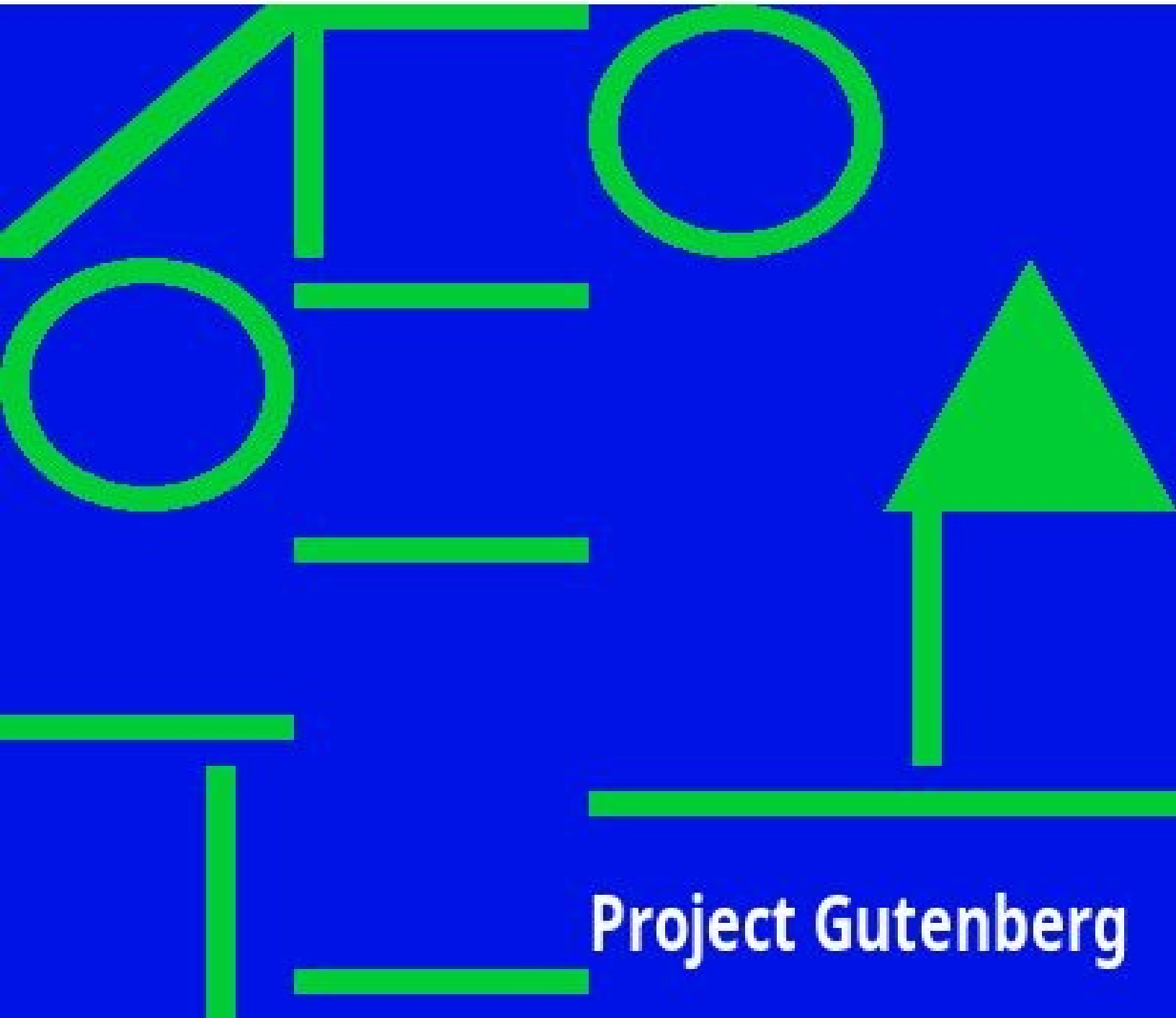
Now We Are Three

Joe L. Hensley



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Author: Joe L. Hensley

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Where are we going? What will the world be like in the days—perhaps not too distant—when we have tested and tested the bombs to the finite degree? Joe L. Hensley, attorney in Madison, Indiana, and increasingly well known in SF, returns with this challenging story of that Tomorrow.

