

THE UNDAMNED

BY GEORGE O. SMITH

THE UNDAMNED

Plutonium was an equalizer. Nations learned the art of being polite, just as individuals had learned. To lash out with Plutonium wildly would be inviting national disaster, and to behave in an antisocial manner would get any nation the combined hatred of the rest of the world—equally a national disaster.

This was surface politeness. Beneath, the work went on to find an adequate defense, for now that all nations were equal, the first capable of defending itself was to be winner. Ultimately, atomic death was licked. Nicely licked but only at the expenditure of more power than it took to develop the atomic weapon itself. It was, however, developed. And that nation then lashed out—to find that other nations of less belligerency had also licked the problem.

The war—fizzled. For the wall shield that killed the effectiveness of the atomic bomb found no difficulty in stopping a lesser weapon.

All war—fizzled. And nations looked at one another and formed the Terran Union. Then the Terran Union looked to the stars for a new world to conquer. They found Mars ready and waiting.

The Terran Union colonized Mars and exploited the Red Planet as men have always done with a new frontier. The next hundred years wrought their changes and the Martian Combine fell away from the Terran Union because of the distance, the differences of opinion, and because of slight mutational changes.

There were interplanetary wars. The First was fought to eliminate the fact of governing Mars from Terra, the Second was fought to

stop interplanetary piracy and to force both planets to respect the integrity of the other. The Third Interplanetary War was started because of sheer greed.

During the Third Interplanetary War, atomic bombing sprung up, died, and then continued on a very strange nuisance value basis. It became complex, and upon the 1327th Day of the Third Interplanetary War, interplanetary robombing assumed a most dangerous aspect. The swift action of a small group averted disaster, and from that day on, the course of the Third Interplanetary War was assured.—I. A. Seldenov's History of Sol, Vol. IV.

The call bell tinged gently in a code that pierced sleep.

Colonel Ralph Lindsay reached out sleepily and nudged a button at his bedside. Equally sleepily, he donned trousers over his pajamas, slipped his feet into scuffs, and carefully headed for the door. The open door swung a shaft of light across the bed, and Lindsay opened his eyes wide enough to determine whether Jenna was still asleep.

Satisfied, Lindsay went down the corridor of the ship blinking at the ever-present light. He let himself into the scanning room and dropped into his chair. He picked up the phone and said: "Lindsay speaking, answering 3379X."

"General Haynes, Ralph. They got one through."

"How?" asked Lindsay, coming awake.

"Super velocity job. The finders were behind by a quarter radian, at least."

"Jeepers," grunted Lindsay.

"Say it again," returned the general. "We thought we were bad when we let one out of five hundred slip through to you. This, remember, was one out of one. Period. If they use 'em in quantity—and I see no reason why the devils won't—I can see a good record all shot to pieces."

"Where's it headed?"

"According to the course-calc, it should be hitting Mojave most any minute."

"Well, I'd better get on it," said Lindsay. "May I contact you later?"

"Do so, by all means," said the general, signing off. "We can't permit things like this to happen. I won't hang my head in shame at one per cent missed, but when one hundred per cent of a shipment runs through, I'm scared."

Lindsay mumbled an agreement and then clicked the switch to another line. That would be quicker than juggling the hook for communications central. The new line came in immediately and Lindsay dialed a number.

It rang.

Lindsay waited.

And a sleepy voice answered: "Roberts."

"Lindsay, Jim. We've another one. Haynes just called. Heading for Mojave, should be arriving pretty soon."

"Haynes just called and it is due to land?" demanded Roberts. His voice seemed to come awake and alert instantly. "High speed, huh?"

"Yup."

"I'm shucking into clothing and I'll be in the scanning room of your ship in a few minutes."

Roberts hung up, making a remark about finding things in your own backyard. It was true, reflected Lindsay. The spaceport outside of the scanning room greenhouse lay darkly quiet. A few flickers of distant lights were caused by motion of men between them and him, and on the horizon he could see the soldier-like columns of the vertical boundary marker lights piercing the sky. Lindsay fumbled in a pocket, and swore because his cigarettes were in his battle shirt on the chair beside the bed, and he was still dressed in pajama top and trousers over the pajama bottoms. He wondered whether he could steal in and get cigarettes, or whether he'd better wake Jenna anyway, and wondered where she kept them in the ship—somehow he never really knew because there was always a package available when he wanted one. He wondered—

And the door opened and Jenna entered with a bright smile. "Cigarette, darling?" she asked. Over her nightgown she wore Ralph's battle shirt. She was holding the lighter to two of them held simultaneously between her very red lips.

He would have forgiven her anything for that. And the fact that instead of being dull with sleep, Jenna looked fresh and bright gave the woman an added charm. "Ghastly time to be up and around," she observed with a smile. She handed him one of the cigarettes

and glanced at the clock. "Oh-two-hundred," she said idly. "Pacific War Time. Thirteen hundred and twenty-seventh day of. What's up, Ralph?"

