

Flight From Tomorrow

by

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Front Page	3
Flight From Tomorrow	3
COMPLETE NOVELET	3
<i>by H. Beam Piper</i>	3
Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	14
Chapter 4	19

Front Page

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COMPLETE NOVELET

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There was no stopping General Zarvas' rebellion



Hunted and hated in two worlds, Hradzka dreamed of a monomaniac's glory, stranded in the past with his knowledge of the future. But he didn't know the past quite well enough...

Chapter 1

But yesterday, a whole planet had shouted: *Hail Hradzka! Hail the Leader!* Today, they were screaming: *Death to Hradzka! Kill the tyrant!*

The Palace, where Hradzka, surrounded by his sycophants and guards, had lorded it over a solar system, was now an inferno. Those who had been too closely identified with the dictator's rule to hope for forgiveness were fighting to the last, seeking only a quick death in combat; one by one, their isolated points of resistance were being wiped out. The corridors and chambers of the huge palace were thronged with rebels, loud with their shouts, and with the rasping hiss of heat-beams and the crash of blasters, reeking with the stench of scorched plastic and burned flesh, of hot metal and charred fabric. The living quarters were overrun; the mob smashed down walls and tore up floors in search of secret hiding-places. They found strange things—the space-ship that had been built under one of the domes, in readiness for flight to the still-loyal colonies on Mars or the Asteroid Belt, for instance—but Hradzka himself they could not find.

At last, the search reached the New Tower which reared its head five thousand feet above the palace, the highest thing in the city. They blasted down the huge steel doors, cut the power from the energy-screens. They landed from antigrav-cars on the upper levels. But except for barriers of metal and concrete and energy, they met with no opposition. Finally, they came to the spiral stairway which led up to the great metal sphere which capped the whole structure.

General Zarvas, the Army Commander who had placed himself at the head of the revolt, stood with his foot on the lowest step, his followers behind him. There was Prince Burvanny, the leader of the old nobility, and Ghorzesko Orhm, the merchant, and between them stood Tobbh, the chieftain of the mutinous slaves. There were clerks; laborers; poor but haughty nobles; and wealthy merchants who had long been forced to hide their riches from the dictator's tax-gatherers, and soldiers, and spacemen.

"You'd better let some of us go first sir," General Zarvas' orderly, a blood-stained bandage about his head, his uniform in rags, suggested. "You don't know what might be up there."

The General shook his head. "I'll go first." Zarvas Pol was not the man to send subordinates into danger ahead of himself. "To tell the truth, I'm afraid we won't find anything at all up there."

"You mean...?" Ghorzesko Orhm began.

"The 'time-machine'," Zarvas Pol replied. "If he's managed to get it finished, the Great Mind only knows where he may be, now. Or when."

He loosened the blaster in his holster and started up the long spiral. His followers spread out, below; sharp-shooters took position to cover his ascent. Prince Burvanny and Tobbh the Slave started to follow him. They hesitated as each motioned the other to precede him; then the nobleman followed the general, his blaster drawn, and the brawny slave behind him.

The door at the top was open, and Zarvas Pol stepped through but there was nothing in the great spherical room except a raised dais some fifty feet in diameter, its polished metal top strangely clean and empty. And a crumpled heap of burned cloth and charred flesh that had, not long ago, been a man. An old man with a white beard, and the seven-pointed star of the Learned Brothers on his breast, advanced to meet the armed intruders.

"So he is gone, Kradzy Zago?" Zarvas Pol said, holstering his weapon. "Gone in the 'time-machine', to hide in yesterday or tomorrow. And you let him go?"

The old one nodded. "He had a blaster, and I had none." He indicated the body on the floor. "Zoldy Jarv had no blaster, either, but he tried to stop Hradzka. See, he squandered his life as a fool squanders his money, getting nothing for it. And a man's life is not money, Zarvas Pol."

"I do not blame you, Kradzy Zago," General Zarvas said. "But now you must get to work, and build us another 'time-machine', so that we can hunt him down."

"Does revenge mean so much to you, then?"

The soldier made an impatient gesture. "Revenge is for fools, like that pack of screaming beasts below. I do not kill for revenge; I kill because dead men do no harm."

"Hradzka will do us no more harm," the old scientist replied. "He is a thing of yesterday; of a time long past and half-lost in the mists of legend."

"No matter. As long as he exists, at any point in space-time, Hradzka is still a threat. Revenge means much to Hradzka; he will return for it, when we least expect him."

The old man shook his head. "No, Zarvas Pol, Hradzka will not return."

