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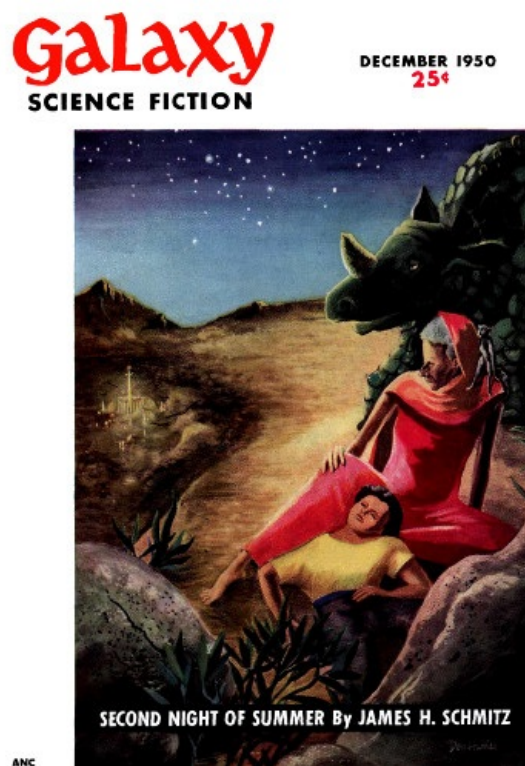
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A STONE AND A SPEAR ***



A Stone and a Spear

BY RAYMOND F. JONES

Illustrated by JOHN BUNCH

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**Given: The future is probabilities merging into one certainty.
Proposition: Can the probabilities be made improbables
so that the certainty becomes impossible?**

From Frederick to Baltimore, the rolling Maryland countryside lay under a fresh blanket of green. Wholly unaware of the summer glory, Dr. Curtis Johnson drove swiftly on the undulating highway, stirring clouds of dust and dried grasses.

Beside him, his wife, Louise, held her blowing hair away from her face and laughed into the warm air. "Dr. Dell isn't going to run away. Besides, you said we could call this a weekend vacation as well as a business trip."

Curt glanced at the speedometer and eased the pressure on the pedal. He grinned. "Wool-gathering again."

"What about?"

"I was just wondering who said it first—one of the fellows at Detrick, or that lieutenant at Bikini, or—"

"Said *what*? What are you talking about?"

"That crack about the weapons after the next war. He—whoever it was—said there may be some doubt about what the weapons of the next war will be like, but there is absolutely no doubt about the weapons of World War IV. It will be fought with stones and spears. I guess any one of us could have said it."

Louise's smile grew tight and thin. "Don't any of you ever think of anything but the next war—*any* of you?"

"How can we? We're fighting it right now."

"You make it sound so hopeless."

"That's what Dell said in the days just before he quit. He said we didn't *have* to stay at Detrick producing the toxins and aerosols that will destroy millions of lives. But he never showed us how we could quit—and be sure of staying alive. His own walking out was no more than a futile gesture."

"I just can't understand him, Curt. I think he's right in a way, but what brought *him* to that viewpoint?"

"Hard to tell," Curt said, unconsciously speeding up again. "After the war, when the atomic scientists were publicly examining their consciences, Dell told them to examine their own guts first. That was typical of him then, but soon after, he swung just as strongly pacifist and walked out of Detrick."

"It still seems strange that he abandoned his whole career. The world's foremost biochemist giving up the laboratory for a *truck farm*!" Louise glanced down at the lunch basket between them. In it were tomatoes that Dr. Hamon Dell had sent along with his invitation to visit him.

For nearly a year Dr. Dell had been sending packages of choice fruit and vegetables to his former colleagues, not only at the biological warfare center at Camp Detrick but at the universities and other research centers throughout the country.

"I wish we knew exactly why he asked us to come out," said Louise.

"Nobody claims to have figured him out. They laugh a little at him now. They eat his gifts willingly enough, but consider him slightly off his rocker. He still has all his biological talents, though. I've never seen or tasted vegetables like the ones he grows."

"And the brass at Detrick doesn't think he's gone soft in the head, either," she added much too innocently. "So they ordered you to take advantage of his invitation and try to persuade him to come back."

Curt turned his head so sharply that Louise laughed.

"No, I didn't read any secret, hush-hush papers," she said. "But it's pretty obvious, isn't it, the way you rushed right over to General Hansen after you got the invitation?"

"It *is* hush-hush, top-secret stuff," said Curt, his eyes once more on the road. "The Army doesn't want it to leak, but they need Dell, need him badly. Anyone knowing bio-war developments would understand. They wanted to send me before. Dell's invitation was the break we needed. I may be the one with sufficient influence to bring him back. I hope so. But keep it under your permanent and forget your guessing games. There's more to it than you know."

The car passed through a cool, wooded section and Louise leaned back and drank in the beauty

of it.

