of a very human looking girl and it is evident that Bronson Beta scientists had far outstripped the Earth.

CHAPTER VI.—Kyto, Tony's former servant, tells Tony he, a Tokyo professor turned spy, then was was to Americas decals. He says certain Russian, Japanese and German scientist [illegible] Beta and probably sent the mysterious plane to spy on their camp. Tony thinks a needed Russian outfit is hidden in camp. Radio communication between Hendron's and Tony's camps is broken after a single cry for help, from Hendron's people is heard. Tony hurries back to find Peter Vanderbilt and Jack Taylor, and they see an [illegible] on Hendron's ship, crouched as if dead. Not knowing what danger awaits, Tony insists upon leaving the plane, but Taylor, disregarding the fate of him, "The camp has been gassed and every member made unconscious, but we had protection."

Eve rose and gestured Randell into her father's chair. She shook his hand. Dodson shook his hand.

Randell looked drawn and bleak. 'One other thing." Tony said, his voice steady. "We may be in a new and to me fantastic danger." Like a soldier making a report, he detailed the knowledge Kyto had given him and told Randell what precautions he had already taken.

"I'll get outposts established at once," Randell said. "I scarcely believe that such a thing could be—but we can take no chances."

"I'd like to talk with Kyto," Eve said. She left the room even as Tony nodded to bid her good-by.

"That radio—" said Randell. Tony could not make his senses believe that the man who spoke to him now was the man with whom he had spent the latter part of the previous night in deep exultation. Rivalry over leadership—rivalry over Eve—they seemed inadequate things intellectually for the breaker of a friendship. Tony remembered the pact he and Randell had reached in Michigan, long ago. Now—it seemed broken!

"I'll take it immediately, Dave," he answered.

The two of his best friends started Randell somewhat from his benumbed mood. He rose and held out his hand.

"Key took it. "So long," he said "Good luck".

Tony opened the electric switch for the supply of nitrate chemicals of fuel to the atomic blast or air plane. The increase of speed as he fled southward took some of the strain from his nerves.

Tony had lost his hope of being leader. He had lost Eve. Randell came first in the hearts of his companions. Tony wondered how other men in the camp would adjust their philosophies to this double catastrophe. Duquesne would say: "Cest la vie." Vanderbilt would have an epigram. Eliot James would tell him to hope and to wait and to be courageous.

A few minutes later he was at the cantonment, and the radio was being carried from the plane by experts.

James was at his side. "Lord, you look tired! I've got a bunk for you."

"Thanks."

Questions were being asked. "Got to sleep," Tony said, trying to smile. "Tell you later. Every one's all right—Hendron's somewhat ill—Randell's commanding up there. See you after I have a nap." They let him go.

He stretched out under one of the shelters. James, after a private question or two, thoughtfully left him. He could not sleep, however. He did not even want to be alone. Then—he was being shaken. James stood beside him.

"Tony! Wake up!"

He sat up, shook himself.

"We got the radio working. Were talking to Hendron's camp. Suddenly the man at the other end coughed and yelled 'Help'—and now we can't raise anyone."

Tony was up again—outdoors—running toward the plane. James was running behind him.

"Give me Vanderbilt and Taylor. We'll go."

"But—"

"What else can we do?"

. . . . . .

As Tony descended upon Hendron's encampment, three men peered tensely through the glass windows of the ship: Taylor, Vanderbilt, and Tony himself. Nothing seemed disturbed; the buildings were intact.

Tony cut the motors so that their descent became a soft whistle.

Then they saw clearly.

Far below were human figures, the people of the cantonment and all of them lay on the ground, oddly collapsed, utterly motionless.

They looked as if they were dead; and Tony thought they were dead. So did Jack Taylor at his side; and Peter Vanderbilt, his saturnine face pressed against the quartz windows of the plane, believed he was witnessing catastrophe to Hendron's attempt to preserve humanity.

Tony cut the propulsive stream and slid down the air in sudden quiet. He lost altitude and turned on power as he reached the edge of the landing field. The plane bumped to a stop and rested in silence.

No one appeared from the direction of the camp. Nothing in sight there stirred.

Tony put his hand on the lever that opened the hood of the cockpit.

"I'll sink it open and jump out. Looks like gas. Slam it after I go, and see what happens to me."

Either of his companions would have undertaken that terrifying assignment—would have insisted upon undertaking it; but Tony put his words into execution before they could speak. The hatch grated open. Tony leaped out on the fuselage; there was a clang, and almost none of the outer air had entered the plane.

Taylor's knuckles on the hatch-handle were white.

