



The Whispering Spheres

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About Winterbotham:

Russell R. Winterbotham (1904-1971) was a writer of western and science fiction genre fiction, and the author of several Big Little Books. He also wrote crime under the pen name J. Harvey Bond.

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Chapter 1

THE CAULDRON

The factory saw-toothed the horizon with its hideous profile as the moon rose in the east. The red glow of the furnaces bathed the tall buildings, the gigantic scaffolds, the cord-like elevated pipelines and the columnar smokestacks in the crimson of anger. Even the moon seemed to fade as the long-fingered smokestacks reached toward it belching their pollution. The air, which should have been clean, was filled with the reek of unfamiliar odors.

From the machine shop, where giant cannon were forged into smooth, sleek instruments of death, came noise: unchecked, unmuffled, blasphemous din. But something odd was afoot. There was a sudden hush. It seemed as if a giant hand had covered the metal city to muffle its screams.

In the nearby city of box-like houses, where the workers lived, there was an echoing stir. Lights glowed in the windows of the tiny homes. People were awakened in the night by the sudden cessation of din.

Something was wrong in the factory.

But there couldn't be anything wrong. The factory was enclosed by a high, electrified fence. There were guards on duty night and day, armed to the teeth and ready to shoot an intruder who failed to give an account of himself. There were wars and rumors of wars on the face of the earth and there was need for the uninterrupted production of sleek cannon.

But, if something were wrong, why didn't the whistle blow? There were signals: three short blasts, repeated many times, meant fire; one long blast meant a breakdown; five toots meant a layoff. But now the whistle was silent.

Heads popped from the windows of the houses in the city. They listened. Was it a whistle that the workers heard? No. It was a whispering, barely audible at first, then louder. It was the whisper of tongues of flame. But no flames were visible. Only the red glow of the furnaces lighted up the factory's profile.

One by one the lights of the city went out as workers went back to bed, to toss restlessly. Without noise there could be no sleep.

The tongues of flame still whispered.

A car moved rapidly through the streets of the city. At the wheel was a man dressed in a captain's uniform. The machine whirled onto the highway that led toward the factory. A barricade, lighted by torch-lanterns, barred his path. A sentry with a bayoneted gun stood to one side, signaling a halt.

The car slowed.

"Captain Ted Taylor, ordnance department!" the captain said, extending his pass toward the sentry.

The sentry signaled him on.

The car came within a stone's throw of the factory, where it turned into a parking lot. The officer climbed out, noiselessly, and moved into the shadows.

Once Captain Taylor had been a scientist, but that was long ago, before wars had made biology very unexciting.

Out of the shadows a second figure moved. He was a short, stocky man, compared with the slender, graceful figure of the captain.

"Ps-st! Captain!"

"Masters!"

"You got my short-wave call, I see. I was afraid you would be asleep. He came late, but he's in the tunnel now."

"Who is it?"

"The fellow we've suspected all along. Poses as an ignorant laborer, but he's not ignorant by a long shot. His name is Hank Norden."

Masters pointed toward a clump of bushes. As he did, he caught the captain's arm with his left hand. The bushes were moving.

A black hole appeared at the base of the bushes and from it emerged the head and shoulders of a man. Taylor drew his pistol. The man's head turned, searching the shadows to see if he was observed. He failed to detect the figures of Taylor and Masters, huddled nearby in the shadows.

The man scrambled from the hole. He closed the trap door behind him and then started to move rapidly away.

"Halt!" barked Taylor.

The man began to run. The captain's pistol spat, kicking up dust beside the running feet. The fleeing man jumped to one side, to spoil Taylor's aim on the next shot, but as he did so, he stumbled and fell.

A moment later Taylor had landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground.

The faded moonlight showed angry eyes, a jutting, undershot jaw and a sharp, pointed nose.

"Damn you!" spat the captive.

Taylor removed a revolver from the prisoner's clothing and tossed it to Masters.

"It's Norden, all right," Masters said, scrutinizing the captive. "I'd know that jaw in a million. What are you doing here, fellah?"

"I'm blowing the factory to hell!" Norden said between his teeth. "You can't stop me. Everything's fixed. In a minute a bomb'll go off. You, I, everyone will be smashed to atoms. And I'm glad. For the fatherland."

"We know why you're doing it," Taylor said. "Come on, Masters. Get your short-wave working. Notify the factory office. Where's the bomb, Norden? Come on, speak up, or I'll pull you to pieces!"

Norden said nothing. Masters was calling the office. He turned to the captain:

"I can't raise anyone."

"We'll go to the gate." Taylor prodded the prisoner ahead on the run.

"You can't make it in time," Norden panted.

"We'll die trying!"

A floodlight turned the area in front of the gate into a patch of daylight. An armed sentry challenged from a small building. The captain answered.

"Sorry, but you can't come in. Strict Orders. After hours," the sentry said, when the captain asked to be allowed to pass.

"But it's urgent—life or death. We've got to use your telephone. Or—you call the office. Tell the super there's a bomb in the plant—"

The sentry's jaws gaped, but only for an instant. Down the road inside the plant came a running, bareheaded figure—screaming:

"Let me out! Let me out of here!"

"Halt!" shouted the sentry.

The figure stumbled to a stop at the gate. The light showed the pale, sweating face trembling with fear.

"What's the matter with you?" the sentry asked.

"The metal pots! They're alive! Big, orange bubbles are floating from the cauldrons!"

"Nuts!" said the sentry. "You're drunk."

But as the soldier spoke there was a trembling movement of the ground beneath the feet of the men at the gate. Captain Taylor threw himself on the ground. But there was no blast.

The red of the sky-glow suddenly faded to orange. Up through the roof of the casting room crashed a huge, glowing sphere then floated like a will-o'-the wisp in the moonlight.

Chapter 2

THE SPHERES

When the sentry faced the captain again, he stared into the mouth of a service pistol.