Lindsay puffed deeply and let the smoke trickle out with his words. "Another one—high-speed job."

Jenna nodded. "Roberts?"

"He's coming right over."

"I've coffee brewing. It hasn't landed yet?"

"Not yet, but we're expecting it any minute."

"We'll have time for coffee."

"We'll *take* time for coffee," said Ralph. "Roberts will do a better job for a bit of stimulant and something warm."

Jenna yawned and laughed at herself. Ralph turned as blue streamers cast flickerings on the walls. Outside in the dark, ships of Terra's fleet were taking off, trailing their flares into the twinkling sky above them. They were getting out of range of the robomb blast; clearing the vast Mojave Spaceport. The marker lights winked off as the last ship left the port, and the sudden roar of the skytrain crescendoed and then died as the personnel of Mojave left in haste. Only the decontamination ship remained on the port.



Seconds later, a pale actinic glow suffused the area. The walls of the buildings glowed with it as the wall shields hugged the buildings and anchored them to the solid crust of the planet. In the ship a counting-rate meter climbed up the scale and a radiation identifier winked, indicating that it was very hard gamma that triggered the counter. The internal meter showed no danger inside of the ship; it was far enough from the nearest building on the port.

The door opened again and Jim Roberts walked in. "Give it to me," he said crisply, nodding cheerfully at Jenna.

Ralph's wife nodded back and then left to get the coffee. When she returned, Ralph had explained to Captain Roberts fully.

"The devil," muttered Roberts. "Looks rough."

"We've been expecting the high-speed stuff, though," said Jenna, pouring coffee into three cups.

Lindsay opened his mouth to speak. "You've—" he started, but he was interrupted by a ground-shaking rumble. Out of the dark California sky a juggernaut fell, its braking blast lighting up the area. The shrill of its passage came then, a lowering shrill that started up in the ear-splitting register and running down the scale like a dying siren until it was lost in a moan. The earth shook again as the monster hit the sands of the desert. It sent them high in a mighty impact crater, plowed its short furrow, and then at the bottom of its inverted cone it nuzzled into the ground and—started to tick.

Lindsay's jaw closed and he continued: "—been predicting it for a long time, Jenna." Then he laughed shortly and with just a bit of mirth. "I won't even let a Martian robomb interfere with what I intend to say." He became serious again. "No, Jenna, I think you're the only one who has been insisting that there will be a high-speed job coming along."

Roberts nodded. "The boys at the driver labs claimed it couldn't be done."

Jenna smiled. It was an elfin smile that brought out the unearthly beauty of the woman. "That's because I'm Martian," she said simply. "I know how their minds work."

"That you do," assented Roberts, sipping his coffee. "No one but a Martian could have unpacked the Gooney."

Lindsay's face paled slightly. Reference to the first and only fuse that Jenna had ever dissected brought goose pimples to him. Up to

that particular time, the Martians had never included killing charges in the fuses themselves. Once the thing was out of the robomb, the fuse could not harm any one. But this diabolical jigsaw puzzle was different. And Jenna had handed the three pellets to Ralph and then fled. Lindsay followed her drawings, and they all knew that no one but a Martian could ever have been able to follow the mechanical labyrinth of that fuse in safety. Yet they all knew that she'd been safe where not one of them would have been, for if she'd not asked, amusedly, for permission, the Gooney would have taken them, one by one. The Gooney had been dissected and the robomb it came with had been fitted with a Terran fuse and shipped back. All hoped it would give Mars as much worry as it had caused Terra.

"I've tried detonating it, and naturally, no dice," said Roberts.

"Better defuse it, then. You've hit it with everything?"

"Everything but another atomic."

"That's asking too much," said Lindsay. "They're packed to the limit with atomics now, and doubling the power—*brrrrr*."

"Well," said Roberts with a slight smile, "my gear is in the battle buggy. Outside."

"O.K.," said Lindsay. "We'll move back to a clearer area and set the recorders going. It's cold, for Haynes' outfit didn't so much as heat it on the way in. High-speed job for fair, and probably loaded with mercurite."

The ship sat down again far enough from the buildings so that the green actinic light from the force fields did not rise to dangerous levels. The pale glow gave enough light to make the television

cameras usable without any other artificial means, though the shapeless blob that was the battle buggy and Jim Roberts was hard to keep from losing with the unaided eye.

Roberts' voice came over the communicator. "O.K.? I'm about to go after that devil."

"Go ahead, Jim," said Lindsay. A few beads of sweat popped out on his forehead.

Jenna frowned. "It must be sheer hell to be like him."

Lindsay nodded, held a finger up to his lips. Jenna nodded, too, having been warned that the recorder was on, and also that Roberts could hear every word.

