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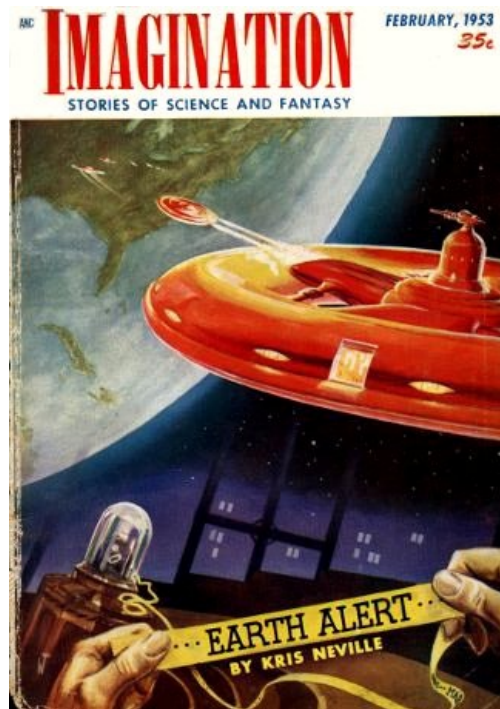
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INVADER ***



THE INVADER

By Alfred Coppel

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The Triomed advanced stealthily across the floor of the dark cell toward the sleeping figure huddled in the corner. After the long, lonely voyage, the nearness to a host filled the Triomed with eager anticipation.

The tiny spaceship that had carried him into this lush planetary system far from the galaxy's heart lay well hidden behind him. So far as he could tell, his descent had not been detected, and that was as it should be—for he was a Triomed and a scientist. One of the finest in the service of his dying race. Dying that is, until now, he thought. No longer would the race of Triomedes weaken and die for lack of suitable hosts. This third planet of the yellow sun was a paradise thick with warm-blooded biped mammals....

Invading Earth was going to be a cinch, the Triomed scout decided. But to make certain he must study its inhabitants—as one of them!

The sleeping creature stirred uneasily, as though sensing the approach of danger. The Triomed froze into immobility. It was unlikely that he could be seen, he knew, though the sense of sight was only a synthesized abstraction to him. It was not one of his own proper senses, but he had been able to detect at long distance that almost every living creature on this planet received impressions through certain specialized organs mounted on and within their structure. There were plants, of course, as there were on Triom, but they were unimportant.

There were viruses, too, and he had been afraid when he had discovered this fact that he had arrived too late. But the first attempts at establishing communication had relieved the Triomed of his fears. The indigenous viruses were primitive; not at all like his own illustrious ancestors of ancient Triom.

The sleeping biped relaxed and the Triomed inched forward again, a flat, almost two dimensional smear of glistening matter on the floor in front of the biped.

From high above the planet's night side, the Triomed had sensed the city. He had absorbed its shape and size and meaning while his craft settled through the heavy, oxygen-rich air. It was not enough that his instruments told of suitable hosts. He was a scientist and believed in absolute proof. Also, he had been in space long—without the satisfaction of a host—and he yearned for the rapport, the domination of a warm-blooded creature.

There had been a dark segment in the brilliant pattern of the city. An island of solitude amid the myriad confluences. It was there that he had landed his tiny probe ship and hidden it among the thickly wooded glades. Almost immediately he had sensed the nearness of many creatures. Insects, plants, warm-blooded quadrupeds and bipeds. There had been machines and buildings and winding roadways among the trees. Darkness had covered his progress until at last he found himself near the sleeping creature, ready to infiltrate and take command.

The glistening shape elongated, became a thread-like tendril of almost gossamer thickness. It touched the flesh of the sleeper and thrilled with pleasure. Cautiously, the Triomed moved up the hairy leg, an invisible strand of alien life close to the warm skin. Presently, the strand found the opening it sought. It slithered imperceptibly into the moist warmth of the sleeper's nostril, moved through the tear-duct into the space behind the eyeball. Here it probed through muscle and membrane along the base of the brain, seeking the pineal gland.

And found it, penetrated it, coiling like a microscopic serpent within the gland. A surge of pleasure went through the Triomed. Here was safety. The host was large, powerful and vibrant with life. Quickly, the Triomed established dominance. It was shockingly easy. The creature's mind was immature, primitive. Briefly it struggled and then died as the alien poisoned the identity centers of the brain.

New sensations poured in through unfamiliar sense organs. Sounds of the faraway city, small sounds from the many living creatures in the darkness. Smells and sights and pressures from all about him presented themselves—were evaluated and recorded in the atomic structure of the Triomed.