"Sorry," said the officer, "but I've got to get inside." Captain Taylor turned to Masters. "Keep him covered. I'll be back unless the bomb goes off."

"The bomb," whispered Norden, fearfully, "should have exploded. I was double-crossed. They sent me here to get caught! The dirty—"

"Watch Norden, and you might keep your eye on Funky, here," Taylor said, pointing to the slobbering man who had dropped to his knees at the sight of the orange sphere. "I'm going inside."

The captain moved through the gate. The silence was uncanny. Since the war began this factory had never been idle. Thousands of cannon made; contracts for countless more! But now quiet, save for an undescribable, whispering overtone that seemed to permeate the air.

Something glowed in the semi-darkness ahead like a pile of hot ashes on the ground.

Taylor entered the long forge room. A white hot splinter of metal hung from the crane. There were a dozen heaps of the glowing ashes scattered about the room, but no sign of life.

He moved on into the finishing room, where the long tubes of howitzers and field pieces lay in various stages of construction. Still there was silence.

The whispering grew louder, like a breeze stirring dry cornstalks.

The silence suddenly was broken by a scream. Then another. There was a sound of running footsteps.

Taylor dropped behind a lathe.

Through the door came an orange glow. Sharply outlined against the eerie light ran a human figure, a man in overalls, carrying a hammer. On the fellow's face was frozen fear. He halted, turned and looked behind him.

The darkness vanished as through the doorway floated a huge, orange sphere of light.

"Stop! Go back! I mean you no harm!" screamed the workman.

The ball of orange fire floated on toward him. The man's arm raised. He hurled the hammer straight at the sphere.

The missile rang, bounced back and fell to the sandy floor.

A small flicker of flame wafted over the surface of the sphere. Then it lashed out like a whip toward the trembling man. His entire body glowed like a torch, then crumpled to the floor in a heap of ashes.

Scarcely daring to breathe, the captain watched the sphere float over the ashes of its victim for a moment; then, apparently satisfied that the man no longer lived, floated back through the doorway.

Taylor took a deep breath. It might be well if the bomb would explode, but he knew now it had been silenced.

In an insulated panel on the wall were the remains of an electric switchboard. The copper switches were fused, the wires burned through. The huge cables that brought the electric current to the switchboard lay molten on the floor.

The bomb probably was electrical and undoubtedly had been fused like the switchboard.

The captain had one objective now, to get out of the plant before the orange spheres discovered him. He didn't know what he faced, but something told him that it had never faced mankind before. He had no weapon to combat the sphere.

Taylor reached the forge room again. He stepped over more glowing piles of ashes.

Then his ears caught a crescendo of the whispering that he had heard before. He looked behind him. In the doorway was an orange glow. The sphere was coming—looking for him!

Behind the forge was a machine which had been used to operate the crane. Beyond it was stygian darkness. He might hide there.

The captain slipped toward the machine. Every bit of electrical wiring on the controls had been fused.

The room grew lighter, the whispering louder and then, through the doorway, floated the dazzling sphere.

Something gripped Taylor's shoulder muscles. A mild electrical shock coursed through his body, as if an invisible feeler had passed over him.

The sphere halted, changed its direction and floated slowly toward the captain.

Instinctively, Taylor backed into the corner behind the machine. He dropped to his hands and knees and was free of the invisible feeler! Again the orange sphere halted, as if trying to relocate its victim.

Taylor rounded a pillar which supported the track for the crane. His fingers struck an accumulation of rubbish that had been tossed into the corner. He started to push it out of the way, when the floor beneath it moved. It was a trap door!

A gasp of surprise came from Taylor's lips. He had a chance. But the sound gave him away. The electrical feeler touched him again. The shock jerked at his muscles and the sphere started floating nearer.

The trap door swung back. Taylor's right boot touched the top rung of the ladder. He moved his left boot down to the next rung. Each movement seemed to take ages and every exertion of his muscles was agony as the electrical shock gripped him with increasing intensity.

He forced his body down into the opening. He saw the flame flickering over the surface of the sphere as the thing prepared to strike.

The sphere seemed to pulse briefly as he released his grasp on the rim of the opening and shoved himself downward into the hole. He dropped several feet.

Above him a brilliant flash of fire lit the opening.

The sphere itself hovered above the hole.

Chapter 3

PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

The sphere pulsed again. But this time no flaming whip sprang from its surface. There was a single flash. For an instant Taylor caught a glimpse of bestial eyes, looking angrily at him from the center of the flash. Then there was nothing. He was in the darkness of a tunnel. Even the charred embers of the wooden trap door above him seemed dimmed by a cloud of dust.

The sphere had simply exploded.

Taylor had no time to analyze the situation. His hands groped along the side of the tunnel, the one Norden had used to enter the plant on his spying expeditions. Taylor crawled slowly, feeling his way. It seemed eternity until at last he reached the end of the passage and felt the trap door overhead.

A minute later he rejoined the others, huddled in darkness outside the gate.

"The searchlight went out," Masters explained. "Something wrong with the power, I guess."

"I know what it was," Taylor said gruffly. He turned to the disarmed sentry. "Has anyone come out of here since the factory stopped working?"

"Nobody but him, sir," the soldier said, jerking his thumb at the sobbing man huddled against Norden. "He said his name was Orkins—Jim Orkins. He works in the warehouse. But you can't tell anything about the rest o' what he says. He just babbles, sir. Something about livin' lightnin' and balls of fire. He ain't drunk, sir, so he must be crazy."

"Help him get up," Taylor ordered. "Masters, you take charge of Norden. We're going back to the car."

"Excuse me, sir," the sentry said, hesitantly. "But that's against orders. I can't leave. I'm to guard this gate, sir."

"Your orders are canceled," the captain said.