"Hush-hush, top secret stuff," she said. "Grown men playing children's games."

"Pretty deadly games for children, darling."

In the late afternoon they by-passed the central part of Baltimore and headed north beyond the suburb of Towson toward Dell's truck farm.

His sign was visible for a half mile:

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT
Eat the Best
EAT DELL'S VEGETABLES

"Dr. Hamon Dell, world's foremost biochemist—and truck farmer," Curt muttered as he swung the car off the highway.

Louise stepped out when the tires ceased crunching on the gravel lane. She scanned the fields and old woods beyond the ancient but preserved farmhouse. "It's so unearthly."

Curt followed. The song of birds, which had been so noticeable before, seemed strangely muted. The land itself was an alien, faintly greenish hue, a color repulsive to more than just the eyes.

"It must be something in this particular soil," said Curt, "something that gives it that color and produces such wonderful crops. I'll have to remember to ask Dell about it."

"You want Dr. Dell?"

They whirled at the sound of an unfamiliar voice. Louise uttered a startled cry.

The gaunt figure behind them coughed asthmatically and pointed with an arm that seemed composed only of bones and brownish skin, so thin as to be almost translucent.

"Yes," said Curt shakenly. "We're friends of his."

"Dell's in back. I'll tell him you're here."

The figure shambled away and Louise shook herself as if to rid her mind of the vision. "If our grandchildren ever ask about zombies, I can tell them. Who in the world do you suppose he is?"

"Hired man, I suppose. Sounds as if he should be in a lung sanitarium. Funny that Dell would keep him around in that condition."

From somewhere behind the house came the sound of a truck engine. Curt took Louise's arm and led her around the trim, graveled path.

The old farmhouse had been very carefully renovated. Everywhere was evidence of exquisite care, yet the cumulative atmosphere remained uninviting, almost oppressive. Curt told himself it was the utter silence, made even more tense by the lonely chugging of the engine in back, and the incredible harsh color of the soil beneath their feet.

Rounding the corner, they came in sight of a massive tank truck. From it a hose led to an underground storage tank and pulsed slowly under the force of the liquid gushing through it. No one was in sight.

"What could that be for?" asked Louise.

"You've got me. Could be gasoline, but Dell hasn't any reason for storing that much here."

They advanced slowly and amazement crept over Curt as he comprehended the massiveness of the machine. The tank was of elliptical cross section, over ten feet on its major axis. Six double wheels supported the rear; even the front ones were double. In spite of such wide weight distribution, the tires were pressing down the utterly dry ground to a depth of an inch or more.

"They must haul liquid lead in that thing," said Curt.

"It's getting cool. I wish Dell would show up." Louise glanced out over the twenty-acre expanse of truck farm. Thick rows of robust plants covered the area. Tomatoes, carrots, beets, lettuce, and other vegetables—a hundred or so fruit trees were at the far end. Between them ran the road over which the massive truck had apparently entered the farm from the rear.

A heavy step sounded abruptly and Dell's shaggy head appeared from around the end of the truck. His face lighted with pleasure.

"Curt, my boy! And Louise! I thought you weren't going to show up at all."

Curt's hand was almost lost in Dell's enormous grip, but it wasn't because of that that his grip was passive. It was his shocked reaction to Dell's haggard appearance. The fierce eyes looked merely old and tired now. The ageless, leathery hide of Dell's face seemed to have collapsed before some overpowering decay, its bronze smoothness shattered by deep lines that were like tool marks of pain.

Curt spoke in a subdued voice. "It's hard to get away from Detrick. Always one more experiment to try—"

"—And the brass riding you as if they expected you to win another war for them tomorrow afternoon," said Dell. "I remember."

"We wondered about this truck," Louise commented brightly, trying to change the subject. "We finally gave up on it."

"Oh, that. It brings liquid fertilizer to pump into my irrigation water, that's all. No mystery. Let's go on to the house. After you're settled we can catch up on everything and I'll tell you about the things I'm doing here."

"Who's the man we saw?" asked Curt. "He looks as if his health is pretty precarious."

"That's Brown. He came with the place—farmed it for years for my uncle before I inherited it. He could grow a garden on a granite slab. In spite of appearances, he's well enough physically."

"How has your own health been? You have—changed—since you were at Detrick."

Dell raised a lock of steel-gray hair in his fingers and dismissed the question with a wan smile. "We all wear out sometime," he said. "My turn had to come."

Inside, some of the oppressiveness vanished as the evening passed. It was cool enough for lighting the fireplace, and they settled before it after dinner. While they watched the flickering light that whipped the beamed ceiling, Dell entertained them with stories of his neighbors, whose histories he knew clear back to Revolutionary times.

Early, however, Louise excused herself. She knew they would want privacy to thresh out the purposes behind Dell's invitation—and Curt's acceptance.