He was now equipped, he reflected with satisfaction, to carry out further exploration. In the guise of the indigenous biped he could roam among the natives at will. He remained in a sitting position, however, while he familiarized himself with his host.

He had two articulated appendages fixed to the trunk at a point near and below the skull-case. These ended in complex extremities consisting of five jointed fingers. The same pattern was repeated at the lower end of the trunk, but the extremities were suited there for the carrying of the creature's considerable weight. Within the trunk were the customary viscera generally associated with warm-blooded beings: lungs, intestines, stomach, liver, bladder, reproductive organs and assorted ducted and ductless glands. It was apparent to the Triomed that his present body was in excellent health. He was greatly pleased.

After some careful experiments, the Triomed rose. If there was a proper method of egress from the cubicle in which he found himself, it was not imprinted on the biped's brain. For a moment this gave the alien pause. He could, of course, determine the proper method by a tedious process of trial and error, but that would take time and he had no desire to waste the hours of darkness. One wall, he noted, consisted of vertical risers fixed in the substance of the floor and ceiling. Beyond, he could see the darkling woods and the sky-glow of the city. The answer, then, was simple force. He did not doubt there was strength enough in the host's musculature to distort the risers.

His assumption was quite correct.

Stepping through the bent risers, he picked his way along a narrow walkway lined with cubicles similar to the one he had left. Within them, dark shapes moved or lay sleeping. Some were alert, others were not. But none gave an alarm. The Triomed reached the end of the walk, scaled a

fence easily and stood on a surface of wet grass that sloped away from the low dark building toward the woods.

Behind him he heard a shout. A narrow beam of light pierced the night, swinging to and fro with a searching motion. He had a fleeting glimpse of a small biped running down the walk toward the cubicle he had deserted.

The Triomed broke toward the wood with a long loping pace that covered the ground with unbelievable swiftness. The probing light did not find him. Once among the trees he paused and took his bearings. The woods were not thick. He could see the lights of the city through the foliage. They began at the very edge of the trees, where a wide open area could be discerned. Wheeled vehicles moved past with breathtaking speed.

If there was pursuit, it was inefficient, for the Triomed moved through the woods undisturbed until he stood at the edge of the avenue, sheltered by the shadow of a large tree. Most of the traffic was vehicular, he noted. There were few pedestrians. From the noise and odor he classified the vehicles as being powered by internal combustion engines burning hydro-carbons. Primitive. That was good, he reflected. When the fleets of Triom descended on this planet, there would be no science worthy of the name to oppose them.

He waited until there was an interval in the traffic, and then stepped out confidently, crossing the avenue. As he reached the opposite side he heard a screech of brakes and a garbled, choking sound. He did not turn to discover the source of the disturbance until he had reached the shelter of a building on the far side of the walk bordering the street.

A vehicle had stopped at an oblique angle to the lane in which it was travelling, and its single occupant, a very pale-faced biped was goggling stupidly in the direction of the hidden Triomed.

For the first time, the alien being felt a twinge of apprehension. Certainly he had done nothing out of the ordinary in crossing the open space on foot? But perhaps there were tribal taboos and traditions among the natives that could not be ignored without attracting attention.

The Triomed promised himself that he would exercise more caution in such matters. Too much depended on this reconnaissance to allow it to be disturbed by carelessness.

He worked his way through the shadows between the many buildings until the wide highway was far behind him. He was very aware of the teeming life all about him—in the buildings, in the vehicles on the streets. Still, some odd impulse that stemmed from the numbed brain of his host rather than his own, kept him fairly hidden. This, he decided with something akin to annoyance, was not as it should be. If his survey were to be of any value, he must roam at will and without fear of detection, secure in his disguise.

Presently he came upon a street where streams of bipeds jostled one another, each seemingly intent upon its own particular incomprehensible errands. For a long while he watched from the shelter of an alley doorway, classifying and integrating the information his host's sharp eyes brought him. It was miraculous. Hosts of every size and description were in abundance—an unlimited supply of them. Enough for the whole population of Triom. It was beyond belief, but he could not doubt. And this was but a single concentration. A single city. From the stratosphere he had seen hundreds of similar cities. Paradise! He envisioned the fleets of Triom descending, the Triomedes emerging and infiltrating. The thoughts brought pride and anticipation. It had been so easy....