"If I desert my post, it's court martial," the sentry explained. "How do I know you aren't a spy? Captains don't go around making privates break the orders of the day. If you've got business in the plant, why was I told to keep *everyone* out? Why didn't they tell me to pass Captain Taylor? I got a duty here and I'll do it if it kills me. So help me, sir. Sergeant o' the guard!"

The echo of the sentry's bellow rattled against the bleak factory buildings. A sphere bobbed up through the hole in the roof. Orkins opened his mouth to scream, but Norden clapped his hand over the man's lips, choking him off.

"Quiet!" Taylor ordered hoarsely. He addressed the sentry: "See that thing? It means death to you, to all of us if it finds us. The sergeant of the guard, probably all of the other sentries are dead. Every workman in the plant is dead. Somehow we were missed. The searchlight power went off before they found this post, I suppose. Now then, all of you follow Masters back to the car. I'll bring up the rear."

"I won't leave," the sentry said, stubbornly.

Masters stepped forward and put his pistol against the soldier's back.

"You'll go," he said. "Maybe this ain't regulation, but neither are the spheres."

The stubby little secret service man pushed the soldier ahead of him. The sentry marched with his hands in the air.

Drawing his own pistol, Taylor turned to Norden.

"Help Orkins to the car," he said.

Norden drew himself up stiffly.

"Go ahead and shoot," he said. "It'll save the firing squad some trouble."

Taylor took one step forward. Norden faced him unflinchingly. Taylor's hand shot out, caught Norden's coat and threw him after Masters.

"Don't leave me alone!" Orkins cried, crawling after Norden and clasp- ing him about the legs. Norden kicked him aside.

"Keep moving!" Taylor ordered Norden, who had halted.

Norden did not move.

Taylor swung his fist. The blow connected and the officer caught the falling man, swung him over his shoulder, then turned to the cringing Orkins.

"If you don't want to be left here alone, follow us," he said.

Orkins suddenly regained his ability to use his muscles.

Masters, watching over his shoulder, chuckled. There was a faint wink of one eye visible in the moonlight.

"Kinda screwy, ain't he?" he said, jerking his head in Orkins' direction.

"I don't know that I blame him, much," Taylor said. "Look at the plant."

Over the roof and the smokestacks floated the yellowish-red ball of fire. Another sphere was emerging from the hole in the roof.

"What are they? A new kind of bomb?" Masters asked.

"Norden's bomb never had a chance. Compared with what actually happened in there, a bomb would have been a picnic. There's not a living person left in the whole place."

"Not a—hold on there, Cap! Do you know how many were working?"

"They're all dead," Taylor said. Briefly he outlined what he had seen in the plant.

"Norden, the blankety-blank!" Masters swore. "Shooting's too good for him."

"This isn't connected with the war—at least not directly. It's something else, Masters. What, I don't know yet, but I'm beginning to think that it's something the human race has never met before. Those spheres have killed a couple of hundred workers with bolts of energy—"

"I'm no scientist, captain."

"That's the best I can describe this force, Masters. I might call it heat-bolts, but it's probably partly electric and partly heat, not entirely either. You see, Masters, heat is energy, just like electricity and light. The energy these spheres shoot out is a mixture of energies. We can imagine a spark of electricity shooting out and striking a man like a bolt of lightning, but it's hard to visualize heat behaving that way."

"Say, mister," the sentry interrupted, "my arms are getting tired."

"Okay, buddy," Masters replied. "If I let you put your arms down, will you behave like a nice little boy?"

"I'll be a perfect angel," the sentry said, lowering his arms.

"You'll be an angel if you aren't, too," Masters added.

"What's your name, soldier?" Taylor asked the sentry.

"Private Pember, sir. Company A, 110th infantry—"

"All right, Private Pember, you can carry this fellow."

Taylor shifted the faintly stirring Norden to the shoulders of the soldier.

"If it will make you feel any easier, Pember," the captain went on, "I can assure you that exigencies demanded your removal from your post. Your life was in danger and you could do no good by remaining there. In

fact, there was nothing left to guard. You can do more good for your country by coming with us."

"Yes, sir," Pember said. "I guess you are right, captain."

"You're a good soldier, Pember," Taylor went on. "A situation like this is unique. It demands use of individual initiative, rather than blind obedience to orders. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Pember said, adjusting the burden on his shoulder.

They reached the car.

A dozen of the orange-red globes now floated above the plant. They were circling slowly, in widening arcs, toward the limits of the factory grounds.

"Searching for human beings," Taylor decided, watching them.

Orkins clutched Taylor's coat tails.

"They're coming out!" he cried. "There's hell to pay."

Taylor took Orkins' arm and forced him down on the running board of the car, where Norden already was coming out of his daze.

"Keep quiet!" Taylor ordered. "They'll discover us."

"They'll find us anyway!" Orkins said, frantic with fear. He groaned loudly.

"Okay. He asked for it," Masters said.

There was a splatting sound as Masters' fist landed. Masters made a face over a distasteful duty done and turned to Pember:

"Put them both in the car." He indicated Norden. "Here's handcuffs. Lock them together."

Taylor and Masters watched the circling spheres. Suddenly one darted down. From its pulsating body shot a flash of flame. A human scream rent the air.

"It's the darnedest thing I ever saw," Masters said with a shudder. "Those fireballs squirt heat-electricity out at a guy and roast him!"

"Yes," Taylor said with a nod, "and that isn't all. Those spheres act as though they were alive. When that one went out above the opening of the tunnel, I thought I saw a pair of eyes."

Masters studied the assertion, then spoke:

"Captain, I may look dumb, but I've been in the secret service long enough to be found out if I really am. I've a hunch you killed that sphere."

"I've thought of that, but how could I? I didn't touch him."

