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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IRRESISTIBLE WEAPON \*\*\*



*There's no such thing as a weapon too horrible to use; weapons will continue to become bigger, and deadlier. Like other things that can't be stopped...*

## IRRESISTIBLE WEAPON

By H. B. Fyfe

Illustrated by ED EMSH

**I**N THE SPECIAL observation dome of the colossal command ship just beyond Pluto, every nervous clearing of a throat rasped through the silence. Telescopes were available but most of the scientists and high officials preferred the view on the huge telescreen.

This showed, from a distance of several million miles, one of the small moons of the frigid planet, so insignificant that it had not been discovered until man had pushed the boundaries of space exploration past the asteroids. The satellite was about to become spectacularly significant, however, as the first target of man's newest, most destructive

weapon.

"I need not remind you, gentlemen," white-haired Co-ordinator Evora of Mars had said, "that if we have actually succeeded in this race against our former Centaurian colonies, it may well prevent the imminent conflict entirely. In a few moments we shall know whether our scientists have developed a truly irresistible weapon."

Of all the officials, soldiers, and scientists present, Arnold Gibson was perhaps the least excited. For one thing, he had labored hard to make the new horror succeed and felt reasonably confident that it would. The project had been given the attention of every first-class scientific mind in the Solar System; for the great fear was that the new states on the Centaurian planets might win the race of discovery and ...

*And bring a little order into this old-fashioned, inefficient fumbling toward progress, Gibson thought contemptuously. Look at them—fools for all their degrees and titles! They've stumbled on something with possibilities beyond their confused powers of application.*

A gasp rustled through the chamber, followed by an even more awed silence than had preceded the unbelievable, ultra-rapid action on the telescreen. Gibson permitted himself a tight smile of satisfaction.

*Now my work really begins*, he reflected.

A few quick steps brought him to Dr. Haas, director of the project, just before the less stunned observers surrounded that gentleman, babbling questions.

"I'll start collecting the Number Three string of recorders," he reported.

"All right, Arnold," agreed Haas. "Tell the others to get their ships out too. I'll be busy here."

*Not half as busy as you will be in about a day*, thought Gibson, heading for the spaceship berths.

HE HAD ARRANGED to be assigned the recording machines drifting in space at the greatest distance from the command ship. The others would assume that he needed more time to locate and retrieve the apparatus—which would give him a head start toward Alpha Centauri.

His ship was not large, but it was powerful and versatile to cope with any emergency that may have been encountered during the dangerous tests. Gibson watched his instruments carefully for signs of pursuit until he had put a few million miles between himself and the command ship. Then he eased his craft into subspace drive and relaxed his vigilance.

He returned to normal space many "days" later in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. They may have attempted to follow him for all he knew, but it hardly mattered by then. He broadcast the recognition signal he had been given to memorize long ago, when he had volunteered his services to the new states. Then he headed for the capital planet, Nessus. Long before reaching it, he acquired a lowering escort of warcraft, but he was permitted to land.

"Well, well, it's young Gibson!" the Chairman of Nessus greeted him, after the newcomer had passed through the exhaustive screening designed to protect the elaborate underground headquarters. "I trust you have news for us, my boy. Watch outside the door, Colonel!"

One of the ostentatiously armed guards stepped outside and closed the door as Gibson greeted the obese man sitting across the button-studded expanse of desk. The scientist was under no illusion as to the vagueness of the title "Chairman." He was facing the absolute power of the Centaurian planets—which, in a few months' time, would be the same as saying the ruler of all the human race in both systems. Gibson's file must have been available on the Chairman's desk telescreen within minutes of the reception of his recognition signal. He felt a thrill of admiration for the efficiency of the new states and their system of government.

He made it his business to report briefly and accurately, trusting that the plain facts of his feat would attract suitable recognition. They did. Chairman Diamond's sharp blue eyes glinted out of the fat mask of his features.

"Well done, my boy!" he grunted, with a joviality he did not bother trying to make sound overly sincere. "So *they* have it! You must see our men immediately, and point out where they have gone wrong. You may leave it to me to decide *who* has gone wrong!"

