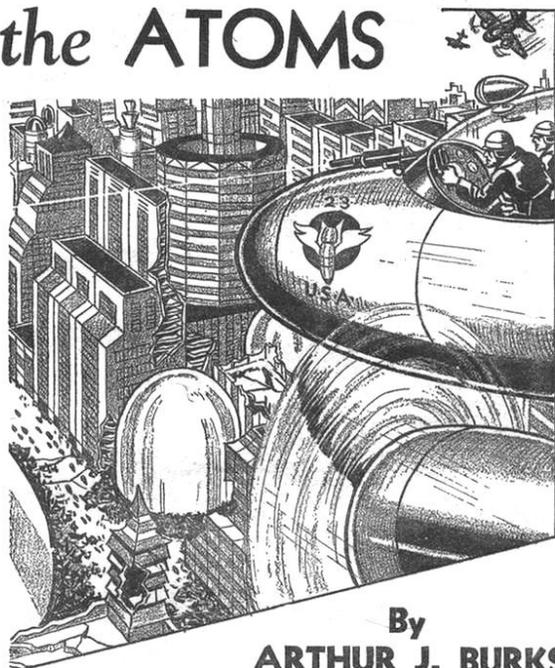


# DICTATOR of the ATOMS

Both crates dived straight at the white cone, near its peak

A Complete Novelette of Civilization in Chaos



By  
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## CHAPTER I Light of Doom

**A**FTERWARD, Dale Pruett cursed himself as the greatest fool ever born into the world. As the first Secretary of Military Science, the newly created portfolio, he should have gone into action at the beginning.

The year had brought the deadliest of winter within the knowledge of man, of history. Florida and California, each noted for their salubrious climates, had had two feet of snow and sub-zero weather that had lasted for a grim two months.

New York City had experienced a ghastly winter, with a mean temperature of forty-seven degrees below zero. Then the winter had broken, and raging floods swept the land.

Later, a golden, brilliant spring, in which people quickly forgot the bleak horror of winter. They forgot, yes, until the heat of the sun, in early March, became unbearable, until a hundred and four degree temperature at

midnight was common.

This was spring! If the heat increased proportionately, nothing would live in midsummer south of a line drawn western from Quebec. Even north of that would be a blazing horror. Scientists offered explanations. Sun spots, they said, as though that explained anything. It seemed as though Nature herself were trying to destroy mankind, perhaps even the earth. Mankind must find a way to combat the growing chaos. From sub-zero to boiling heat in less than thirty days! Perhaps, out beyond Earth's stratosphere, at the bottom of which man lived, as fish at the bottom of the sea, something cataclysmic was happening.

Not even Dale Pruett thought, at first, to link the dread happenings to a human agency.

Dale Pruett was walking, late at night, along Fifth Avenue, down near Washington Square, when his eyes suddenly lifted to the sky, dead ahead, along the glowing canyons of mid-Manhattan.

A thin pencil of flame, the color of dark orange, stabbed from some spot within a

block or two of Times Square, straight into the heavens, like a streak of lightning made straight, and suddenly frozen in place. He watched it until his eyes could no longer see how far it went. It seemed to be reaching out into infinity.

THERE was something loathsome about that pencil of light. Pencil? It must have been all of fifty feet across, seeming to maintain the same dimensions unbroken as far as he could see, allowing for the diminution, the narrowing.

A miasma of menace seemed to flow out of that eerie beam, to envelop all of New York City. Pruett paused, holding his breath. Sweat spilled over his body in rivulets. His face was tortured. He felt that his burdens were greater than he could bear. Thirty years old, and the responsibility of a nation's life rested in his hands! Exactly that, for martial law had been in effect for twenty days, and he was secretary of Military Science, senior in responsibility to the Secretary of War.

Out beyond the cylinder of light the sky shaded from a sickly lemon to a dull, ghastly purple. In the weird light the buildings of Manhattan stood silhouetted like shadowy pinnacles etched against the night sky.

Then he was conscious of a quivering in the air, as though the very air were whispering, laughing in mockery. It seemed like a sound just below, or above, the range of the human ear. The air was breathing!

If this were true, and he were not merely dizzy with the scorching heat, then here might be the hint of the cosmic disturbances which had thrown the world's seasons into a hellish turmoil.

He started running uptown, toward that lambent beam. But he couldn't make it. He fell, time after time, like a man far gone with thirst on the floor of a desert at midday. Yet he knew he must reach that spot, see what made the shaft of flame against the sky. Just to look at it was to feel a tingling of abysmal horror all through him. There was something

super-naturally hypnotic about it.

"I've got to get there, see what it is," he muttered.

In the final spurt, Pruett crawled on hands and knees to within a block of the pencil of flame. It was dimming now, a little, due to the fact that the sun was rising. A fiery red ball.

Pruett was prone, peering around the corner of a single story building, when it happened.

The light snapped off, as though someone had turned a switch.

There remained only the lemonish glow, slowly dying out, as that loathsome beam retreated before the advance of the sun.

Then an explosion which might have been the blasting of Krakatoa shook Manhattan from end to end. It was like the crack of doom. Like two volcanoes erupting simultaneously.