"Maybe you don't have to touch 'em to kill 'em. We don't know what they are, except they're different—"

"We don't know the real natures of anything, as far as that goes. Man's a mixture of chemicals, but that doesn't explain him. The spheres are a mixture of energies—we can observe that much, but it still doesn't explain them. Where are they from? Why did they come here? What are their primary objectives?"

"Primary objectives? That's a military term, ain't it?"

"Partly military, and partly scientific. We know the secondary objective of the spheres. It's the same as man's or any other living creature. The spheres are alive and their objective is to keep on living, but that isn't their primary motif. The primary objective is the difference between a good man and a bad one. Whatever is more important to a man than life itself is his primary objective."

"Life's pretty important," Masters said, solemnly.

"Yes, but life isn't everything. Any man, no matter how yellow or mean he is, has some ideal he's willing to die for—or at least he's willing to risk dying to attain. Look at Norden. He's hard, cold-blooded and he doesn't think twice about putting a bomb in a plant to wipe out scores of lives. He dared me to kill him, rather than help us. His code as a spy is his primary objective. Look at Pember. He must have been frightened by the spheres, but we had to force him to leave his post. We've shown him that his duty now is with us—he realizes that the spheres are the immediate enemy of his country and he'll do his best fighting them. And you and I have ideals—we know each other too well to list them."

"I getcha so far, but what about Orkins?"

"The man's not afraid of death, but afraid of the unknown. Men like him commit suicide rather than face reality. He wants security. He's afraid of uncertainty. He lives in an unreal, imaginary world and when uncertainty, which is reality, intrudes, he is completely lost."

"You make me feel sorry for the poor devil."

"That's because you understand why he's funky. Primary objectives make men do what they do—but understanding Orkins doesn't solve our problem."

"No. What are the spheres? Are they alive? If so, they must want something. What do they want?"

"A conquest of the human race?" Taylor pondered. "Maybe. But it isn't likely. They can't gain much by conquering us. It wouldn't do man any good to stage a conquest of earthworms and swordfish, since neither could pay taxes. The spheres are as different from man as man from an angle-worm. Are we a menace to the spheres? Apparently the only time we really menace them is when we crawl into a hole like a

rabbit—maybe there's something in that that will help us, but I don't think that's why they kill us. Are we a nuisance? If so, why? Are we a food? There is energy in sunlight and chemicals in the human body. A creature of energy would feed on something like sunlight, not chemicals. His menu would be electric wires, storage batteries—"

"Great Scott, Captain!" Masters interrupted. "Let's get away from this car. There's a battery in it—food for the spheres!"

Masters looked nervously up at the circling globes. Taylor, deep in thought, did not stir. Instead, he continued his speculation:

"Maybe they kill us for sport."

He was thinking of small boys torturing frogs; of Roman emperors at the circus; of sportsmen exterminating game; of the mob watching the guillotine on the streets of Paris. It was Zarathustra who said that when gazing at tragedies, bull fights and crucifixions, man has felt his happiest; and when man invented hell, he made hell his heaven on earth. Couldn't this be a characteristic of all life? Couldn't the spheres be cruel and ruthless, too?

Man, the mighty hunter, had become the prey.

A sphere detached itself from the group and circled toward the car.

"I guess you're right, Masters," Taylor decided as he watched the spheres. "We'd better move."

Chapter 4

PREY

Masters unlocked the handcuffs of the two men in the car. He disposed of his short-wave set in a ditch, for it, too, had batteries which might attract the spheres.

"Get out of the car, Orkins," he ordered.

"Watch him, Masters," Taylor warned. "If he starts yelling, choke him."

"But not too hard," Masters added. "If we're going to be rabbits, human values will change. Men who run into holes will live to eat turnips, those who bare their teeth won't. Orkins might be the forefather of a new race—a helluva race. Come on, Orkins. Get out. Hurry up, Father Abraham, or I'll drag you out."

Orkins, cringing, emerged.

Taylor took charge of Norden, who followed Orkins out of the machine.

"I hate your guts, Norden," he said. "You're a dirty, lousy rat and you ought to be shot. But after all, you're a man. You've courage and I admire it, as much as I hate the way you use it. Overseas there's a war between countries. Here there's another war between humanity and a species of alien monsters. Whether we like it or not, we're allies."

Norden's undershot jaw moved in a grin.

"I know about the spheres, Captain," Norden replied. "I overheard your remarks to Mr. Masters. I've listened to Orkins' babble."

"Will you help us?"

"I will bargain with you."

"For your life? You know I can't do anything about that. I'll do my best—I'll speak a good word at your trial, try to save you from the firing squad, but I'm only a captain. That's all I can do. I haven't the power to do anything more."

"Then I will not help."

"Do you know what we're up against?"

"It looks pretty bad, doesn't it, Captain? But consider my hopeless case."

"We have a chance, Norden. I know, more than any other living man perhaps, what those spheres are. I've seen them close at hand. Any hope of defeating them rests in us, using the meager knowledge I've gained from contact. What happens to your fatherland after the spheres finish on this side of the ocean depends on whether we conquer them, or they exterminate us."

Norden stopped smiling.

"When you put it that way, Captain, how could I refuse?" he asked. "I'll cooperate, not to help you, but to help the fatherland."

The moonlight showed a gleam in Norden's deep-set eyes that Taylor did not like.

They moved to a wooded spot in a nearby field. There was a feeling of semi-security as they settled down to rest under the trees. Orkins' moans of fear were silenced by sleep. Norden sat motionless and Taylor could not tell whether he was asleep or awake. Pember removed his pack and used it for a pillow. Masters snored peacefully on the grass.

Only Taylor remained awake. A sphere floated overhead. Taylor, watching, saw the leaves of the tree stir restlessly as the invisible feelers probed toward the earth.

It was a reddish-orange orb, like the setting sun. Taylor once more got the impression of deeply embedded eyes glowering beneath the shining surface.