ARNOLD GIBSON shivered involuntarily before reminding himself that *he* had seen the correct answer proved before his eyes. He had stood there and watched—more, he had worked with them all his adult life—and he was the last whom the muddled fools would have suspected.

The officer outside the door, Colonel Korman, was recalled and given orders to escort Gibson to the secret state laboratories. He glanced briefly at the scientist when they had been let out through the complicated system of safeguards.

"We have to go to the second moon," he said expressionlessly. "Better sleep all you can on the way. Once you're there, the Chairman will be impatient for results!"

Gibson was glad, after they had landed on the satellite, that he had taken the advice. He was led from one underground lab to another, to compare Centaurian developments with Solarian. Finally, Colonel Korman appeared to extricate him, giving curt answers to such researchers as still had questions.

"Whew! Glad you got me out!" Gibson thanked him. "They've been picking my brain for two days straight!"

"I hope you can stay awake," retorted Korman with no outward sign of sympathy. "If you think you can't, say so now. I'll have them give you another shot. The Chairman is calling on the telescreen."

Gibson straightened.

*Jealous snob!* he thought. *Typical military fathead, and he knows I amount to more than any little colonel now. I was smart enough to fool all the so-called brains of the Solar System.*

"I'll stay awake," he said shortly.

Chairman Diamond's shiny features appeared on the screen soon after Korman reported his charge ready.

"Speak freely," he ordered Gibson. "This beam is so tight and scrambled that no prying jackass could even tell that it is communication. Have you set us straight?"

"Yes, Your Excellency," replied Gibson. "I merely pointed out which of several methods the Solarians got to yield results. Your—our scientists were working on all possibilities, so it would have been only a matter of time."

"Which you have saved us," said Chairman Diamond. His ice-blue eyes glinted again. "I wish I could have seen the faces of Haas and Co-ordinator Evora, and the rest. You fooled them completely!"

Gibson glowed at the rare praise.

"I dislike bragging, Your Excellency," he said, "but they *are* fools. I might very well have found the answer without them, once they had collected the data. My success shows what intelligence, well-directed after the manner of the new states of Centauri, can accomplish against inefficiency."

The Chairman's expression, masked by the fat of his face, nevertheless approached a smile.

"So you would say that you—one of *our* sympathizers—were actually the most intelligent worker *they* had?"

*He'll have his little joke, thought Gibson, and I'll let him put it over. Then, even that sour colonel will laugh with us, and the Chairman will hint about what post I'll get as a reward. I wouldn't mind being in charge—old Haas' opposite number at this end.*

"I think I might indeed be permitted to boast of that much ability, Your Excellency," he answered, putting on what he hoped was an expectant smile. "Although, considering the Solarians, that is not saying much."

The little joke did not develop precisely as anticipated.

"Unfortunately," Chairman Diamond said, maintaining his smile throughout, "wisdom should never be confused with intelligence."

**G**IBSON WAITED, feeling his own smile stiffen as he wondered what could be going wrong. Surely, they could not doubt *his* loyalty! A hasty glance at Colonel Korman revealed no expression on the military facade affected by that gentleman.

"For if wisdom *were* completely synonymous with intelligence," the obese Chairman continued, relishing his exposition, "you would be a rival to myself, and consequently would be—disposed of—anyway!"

Such a tingle shot up Gibson's spine that he was sure he must have jumped.

"*Anyway?*" he repeated huskily. His mouth suddenly seemed dry.

Chairman Diamond smiled out of the telescreen, so broadly that Gibson was unpleasantly affected by the sight of his small, gleaming, white teeth.

"Put it this way," he suggested suavely. "Your highly trained mind observed, correlated, and memorized the most intricate data and mathematics, meanwhile guiding your social relations with your former colleagues so as to remain unsuspected while stealing their most cherished secret. Such a feat demonstrates ability and intelligence."

Gibson tried to lick his lips, and could not, despite the seeming fairness of the words. He sensed a pulsing undercurrent of cruelty and cynicism.