Hradzka holstered his blaster, threw the switch that sealed the "time-machine", put on the antigrav-unit and started the time-shift unit. He reached out and set the destination-dial for the mid-Fifty-Second Century of the Atomic Era. That would land him in the Ninth Age of Chaos, following the Two-Century War and the collapse of the World Theocracy. A good time for his purpose: the world would be slipping back into barbarism, and yet possess the technologies of former civilizations. A hundred little national states would be trying to regain social stability, competing and warring with one another. Hradzka glanced back over his shoulder at the cases of books, record-spools, tri-

dimensional pictures, and scale-models. These people of the past would welcome him and his science of the future, would make him their leader.

He would start in a small way, by taking over the local feudal or tribal government, would arm his followers with weapons of the future. Then he would impose his rule upon neighboring tribes, or principedoms, or communes, or whatever, and build a strong sovereignty; from that he envisioned a world empire, a Solar System empire.

Then, he would build "time-machines", many "time-machines". He would recruit an army such as the universe had never seen, a swarm of men from every age in the past. At that point, he would return to the Hundredth Century of the Atomic Era, to wreak vengeance upon those who had risen against him. A slow smile grew on Hradzka's thin lips as he thought of the tortures with which he would put Zarvas Pol to death.

He glanced up at the great disc of the indicator and frowned. Already he was back to the year 7500, A.E., and the temporal-displacement had not begun to slow. The disc was turning even more rapidly—7000, 6000, 5500; he gasped slightly. Then he had passed his destination; he was now in the Fortieth Century, but the indicator was slowing. The hairline crossed the Thirtieth Century, the Twentieth, the Fifteenth, the Tenth. He wondered what had gone wrong, but he had recovered from his fright by this time. When this insane machine stopped, as it must around the First Century of the Atomic Era, he would investigate, make repairs, then shift forward to his target-point. Hradzka was determined upon the Fifty-Second Century; he had made a special study of the history of that period, had learned the language spoken then, and he understood the methods necessary to gain power over the natives of that time.

The indicator-disc came to a stop, in the First Century. He switched on the magnifier and leaned forward to look; he had emerged into normal time in the year 10 of the Atomic Era, a decade after the first uranium-pile had gone into operation, and seven years after the first atomic bombs had been exploded in warfare. The altimeter showed that he was hovering at eight thousand feet above ground-level.

Slowly, he cut out the antigrav, letting the "time machine" down easily. He knew that there had been no danger of materializing inside anything; the New Tower had been built to put it above anything that had occupied that space-point at any moment within history, or legend, or even the geological knowledge of man. What lay below, however, was uncertain. It was night—the visi-screen showed only a star-dusted, moonless-sky, and dark shadows below. He snapped another switch; for a few micro-seconds a beam of intense light was turned on, automatically photographing the landscape under him. A second later, the developed picture was projected upon another screen; it showed only wooded mountains and a barren, brush-grown valley.

The "time-machine" came to rest with a soft jar and a crashing of broken bushes that was audible through the sound pickup. Hradzka pulled the main switch; there was a click as the shielding went out and the door opened. A breath of cool night air drew into the hollow sphere.

Then there was a loud *bang* inside the mechanism, and a flash of blue-white light which turned to pinkish flame with a nasty crackling. Curls of smoke began to rise from the square black box that housed the "time-shift" mechanism, and from behind the instrument-board. In a moment, everything was glowing-hot: dribblets of aluminum and silver were running down from the instruments. Then the whole interior of the "time-machine" was afire; there was barely time for Hradzka to leap through the open door.

The brush outside impeded him, and he used his blaster to clear a path for himself away from the big sphere, which was now glowing faintly on the outside. The heat grew in intensity, and the brush outside was taking fire. It was not until he had gotten two hundred yards from the machine that he stopped, realizing what had happened.

The machine, of course, had been sabotaged. That would have been young Zoldy, whom he had killed, or that old billy-goat, Kradzy Zago; the latter, most likely. He cursed both of them for having marooned him in this savage age, at the very beginning of atomic civilization, with all his printed and recorded knowledge destroyed. Oh, he could still gain mastery over these barbarians; he knew enough to fashion a crude blaster, or a heat-beam gun, or an atomic-electric conversion unit. But without his books and records, he could never build an antigrav unit, and the secret of the "temporal shift" was lost.

For "Time" is not an object, or a medium which can be travelled along. The "Time-Machine" was not a vehicle; it was a mechanical process of displacement within the space-time continuum, and those who constructed it knew that it could not be used with the sort of accuracy that the dials indicated. Hradzka had ordered his scientists to produce a "Time Machine", and they had combined the possible—displacement within the space-time continuum—with the sort of fiction the dictator demanded, for their own well-being. Even had there been no sabotage, his return to his own "time" was nearly of zero probability.

The fire, spreading from the "time-machine", was blowing toward him; he observed the wind-direction and hurried around out of the path of the flames. The light enabled him to pick his way through the brush, and, after crossing a small stream, he found a rutted road and followed it up the mountainside until he came to a place where he could rest concealed until morning.