It came just as Dale Pruett spotted the building from the roof of which, apparently, the light ray had shot into the sky. He knew the building well. Twenty years before it had been a skyscraper, one of the world's tallest buildings. The Dorgan Building-fifty stories high. A spire, reaching into the sky.

Pruett's eyes were glued on that building when the explosion came. It ripped the walls apart, from top to bottom, from side to side, as though it had been a house of cards.

HE had seen the Dorgan Building disintegrate! It had seemed to fly outward in all directions, as though it had been a great hand grenade of many segments which had exploded. Pieces of it were hurled like bullets through buildings all around it. One great fragment of wreckage had torn out a corner of the building behind which Pruett was sprawling, had gone past him and utterly demolished half a block of elevated railway structure.

The buildings surrounding the Dorgan seemed to sag, to bend into themselves, to

collapse like huge balloons deflating. Their crash to the ground was an earthquake in itself. And then, his dazed brain tried to find some simile for what next he saw—

Minerva, springing full-grown from the head of Zeus? A mountain thrusting itself up from the sea, across a sea lane which for years had been free to the passage of ships?

Not strong enough, such similes. For the Dorgan Building was gone, and in its place, straight, and white, and glowing with silvery brilliance, was another building! It was a thing of awesome beauty. It reached into the sky to about the same height as had the Dorgan Building. It was a cone, reaching gradually to a point, an astounding example of unearthly architecture.

But there were no doors, no windows! Just the cone, of some material the composition of which Dale Pruett could not guess. Nor could he guess what had happened. But swiftly he realized one thing: that immense white cone, that giant pyramid, was an un conjecturable menace to New York City. A fresh menace to a stricken city, tortured by Arctic chill, by furnace blasts almost beyond human endurance, and now this!

The Dorgan Building had given birth to another structure, like none ever seen on earth, and had destroyed itself in the parturition.

Heaped at the base of the snowy cone was the rubble of the Dorgan Building, like shale at the foot of a precipice. Powdered stone and plaster, twisted beams, with here and there shards of glass, eerily like the eyeballs of humanity, staring blindly into the rising sun.

Out of it rose the white nightmare, which couldn't be—yet was!

## CHAPTER II

### Voice from the Cone

SHRILL whistles skirled. Officers and men of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and National

Guard, organizations representing what law remained in New York City were coming on the double quick. Every building in Manhattan held its quota of soldiers, whose task was to prevent looting, to care for human beings being driven stark, staring mad by heat and terror. Columns of troops patrolled the streets surrounding what had been the Dorgan Building.

Dale Pruett moved slowly toward the white miracle, hypnotically, half fascinated with horror. Officers recognized the young cabinet officer. Hands snapped to swift salute as he passed.

“What is this thing, anyway, sir?” asked a thin-waisted, correctly uniformed colonel.

“I don't know, Colonel. I was walking. I saw a strangely colored light probing the sky. I was hurrying here—only in time to see the Dorgan Building reduced to nothingness, and this white column, cone, whatever you wish to call it, standing in its place.”

“But what in the world is it?”

“I haven't the slightest idea.” Pruett shook his head. “But that light I saw had something to do with it—of that I am sure. We've got to find out. But first we've got to examine that building. What does it look like to you, sir?”

“A Gargantuan blob of ice-cream. Sounds screwy, doesn't it, Mister Secretary? But you find a better name and I'll accept correction without a murmur.”

Dale Pruett knew Colonel Gamborg Liesen to be a bluff officer, but one known for his bravery and integrity. A man who rated medals enough, most of them for bravery, to fill two trunks. A man who laughed at death and danger.

“There doesn't seem to be any way into this outlandish piece of architecture, sir,” said Colonel Liesen.

“No,” Pruett reluctantly agreed, “but we've got to find out what it is, anyhow. See here, Colonel, this thing isn't here by chance.

For all we know, it may be a visitation from interstellar space. Mine is the responsibility of finding out. You can aid me there. Station detachments, armed with autorifles, gas-throwers, machine-guns on such surrounding buildings as are left standing, as I move on ahead. There's no surmising what's inside this thing. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's a solid. Maybe— Well, station your troops."

The colonel barked orders. Soldiers snapped to attention, obeyed, hurrying forward to take up their posts at the relayed commands of their officers. In five minutes the cone was covered at points from which could blaze devastating fire. Dale Pruett was conscious of sudden embarrassment. Ridiculous—marshaling a couple of regiments to fight off a possible attack by a *building!*

And yet that building had brought death to New York. Pruett didn't have to hear the sirens of ambulances to know that; nor to remember the hail of havoc-spreading wreckage that had fallen on New York; nor the phantasm he had himself seen.

This white cone was a menace beyond measure. It was catastrophe, and nothing whatever was known of its nature, of how it had come there, or of its purpose, if any. And it must have some.

With the troops in place, all save a company surrounding the colonel, acting as his orderlies and the like, Colonel Liesen looked at Dale Pruett.

"MY position is inferior to yours, sir," he said, "but your position in this nation is a vital one. If anything should happen to you, the only important representative of Washington on the spot with material powers—" His jaws snapped stubbornly. "I am going to send some men to investigate the nature of that building!"

"I can't allow you to send men into unknown danger," said Pruett.