"I'm within one hundred feet of the crater, Lindsay. My first approach will be with the standard radiation detectors and the initial tools." This was well-known to all, but stated for recording purposes. "I have stopped the battle wagon at this distance. I am picking up my kit. I am stepping to the ground, now, and—"

He was interrupted by the ka-plunking sound in the speaker. It was a cross, in sound, between plucking a screen door spring and dropping a boulder into a placid lagoon. A blinding flash of light burst against the dark sky, an expanding ball of flame raced skyward and died in a faintly luminous cloud that boiled upwards to a terrific height. Immediately afterwards, the ground shook madly. The counting-rate meter chattered and screeched as it overloaded and the radiation identifier winked furiously on all pilot lights, indicating all kinds of possible radiation. The pale actinic glow on the walls of the squat buildings flamed bright, wavered,

flickered, paled again, and went out for good. The area and the ship was pelted with a fine rain of dirt, pebbles, and fused glass.

The roar of the sound came, then, a thundering tortured blast that tore at the planeted ship, whistling through the minute scratches from previous blasts, and producing a thrumming sound.

Quiet came once more, and only the faint buzz of the counting rate meter audio broke the silence.

Then a slight sob from Jenna.

And Colonel Ralph Lindsay took a deep, indrawn breath that shuddered his large frame.

He shook himself, and turned to his wife. "Get hold of yourself," he said harshly.

Jenna nodded, tossed away two tears, blinked her eyes and sat down weakly. "I'll be all right," she said. "I must."

"They all get it, sooner or later," gritted Lindsay. "That's ... that's—"

"Shut up, Ralph," ordered his wife. "You'll be blubbering next. Save it for when you can. We've got work to do."

Lindsay looked at her, and as he looked, he calmed. "It's rather tough," he said. "There's been several ... many. But few within sight. Well, he's gone and there's nothing we can do to bring him back."

"What makes it particularly tough is that Jim Roberts was the only one in the crew that was halfway stable, mentally," said Jenna. "The only one who was not carrying a mental load."

Lindsay nodded. "A case of having specialized mechanical ability and putting it to use in the best way. But Jenna ... I'm ... you're—?"

Jenna smiled. "We aren't," she agreed. She stood up and leaned against him lightly, and then moved into the circle of his arm. "But remember that neither of us is active in decontamination work. General Haynes needed a stable man to direct the group, one that would correlate the information and keep it. Not one that he'd have to replace every few weeks. Losing Jim is tough. Better it have been one of the others; Lacy, who lost his family and the will to live at the same instant of blast; Grant, who is just a plain thrill-seeker and sportsman; Garrard, who does anything and everything without looking ahead because he is convinced that the Book of Fate has his every minute move printed in letters of fire; Harris, who saw his brother die and who now has a psychopathic hatred against the things but has no great dislike for the Martians who fashioned them. He hates our robombs as much as he hates theirs. Well—"

She was interrupted by the phone. Lindsay answered. It was General Haynes.

"Who?"

"Roberts."

"Bad?"

"As soon as the dust clears away we'll know. The force fields are usually good, and they kept out the radiation from the buildings. As soon as the surface activity dies out, Mojave will be workable again. We're leaving as soon as we can."

"Better mobilize your big men," said Haynes. "The second just hissed past us. Looks like a long siege. That one was mercurite, wasn't it?"

"Nothing else."

"Thought so. We saw the blast from here in space. Know what that means?"

Lindsay nodded and said: "It means they think they have an untouchable fuse. Otherwise they'd not bother sending the high-powered stuff over."

"Right. They'd not make us a present."

"Also, there is something about that fuse. Something, something. Look, sir, robombing is a fine art. There is but one defense against it—and that is for those who want to live to get out of the neighborhood. That's what the skytrains are for. That's why you send us immediate word when you have their course predicted. The secondary defense is not really a defense as it is a preservative measure. The force fields go up to protect man's work, and when the blast comes, it really destroys nothing. Then, after a given time, the people return and go to work in safety because the force fields kept the insides of the building from either destruction or radioactivity.

"Now," continued Lindsay, "that one went off within ten to twenty minutes after it landed. The immobilization period for that area is but a couple of days at best. If not touched, the fuse would tick away for weeks while the area stands idle. But not with this new, high-speed job that is also loaded with mercurite. Something—

"Where was this new job?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Headed for the Gary steel mills," came Haynes' answer.

"I'm putting in a call for my crew," said Lindsay. "We'll all meet in Chicago-South. There's something—" He shook the thought away with a violent shake of his head. "We'll find out in Gary."

He went to the general call phone and cut a tape, fed the end into the automatic transmitter, and checked to see that the general call was being transmitted. He wondered, briefly, just which of them would get to Gary first.