Were the eyes an illusion? Did the creatures really have eyes, like those of higher forms of animal life? Illusion or not, the eyes seemed to be there, intense, glaring and savage. They seemed to peer into the depths of Taylor's soul.

Taylor sat motionless, almost positive he was under observation. He expected to feel the jerk of the electric shock of the feeler. Instead, the sphere drifted on. The eyes had not seen.

A moment later flame streaked down from the sphere toward the parking lot. There was a roar as a gasoline tank exploded and flame shot skyward.

"There goes the battery!" Taylor muttered.

The others were roused by the explosion. Orkins sobbed hysterically. Masters, Pember and Norden watched the roaring flame.

"We'll never escape them!" Orkins moaned. "They'll find us sooner or later. They can sense us."

"They're not infallible," Taylor said. "Remember I got away from them in the tunnel." He turned knowingly toward the others. "Perhaps, if we dug a cave—"

"Sure!" said Masters. "It's a good idea."

"Yes, sir!" Pember said with a nod. He pulled his trench tool from his pack and handed it to Orkins. "Maybe you'd like to dig, Mr. Orkins. It'll keep your mind off them things."

Orkins seized the small shovel almost instantly. Taylor half-smiled. He had made the suggestion for Orkins' benefit. The cave probably would never be finished. One deep enough to offer a refuge for five men could hardly be dug in a practical length of time.

Dawn was not far off and the spheres were drifting over the town. Already streets were filled with panic-stricken people. The appearance of the strange balls of fire brought residents from their homes in the middle of the night. Some fled in terror, believing a new type of raider had been invented by the enemy. Others stood watching.

The spheres circled. Taylor watched them, realizing he could do nothing to stop what would happen. There was no way to warn these helpless people that the spheres dealt death in a most sudden and violent form.

Something nagged at Taylor's mind. Why had the sphere gone out when he crept into the tunnel? What had caused it to die? Had the sphere been grounded, trying to reach him under the surface of the earth? Not likely, otherwise the creatures would not be able to attack a man standing on the ground. The bolt, besides, was not electricity, like lightning, but heat, which is not grounded easily.

Where had the spheres come from? They surely were not of this world. On the basis of biological evolution they could not be the children of any life known to science. Had they evolved suddenly, by accident? Some scientists thought all life had grown by accident; the right combination of circumstances had occurred and a chemical action had followed. Had the right combination for the spheres come about as the result of the war and the releasing of untold amounts of energy?

But even if life had begun on earth by accident, all other types had taken ages to develop. These spheres, thinking creatures, could not have evolved overnight.

These seemingly invincible creatures could not have come from this world. Biological development comes through struggle and survival. An invincible creature does not have to worry about its existence—in fact, struggle was necessary to develop an invincible being. These spheres

must be from another world. Refugees, perhaps, from another, even more powerful race; or maybe they were seeking a new world to conquer.

One was circling overhead again. The leaves rustled. Taylor thought he heard a choked-off scream. Orkins. He gritted his teeth grimly.

There was only one link of hope in Taylor's chain of thought. There must always be a check to every form of life. Terrestrial plagues of insects were followed suddenly by flocks of birds. In western states an increase in the number of jackrabbits always is a forerunner of an increase in the number of coyotes. But the jackrabbits carried parasites fatal to the coyotes. If man was a rabbit, then perhaps he harbored the check to these creatures of flame.

What check would limit the whispering spheres? No germ, surely. What possible check was there except man's nature? What part of man's nature? That was the answer Taylor wanted to know.

His chain of thought was suddenly interrupted.

Pember was coming on the run. The private saluted the captain.

"Something's wrong, sir! Orkins is throwing a fit."

"Can't you quiet him? The spheres are near."

"Norden held his hand over Orkins' mouth, but it made Orkins worse. I—I think it's serious, sir."

Taylor followed Pember to the place where Orkins had been digging. Norden was there, bending over Orkins, who lay on the ground. Masters, standing behind Norden, shook his head.

"He's dead," Norden said, straightening.

"He was scared to death by the spheres," Masters said. "No one harmed him, except to hold a hand over his mouth. He wasn't choked. He could have breathed through his nostrils—"

"Wait—"

Taylor held up his hand. Something clicked in his brain.

Masters had said something about the spheres that fitted. He said, *Maybe you don't have to touch 'em to kill 'em.* Figuratively speaking, Orkins hadn't been seriously touched either.

The answer!

Chapter 5

AN ESCAPE

Taylor ordered Pember and Norden to bury Orkins where he had been digging, then the officer took Masters aside.

"We've got a weapon," Taylor announced.

Masters grunted:

"Yeah? Indians had bows and arrows, too. Look at what happened to them."

"This is different. A new weapon. We can beat the spheres through their emotions."

"You mean fear, love, hate—all that stuff? How do you know these spheres have emotions?"

"What is life but a series of sensations and emotions? If the spheres are alive, they must have something which correspond to emotions. The emotions may be different from ours, but they'll be emotions just the same. Orkins died of fear. Of course, you can call it heart attack, but fear brought it on. That sphere that had me cornered in the plant died, too. Do you see?"

"Was the sphere afraid of you or the tunnel?"

"Don't be flippant. The emotion wasn't fear. It might not have been any emotion we have, but an emotion that we'd expect a creature made of energy to have. An emotion of frustration! It had me cornered. I escaped. The energy sphere met resistance. When energy meets resistance it changes!"

"I don't get it."

"Look, Masters. If the spheres are mixtures of energies, like we are mixtures of chemicals, death means extinction, just as biological death means the extinction of the chemical action in our lives. Theologians say we don't die—that there's a change and we go on existing in a spiritual life. Now let's take a peep at what science tells us about energy: Newton says energy is never extinguished. When it ceases in one form, it changes

to another. What happens when you run electricity through a resistance coil?"

"It turns to heat, of course!"

"And when you enclose light where it can't escape?"