"A soldier's job is to hold himself in readiness to die if need be," said the colonel grimly. "But I'll ask for volunteers." He

whirled on his men.

"I want ten men to investigate that giant cone," he bellowed. "It may strike you dead when you touch it. It may swallow you up. It may— Nobody knows what may happen... Ten volunteers!"

The white-faced company, led by their captain, took two steps forward, halted. Colonel Gamborg Liesen's face was proud as he faced Pruett again.

"Take your pick, sir," he said.

Pruett selected the first ten men.

"Surround the building," he instructed them, "at approximately equal intervals between men. When your colonel signals, close in on it. All I ask you to do is examine its substance, return here, and tell me what you think it is, its temperature, anything that may occur to you."

Rifles on shoulders, they marched stiffly away.

Side by side, Pruett and Colonel Liesen watched the ten men close on the building as their commander's sharp whistle shrilled. A waiting silence had fallen over all New York City.

Four of the soldier volunteers were visible to Pruett and Colonel Liesen. Pruett watched them intently.

The four men had just reached the white walls of the snowy nightmare. Suddenly their hands lifted to touch it—and all four of them vanished as though they had never been!

There had been the sound of their heavy shoes on the rubble. Wraith-like, they had marched straight into the whiteness—to be erased without a trace! Pruett and Colonel Liesen stared at each other in horror. They licked dry lips.

The cone had swallowed the volunteers! Absorbed them, sucked them in, as into a pit of quicksand.

The colonel whirled, whistle to his lips. There seemed no sense in what he was about to do, but he was a soldier. He was following a soldier's reactions.

"I'm opening fire on that—that—" he gritted.

"But what good will it do? Our weapons—"

"Are all we have for offense. We've got to find out whether they are of any use!"

The whistle keened piercingly. Instantly the colonel had the attention of his men on the surrounding buildings.

"By volley, fire!"

With crackling roars bullets poured straight at the white cone. Pruett knew as well as Colonel Liesen that those marksmen were crack shots. Thousands of rounds—as rifles rolled and machine-guns chattered—sped into that white cone. But not one bullet entered it. Nor did the rifle grenades which were hurled against it.

The white building *swallowed* those bullets—swallowed the grenades, as it had swallowed the volunteers! And just as silently.

Watchers outside should have been able to hear the hail of bullets against the whiteness—against anything which was so plainly visible as this white column. But all they heard were the shattering explosions from the spots where the soldiers were stationed, firing into the cone.

THE soldiers, too, suddenly realized what was happening—or what was not happening. Their rising terror, their sudden, superstitious awe of something supernatural became apparent in their instantly accelerated swiftness of fire, as though by its sheer fury they would destroy the smooth white cone.

The surface of that cone should have been scarred by bullet holes, by the black stains of smashed lead and steel. But after five minutes of rapid firing, there was no single mark to indicate that even one bullet had touched the white horror!

Pruett and Colonel Liesen stared into each other's eyes. The colonel moistened dry lips, shook his head.

"There ain't," he whispered, "no such

animal. I see it, but it isn't there, understand? Maybe my not knowing what to do— Well, I'm an old man, just a colonel. You're a cabinet officer. Now what?"

"I don't know." Pruett's voice was a groan. "It's like shooting bullets into a void. They vanish, utterly ineffectual, when they touch. There's no sense to it. But we've got to find sense!"

He stopped. What was there to be said, after all? Colonel Liesen signaled for the firing to stop. The silence for a minute was as stupefying as clamorous sound. Then, abrupt, eerie, yet plain as if the shouter had stood on the rubble of the Dorgan Building, right over their heads, came a cry of terror, of anguish.

"Colonel Liesen! Colonel Liesen! Yell to the men to run for their lives! They're going to—"

And that was all. Silence within the cone followed (the voice must have come from the cone) as the cry was chopped off. The man yelling from the heart of the white mystery had been silenced. He had tried to cry out a warning—had hinted that "They"—

Colonel Liesen's face was dead white. It was perhaps the first time in his life that Gamborg Liesen had ever been afraid. It had taken the supernatural to put that fear into his courageous heart.

He had started to put his whistle to his lips again when a four-story building, across the lot from where they stood, and in which a platoon of troops was stationed, exploded like a monster bomb.

One moment it was there, filled with soldiers pointing rifles and machine-guns. The next moment it was gone. No soldiers. No rifles. No guns. Nothing. Save fresh rubble—and a white mound of a building that looked strangely like the crown of a derby hat!

It was then that the colonel went mad. He sprang up the rubble toward the white cone into which his volunteers had vanished.

"I'm going to damn well find out who 'they' are!" he shouted, before Pruett could

clutch and hold him. He was emptying his pistol into the whiteness as he lunged ahead.

Laughing like a maniac, he flung his pistol squarely at the white curve of the cone. It could be seen against the whiteness for one flash on its gleaming barrel, at the instant of contact. Then it was gone, as though it had sunk into milk.

Then Liesen had hurled himself at the cone, too. The next instant he disappeared.