When she was gone, there was a moment's silence. The logs crackled with shocking pistol shots in the fireplace. The scientist moved to stir the coals and then turned abruptly to Curt.

"When are you going to leave Detrick?"

"When are *you* coming back?" Curt demanded instead of answering.

"So they still want me, even after the things I said when I left."

"You're needed badly. When I told Hansen I was coming down, he said it would be worth five years of my own work to bring you back."

"They want me to produce even deadlier toxins than those I gave them," Dell said viciously. "They want some that can kill ten million people in four minutes instead of only one million—"

"Any man would go insane if he looked at it that way. It would be the same as gun-makers being tormented by the vision of torn men destroyed by their bullets, the sorrowing families—"

"And why shouldn't the gun-makers be tormented?" Dell's voice was low with controlled hate. "They are men like you and me who give the *war*-makers new tools for their trade."

"Oh, Dell, it's not as simple as that." Curt raised a hand and let it fall wearily. They had been over this so many times before. "Weapon designers are no more responsible than any other agents of society. It's pure neurosis to absorb the whole guilt of wars yet unfought merely because you happened to have developed a potential weapon."

Dell touched the massive dome of his skull. "Here within this brain of mine has been conceived a thing which will probably destroy a billion human lives in the coming years. *D. triconus* toxin in a suitable aerosol requires only a countable number of molecules in the lungs of a man to kill him. My brain and mine alone is responsible for that vicious, murderous discovery."

"Egotism! Any scientist's work is built upon the pyramid of past knowledge."

"The weapon I have described exists. If I had not created it, it would not exist. It is as simple as that. No one shares my guilt and my responsibility. And what more do they want of me now? What greater dream of mass slaughter and destruction have they dreamed?"

"They want you," said Curt quietly, "because they believe we are not the only ones possessing the toxin. They need you to come back and help find the antitoxin for *D. triconus*."

Dell shook his head. "That's a blind hope. The action of *D. triconus* is like a match set to a powder train. The instant its molecules contact protoplasm, they start a chain reaction that rips apart the cell structure. It spreads like fire from one cell to the next, and nothing can stop it once it's started operating within a given organism."

"But doesn't this sense of guilt—unwarranted as it is—make you *want* to find an antitoxin?"

"Suppose I succeeded? I would have canceled the weapon of an enemy. The military would know he could nullify ours in time. Then they would command me to work out still another toxin. It's a vicious and insane circle, which must be broken somewhere. The purpose of the entire remainder of my life is to break it."

"When you are fighting for your life and the enemy already has his hands about your throat," Curt argued, "you reach for the biggest rock you can get your hands on and beat his brains in. You don't try to persuade him that killing is unethical."

For an instant it seemed to Curt that a flicker of humor touched the corners of Dell's mouth. Then the lines tightened down again.

"Exactly," he said. "You reach for a rock and beat his brains in. You don't wipe human life off the face of the Earth in order to reach that enemy. I asked you to come down here to help me break this circle of which I spoke. There has to be someone here—after I'm gone—"

Dell's eyes shifted to the depths of shadows beyond the firelight and remained fixed on unseen images.

"Me? Help you?" Curt asked incredulously. "What could I do? Give up science and become a truck gardener, too?"

"You might say that we would be in the rock business," replied Dell. "Fighting is no longer on the level of one man with his hands about another's throat, but it *should* be. Those who want power and domination should have to fight for it personally. But it has been a long time since they had to.

"Even in the old days, kings and emperors hired mercenaries to fight their wars. The militarists don't buy swords now. They buy brains. We're the mercenaries of the new day, Curt, you and I. Once there was honor in our profession. We searched for truth for its own sake, and because it was our way of life. Once we were the hope of the world because science was a universal language.

"What a horrible joke that turned out to be! Today we are the terror of the world. The war-makers built us fine laboratories, shining palaces, and granted every whim—for a price. They took us up to the hills and showed us the whole world and we sold our souls for it.

"Look what happened after the last war. Invading armies carried off prize Nazi brains like so much loot, set the scientists up in big new laboratories, and these new mercenaries keep right on pouring out knowledge for other kings and emperors.

"Their loyalty is only to their science. But they can't experiment for knowledge any more, only weapons and counter-weapons. You'll say I'm anti-war, even, perhaps, anti-American or pro-Russian. I am not against just wars, but I am against unjust slaughter. And I love America too much to let her destroy herself along with the enemy."

"Then what are we to do?" Curt demanded fiercely. "What are we to do while enemy scientists prepare these same weapons to exterminate *us*? Sure, it's one hell of a mess. Science is already dead. The kind you talk about has been dead for twenty years. All our fine ideals are worthless until the politicians find a solution to their quarrels."

"Politicians? Since when did men of science have to wait upon politicians for solutions of human problems?" Dell passed a hand over his brow, and suddenly his face contorted in pain.