Chapter 2

It was broad daylight when he woke, and there was a strange throbbing sound; Hradzka lay motionless under the brush where he had slept, his blaster ready. In a few minutes, a vehicle came into sight, following the road down the mountainside.

It was a large thing, four-wheeled, with a projection in front which probably housed the engine and a cab for the operator. The body of the vehicle was simply an open rectangular box. There were two men in the cab, and about twenty or thirty more crowded into the box body. These were dressed in faded and nondescript garments of blue and gray and brown; all were armed with crude weapons—axes, bill-hooks, long-handled instruments with serrated edges, and what looked like broad-bladed spears. The vehicle itself, which seemed to be propelled by some sort of chemical-explosion engine, was dingy and mud-splattered; the men in it were ragged and unshaven. Hradzka snorted in contempt; they were probably warriors of the local tribe, going to the fire in the belief that it had been started by raiding enemies. When they found the wreckage of the "time-machine", they would no doubt believe that it was the chariot of some god and drag it home to be venerated.

A plan of action was taking shape in his mind. First, he must get clothing of the sort worn by these people, and find a safe hiding-place for his own things. Then, pretending to be a deaf-mute, he would go among them to learn something of their customs and pick up the language. When he had done that, he would move on to another tribe or village, able to tell a credible story for himself. For a while, it would be necessary for him to do menial work, but in the end, he would establish himself among these people. Then he could gather around him a faction of those who were dissatisfied with whatever conditions existed, organize a conspiracy, make arms for his followers, and start his program of power-seizure.

The matter of clothing was attended to shortly after he had crossed the mountain and descended into the valley on the other side. Hearing a clinking sound some distance from the road, as of metal striking stone, Hradzka stole cautiously through the woods until he came within sight of a man who was digging with a mattock, uprooting small bushes of a particular sort, with rough gray bark and three-pointed leaves. When he had dug one up, he would cut off the roots and then slice away the root-bark with a knife, putting it into a sack. Hradzka's lip curled contemptuously; the fellow was gathering the stuff for medicinal use. He had heard of the use of roots and herbs for such purposes by the ancient savages.

The blaster would be no use here; it was too powerful, and would destroy the clothing that the man was wearing. He unfastened a strap from his belt and attached it to a stone to form a hand-loop, then, inched forward behind the lone herb-gatherer. When he was close enough, he straightened and rushed forward, swinging his improvised weapon. The man heard him and turned, too late.

After undressing his victim, Hradzka used the mattock to finish him, and then to dig a grave. The fugitive buried his own clothes with the murdered man, and donned the faded blue shirt, rough shoes, worn trousers and jacket. The blaster he concealed under the jacket, and he kept a few other Hundredth Century gadgets; these he would hide somewhere closer to his center of operations.

He had kept, among other things, a small box of food-concentrate capsules, and in one pocket of the newly acquired jacket he found a package containing food. It was rough and unappetizing fare—slices of cold cooked meat between slices of some cereal substance. He ate these before filling in the grave, and put the paper wrappings in with the dead man. Then, his work finished, he threw the mattock into the brush and set out again, grimacing disgustedly and scratching himself. The clothing he had appropriated was verminous.

Crossing another mountain, he descended into a second valley, and, for a time, lost his way among a tangle of narrow ravines. It was dark by the time he mounted a hill and found himself looking down another valley, in which a few scattered lights gave evidence of human habitations. Not wishing to arouse suspicion by approaching these in the night-time, he found a place among some young evergreens where he could sleep.

The next morning, having breakfasted on a concentrate capsule, he found a hiding-place for his blaster in a hollow tree. It was in a sufficiently prominent position so that he could easily find it again, and at the same time unlikely to be discovered by some native. Then he went down into the inhabited valley.

He was surprised at the ease with which he established contact with the natives. The first dwelling which he approached, a cluster of farm-buildings at the upper end of the valley, gave him shelter. There was a man, clad in the same sort of rough garments Hradzka had taken from the body of the herb-gatherer, and a woman in a faded and shapeless dress. The man was thin and work-bent; the woman short and heavy. Both were past middle age.

He made inarticulate sounds to attract their attention, then gestured to his mouth and ears to indicate his assumed affliction. He rubbed his stomach to portray hunger. Looking about, he saw an ax sticking in a chopping-block, and a pile of wood near it, probably the fuel used by these people. He took the ax, split up some of the wood, then repeated the hunger-signs. The man and the woman both nodded, laughing; he was shown a pile of tree-limbs, and the man picked up a short billet of wood and used it like a measuring-rule, to indicate that all the wood was to be cut to that length.

Hradzka fell to work, and by mid-morning, he had all the wood cut. He had seen a circular stone, mounted on a trestle with a metal axle through it, and judged it to be some sort of a grinding-wheel, since it was fitted with a foot-pedal and a rusty metal can was

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