"On the other hand," the mellow voice flowed on, "having received the information, being able to use it effectively now without you, and knowing that you betrayed *once*—I shall simply discard you like an old message blank. *That* is an act of wisdom.

"Had you chosen your course more wisely," he added, "your position might be stronger."

By the time Arnold Gibson regained his voice, the Centaurian autocrat was already giving instructions to Colonel Korman. The scientist strove to interrupt, to attract the ruler's attention even momentarily.

Neither paid him any heed, until he shouted and tried frenziedly to shove the soldier from in front of the telescreen. Korman backhanded him across the throat without looking around, with such force that Gibson staggered back and fell.

He lay, half-choking, grasping his throat with both hands until he could breathe. The colonel continued discussing his extinction without emotion.

"... so if Your Excellency agrees, I would prefer taking him back to Nessus first, for the sake of the morale factor here. Some of them are so addled now at having been caught chasing up wrong alleys that they can hardly work."

Apparently the Chairman agreed, for the screen was blank when the colonel reached down and hauled Gibson to his feet.

"Now, listen to me carefully!" he said, emphasizing his order with a ringing slap across Gibson's face. "I shall walk behind you with my blaster drawn. If you make a false move, I shall not kill you."

Gibson stared at him, holding his bleeding mouth.

"It will be much worse," Korman went on woodenly. "Imagine what it will be like to have both feet charred to the bone. You would have to crawl the rest of the way to the ship; *I* certainly would not consider carrying you!"

In a nightmarish daze, Gibson obeyed the cold directions, and walked slowly along the underground corridors of the Centaurian research laboratories. He prayed desperately that someone—anyone—might come along. *Anybody* who could possibly be used to create a diversion, or to be pushed into Korman and his deadly blaster.

The halls remained deserted, possibly by arrangement.

*Maybe I'd better wait till we reach his ship,* Gibson thought. *I ought to be able to figure a way before we reach Nessus. I had the brains to fool Haas and ...*

He winced, recalling Chairman Diamond's theory of the difference between intelligence and wisdom.

*The obscene swine!* he screamed silently.

Colonel Korman grunted warningly, and Gibson took the indicated turn.

They entered the spaceship from an underground chamber, and Gibson learned the reason for his executioner's assurance when the latter chained him to one of the pneumatic acceleration seats. The chain was fragile in appearance, but he knew he would not be free to move until Korman so desired.

*More of their insane brand of cleverness!* he reflected. *That's the sort of thing they do succeed in thinking of. They're all crazy! Why did I ever ...*

But he shrank from the question he feared to answer. To drag out into the open his petty, selfish reasons, shorn of the tinsel glamor of so-called "service" and "progress," would be too painful.

**A**FTER THE FIRST series of accelerations, he roused himself from his beaten stupor enough to note that Korman was taking a strange course for reaching Nessus. Then, entirely too close to the planet and its satellites to ensure accuracy, the colonel put the ship into subspace drive.

Korman leaned back at the conclusion of the brief activity on his control board, and met Gibson's pop-eyed stare.

"Interesting, the things worth knowing," he commented. "How to make a weapon, for instance, or whether your enemy has it yet."

He almost smiled at his prisoner's expression.

"Or even better: knowing exactly how far your enemy has progressed and how fast he can continue, whether to stop him immediately or whether you can remain a step ahead."

"B-but—if both sides are irresistible ..." Gibson stammered.

Korman examined him contemptuously.

"No irresistible weapon exists, or ever will!" he declared. "Only an irresistible *process*—the transmission of secrets! You are living proof that no safeguards can defend against *that*."

He savored Gibson's silent discomfort.

"I am sure you know how far and how fast the Centaurian scientists will go, Gibson, since I guided you to every laboratory in that plant. Your memory may require some painful jogging when we reach the Solar System; *but remember you shall!*"

"But you—you were ordered to ..."

"You didn't think I was a Centaurian, did you?" sneered Korman. "After I just explained to you *what* is really irresistible?"

THE END



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