"What is it?" Curt exclaimed, rising.

"Nothing—nothing, my boy. Some minor trouble I've had lately. It will pass in a moment."

With effort, he went on. "I wanted to say that already you have come to think of science being divided into armed camps by the artificial boundaries of the politicians. Has it been so long ago that it was not even in your lifetime, when scientists regarded themselves as one international brotherhood?"

"I can't quarrel with your ideals," said Curt softly. "But national boundary lines do, actually, divide the scientists of the world into armed camps."

"Your premises are still incorrect. They do not deliberately war on each other. It is only that they have blindly sold themselves as mercenaries. And they can be called upon to redeem themselves. They can break their unholy contracts."

"There would have to be simultaneous agreement among the scientists of all nations. And they are men, influenced by national ideals. They are not merely ivory-tower dabblers and searchers after truth."

"Do you remember me five years ago?" Dell's face became more haggard, as if the memory shamed him. "Do you remember when I told the atomic scientists to examine their guts instead of their consciences?"

"Yes. You certainly *have* changed."

"And so can other men. There is a way. I need your help desperately, Curt—"

The face of the aging biochemist contorted again with unbearable pain. His forehead beaded with sweat as he clenched his skull between his vein-knotted hands.

"Dell! What is it?"

"It will pass," Dr. Dell breathed through clenched teeth. "I have some medicine—in my bedroom. I'm afraid I'll have to excuse myself tonight. There's so much more I have to say to you, but we'll continue our talk in the morning, Curt. I'm sorry—"

He stumbled out, refusing Curt's offer of aid with a grim headshake. The fire crackled loudly within the otherwise silent room. Curt felt cold at the descending chill of the night, his mind bewildered at Dell's barrage, some of it so reasonable, some of it so utterly confused. And there was no clue to the identity of the powerful force that had made so great a change in the once militant scientist.

Slowly Curt mounted the staircase of the old house and went to the room Dell had assigned them. Louise was in bed reading a murder mystery.

"Secret mission completed?" she asked.

Curt sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm afraid something terrible is wrong with Dell. Besides the neurotic guilt complex because of his war work, he showed signs of a terrific and apparently habitual pain in his head. If that should be brain tumor, it might explain his erratic notions, his abandonment of his career."

"Oh, I hope it's not that!"

It seemed to Curt that he had slept only minutes before he was roused by sounds in the night. He rolled over and switched on the light. His watch said two o'clock. Louise raised up in sharp alarm.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I thought I heard something. There it is again!"

"It sounds like someone in pain. It must be Dell!"

Curt leaped from the bed and wrestled into his bathrobe. As he hurried toward Dell's room, there was another deep groan that ended in a shuddering sob of unbearable agony.

He burst into the scientist's room and switched on the light. Dell looked up, eyes glazed with pain.

"Dr. Dell!"

"Curt—I thought I had time left, but this is as far as I can go—Just remember all I said tonight. Don't forget a word of it." He sat up rigidly, hardly breathing in the effort of control. "The responsibility for the coming destruction of civilization lies at the doors of the scientist mercenaries. Don't allow it, Curt. Get them to abandon the laboratories of the warriors. Get them to reclaim their honor—"

He fell back upon the pillow, his face white with pain and shining with sweat. "Brown—see Brown. He can tell you the—the rest."

"I'll go for a doctor," said Curt. "Who have you had? Louise will stay with you."

"Don't bring a doctor. There's no escaping this. I've known it for months. Wait here with me, Curt. I'll be gone soon."

Curt stared with pity at the great scientist whose mind had so disintegrated. "You need a doctor. I'll call a hospital, Johns Hopkins, if you want."

"Wait, maybe you're right. I have no phone here. Get Dr. Wilson—the Judge Building, Towson—find his home address in a phone book."

"Fine. I'll only be a little while."

He stepped to the door.

"Curt! Take the lane down to the new road—behind the farm. Quicker—it cuts off a mile or so—go down through the orchard—"

"All right. Take it easy now. I'll be right back."

Curt frantically got dressed, ran down the stairs and out to the car. He wondered absently what had become of the cadaverous Brown, who seemed to have vanished from the premises.

The wheels spun gravel as he started the car and whipped it out of the driveway. Then he was on the stretch of lane leading through the grove. The moonless night was utterly dark, and the stream of light ahead of the car seemed the only living thing upon the whole landscape. He almost wished he had taken the more familiar road. To get lost now might mean death for Dell.

No traffic flowed past him in either direction. There were no buildings showing lights. Overwhelming desolation seemed to possess the countryside and seep into his soul. It seemed impossible that this lay close to the other highway with which he was familiar.

He strained his eyes into the darkness for signs of an all-night gas station or store from which he could phone. Finally, he resigned himself to going all the way to Towson. At that moment he

glimpsed a spark of light far ahead.