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now

we

are

three

by Joe L. Hensley

It didn't matter that he had quit. He was still one of the guilty. He had seen it in her eyes and in the eyes of others.

JOHN RUSH smoothed the covers over his wife, tucking them in where her restless moving had pulled them away from the mattress. The twins moved beside him, their smooth hands following his in the task, their blind eyes intent on nothingness.

"Thank you," he said softly to them, knowing they could not hear him. But it made him feel better to talk.

His wife, Mary, was quiet. Her breathing was smooth, easy—almost as if she were sleeping.

The long sleep.

He touched her forehead, but it was cool. The doctor had said it was a miracle she had lived this long. He stood away from the bed for a moment watching before he went on out to the porch. The twins moved back into what had become a normal position for them in the past months: One on each side of the bed, their thin hands holding Mary's tightly, the milky blind eyes surveying something that could not be seen by his eyes. Sometimes they would stand like this for hours.

Outside the evening was cool, the light not quite gone. He sat in the rocking chair and waited for the doctor who had promised to come—and yet might not come. The bitterness came back, the self-hate. He remembered a young man and promises made, but not kept; a girl who had believed and never lost faith even when he had retreated back to the land away from everything. Long sullen silences, self-pity, brooding over the news stories that got worse and worse. And the children—one born dead—two born deaf and dumb and blind.

Worse than dead.

You helped, he accused himself. You worked for those who set off the bombs and tested and tested while the cycle went up and up beyond human tolerance—not the death level, but the level where nothing was sure again, the level that made cancer a thing of epidemic proportions, replacing statistically all of the insane multitude of things that man could do to kill himself. Even the good things that the atom had brought were destroyed in the panic that ensued. No matter that you quit. You are still one of the guilty. You have seen it hidden in her eyes and you have seen it in the milky eyes of the twins.

Worse than dead.

Dusk became night and finally the doctor came. It had begun to lightning and a few large drops of rain stroked Rush's cheek. Not a good year for the farming he had retreated to. Not a good year for anything. He stood to greet the doctor and the other man with him.

"Good evening, doctor," he said.

"Mr. Rush—" the doctor shook hands gingerly, "I hope you don't mind me bringing someone along—this is Mr. North. He is with the County Juvenile Office." The young doctor smiled. "How is the patient this evening?"

"She is the same," John Rush said to the doctor. He turned to the other man, keeping his face emotionless, hands at his side. He had expected this for some time. "I think you will be wanting to look at the twins. They are by her bed." He opened the door and motioned them in and then followed.

He heard the Juvenile man catch his breath a little. The twins were playing again. They had left their vigil at the bedside and they were moving swiftly around the small living room, their hands and arms and legs moving in some synchronized game that had no meaning—their movements quick and sure—their faces showing some intensity, some purpose. They moved with grace, avoiding obstructions.

"I thought these children were blind," Mr. North said.

John smiled a little. "It is unnerving. I have seen them play like this before—though they have not done so for a long time—since my wife has been ill." He lowered his head. "They are blind, deaf, and dumb."

"How old are they?"

"Twelve."

"They do not seem to be more than eight—nine at the most."

"They have been well fed," John said softly.

"How about schooling, Mr. Rush? The teaching of handicapped children is not something that can be done by a person untrained in the field."

"I have three degrees, Mr. North. When my wife became ill and I began to care for them I taught them to read braille. They picked it up very quickly, though they showed little continued interest in it. I read a number of books in the field of teaching handicapped children ..." He let it trail off.

"Your degrees were in physics, were they not, Mr. Rush?" Now the touch of malice came.

"That is correct." He sat down in one of the wooden chairs. "I quit working long before the witch hunts came. I was never indicted."

"Nevertheless your degrees are no longer bona fide. All such degrees have been stricken from the records." He looked down and John saw that his eyes no longer hid the hate. "If your wife dies I doubt that any court would allow you to keep custody of these children."