When the decontamination headquarters ship arrived, it was second. The little private strato-speedster that was Jack Grant's own pride and joy was sitting in the main landing field of the Gary port when Lindsay arrived. Lindsay sort of expected that, for Grant's little high-powered job placed the owner no more than a couple of hours from any place on Terra, most of which was spent in going up and down through the thicker atmosphere near the surface.

They landed, and the air lock clanged open. Moments later Jack Grant entered the scanning room with his usual whirlwind manner.

"What's cooking, Ralph?" he greeted, extending an eager hand. His free arm he swept around Jenna, giving her a vigorous hug and a kiss on the forehead. "Jenna, I swear you're more beautiful by the day. Please?"

"Please what?" she countered, freeing herself and backing off a bit.

"Please poison him and marry me?"

"Nope," she said with finality. "And I won't stand to see him ... ah ... removed, as you indelicately put it."

"Ralph, you wouldn't mind getting bumped off for your wife's happiness, would you?"

Lindsay usually lived through Grant's brash manner; made a mental apology for the man because he himself did not understand the kind of mind that saw little serious in life. And usually Grant's disregard of the serious side of life gave all a moral uplift, a chance to disregard with Grant all of the problems that hack and tear. But Lindsay had just seen Jim Roberts go up in a sun-hot inferno, and he was slightly sick with shock. Now, Grant's blithe manner seemed banal, crude; insufficiently sensitive. If Grant had no feelings, he should at least consider the sensitivity of others. Lindsay tried to cheer himself, and managed at best a weak, sickly grin that was lost on Grant completely. Lindsay might have made some biting remark, but he noted with some wonder that Jenna was not bitterly unhappy in the badinage. Jenna, he knew, could and would clutch hysterically at any light point in a crisis to gain just a bit of stability. Lindsay himself was inclined to cling doggedly to a situation, deviating not one bit, until it was finished satisfactorily. Then he would let down.

So noting Jenna's whimsical smile, he merely said, and it was with an effort: "Think it would make her happy?"

Grant laughed and hugged Jenna quickly and said: "Look, you don't mean she's actually happy—?"

Jenna nodded brightly, made a full turn to unwind Grant's arm from her waist and pirouetted over to her husband. That stopped Grant, and he smiled cheerfully and tried to look downcast.

"Love, unrequited," he sang in an off-tone basso, the opening bars of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Love unrequited robs me of my rest."

Then he grinned. "Love unrequited and my boss and his best wife who haul me out of a sound and peaceful sleep to go out and pin a baby-blue ribbon on a Martian robomb. O.K., fellers, I'll pull its teeth and then, Jenna, may we continue where you left me off?"

"Been watching it?" asked Lindsay.

Grant nodded. "I've been here since it started in. The mills are clean, the force fields are up, and the temperature of the thing is low enough to handle by now. I'm ready."

"We're waiting," said Lindsay.

"Waiting?"

"For the rest of the crew, you know. This is serious."

"Well, it is in my district," laughed Grant. "Let the rest assemble. By the time they get here I'll have the fuse out and in one hand. Probably semi-disassembled."

"Jim Roberts was a good man," warned Lindsay.

"He was that."

"You're waiting."

"Why?"

"Because there seems to be more to this than meets the eye."

The door opened in time for the entering men to hear Lindsay's last words. Garrard and Harris came in quietly, sat down, and started to smoke. Garrard puffed his pipe with calm indifference, and Harris smoked furiously on a cigarette that he puffed into a long, hot ember that almost burned his lips. Garrard spoke first.

"More than meets the eye, huh?"

Harris nodded, but his mind seemed elsewhere. "Mutants?" he said, giving the inert robomb out there a personality. Harris was pitting himself against a personality when he went to do his job. He had no real hatred for the Martians who engineered them, but he felt and acted as though he were pitting his brain against a wholly alien, inimical sentience.

Lindsay caught his thought, and though Harris was half solemn, the allegory fitted. For what are engineering improvements but a mechanical mutant?

Garrard smiled, and shrugged. "I say let's find out who is more ingenious," he said. "And let's do it quick. Grant, are the mills running on the servos?"

"Uh-huh, but it isn't good enough. There ought to be a human hand at the place instead of remote controls. I agree, let's get going before something happens to that load of steel out there. Stalling production is the only reason for robombing in the first place. Let's lick that fuse before they find out how much mercurite to put in in order to blast the force fields right out of the planet's crust," said Grant. "Go on with your lecture," he told Lindsay.

"Well, first-off, it's a new, high-speed job. It's also loaded with mercurite. They've, as usual, packed everything into their Sunday Punch. Their cocksuredness makes me certain that they think this fuse unremovable."

Grant turned to Jenna. "Jenna, you're of Martian stock, part way, anyway. Have any ideas?"

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