Nothing more—save that even as frightened soldiers who had seen one of their own platoons made invisible before their eyes broke into riotous flight before a danger they could not understand, the building from which they were fleeing exploded. And in its place and their place was an appalling silence, a horrible emptiness. And a second white building, oddly shaped like the crown of a derby hat!

Three white nightmares. And Dale Pruett, his hands gripped, lips tight to a disappearing line, knew in that instant that there was more to come.

His shout sped the surviving soldiers on their way. But as they fled there was a wild prayer in his heart.

“God, show me the way to an explanation—and a counter-offensive!”

### CHAPTER III Sky Birds

IT was a white-faced group who sat about the circular table in a room in the heart of Manhattan that night. Dale Pruett, General Monet, Chief of Staff of the Army, Admiral Logan of the Navy, Lieutenant-general Daling of the Marines, the Secretary of War, Kamin, New York's mayor, Pruett's own aides, a captain of the Navy, a colonel of Marines, and Secretary of Air Lupin.

“We're facing a new instrument of war, gentlemen,” said Pruett grimly. “It has taken us all by surprise. We have nothing that is effective against it. For the last ten hours

our tubes and bridges have been choked with people, fleeing to the open. Latest reports indicate that forty thousand people have been slain. I've watched refugees, crossing Queensboro, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and George Washington Bridges. The chaos is indescribable. The whole city is making an exodus.”

That the white buildings were of human origin everybody believed, yet not once had a human voice—save that from one of the first four men who had vanished into the original cone—come forth. There, had been no demands, no ultimatum nor proposals.

But regularly, once each hour, since Pruett had drawn every living thing out of the area where the catastrophe had befallen, there had been a fresh explosion. Many buildings had been shaken into the streets, all of which were now impassable except to people on foot, and few dared such travel, because of the towering, half-wrecked buildings on either hand.

Moment by moment buildings dropped their fronts into streets, showering down tons of masonry. Airplanes were keeping watch over the area, over Times Square, where the first catastrophe occurred. There now were fifteen new miracle structures, forming a sort of broken circle about that first one.

The trend of movement of the explosions, however, was downtown. Five or six buildings along Forty-Fourth Street exploded, giving birth to the white monsters. Then one on Eighth Avenue and Forty-Second. Then one on Park Avenue. Grand Central Station went, and in its place was a gorgeously beautiful mound of pure white.

“Within a week,” said Pruett, “not one of New York's original buildings will be left standing. In their place will be these invading cones, which are impervious to attack, and which we cannot enter—and return alive.”

“You feel sure that Colonel Gamborg Liesen and his men are dead?”

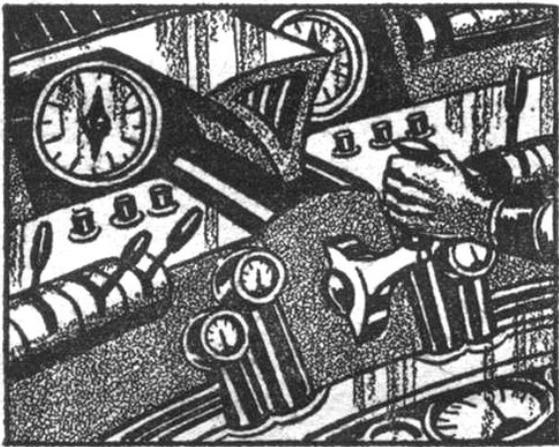
“That’s my guess. I don’t know.”

The Secretary of War rose suddenly and switched on the radio. Nothing came out but howls, as though the air were filled with static. This lasted a moment or two, sounding oddly like a great sea of military tanks on the march! Then—

“Secretary Pruett! Secretary Pruett!”

Silence instantly gripped the war council.

“Great Scott,” said Pruett, “that’s Liesen’s voice! But how can we answer him?”



“THIS is Colonel Liesen speaking, Pruett!” the voice went on. “There is nothing you can do against these cones. I am speaking now with our enemy listening and censoring every word I speak. I can’t tell you who the enemy are, or from what country—only that they are invincible to any sort of armament we have today. They bid me tell you that unless the city capitulates, it will be utterly destroyed. They state also that they are in position to do this to every city in the world. They are making New York an example. They know that the story of New York’s catastrophe is being reported to the world. They wish this speech to be, also. They call themselves the Internationals, and their leader regards himself as World Dictator! The massing of the power of sundered atoms—”

The voice died out, with that sudden cessation of sound that left an icy chill about the heart. But Colonel Liesen was safe.

Perhaps his men inside that first cone were, also. The world had friends in the enemy camp, then, even though they were prisoners.

Great beads of perspiration broke out on the faces of the listeners. The Secretary of Air jumped to his feet.

“With your permission, sir,” he said, “I want to try one more thing. It’s ghastly, trying to fight against the absolutely unknown.”

“Colonel Liesen was trying to give us a hint when he was silenced,” whispered Pruett. “He wasn’t silenced by violence, either. He was simply shut off as a light is switched off, or a radio dialed to another station. We cannot communicate with the occupants of the new buildings. They can reach us at will, talk to us through our own radios. Pardon, Mister Air Secretary—you were suggesting?”

“We haven’t tried to do anything from above. We have bombs which could blow New York’s biggest building off the map, with power as explosive as that which the invading cones seem to exercise. Let’s try them!”