A year before—even six months and John would not have protested. Now he had to make the effort. "They are my children—such as they are—and I will fight any attempt to take them from me."

The Juvenile Man smiled without humor. "My wife and I had a child last year, Mr. Rush. Or perhaps I should say that a child was born to us. I am glad that child was born dead—I think my wife is even glad. Perhaps we should try again—I understand that you and your kind have left us an even chance on a normal birth." He paused for a moment. "I shall file a petition with the circuit court asking that the Juvenile Office be appointed guardians of your children, Mr. Rush. I hope you do not choose to resist that petition—feeling would run pretty high against an ex-physicist who tried to prove he *deserved* children." He turned away stiffly and went out the front door. In a little while Rush heard the car door slam decisively.

The doctor was replacing things in the black bag. "I'm sorry, John. He said he was going to come out here anyway so I invited him to come with me."

John nodded. "My wife?"

"There is no change."

"And no chance."

"There never has been one. The brain tumor is too large and too inaccessible for treatment or surgery. It will be soon now. I am surprised that she has lasted this long. I am prolonging a sure process." He turned away. "That's all I can do."

"Thank you for coming, doctor—I appreciate that." Rush smiled bitterly, unable to stop himself. "But aren't you afraid that your other patients will find out?"

The doctor stopped, his face paling slightly. "I took an oath when I graduated from medical school. Sometimes I want to break that oath, but I have not so far." He paused. "Try as I may I cannot blame them for hating you. You know why."

Rush wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. "Don't you realize that the government that punished the men I worked with for their 'criminal negligence' is the same government that commissioned them to do that work—that officials were warned and rewarned of the things that small increases in radiation might do and that such things might not show up immediately—and yet they ordered us ahead?" He stopped for a moment and put his head down, touching his work-roughened hands to his eyes. "They put us in prison for refusing to do a job or investigated us until no one could or would trust us in civilian jobs—then when it was done they put us in prison or worse because the very things we warned them of came true."

"Perhaps that is true," the doctor said stiffly, "but the choice of refusing was still possible."

"Some of us did refuse to work," Rush said softly. "I did, for one. Perhaps you think that we alone will bear the blame. You are wrong. Sooner or later the stigma will spread to all of the sciences—and to you, doctor. Too many now that you can't save; in a little while the hate will surround you also. When we are gone and they must find something new to hate they will blame you for every malformed baby and every death. You think that one of you will find a cure for this thing. Perhaps you would if you had a hundred years or a thousand years, but you haven't. They killed a man on the street in New York the other day because he was wearing a white laboratory smock. What do you wear in your office, doctor? Hate-blind eyes can't tell the difference: Physicist, chemist,

doctor.... We all look the same to a fool. Even if there were a cancer cure that is only a part of the problem. There are the babies. Your science cannot cope with the cause—only mine can do that."

The doctor lowered his head and turned away toward the door.

There was another thing left to say: "If the plumbing went bad in your home, doctor, you would call a plumber, for he would be the one competent to fix it." Rush shook his head slowly. "But what happens when there are no plumbers left?"

The children were by the bed, their hands holding those of the mother. Gently John Rush tugged those hands away and led them toward their own bed. The small hands were cold in his own and he felt a tiny feeling of revulsion as they tightened. Then the feeling slipped away and was replaced—as if a current had crossed from their hands to his. It was a warm feeling—one that he had known before when they touched him, but for which he had never been able to find mental words to express the sensation.

Slowly he helped them undress. When they were in the single bed he covered them with the top sheet. Their milky eyes surveyed him, unseeing, somehow withdrawn.

"I have not known you well," he said. "I left that to her. I have sat and brooded and buried myself in the earth until it is too late for much else." He touched the small heads. "I wish you could hear me. I wish ..."

Outside on the road a truck roared past. Instinctively he set to hear it. The faces below him did not change.

He turned away quickly then and went back out on the porch. He filled his pipe and sat down in the old, creaky rocker. A tiny rain had begun to fall hesitantly—as if afraid of striking the sun-hardened ground.