Encouraged, Curt stepped on the gas. In less than ten minutes he was at the spot. He braked the car to a stop, and surveyed the building as he got out. It seemed more like a power substation than anything else. But there should be a telephone, at least.

He knocked on the door. Almost instantly, footsteps sounded within.

The door swung wide.

"I wonder if I could use your—" Curt began. He gasped. "Brown! Dell's dying—we've got to get a doctor for him—"

As if unable to comprehend, the hired man stared dumbly for a long moment. His hollow-cheeked face was almost skeletal in the light that flooded out from behind him.

Then from somewhere within the building came a voice, sharp with tension. "Brown! What the devil are you doing? Shut that door!"

That brought the figure to life. He whipped out a gun and motioned Curt inward. "Step inside. We'll have to decide what to do with you when Carlson finds you're here."

"What's the matter with you?" Curt asked, stupefied. "Dell's dying. He needs help."

"Get in here!"

Curt moved slowly forward. Brown closed the door behind him and motioned toward a closed door at the other end of a short hall. They opened it and stepped into a dimly lighted room.



Curt's eyes slowly adjusted and he saw what seemed to be a laboratory. It was so packed with equipment that there was scarcely room for the group of twelve or fifteen men jammed closely about some object with their backs to Curt and Brown.



Brown shambled forward like an agitated skeleton, breaking the circle. Then Curt saw that the object of the men's attention was a large cathode ray screen occupied by a single green line. There was a pip on it rising sharply near one side of the two-foot tube. The pip moved almost imperceptibly toward a vertical red marker over the face of the screen. The men stared as if hypnotized by it.

The newcomers' arrival, however, disturbed their attention. One man turned with an irritable growl. "Brown, for heaven's sake—"

He was a bony creature, even more cadaverous than Brown. He caught sight of Curt's almost indecently robust face. He gasped and swore.

"Who is this? What's he doing here?"

The entire montage of skull faces turned upon Curt. He heard a sharp collective intake of breath, as if his presence were some unforeseen calamity that had shaken the course of their incomprehensible lives.

"This is Curtis Johnson," said Brown. "He got lost looking for a doctor for Dell."

A mummylike figure rose from a seat before the instrument. "Your coming is tremendously unfortunate, but for the moment we can do nothing about it. Sit here beside me. My name is Tarron Sark."

The man indicated a chair.

"My friend, Dr. Dell, is dying," Curt snapped out, refusing to sit down. "I've got to get help. I saw your light and hoped you'd allow me to use your phone. I don't know who you are nor what Dell's hired man is doing here with you. But you've got to let me go for help!"

"No." The man, Sark, shook his head. "Dell is reconciled. He has to go. We are awaiting precisely the event you would halt—his death."

He had known it, Curt thought, from the moment he entered that room. Like vultures sitting on cliffs waiting for the death of their prey, these fantastic men let their glance slip back to the screen. The green line was a third of the way toward the red marker now, and moving more rapidly.

It was nightmare—meaningless—

"I'm not staying," Curt insisted. "You can't prevent me from helping Dell without assuming responsibility for his death. I demand you let me call."

"You're not going to call," said Sark wearily. "And we assumed responsibility for Dell's death long ago. Sit down!"

Slowly Curt sank down upon the chair beside the stranger. There was nothing else to do. He was powerless against Brown's gun. But he'd bring them to justice somehow, he swore.

He didn't understand the meaning of the slowly moving pattern on the 'scope face, yet, as his

eyes followed that pip, he sensed tension in the watching men that seemed sinister, almost murderous. How?

What did the inexorably advancing pip signify?

No one spoke. The room was stifling hot and the breathing of the circle of men was a dull, rattling sound in Curt's ears.

Quickly then, gathering sudden momentum, the pip accelerated. The circle of men grew taut.

The pip crossed the red line—and vanished.

Only the smooth green trace remained, motionless and without meaning.

With hesitant shuffling of feet, the circle expanded. The men glanced uncertainly at one another.

One said, "Well, that's the end of Dell. We'll soon know now if we're on the right track, or if we've botched it. Carlson will call when he's computed it."

"The end of Dell?" Curt repeated slowly, as if trying to convince himself of what he knew had happened. "The pip on the screen—that showed his life leaving him?"

"Yes," said Sark. "He knew he had to go. And there are perhaps hundreds more like him. But Dell couldn't have told you of that—"

"What will we do with him?" Brown asked abruptly.

"If Dell is dead, you murdered him!" Curt shouted.

A rising personal fear grew within him. They could not release him now, even though his story would make no sense to anybody. But they had somehow killed Dell, or thought they had, and they wouldn't hesitate to kill Curt. He thought of Louise in the great house with the corpse of Haman Dell—if, of course, he was actually dead. But that was nonsense....