He decided not to linger. He felt now that he had his proofs and that he should return at once to his ship. Triom must be told immediately. The communicator in the ship could carry the message as soon as the craft reached a suitable distance from planetary mass. He would return, send the ship aloft, dispatch his message and then return to his host to await the others of his race.

His decision made, he stepped confidently out into the throng of bipeds, seeking the shortest route back to his hidden craft.

The result was instantaneous and amazing.

The crowd drew back with a howling, shrieking noise, leaving him standing in the center of a circle of dead white faces.

Behind the first row of bipeds, he could see others running in every direction, and screaming at the top of their voices. The racket, combined with the noises of the city, was most unpleasant. The Triomed began to be afraid.

He broke into a rapid walk, and the crowd parted before him with much louder screeching. Here and there a biped, apparently braver than the rest, made threatening motions with bundles or knotted fists. A package struck him on the shoulder.

The Triomed began to run. He noted for the first time that he towered head and shoulders over most of the bipeds nearby, and his host's brain interpreted the smells of hate and fear all about him.

The crowd scattered wildly at his

approach, but he was being followed. Panic began to clutch at the alien. What had he done wrong? Somewhere a wailing sound began—vehicles with glaring red lights swept past him with vicious, explosive noises. He felt a stinging pain in one leg, and glanced down to see it streaked with red.



Ahead of him a line of bipeds all clothed in identical blue sacs of fabric had formed, spilling from the vehicles as they halted. The Triomed stopped, sensing mortal danger. Behind him, the mob rumbled. Ahead the blue bipeds stood holding artifacts that the Triomed did not for an instant doubt were weapons.

No street opened on either side of him. He was trapped between the weapons, the mob, and two tall buildings. He hesitated only for a moment. With a desperate leap, he reached the second level of windows of the building nearest him and clung there, gasping.

A white-faced creature appeared and began poking at him with a steel rod that burned like fire when it touched his host's flesh. The creature screamed shrilly all the while.

With a sob, the Triomed swung himself onto the window ledge and began climbing upward, toward the roof of the building. It was slow work and the pain in his leg and burned shoulder slowed him down. He dare not free himself of his host now, for he was much too far from his ship to be able to return in his natural form.

There were searchlights in the street below, probing at him as he clung to the sheer facade of the building. Panic drove him upward. A continuous, wailing roar rose from the canyon below, a fear-laden hideous cacophony. The Triomed felt himself weak with terror, part of which was his host's and part of which stemmed from within himself. The terror and fear of not knowing what had gone wrong and why he stood now in such peril.

At last he reached the roof. He heaved himself over the parapet and lay for a moment, flanks heaving painfully. Then he stiffened with a new fear. He was not alone. The roof was occupied. A score or more of armed bipeds blocked him into a triangular corner of the roof. He got to his feet and stumbled backward. Their weapons were aimed at him. He retreated until the parapet stopped him, warning of the sheer drop to the street far below.

A figure separated itself from the armed mass. A flash of recognition came—partially his own, partially his host's. It was the small biped he had seen in the searchlight beam running toward the cubicle he had deserted so long ago it seemed.

The small creature began speaking, making soft, soothing noises, advancing all the while, a tiny glass vial in his hands.

Without knowing why, the Triomed felt his lips pull away from his teeth in a snarl. He heard a deep, rumbling growling sound in his own throat. The biped stopped, and the Triomed could smell his sudden fear.

He felt a surge of incomprehensible rage come over him—he crouched menacingly.

The creature took a step closer. Another. The Triomed tensed.

The creature was within reach, extending the vial. The alien could see that it was tipped with a sliver of steel. He sprang—

The weapons crashed. The alien felt the thudding impact of projectiles penetrating the brain case. In a panic he began to extrude from the pineal gland. If death overcame the host while he had rapport, he, too, would die. And if he died, Triom would die.

He felt his huge body totter. There was another blast from the weapons and he sensed the projectile coming—with what seemed to be agonizing slowness to his quickened senses. It was spinning in the darkness. It struck the eye, smashed it, moved inward, along the base of the brain....

The Triomed felt one deep, searing agony that was his alone as the bullet crushed him. The hot metal acrid touch was the last thing he knew before death came....

The policemen stood about in a circle, staring down in mixed awe and relief at the huge body on the roof.

"I've seen him a dozen times in the park," one said. "He always seemed so—so peaceable." He shook his head. "What in hell do you suppose came over him?"

The keeper looked up from where he knelt over the deep, still chest, bloody and riddled with bullets. "It happens like this sometimes," he said. "You can never tell about gorillas."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INVADER ***

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