“It must be our last attempt,” said Pruett. “I can’t jeopardize more lives. I wonder why we don’t hear from the President?”

“Possibly,” said the Secretary of War, “because though New York City can contact the outside world, we are surrounded by a wall of force through which nothing can penetrate inwardly.”

Half an hour later the group had taken their lives in their hands to approach the devastated area in which glinted the white cones, where the buildings to right and left of them might go at any second, blasting the intrepid group of men into nothingness.

The Secretary of Air had already sent messages to the flyers over New York City, and now a score of planes were diving straight at their targets. From the air the cones must have looked like monster toadstools. Pruett would have given much to have been flying

one of those bullet-swift planes. But his duty was in the midst of the growing desolation.

The planes dived. Spheres of death began to drop from their bellies. With the newest instruments, they couldn't miss. Bombing from planes was now child's play.

"Great Scott!" cried Air Secretary Lupin. "I forgot that two of those bombs will shake half of what remains of New York into the street."

"Wait!" said Pruett, with grim intentness. "Maybe they won't. They'll hit the cones, and then we'll see."

THEY saw, one after the other, six of the projectiles of death drop out of sight among the white cones. But they didn't hear them strike anything! Even duds—which weighed four and five thousand pounds—would have caused the earth to shake under their feet. One bomb, exploding, this close to the group, would have floored every person there, a fact they had overlooked.

But they needn't have worried. The projectiles fell into silence, into nothingness without result! The cones swallowed monster bombs as easily, as surely, as they had swallowed men and bullets.

"Pruett!" cried the Secretary of War. "Look at those two planes! It's suicide!"

For a moment after the falling projectiles had produced no slightest result, the war planes had behaved like frightened birds. Wholesale collision of planes seemed imminent as though pilots had gone mad with the dropping into silence of their cargoes of what should have meant death and annihilation.

Then two crates broke away. They were diving straight for that first cone which had signaled the beginning of the marching white horror on the city of New York. Side by side, their blunt wings shrieking as they sped down at four hundred miles an hour, the two crates held their dive and their terrific speed.

"They're mad—mad!" groaned

Secretary of the Navy Logan. "They're sacrificing themselves for nothing! If those bombs won't work—"

"Each of those crates still carries three bombs," said Pruett shortly. "When that cargo hits—" He didn't finish the sentence.

Both crates dived straight at the white cone, near its peak. The high officials instinctively shut their eyes.

The fliers missed the summit of the cone by inches. And as they swooped across they dropped a full cargo of bombs. Nothing happened.

"Maybe," whispered Pruett, "maybe I've got an answer now. You remember, in files of the inventors of thirty years ago, a treatise by Nikola Tesla, wherein he hinted that within a few years the only way a country could be able absolutely to protect itself against attack would be through an invisible, surrounding wall of force? An invisible power that would check anything that touched it?"

Pruett's confreres nodded. One or two also recalled that some efforts had been made by two European countries to work out such a theory—only to find that no electrical power could be developed along Tesla's lines, even along a few miles of frontier, that wouldn't cost billions over and beyond the treasury of the then wealthiest nation.

"But in the laboratories of the nations of the world"—Pruett's voice was shrill with excitement—"scientists have never stopped trying to find the answer to the protection at which Tesla hinted. All scientists recognized Tesla's genius, knew that he himself might have worked it out, had he not flatly stated that he would not give such a weapon to any nation, even his own—and made an end of his experiments."

"What are you driving at, sir?" asked the Lieutenant-general of Marines.

"SIMPLY this: Scientists might have been working secretly since Tesla's time. With the power to isolate nations, a power that might be

turned into undreamed-of channels—look, gentlemen, suppose it were possible to solidify, in some material form, a current of electricity? Suppose it were possible, by some mechanical means, to catch a lightning flash in the midst of its greatest demonstration, and solidify it? Suppose it were possible to leash the power.... I have it! I have it! What Liesen was trying to tell us! Suppose the power of the atom, broken asunder, might be harnessed, in tremendous mass, as we have for a century harnessed the power of great waterfalls?”

As though the unseen, unknown enemy had heard his words, six great explosions occurred, simultaneously. The Empire State split from top to bottom. Grey dust from its shattered stones carried away on the breeze. The rest fell into the street with a ghastly, ominous rumbling of volcanic sound.

In its place, on the instant, stood the tallest white cone yet to make itself visible to stricken, terrified New York City. The Woolworth Building went at almost the same time.

“Maybe this is the answer,” Pruett said in a low voice to the Secretary of War. “Maybe it isn’t. But I have a suggestion to make—one more experiment to try. It may mean annihilation for a division of troops. If it isn’t the answer, then God have mercy on us!”

“What is in your mind, sir?” said the Secretary of War. “What can I do to help?”

“Marshal your colonels. Give them instructions, carefully synchronizing the time, for a general frontal attack on the cones! I would like, myself, to lead the attack on the cone that stands where stood the Empire State Building!”

“You’ll simply become a prisoner.”

“I’m looking to numbers to make it stick. There *can’t* be vast numbers of human beings inside those cones, even allowing for the miraculous: that it is possible for them to be there, during the very moment of explosion!”