"Dell must have sent you to us!" Sark said, as if a great mystery had suddenly been lifted from his mind. "He did not have time to tell you everything. Did he tell you to take the road behind the farm?"

Curt nodded bitterly. "He told me it was the quickest way to get to a doctor."

"He did? Then he knew even better than we did how rapidly he was slipping. Yes, this was the quickest way."

"What are you talking about?" Curt demanded.

"Did Dell say anything at all about what he wanted of you?"

"It was all wild. Something about helping with some crazy plans to retreat from the scientific world. He was going to finish talking in the morning, but I guess it wouldn't have mattered. I realize now that he was sick and irrational."

"Too sick to explain everything, but not irrational," Sark said thoughtfully. "He left it to us to tell you, since you are to succeed him."

"Succeed Dell? In what?"

Sark suddenly flipped a switch on a panel at his right. A screen lighted with some fuzzy image. It cleared with a slight dial adjustment, and Curt seemed to be looking at some oddly familiar moonlit ruin.

"An American city," said Sark, hurrying his words now. "Any city. They are all alike. Ruin. Death. This one died thirty years ago."

"I don't understand," Curt complained, bewildered. "Thirty years—"

"At another point in the Time Continuum," said Sark. "The future. Your future, you understand. Or, rather, *our* present, the one you created for us."

Curt recoiled at the sudden venom in Sark's voice. "The *future*?" That was what they had in common with Dell—psychosis, systematic delusions. He had suspected danger before; now it was imminent and terrifying.

"Perhaps you are one of those who regard your accomplishments with pride," Sark went on savagely, ignoring or unaware of Curt's fear and horror. "That the hydrogen bombs smashed the cities, and the aerosols destroyed the remnants of humanity seems insignificant to you beside the high technical achievement these things represent."

Curt's throat was dry with panic. Irrelevantly, he recalled the pain-fired eyes of Dell and the dying scientist's words: "The responsibility for the coming destruction of civilization lies at the doors of the scientist mercenaries—"

"Some of us *did* manage to survive," said Sark, glaring at the scene of gaunt rubble. Curt could see the veins pounding beneath the thin flesh of his forehead. "We lived for twenty years with the dream of rebuilding a world, the same dream that has followed all wars. But at last we knew that

the dream was truly vain this time. We survivors lived in hermetically sealed caverns, trying to exist and recover our lost science and technology.

"We could not emerge into the Earth's atmosphere. Its pollution with virulent aerosols would persist for another hundred years. We could not bear a new race out of these famished and rickety bodies of ours. Unless Man was to vanish completely from the face of the Earth, we had only a single hope. That hope was to prevent the destruction from ever occurring!"

Sark's eyes were burning now. "Do you understand what that means? We had to go *back*, not forward. We had to arm to fight a new war, a war to prevent the final war that destroyed Mankind."

"Back? How could you go back?" Curt hesitated, grasping now the full insanity of the scene about him. "How have you *come* back?" He waited tautly for the answer. It would be gibberish, of course, like all the mad conversation before it.

"The undisturbed flow of time from the beginning to the end—neither of which we can experience—we call the Prime Continuum," Sark replied. "Mathematically speaking, it is composed of billions of separate bands of probability running side by side. For analogy, you may liken it to a great river, whose many insignificant tributaries merge into a roaring, turbulent whole. That is the flow of time, the Prime Continuum.

"You may change one of these tributaries, dam it up, turn it aside, let it reach the main stream at a different point. No matter how insignificant the tributary, the stream will not be the same after the change. That is what we are doing. We are controlling critical tributaries of the Prime Continuum, altering the hell that you scientists have so generously handed down to us.

"Dell was a critical tributary. You, Dr. Curtis Johnson, are another. Changing or destroying such key individuals snips off branches of knowledge before they come into fruit."

It was an ungraspable answer, but it had to be argued against because of its conclusion. "The scientists are not bringing about the war," Curt said, looking from one fleshless face to another. "Find the politicians responsible, those willing to turn loose any horror to gain power. *They* are the ones you want."

"That would mean destroying half the human race. In your day, nearly every man is literally a politician."

"Talk sense!" Curt said angrily.

"A politician, as we have come to define him, is simply one willing to sacrifice the common good for his own ends. It is a highly infectious disease in a day when altruism is taken for cowardice or mere stupidity. No, we have not mistaken our goal, Dr. Johnson. We cannot hasten the maturity of the race. We can only hope to take the matches away so the children cannot burn the house down. Whatever you doubt, do not doubt that we are from the future or that we caused Dell's death. He is only one of many."

Curt slumped. "I did doubt it. I still do, yet not with conviction. Why?"

"Because your own sense of guilt tells you that you and Dell and others like you are literally the matches which we have to remove. Because your knowledge of science has overcome your desire not to believe. Because you *know* the shape of the future."