Somewhere out there, somewhere hunted, but not found, the plumbers gathered. There had been a man—what was his name? Masser—that was it. He had been working on a way to inhibit radioactivity—speed up the half-life until they had taken the grant away. If a man can do whatever he thinks of—can he undo that which he has done?

Masser was the theoreticist—I was the applier, the one who translated equations

into cold blueprints. And I was good until they ...

They had hounded him back to the land when he quit. Others had not been so lucky. When a whole people panic then an object for their hate must be found. A naming. An immediate object. He remembered the newspaper story that began: "They lynched twelve men, twelve ex-men, in New Mexico last night ..."

Have I been wrong? Have I done the right thing? He remembered the tiny hands in his own, the blind eyes.

Those hands. Why do they make me feel like ...

He let his head slide back against the padded top of the rocking chair and fell into a light, uneasy sleep.

The dreams came as they had before. Tiny, inhumanly capable hands clutched at him and the sun was hot above. There was a background sound of hydrogen bombs, heard mutely. He looked down at the hands that touched and asked something of his own. The eyes were not milky now. They stared up at him, alert and questioning. *What is it you want?*

The wind tore holes in tiny voices and there was the sound of laughter and his wife's eyes were looking into his own, sorry only for him, at peace with the rest. And they formed a ring around him, those three, hands caught together, enclosing him. *What is it you are saying?*

It seemed to him that the words would come clear, but the rain came then, great torrents of it, washing all away, all sight and sound....

He awoke and only the rain was true. The tiny rain had increased to a wind-driven downpour and he was soaked where it had blown under the eaves onto the porch.

From inside the house he heard a cry.

She was sitting upright in bed. Her eyes were open and full of pain. He went quickly to her and touched her pulse. It was faint and reedy.

"I hurt," she whispered.

Quickly, as the doctor had taught him, he made up a shot of morphine, a full quarter grain, and gave it to her. Her eyes glazed down, but did not close.

"John," she said softly, "the children ... they ... talk to ..." She twisted on the bed and he held her with strong arms until the eyes closed again and her breathing became easy. He pushed the ruffled hair back from her eyes and straightened the awry sheets.

The vibration of his walking might have wakened the twins. He tiptoed to *their* bed—for they refused to be parted even in sleep.

For a second he thought that the small night-light had tricked him by shadows on shadows. He reached down to touch ...

They were gone.

He fought down sudden panic. Where can two children, deaf and dumb and blind go in the middle of the night?

Not far.

He opened the door to the kitchen, hand-hunted for the hanging light. They were not there—nor were they on the small back porch. The panic passed critical mass, exploded out of control. He lurched back into the combination living room, bed room. He looked under all of the beds and into the small closet—everywhere that two children might conceal themselves.

Outside the rain had increased. He peered out into the lightning night. A truck horn blew ominously far down the road.

The road?

He slogged through the mud, instantly soaking as soon as he was out of shelter, not knowing or caring. Through the front yard, out to the road. He could see the lights of the truck coming from far away, two tiny points in the darkness. But no twins.

He waited helplessly while the truck rushed past, its headlights cutting holes in the darkness—fearing those lights would outline something that he had not seen. But there was nothing.

For another eternity he hunted the muddy fields, the small barn and outbuildings. The clutch of fear made him shout their names, though he knew they could not hear.

And then, suddenly, all fear was gone—like a summer squall near the sea, with

the sun close behind. It was as if their hands had reached out and touched him and brought the strange feeling again.

"They are in the house," he said aloud and knew he was right.

He took time to discard muddy shoes on the porch before he opened the door. And they were there—by the mother's bed, hands clasped over hers.

He felt a tiny chill. Their eyes were watching the door as he opened it, their faces set to receive some stimuli—already set—as if they had known he was coming.

Mary was breathing softly. On her face all trace of pain had disappeared and now there was the tiny smile that had been hers long ago. Her breathing was even, but light as forgotten conversation.

Gently he tried to pry their resisting hands away from hers. The hands fought back with a terrible strength beyond normality. By sheer greater force he tore one of the twins away.