A plan of attack was quickly agreed

upon. It was to take place the moment the city went dark, on the first night of the great catastrophe.

#### CHAPTER IV Under the Stars

DALE PRUETT sprawled in the dark. His men had surrounded what had once been the Empire State Building. They were awaiting the zero hour to go forward to victory or black destruction.

He cursed himself as he waited. He should have realized, when Liesen and his men spoke out of that first cone, that they had entered it unharmed, and had lived. There were other human beings inside. They could be beaten, even if their instruments of war could not. Or had it been intended for him so to interpret the hint? Was he now going into a trap at the head of his troops?

In five minutes he would know. His troops had gone into position without a sound. There were no cowards among those men. They knew they might be plunging into something that would be like falling into Mauna Loa, but they had agreed without question.

Four minutes—and Pruett’s thoughts were still chaotic.

What was the answer to the buildings within buildings?

Were there everywhere cities within cities, absolutely unknown to one another? Was it not possible that people walked this moment right through the exact plane their own bodies displaced, with none the wiser, including the walkers?

If this were possible, was it not possible that on rare occasions, Fate or Nature so endowed some individuals that they were able to pass without hindrance from one plane to the other?

*Who knew?*

Man guessed so much, knew so little; but might not his guesses be somehow hints

from the Infinite which, if he understood them, would set him in the seats of the gods?

Two minutes more and he would be charging to—what?

His heart hammered with excitement. Even if he died for what he was planning to do, his experience would be worth it, for behind him would be others to carry on, and with each annihilation humanity would delve deeper into the unplumbed wells of the Infinite.

One minute to go—  
Zero Hour!

Dale Pruett rose, a strange exaltation singing in him, and to his right and left rose his loyal soldiers. They pressed forward. They were armed with small-arms and knives. Each was grimly intent on making an end of the horror, or dying in the attempt.

Then men were closing blindly, savagely, on the strange walls of what had been the Empire State Building. Those walls were a glowing white in the eerie light which flooded the city.

Pruett had forgotten the abnormal heat, the winter of abysmal cold, everything save this moment.

The white walls were dead ahead. Soldiers were climbing up the rubble. Before they reached the white walls, though, not even the grimmest commands to remain silent could restrain their natural soldier instincts to go into battle with cries on their lips—cheers for prospective victory. Rising from a thousand throats, such cheers now broke forth.

“Faster! Faster!” shouted Pruett. Enemies inside might hear and somehow prevent entrance.

But if they had heard, the enemy had no time in which to act. Pruett reached the white wall, walked directly ahead as though the wall had not been there—and stopped in amazement.

He was inside the Empire State Building, right enough. He had been inside it before many times, and it seemed no different than it always had! Nothing had changed,

apparently, save the outer covering of the great skyscraper. There were even electric lights.

THE great lobby into which he burst with his men was crowded with the enemy. Sinister-looking men, garbed in smart military tunics. All were armed, ready for instant action. They were a strange motley—Americans, Japanese, English, Italians. The “Dictator” appeared to have selected a cross-section from every race in the world. Recruits who would follow him to hell itself in the search for an empire of power.

Pruett’s voice rang out.

“Shoot to kill! Take no prisoners!”

Near him one of the enemy was crying out hysterically, giving orders. “Hold them! Guard the Atomotor!” Dale Pruett leveled his gun and fired two rapid shots at the man. Golden flame jetted from the gun. Two dark stains appeared on the man’s grey tunic. The blood hosed out in little crimson fountains and the enemy soldier plopped to the floor of the hall, dead.

Pruett’s men were engaged in grim, deathly combat. Guns barking hollowly inside the strange white cone, glittering trench-knives finding a target and then being withdrawn red with gore, they were fighting desperately in hand-to-hand combat with an unknown horde.

The lobby was a shambles. Under captains and majors, the fight was rising from floor to floor, the new invaders mopping up with savage intensity.

And then Dale Pruett remembered. The soldier he had killed had yelled something about an “Atomotor.” Of course! The Atomotor was the fiendish device the Dictator used to achieve that mysterious barrier. A diabolic machine, conceived by a madman’s super-science, sending emanations of destruction and cosmic force that could destroy civilization.

Pruett knew he must find that machine.

Find it and smash it to ions. And then he must kill the Dictator, the crazed genius who had created it.

But where was the machine? There were hundreds of offices in the building and to comb them all one by one would take valuable time.

One of the enemy came rushing at him, firing from an automatic as he ran. Dale Pruett flung up his pistol and shot for the man's legs. The man toppled, gun clattering on the bloody floor. But the injured man tried to keep going, crawling like a snake with a broken back, toward the stairs.

Pruett stooped over the man on whose pale face was the sweat of agony, in beads as red as his own blood.

"Where is that Atomotor?" demanded Pruett grimly.

"I refuse to tell!"

"Then you're going to show me!"

He hooked his elbow under the ankles and wrists of his wounded captive, lifted him, bending his back. The man groaned horribly. His face was contorted, lined with anguish.

"I can't stand it!" he finally gasped. "I'll tell! I'll tell!"

Pruett eased the pressure on the man's back. "What is the Atomotor? How does it work?"