"It turns to heat!" Masters' face brightened. "And if you pen up heat, it turns to light. I learned that in school. Resistance causes a change. But what do the spheres turn to?"

"Radio energy, Masters! Something absolutely harmless to man. These living, energy spheres will change to radio energy when they meet resistance. Frustration is resistance. Frustration is an emotion. An overwhelming emotion for the spheres! The sphere is frustrated—meets resistance—it disappears. In other words, it dies!"

From the city came screams and cries. The spheres had attacked at last.

The men in the wooded field could see the darting balls sending their searing bolts down on the heads of hapless victims. The crashing roar of the slaughter sounded like distant thunderstorms.

Streets were jammed with panic-stricken human beings, fleeing from the unknown menace which slashed with bolts of heat energy.

From the hole in the factory roof poured more spheres to join the destruction.

"They breed fast, the devils!" said Masters.

A figure in khaki approached Taylor. It was Pember with blood running from a cut on the side of his head. He saluted briskly.

"Norden escaped, sir!" he blurted. "The dirty so-and-so cracked me over the head with the trench tool and got away!"

"I never thought he'd turn yellow," Masters said. "Well, maybe it's a good thing he's gone. I never trusted him anyhow."

"Which way did he go?" Taylor asked.

"He went toward the factory, sir!" Pember replied. "He didn't knock me out. Just a glancing blow. I was too dazed to stop him, but I saw him running toward the factory."

"He'd rather take it that way than the firing squad, I guess," Masters decided.

"Masters," Taylor said. "We overlooked something. Norden knows something we don't know. He was around Orkins most of the time after we left the plant. He listened to what Orkins said. Orkins was in the factory when the spheres first appeared. I overlooked Orkins as having an answer to the problem. I thought I knew it all, but I was wrong! Orkins knew more than I know about the spheres."

"Sure! I should have thought of it, too. How did Orkins get away when everyone else got killed? I never asked that. I just took it for granted that he got away by accident. Orkins might have known enough to help Norden get the spheres on his side!"

Taylor already was running toward the factory. At his heels came Masters and Pember.

Chapter 6

INFERNO

They found no sign of Norden as they approached the factory. Several times they had to take cover in ditches and weeds as whispering spheres floated overhead in search of prey. But they escaped the electrical feelers which stirred the grass and brush around them.

Pember recovered his Garand rifle, which had been left near the sentry box during the retreat.

Taylor led the group into the tunnel, with Masters following and Pember bringing up the rear.

The din of the slaughter in the town and the shrill whistle of the spheres was blotted out underground. They reached the far end, where the ladder led upward to the sphere-haunted factory.

Taylor ascended. He could hear the shrill whistle of spheres dinning through the bleak building. He peeped into the forge room. The first flush of dawn was streaming through the windows.

Norden was there, creeping along the barrels of some naval guns toward the casting room.

Norden halted at the door. He took a deep breath. From his lips came a shrill, whispering whistle, a close imitation of the call of the spheres.

An orange light was reflected from the room beyond.

Still whistling, Norden stepped back a few paces. Through the door, floating toward the spy came an orange sphere.

Taylor watched, expecting to see a bolt of heat lash out toward the spy. But the sphere pulsed slowly, as if half pleased by the sound Norden made with his lips.

So this is how Orkins escaped from the plant, Taylor thought. Orkins had imitated the creatures. They had spared him as a pet, like a man keeps a talking parrot.

Norden stood very still, whistling while the sphere approached. A little tentacle of flame reached out toward him.

Taylor expected to see Norden disappear in a flash of fire, but the flame seemed to caress. A soft glow seemed to diffuse from the man's clothing and body.

The sphere, too, seemed to change, growing softer and more mellow. It wasn't a tangible substance, but something ethereal, like the flicker of flame over an open hearth. Some tremendous force seemed to hold the sphere in globular shape.

Taylor could see the chimerical eyes peering through the surface of the sphere. He looked into the depths of those eyes and still could not be sure they were not an illusion. The intensity of the creatures' intelligence seemed to shine from within, giving the impression of staring, haunting eyes. They were not organs of sight, but they were the windows of the mind. They were the source of those tenuous flames that seemed to caress Norden.

As Taylor looked at the eyes he felt plunged into the pathless depths of a vast, powerful brain. He was in contact with an infinity of intelligence far beyond limits of human comprehension. It was a surging intelligence of energy, abysmal, vaporous and limitless, transcending the dimensions, out-reaching boundless time, overshadowing matter.

The eyes made Taylor forget he was a man. His own mind seemed merged in the intellectual energy floating among the monster machines of the forge room. Dimly, he was conscious that this power was not directed at him, but at Norden who stood, still whistling, in front of the globe.

The sphere was whistling, too, and the sound transformed itself into music of the stars.

A discordant note rose in the song from Norden's imitation of the voice. Norden was shrieking hatred for Taylor's nation, for all those who opposed the self-designated supermen of the world.

"My race must be preserved!"

The thought was Norden's, reflected to Taylor from the shoreless depths of the energy brain.

"All other peoples are evil, decadent, and are doomed to slavery under the man of the future. The future man will be a child of my race. My race is superior. From it the *uberman* will rise. You must help. Prey on these inferior peoples. They do not deserve to live."

The sphere's hues changed, reddish, then yellow, back to orange.

"Is this Norden a man?" came the sphere's questioning thought. "Why doesn't he flee? Why doesn't he scream in terror? He's different from the others. Perhaps he is, as he claims, a superior being. There was one, who

called himself Orkins, who talked with us. But when Orkins saw us slay he ran away in terror. This Norden begs us to kill."

"It is only through destruction of the weak that the strongest survive," Norden answered. "Man is a cruel, but noble creature. Those who fail to kill are weak."

The sphere's whistle grew thunderous.

"You speak the philosophy of my world!" it said.