It was like releasing a bomb. Sudden pain stabbed through his body. The twin struggled in his arms, the small hands reaching blindly out for the thing they had lost. And Mary's eyes opened and all of the uncontrolled pain came, back into those eyes. Her body writhed on the bed, tearing the coverings away. The twin squirmed away from his slackening hold and once again caught at the hands of the mother.

All struggle ceased. Mary's eyes shut again, the pain lines smoothed themselves, the tiny smile flowered.

He reached out and touched the small hands on each side of the mother and the feeling for which there were no words came through more strongly than ever before. Tiny voices tried to whisper within the corners of his mind, partially blotted, sometimes heard. The *real* things, the things of hate and fear and despair retreated beyond the bugle call that sounded somewhere.

"She will die," the voice said; one voice for two. "This part of her will die."

And then *her* voice came—as it had been once before when all of the world was young. "You must not be afraid, John. I have known for a long time—for they were a part of me. And you could not know for your mind was hiding and alone. I have seen ..."

He cried out and pulled his hands away. Sound died, the room was normal again. The milky, white eyes surveyed him, the hands remained locked securely over those of the mother. The thin carven features of the children were emotionless, waiting.

He strove for rational meaning within his brain. *These are my sons—they can not see or hear or speak. They are identical twins—born with those defects.*

Take two children, blind them, make them deaf to all sound, cut away their voices. They are identical twins, facing the same environment, sharing the same heredity of blasted chromosomes. They will have intelligence and curiosity that increases as they mature. They will not be blinded by the senses—the easy way. The first thing they will discover is each other.

What else might they then discover?

It has been said that when sight is lost the sense of touch and hearing increase to almost unbelievable acuteness—Rush knew that. The blind often also develop a sense almost like radar which allows them to perceive an object ahead of them and gives them the ability to follow twisting paths.

Take one child and put him under the disability that the twins were born with. As intelligence grows so does single bewilderment. The world is a puzzling and bewildering place. Braille is a great discovery—a way to communicate with the unknown that lies beyond.

But the twins had shown almost no interest in Braille.

He reached back down for the tiny hands.

"Yes, we can communicate," the single voice that spoke for two said. "We have tried with you before, but we could not break through. Your mind speaks in a language we do not understand, in figures and equations that are not real to us. Those things lie all through your mind—on the surface we have sensed only your pity for us and your hate for the shadowy ones around you, the ones we do not know. It was a wall we could not climb. She is different.

"A part of her will go with us," the voice said. "There is another place that touches this one which we perceive and know more fully than this one."

The voice died away and brief pictures of a land of other dimensions beyond

sight flashed in his brain. He had seen them before imperfectly in the disquieting dreams. "She must go with us for she can no longer exist here," the voice said softly. "Perhaps there are others like us to come—we do not yet know what we are or whether there will be others like us. But we must go now, before we were ready, because of her."

The mother's voice came. "You must go too. There is nothing here for you but sorrow. They will take you, John." A softness touched at him. "Please, John."

The longing was a thing of fire. To cast off the world that had already given him all of the hate and fear that he could stand, that had made him worse than a coward. To go with her.

But she no longer needed him. She was complete—as they were, only necessary to themselves.

He could not go.

During the long night he kept the vigil by the bedside; long after any need to keep it.

The twins were gone and she with them.

He could not cry for all tears seemed useless. He said a small prayer, something he had not done in years, over the cold thing left behind.

The rain had ceased outside. Somewhere out there in his world there were men trying to undo the harm that had been done, harm that he had helped to do, then retreated from. He had no right to retreat further.

Something spoke a requiem sentence in his consciousness, light as late sunset, only vaguely there. "*We are* here—we will wait for you ... come to us ... come ..."

He wrote a short note for the doctor and the others who would come and hunt and go through the motions that men must live by. Perhaps the doctor might even understand.

"I have gone plumbing," the note said.

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Fantastic Universe* August 1957. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

A section of text was missing from the original printing. To restore narrative flow, the following italicised text has been added as a suggested amendment: "It had begun to lightning and a few large drops of rain stroked *Rush's cheek. Not a* good year for the farming he had retreated to. Not a good year for anything."

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