"It is a motor driven by the unleashed power of atomic energy—containing more power than a hundred Niagaras."

"What does it do?" Pruett went on, twisting the prisoner's arm once more.

"I can't tell. He'll kill me!" the man gasped in a tortured breath.

"I'll kill you if you don't—now! What does it do?"

"It—it controls the *etheric flow*—"

"And the light I saw this morning, early, shooting into the sky over the Dorgan Building?"

"Was a signal to our comrades in other buildings throughout the city that the attack was to begin." The prisoner was breathing

heavily, his breath was coming in short, spasmodic gasps.

Pruett realized that the man might pass out any moment now.

"The Dictator!" he demanded quickly. "Where is he?"

"The Dorgan Building—fourteenth floor."

Pruett had not been a second too soon.

The fellow slumped down into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER V The Etheric Flow

AS he raced toward the entrance of the building, once again being able mysteriously to go through that impenetrable barrier, darting madly toward the Dorgan Building, Dale's thoughts were a chaotic vortex. The power of the atom, after it had been successfully smashed, and the power leashed, turned to villainous use instead of to human needs! Scientists had long speculated on that. Since the atom was known to man.

Power beyond conception, within the atom, too infinitesimal ever to be seen! Yet when unleashed, a force that could destroy the world. The etheric flow—just words to indicate something man did not understand—unless the scientist back of this horror had grasped the secret. Ether was supposed to be something, nobody knew exactly what, which was in everything, outer space, throughout the galaxies of the Universe, flowing in all directions at once. And it could not be defined.

Nothing could stop it. It flowed through any metal as though the metal were non-existent. It flowed through man, through his every cell, through the vastness of space, through all the celestial bodies. But what catastrophe might result if some power could control the flow? Pruett knew now the answer to the extreme weathers that had troubled the world—the blistering summers and the

sub-zero winters. The Dictator had in all probability experimented with the etheric flow, learning by trial and error, with a world of men for guinea pigs.

Perhaps he might even have disrupted the Heaviside Layer, that unknown band of force in Earth's stratosphere and which science claims even radio waves cannot penetrate. Who knew but that the Heaviside Layer acted as a sort of weather filter?

Pruett's mind churned with the problem as he ran down deserted Fifth Avenue. Tripping, stumbling over the high-piled debris from the exploded buildings, he ran on breathlessly, stopping only once to tell a patrolling soldier to pass the word on that the Dictator was in the Dorgan Building.

At last he came up to the great white cone which had once been the Dorgan Building. He entered with no hesitation this time, wondering only why he could go through and why bombs dropped from miles above had no effect.

Uniformed enemy soldiers were in the lobby, keeping watch. Pruett fired quickly, accurately, and before they could recover from the surprise attack he was heading for the stairs, leaping up the steps three at a time, a gun in each hand. Below him enemy soldiers were shouting, running in wild confusion.

With almost superhuman energy he kept mounting the stairs, bridging floor after floor. When at last he reached the fourteenth, he leaned momentarily against the wall, his breath coming in giant sobs.

A faint, resounding hum, dynamo-like in nature, was coming from the office in the left corridor. This must be the Dictator's headquarters—the laboratory where the first Atomotor had been unleashed.

Quietly, cautious lest he warn the Dictator that his stronghold had been invaded, Pruett crept along the wall, moving toward the laboratory.

The door was open. A strange spectacle met his view. In the middle of the

room was a huge coppery cylinder, a maze of complex wires, tubings and scientific paraphernalia leading from it to an adjacent motor. Had it not been for the wires, Dale could have lifted the motor itself with one hand. It looked like a neat, compact model of a Diesel engine.

"DIAGONALLY across the room, a dozen telephones before him, a man was barking into the transmitters.

"So they're coming up the Dorgan Building to get me? Stand by. I'm going to broadcast an ultimatum—either they cease all attack or I blow the whole of New York to atoms! All I have to do is pull a switch at my side—" Suddenly the man wheeled, sensing an intruder in the room.

The Dictator was short, squat. Unlike the uniforms of the others, his tunic was red. His eyes glinted like ingots of molten metal. A barbarous black beard contrasted gleaming white teeth. It was difficult to guess his nationality. His features were polyglot.

Pruett had him covered with both guns. "Stay away from that switch," he cried, "or I'll let you have it!"

The Dictator grinned, a futile, beaten grin. Swift as light one hand darted for the switch. He moved with blurring speed, before the act registered with Pruett.

"Unless you drop both guns," the Dictator said evenly, "I'll close the switch right now!"

Pruett let drop his hands, but still held on to the guns. Would the Dictator be the fatalistic type to close the switch, taking the city with him, knowing that all was lost? He must stall for time, Pruett thought swiftly. Help would come soon. He feigned astounded interest.

"Tell me how your ether flow functions," he asked. He must feed the man's vanity, bloat his ego—get him away from that switch!

The Dictator jerked his head sharply, bushy black beard bobbing up. "Etheric flow?"

Then you know about it?"

"A little. You must be a genius to have analyzed it and adapted its potentialities for control." Pruett flattered with subtlety. He must make the man forget about that switch!