"The war after the Third World War—" Curt murmured. "Someone said it would be fought with stones and spears, but your weapons are far from stones and spears."

"Perhaps not so far at that," said Sark, his face twisting wryly. He reached to a nearby table and picked up a tomato and a carrot. "These are our weapons. As humble and primitive as the stones and spears of cavemen."

"You're joking," Curt replied, almost ready to grin.

"No. This is the ultimate development of biological warfare. Man is what he eats—"

"That's what Dell's sign said."

"We operate hundreds of gardens and farms such as Dell's. We work through the fertilizing compounds we supply to these farms. These compounds contain chemicals that eventually lodge in the cells of those who eat the produce. They take up stations within the brain cells and change the man—or destroy him.

"Certain cells of the brain are responsible for specific characteristics. Ways of altering these cells were found by introducing minute quantities of specific radioactive materials which could be incorporated into vegetable foods. During the Third War wholesale insanity was produced in entire populations by similar methods. Here, we are using it to accomplish humane purposes.

"We are simply restraining the scientists responsible for the destroying weapons that produced our nightmare world. You saw the change that took place in Dell. There is a good example of what we do."

"But he *did* change," Curt pointed out. "He *was* carrying out your work. Wasn't that enough for you? Why did you decide he had to die?"

"Ordinarily, we don't want to kill if the change is produced. Sometimes the brain cells are refractory and the characteristics too ingrained. The cells develop tumorous activity as a result of the treatment. So it was with Dell. In his case, however, we would have been forced to kill him by other means if he had not died as he did. This, too, he understood very well. That was why he really wanted no doctor to help him."

"You must have driven him insane first!"

"Look at this and see if you still think so." Sark led the way to a small instrument and pointed to the eyepiece of it. "Look in there."

Curt bent over. Light sprang up at Sark's touch of a switch. Then a scene began to move before Curt's eyes.

"Dell!" he exclaimed.

The scene was of some vast and well-equipped biological laboratory, much like those of Camp Detrick. Silent, mask-faced technicians moved with precision about their tasks. Dr. Dell was directing operations.

But there was something wrong. The figure was not the Dell that Curt knew.

As if Sark sensed Curt's comprehension of this, the scene advanced and swelled until the whole area of vision was filled with Dell's face. Curt gasped. The face was blank and hideous. The eyes stared. When the scene retreated once more, Curt saw now that Dell moved as an automaton, almost without volition of his own.

As he moved away from the bench like a sleepwalker, there came briefly into view the figure of an armed guard at the door. The figure of a corporal, grim in battle dress.

Curt looked up, sick as if some inner sense had divined the meaning of that scene which he could not yet put into words.

"Had enough?" asked Sark.

"What does it mean?"

"That is Dell as he would have been. That is what he was willing to die to avoid."

"But what *is* it?"

"A military research laboratory twelve years into your future. You are aware that in your own time a good deal of research has come to a standstill because many first-string scientists have revolted against military domination. Unfortunately, there are plenty of second-stringers available and they are enough for most tasks—the youngsters with new Ph.D.s who are awed by the glitter of golden laboratories. But, lacking experience or imagination, they can't see through the glitter or have the insight for great work. Some will eventually, too late, however, and they will be replaced by eager new youngsters."

"This scene of Dell—"

"Just twelve years from what you call now. Deadlier weapons will be needed and so a bill will be passed to draft the reluctant first-line men—against their will, if necessary."

"You can't force creative work," Curt objected.

Sark shrugged. "There are drugs that do wonderful and terrible things to men's minds. They can force creation or mindless destruction, confession or outrageous subterfuge. You saw your opponents make some use of them. A cardinal, for example, and an engineer, among others. Now you have seen your friend, Dell, as he would have been. Not the same drugs, of course, but the end result is the same."

Curt's horror turned to stubborn disbelief. "America wouldn't use such methods," he said flatly.

"Today? No," agreed Sark. "But when a country is committed to inhuman warfare—even though the goal may be honorable—where is the line to stop at? Each brutality prepares the way for the next. Even concentration camps and extermination centers become logical necessities. You have heard your opponents say that the end justifies the means. You have seen for yourself—the means become the end."

"But Dell could have escaped," Curt protested. "You could have helped him to your own time or another. He was still valuable. He needn't have died!"

"There is no such thing as actual travel in time," explained Sark. "Or at least in our day we have found none. There is possible only a bending back of a branch of the Prime Continuum so that we can witness, warn, instruct, gain aid in saving the future. And there can be meeting only in this narrow sector of unreality where the branch joins the main stream. Our farms adjoin such sectors, but farther than that we cannot go, nor can one of you become a citizen of the world you have created for us."