Vanderbilt peered through the glass at Tony, his face unmoving. But he whispered, "Guts!" as if to himself.

CHAPTER VII

TONY slipped from the fuselage to the ground. Vanderbilt and Taylor, watching, expected at any moment to see him stagger or shudder or fall whiffingly to the earth. He did not. There was no fright on his face—his expression was locked and blank. He sweated.

He Sniffed the Air Cautiously After Expelling the Breath He Had Held. He Stood There—Waiting, Presumably, to Die. Two Minutes . . . Five. Tony Stood and Breathed and Shrugged Again.

He sniffed at the air cautiously after expelling the breath he had held. Then he drew in a lungful, deeply, courageously. A light wind from the sea beyond the cliffs fanned him. He stood still, waiting, presumably, to die. He looked at the two men who were watching him, and hunched his shoulders as if to say nothing had happened so far.

A minute passed.

The men inside the plane sat tensely. Taylor was panting.

Two minutes. . . . Five. Tony stood and breathed and shrugged again.

"Gas or no gas," Taylor said with an almost furious expression, "I'm going out there with Tony."

He went. Vanderbilt followed in a manner both leisurely and calm.

The three stood outside together watching each other for effects, each waiting for some spasm of illness to attack himself.

"Doesn't seem to be gas," said Tony.

"What, then?" asked Taylor.

"Who knows? Some plague from the Other People? Some death-wave from the sky? Let's look at itself."

The first person they approached, as they went slowly toward the camp and its motionless figures, was Jeremiah Post, the metallurgist. There was no proof that Post was the first to have been affected by this prostration. They happened upon him first; that was all.

The metallurgist lay on his side with his arms over his head. There was no blood or mark of violence upon him.

"Post!" Taylor knelt and shook him.

Vanderbilt muttered.

Taylor turned him over and all three men started. Post's breast heaved.

Tony knelt beside him and opened his shirt. "Breathing! Heart's beating regularly. He's—"

"Only unconscious!" Taylor exclaimed.

"I was going to say," Tony replied, "it's as if he was drugged."

"Or like anesthesia," observed Vanderbilt.

Nearby lay two women; the three men examined them together. They were limp, like Post, and like him, lying in a strange, profound stupor. The sleep of one of them seemed, somehow, less deep than that which held Post insensible; but neither of the women could be roused from it more than he.

"Feel anything funny yourself?" Tony challenged Taylor across the form of the girl over whom they worked.

"No; do you?"

"No. . . . It was gas, I believe; but now it's dissipated, but left its effect on everybody that breathed in."

"Gas," said Vanderbilt calmly, "from where?"

Tony's mind flamed with the warning of Kyto's words. A third Ark from the earth had reached Bronson Beta bearing a band of fanatic, ruthless men who would have the planet for their own, completely. They had brought with them some women, but not a third for many more in order to populate it with children of their own bodies, and of their own fanatic faiths. These men already had obtained the Lark planes of the Other People, and mastered the secrets of their operation. These men long ago had entered some other Sealed City and had begun an exploration into the science of Dead People. Perhaps they had found some formula for a gas that stupefied, but was harmless otherwise.

Their plan and their purpose, then, would be plain. They would spread the gas and render Hendron's people helpless; then they would return to the camp and control it, doing whatever they wished with the people, as they awoke.

Tony scanned the sky, the surrounding hills. There was nothing in sight.

Yet he leaped up. "Peter! Jack! They'll be coming back! We'll be ready for them!"

"Who? Who are they?"

"The men who did this! Come on!"

"Where?"

"To the tubes!" And Tony pointed to them, aimed like cannon into the air—the huge propulsion-tubes from the Ark, which Hendron and he had mounted on their swivels at the edge of the camp. From them could be shot into the air the awful blast that had propelled the Ark through space, and which melted every metal except the single substance with which they were lined.

The nearest of these engines of flight, so expediently made into machines of defense, was a couple of hundred yards away; and now as the three made hastily for it, they noticed a grouping of the limp, unconscious forms that told its own significant story.

Several of the men seemed to have been on the way to the great tube when they had collapsed.

"You see?" gasped Tony; for the three now were running. "It was an attack! They saw it, and tried to get the tube going!"

Two men, indeed, lay almost below the tube. Tony stared down at them as his hands moved the controls, and felt them in order.

"Dead?" Tony asked of Taylor, who bent over the men.

"No. . . . It was gas, I believe; but now it's dissipated, but left its effect on everybody that breathed in."

"Gas," said Vanderbilt calmly, "from where?"

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