The Dictator loosened up. "My invention—" he muttered. "The Atomotor is on now. Turn it off and in a split second this white building would be gone. In its place would be the skeleton of the Dorgan Building. In order to control the etheric flow, we must keep a constant, firm grip on it. That's simple, for the power of the atom is limitless, inexhaustible, and its motor does not run down. The power in these Atomotors has been adapted to current situations. That is it can be sent out through the simple electric wires which lighted this building, which still light them—despite the fact that the rest of the city, save in the other cones, is dark."

Pruett interrupted, feeding the man oily praise. "Heavens, man, you've revolutionized the science of physics! Tell me more about the Atomotor."

The madman chuckled in a gust of fiendish laughter.

"You think you can talk to me, divert my attention, and kill me? I'm too clever for you. I've got one hand on this switch, and at your first move I'll close it. This is a master switch, controlling the atomic energy in all the Atomotors in the city. They have been normally regulated to control the etheric flow—but with the throwing of this switch, the atomic energy in them will be released in full force. The city will be blasted to bits.

"I KNOW you'll never get away from here. So you might as well realize what a genius I am. The power of the atom is sent out over the wires which light this building, the main conduits of which are, or were, imbedded in the walls. The instant the button, after the connection was made, was turned to 'On,' the entire building became, shall we term it 'atomized'? It happens to be the truth. And in

between the wires, no matter in what direction they ran, or how far apart they were, a field of force was set up—through which nothing, not even ether, could pass! Do you understand?"

Dale Pruett took a deep breath. Slowly, imperceptibly, he was edging nearer and nearer the Atomotor.

"I think so," he answered. "Hitherto ether has flowed through time and space and eternity with nothing whatever to stop or even slow its flow. Now, this field of force, built up by the atom—or howsoever many of them may be harnessed in one Atomotor! — suddenly stops that flow. I get that. The ether piles up against the field of force which, roughly, follows the outline of the building. The ether passes through the walls of the building, as always, and continues to pile up until it can no longer occupy the same space as the walls of the building! Then—the walls collapse. It happens so swiftly that the walls actually explode! And we see a new building in place of the old, in the batting of an eye! It looks to be white—"

"Because," interrupted the Dictator, "it is totally lacking in color of any shade whatsoever—"

"And by turning that one button to 'Off,' you can allow the ether to flow on—and the white building disappears, is that it?"

"Yes—"

"What man can imagine, man can do," said Pruett softly. "I'd give my soul if this discovery had been mine. But how is it that men can march straight through walls, but that bullets and inanimate things cannot?"

The Dictator sighed. "That's as simple as the rest of it. On striking the white wall, anything—any thing, you understand—is instantly rendered absolutely motionless. You know, there is a fraction of a second when a spinning wheel, in contact with the ground, is motionless? Any inanimate thing that strikes the white wall is also motionless, and cannot move of itself. Man can move of himself. Machinery cannot. Bullets cannot."

“But the bullets left no marks! Neither did the bombs.”

“They were absorbed by the white walls. If you could see a bullet, in slow motion, penetrate the white wall, you would see it become shorter and shorter as it penetrated, until it vanished, or was ‘swallowed.’ The part that touched the wall was motionless. The part still in motion, continued in motion, until it disappeared. Bullets or bombs, they were imprisoned in the outer barrier. Think of the barrier as a jellylike substance. Anything falling into the jelly becomes motionless.

But animate objects, like men, because they have the motive power within themselves to do so, can move through the barrier after their first initial action has been arrested. The bombs may have exploded within the barrier, but their effect was nil. And now I’ve told you enough, my friend. I’m going to pull that switch!”

SUDDENLY a sharp, whiplike report sounded in the laboratory. The Dictator fell to the floor, a bluish hole in his forehead. Pruett spun around. There, in the doorway, stood good old Colonel Liesen, of the good old Marines, smoking gun in hand!

“COLONEL LIESEN reporting, sir!” he saluted. “The Dictator had me prisoner in the building across the way. There’s an underground passage between this building and that one. I heard his men talking, knew that the Dictator was here, and decided to come here and kill him. You almost beat me to it!”

Pruett walked over quietly to the dead scientist. “A great genius that man must have been,” he said. “But some queer quirk of his mind warped that genius, perverted it. He wanted to be master of the world. He must have spent his lifetime planning this, organizing secret recruits from all over the world, renting office space in all the skyscrapers so that he could install his Atomotors. Suppose he had ever perfected his invention to the point where even human beings could not penetrate the barrier—” Pruett sighed, walked over to the switch on the wall and tore it from its socket.

He could not see what was happening on the outside of the Dorgan Building, nor on the outside of the other conelike structures. But simultaneously with his yanking out of that master switch, and the ceasing of the harnessed etheric flow, the white cones disappeared instantaneously. Only gaunt, skeleton frames of the original buildings remained. There would be much reconstruction work to be done in New York City—after the American soldiers finished mopping up the Dictator’s rabble “army,” and a frightened citizenry should trail tremblingly back to their all but devastated city.

The reign of the Dictator was finished—the menace of the Atomotor over—its secret gone with its diabolically clever inventor.

Dale Pruett smiled wanly as his eyes locked with those of the colonel. Then he slumped down into the nearest chair. The first Secretary of Military Science was very tired.