From the depths of the sphere a rhythm of thought arose. A whispered epic sang through the fibres of Taylor's mind, telling of a world of energy, whipped into a storm of war. Spheres of energy, overwhelmed a weaker race made up of gaseous clouds of atoms.

In the midst of this titanic battle a huge disc appeared, carried by the gaseous clouds. It was a concave lens, like some powerful optical instrument. But instead of focusing beams of light, it reflected, not only light but all forms of energy. As the spheres attacked they were shattered into spores and shot away through space.

The whispered song told of the flight through space. Behind lay a world, unlike the earth, which the spheres called home. It was a gaseous, flaming world where matter and energy mingled as one substance. It was mottled with spots of cold gases which warred with the whispering spheres. *It was the sun.*

The sun was power, yet a ceaseless struggle between energy and matter. But neither energy nor matter was in control. Should matter control, the sun would cool. If energy triumphed, the sun would explode. It was war, like the wars of the earth, where one philosophy was based on power, and the other seeking justice. A victory for might would make a ruthless world. Justice was worthless without injustice. The ideals were mutually dependent, yet always at war.

"The cold gases tricked us," whispered the sphere. "The weak have no right to outwit the strong. The weak has no right to survive. Justice is an unnatural condition. Progress means nothing, except on the road to glory. Your race, sharing our philosophy, can build another great energy reflector to send us back. We can aid our people in triumphing over these inferior beings who claim rights in a world of might."

"We can built what you wish," Norden promised.

It was a promise like other promises Norden had made, Taylor thought. Norden once had promised to help Taylor fight the spheres.

"I will call the others!"

The sphere floated upward toward the hole in the roof. It circled the factory and moved away, toward the town, where a score of other majestic, glowing globes floated like bubbles of fire.

Norden watched, a smile cracking his jutting jaw.

There was still a whispering sound. A single shrill hiss came from the casting room.

"Why do you claim superiority, Norden?" Taylor spoke.

The spy turned. For the first time he saw Taylor.

"*Himmel!*"

Norden's eyes looked beyond Taylor and rested on Masters, who was emerging from the tunnel.

"Is it because you pose the doctrine of slavery and destruction? Is it because your cultural contributions are keyed to military conquest? Is it because of your lies and broken promises? Is it because you are more skillful in butchery? It is because you have refined the art of terrorism?"

Taylor was advancing, half crouching, toward Norden.

Norden's arm swished in a swift motion. He drew an automatic pistol from his pocket and leveled it at Taylor and Masters.

"Because I am the stronger!" Norden said.

Taylor had not expected Norden to be armed. He had overlooked the possibility that the spy might have an extra weapon hidden in the tunnel.

HUMANITY'S ARMY

Taylor and Masters raised their arms. They were caught.

"There is nothing you can do now to save yourself, or your country," Norden said. "Nothing. The spheres will destroy you and your people. They will destroy every living creature who does not surrender to my nation. Might will come into its own."

"Are you sure the spheres are so invincible?" Taylor asked. "Remember, they were expelled from the sun. They must have been checked on the sun many times, otherwise they would have destroyed the creatures who opposed them."

"They are greater than anything on the earth," Norden said.

"The spheres are not for the earth. Our battles are not theirs. By betraying your world to these creatures, you are betraying the whole human race."

"This is not so!" Norden said, thickly. "I know how to handle them. Orkins told me. He said he imitated their whistle and they spared him, while they killed the others in the plant. He didn't realize the value of his discovery. He was too much of a coward."

Norden beckoned his prisoners to him and disarmed them. He pointed to the door of the casting room.

"Look!"

In the center of the room was a metal pot used for small castings. It was filled with molten, glowing metal. Beside it sat a single orange sphere, spraying the pot with bolts of heat to keep the contents warm, for the electrical energy that had supplied the melting pot had long-since been cut off.

In the center of the pot an orange-red bubble was rising from the metal. A sphere was forming on the surface of the metal.

"The rise of living energy!" Norden said. "Our own kind of life may have begun ages ago in much the same way. A spore from some far off world may have drifted here through space, found conditions just right,

and taken root. Thus the spore of the sun—the whispering spheres—found a set of conditions fitted for growth. That metal pot is filled with seeds of the spheres. One by one they will hatch and grow into a force that will bring extinction to all men, except those of my race. The spheres do not want the world, they want the sun. We will see that they go back to the sun, after they have had their sport, killing the weaklings of your nation."

Taylor shuddered as he looked at the growing sphere. This deep, intense intelligence, which found sport in killing human beings, already seemed to be pouring from the depths of its half-formed body.

"The fact that I am alive, proves my superiority," Norden said. "Your people ran in terror at the sight of the spheres, but I bargained with them. I made an alliance."

"You and your superiority!" Masters growled. "If you really were smart, you'd have counted us. Don't you know there are three of us who aren't afraid of the spheres?"

As Masters spoke, the point of Pember's bayonet touched the small of Norden's back. The soldier had crept from the tunnel, unobserved by Norden, who was engrossed in the mental torture of his prisoners.

With a cry of rage Norden whirled and fired.

But Taylor had expected such a move. Even as Norden swung around, the officer sprang, knocking the spy off his feet and spoiling his aim.

A warning whistle came from the sphere heating the cauldron.

"Back! Out of the doorway!" Taylor shouted, grappling with Norden. "I'll take care of him!"

Pember obeyed orders. He jumped back, dragging Masters with him.

Taylor wrenched the gun from Norden's hand, just as the spy landed a jarring blow to the body. Taylor staggered, lost his balance and dropped the gun.

Norden leaped forward to retrieve the weapon, but Taylor blocked the move. He drove Norden back with a hard right. The two men closed in and stood toe to toe, trading blows.

The screaming of the sphere grew louder. The creature by the metal pot seemed to be calling the others over the town. The half-formed sphere in the melting pot joined and the entire building rang with the shrill screams.

