

# **ATOMIC!**

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# ATOMIC!

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

# CHAPTER I

## *The Eye*

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

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

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

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

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

That's the menace—the mutations.

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

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

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

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

I pulled a mike forward.

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

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

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

“Nothing. The radiations would have got them if nothing else did. That's in the closed file now, poor devils. Still, we might spot the ship.” I stood up. “The whole thing may be a wild-goose chase but we never take any chances with the Rings.”

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

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

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



From time to time we work them over with flame throwers

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well?” he asked.

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

“They?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now this is where the story gets difficult to tell.

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





I stared into the Eye....

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

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

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

It was like waking out of a dream, knowing you’ve dreamed, knowing you’re awake now—but having the dream go on—being

powerless to stop it. I wanted to jump up and slam my fist on the desk and shout that all this was phony.

I couldn't.

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

It wasn't hypnosis.

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

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

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

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

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

His glance crossed mine and I knew he was right. I knew he was talking to me, not Williams. Of course the lake couldn't be hidden now that it was out in plain sight. We couldn't make a worse mistake than to rouse interest in ourselves and the lake by telling obvious lies about it....

What lake?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Williams was looking at me with—curiosity? Suspicion?

I rubbed my eyes, put weariness in my voice.

“I’m tired,” I said. “Almost dozed off, didn’t I? Well—”

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

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

It read—

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

FITZGERALD.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the decision was taken out of our hands.

A burst of soundless white fire flashed blindingly across my eyes. It blotted out Williams, it blotted out the ticker with its innocent,

deadly message. I was aware of a killing pain in the very center of my skull....

## *CHAPTER II*

### *The Other Peril*

Someone was shaking me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well?” I said.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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