"But I wish it were so!" Sark bit out venomously. "We'd kidnap you by the millions, force you to look upon the ruin and the horror, let you breathe the atmosphere that no man can inhale and

live, the only atmosphere there is in that world. Yes, I wish you could become our guests there. Our problem would be easier. But it can't be done. This is the only way we can work.

"Dell had to go. There was no escape for him, no safety for us if he lived. He would have been tracked down, captured like a beast and set to work against his will. It was there in the Prime Continuum. Nothing could cancel it except death, the death that saves a billion lives because he will not produce a toxin deadlier than D. triconus."

The vengeance in Sark's voice was almost tangible. Involuntarily Curt retreated a step before it. And—almost—he thought he understood these men out of time.

"What is there—" he began hoarsely and had to stop. "What is there that I can do?"

"We need you to take over Dell's farm. It is of key importance. The list of men he was treating was an extremely vital one. That work cannot be interrupted now."

"How can you accomplish anything by operating only here?" Curt objected. "While you stifle our defenses, our enemies are arming to the teeth. When you've made us sufficiently helpless, they'll strike."

"Did I say we were so restricted?" answered Sark, smiling for the first time. "You cannot imagine what a fresh vegetable means on a professor's table in Moscow. In Atomgrad a ripe tomato is worth a pound of uranium. How do I know? Because I walked the streets of Atomgrad with my grandfather."

"Then you're a—"

Sark's face grew hard and bitter in the half light of the room. "Was," he corrected. "Or might have been. There are no nationalities where there are no nations, no political parties where there are only hunger and death. The crime of the future is not any person's or country's. It is the whole of humanity's."

An alarm sounded abruptly.

"Carlson!" someone tensely exclaimed.

Sark whirled to the panels and adjusted the controls. A small screen lighted, showing the image of a man with graying hair and imperious face. His sharp eyes seemed to burn directly into Curt's.

"How did it go?" exclaimed Sark. "Was the Prime Continuum shift as expected?"

"No! It still doesn't compute out. Nothing's right. The war is still going on. The Continuum is absolute hell."

"I should have known," said Sark in dismay. "I should have called you."

"What is it? Do you know what's wrong?"

"Johnson. Dr. Curtis Johnson. He's here."

Rage spread upon Carlson's face. An oath exploded from his lips. "No wonder the situation doesn't compute with him out of the Prime Continuum. Why did he come there?"

"Dell sent him. Dell died too quickly. He didn't have time to instruct Johnson. I have told him what we want of him."

"Do you understand?" Carlson demanded of Curt with abruptness that was almost anger.

Curt looked slowly about the room and back to the face of his questioner. Understand? If they sent him back, allowed him to go back, could he ever be sure that he had not witnessed a thing of nightmare in this shadowy dream world?

Yes, he could be sure. He had seen the blasted city, just the way he knew it could be—*would* be unless someone prevented it. He had seen the pattern on the scope, attuned to the tiny tributary of the Prime Continuum that was the life of Dr. Dell, had seen it run out, dying as Dell had died.

He could believe, too, that there was a little farm near Atomgrad, where a tomato on a scientist's table was more potent than the bombs building in the arsenal.

"I understand," he said. "Shall I go back now?"

Sark put a paper into his hands. "Here is a list of new names. You will find Dell's procedures and records in his desk at the farm. Do not underestimate the importance of your work. You have seen the failure of the Prime Continuum to compute properly with you out of it. You will correct that.

"Your only contact from now on will be through Brown, who will bring the tank truck once a year. You know what to do. You are on your own."

It was like a surrealist painting as he left. The moon had risen, and in all the barrenness there was nothing but the gray cement cube of the building. The light spilling through the open doorway touched the half dozen gaunt men who had followed him out to the car. Ahead was the

narrow band of roadway leading through some infinite nothingness that would end in Dell's truck farm.

He started off. When he looked back a moment later, the building was no longer there.

He glanced at the list of names Sark gave him, chilled by the importance of those men. For some there would be death as there had been for Dell. For himself—

He had forgotten to ask. But perhaps they would not have told him. Not at this time, anyway. The chemically treated food produced tumors in refractory, unresponsive cells. He had eaten Dell's vegetables, would eat more.

It was too late to ask and it didn't matter. He had important things to do. First would be the writing of his resignation to the officials of Camp Detrick.

As of tomorrow, he would be Dr. Curtis Johnson, truck farmer, specialist in atomic-age produce, luscious table gifts for the innocent and not-so-innocent human matches that would, if he and his unknown colleagues succeeded, be prevented from cremating the hopes of Mankind.

Louise would help him hang the new sign:

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT
Eat the Best
EAT JOHNSON'S
VEGETABLES

Only, of course, she wouldn't know why he had taken Dell's job, nor could he ever explain.

It would probably be the death of Curt Johnson, but that was cheap enough if humanity survived.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A STONE AND A SPEAR ***

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