Taylor was slowly driving Norden back toward the door of the casting room. A tentacle of flame reached out from the monster by the metal pot, but it only circled the men. Apparently it was afraid to strike, for fear of destroying friend as well as enemy.

Norden's knee came up. Taylor dodged in time to avoid a crippling blow, but the leg caught him on the thigh, sending him back and upsetting him on the floor.

With a cry of triumph, Norden dived toward his foe. But Taylor rolled on his back, doubled his legs and met the hurtling body with a two-footed kick.

Norden grunted with pain. He staggered back, straight toward the sphere by the metal pot.

A whistled warning had no effect. The momentum carried Norden crashing into the orange nucleus of energy. There was a blinding flash.

A small pile of glowing ashes appeared on the floor.

The whistle of the sphere stopped. It pulsed once. A feeble ray of heat lashed out toward Taylor, but the bolt halted in mid-air.

A *plop* cracked in Taylor's ear. The sphere disappeared like a bursting soap bubble.

"Cap! Are you all right!"

Masters appeared in the doorway behind Taylor.

"Gosh!" His eyes settled on the pile of ashes, the remains of Norden. He turned to Taylor. "Are you all right, Cap?"

Taylor nodded.

"Where's the sphere?" asked Masters.

"He died of frustration—or sorrow—over having killed the wrong man," Taylor said grimly. Taylor indicated the half-formed monster in the pot. "Now we've got to get rid of that one and all the unhatched spores."

"If that metal pot hatches 'em, we will," said Masters. "We'll dump the metal."

The undeveloped sphere made no move to launch a deadly bolt toward the men. Apparently at this stage of incubation the spheres were harmless.

"Pember!"

"Yes, sir!" the soldier appeared in the doorway, carrying his bayoneted gun.

"Keep a lookout for other spheres. Masters and I are going to dump this metal pot."

"Yes, sir!"

An electric motor ordinarily dumped the pot into molds, but this motor, like everything else electrical in the plant, now was out of commission. Masters, however, found a block and tackle and rigged it to a beam above the pot. The hook he attached to the bottom of the pot.

"Grab hold, Cap!" he said, taking the end of the rope.

Taylor loosened his tunic and seized the rope.

"Heave!" Masters chanted.

The two men strained. Slowly the pot tilted.

Pember, standing at a window, called out over his shoulder:

"They're coming back!"

Above the creak of the pulleys rose the murmuring whisper of the spheres.

"Heave!" Both men joined in the rhythmic call, putting their weight on the rope. The pot tilted more.

The half-formed sphere whistled loudly and the spheres circling over the plant answered.

"Hurry!" Pember urged.

"Heave!" chorused the men on the ropes. The pulleys creaked.

The room suddenly blazed with a brilliant orange glow as a maddened sphere floated through the hole in the roof. It hung in the air, pulsating, scanning what was taking place below.

"Heave!" cried the two men. The pot was at an angle. The hatching sphere screamed to the globe above.

The floating sphere shrieked. Flame danced over its surface.

"It—It's got—eyes!" Masters said, spacing his words with tugs on the ropes.

"Don't look!" Taylor warned. "Heave!"

Pember faced the sphere. He patted his Garand.

"Give 'im hell, boy!"

He swung the rifle to his shoulder and fired. The bullet whined off the sphere as if it were steel. Pember jerked his head in despair. Angrily he fired again. His tin hat slid to one side of his head at a rakish angle.

"You spawn of hell!" he cried.

Pember lowered his gun. The sphere pulsed ominously. Then the doughboy charged.

Beneath the brim of his helmet Pember's jaws were set. His half-closed eyes, glazed by the dazzling light from the sphere, were two slits of savage determination.

There was something glorious in that charge. It was a soldier going into battle against hopeless odds. And it was more. The army of human civilisation at that moment consisted of one buck private, pitting everything he had against something that even science could not analyze.

The sudden attack seemed to surprise the sphere. It bounded back, moving swiftly out of the way of the advancing one-man army.

Pember roared. There were no words in what he shouted. It was just a cry, the battle cry of humanity.

"Heave!" chorused Taylor and Masters.

They too had a battle cry. Every man was doing his best and would die doing it, if necessary.

There was a crack and a hiss. A flicker of flame flashed over the charging soldier. An odor of charred human flesh filled the room.

Then came a new sound, the hissing splash of spilled metal.

The pot was dumped.

Taylor dropped the rope and faced the sphere. He saw the charred pile of ashes beside the inhuman creature. Nearby was a fused tube of metal, all that was left of Pember's rifle.

"All right, you devil!" shouted Taylor. "Strike and be damned! There's one thing you can't fix, and that's the metal pot. Your spores are dead. Your mistake was in having a metal pot for a mother!"

Taylor sensed understanding in the sphere. Those eyes that were not eyes, but windows of the mind, seemed to fade. Flame licked out again from the monster, but it did not launch toward Taylor. Nor was Masters the target.

Instead, the flame reached toward the fading yellow hemisphere and the cooling pool of metal on the floor. There lay the hopes of the species on this planet, wrecked with a block and tackle.

Plop!

The hemisphere exploded like a bubble.

Plop!

The mourning sphere disappeared.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Three more spheres appeared in the opening in the roof and vanished.

Masters tugged on Taylor's sleeve.

"Come on! We've got a chance, if we can get to the tunnel!"

Taylor shook his head.

"No need. We're safe now. If they've changed to radio energy, the big broadcast is on."

The sky was filled with exploding spheres as the whispers sobbed the tale of the disaster. A score of the energy monsters, bred from the metal pot overnight, burst in the rays of the rising sun. Energy, meeting resistance, was changing to something else. The war of energy and matter

might continue on the molten surface of the sun, but on earth there would be only the wars of ideals.

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