

The Man Who Evolved

The Man Who Evolved

by Edmond Hamilton

There were three of us in Pollard's house on that night that I try vainly to forget. Dr. John Pollard himself, Hugh Dutton and I, Arthur Wright—we were the three. Pollard met that night a fate whose horror none could dream; Dutton has since that night inhabited a state institution reserved for the insane, and I alone am left to tell what happened.

It was on Pollard's invitation that Dutton and I went up to his isolated cottage. We three had been friends and room-mates at the New York Technical University. Our friendship was perhaps a little unusual, for Pollard was a number of years older than Dutton and myself and was different in temperament, being rather quieter by nature. He had followed an intensive course of biological studies, too, instead of the ordinary engineering courses Dutton and I had taken.

As Dutton and I drove northward along the Hudson on that afternoon, we found ourselves reviewing what we knew of Pollard's career. We had known of his taking his master's and doctor's degrees, and had heard of his work under Braun, the Vienna biologist whose theories had stirred up such turmoil. We had heard casually, too, that afterwards he had come back to plunge himself in private research at the country-house beside the Hudson he had inherited. But since then we had had no word from him and had been somewhat surprised to receive his telegrams inviting us to spend the weekend with him.

It was drawing into early-summer twilight when Dutton and I reached a small riverside village and were directed to Pollard's place, a mile or so beyond. We found it easily enough, a splendid old pegged-frame house that for a hundred-odd years had squatted on a low hill above the river. Its outbuildings were clustered around the big house like the chicks about some protecting hen.

Pollard himself came out to greet us. "Why, you boys have grown up!" was his first exclamation. "Here I've remembered you as Hughie and Art, the campus trouble-raisers, and you look as though you belong to business clubs and talk everlastingly about sales-resistance!"

"That's the sobering effect of commercial life," Dutton explained, grinning. "It hasn't touched you, you old oyster—you look the same as you did five years

ago.”

He did, too, his lanky figure and slow smile and curiously thoughtful eyes having changed not a jot. Yet Pollard’s bearing seemed to show some rather more than usual excitement and I commented on it.

“If I seem a little excited it’s because this is a great day for me,” he answered.

“Well, you are in luck to get two fine fellows like Dutton and me to trail up to this hermitage of yours,” I began, but he shook his head smilingly.

“I don’t refer to that. Art, though I’m mighty glad you’ve come. As for my hermitage, as you call it, don’t say a word against it. I’ve been able to do work here I could never have done amid the distractions of a city laboratory.”

His eyes were alight. “If you two knew what—but there, you’ll hear it soon enough. Let’s get inside—I suppose you’re hungry?”

“Hungry—not I,” I assured him. “I might devour half a steer or some trifle like that, but I have really no appetite for anything else today.”

“Same here,” Dutton said. “I just pick at my food lately. Give me a few dozen sandwiches and a bucket of coffee and I consider it a full meal.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do to tempt your delicate appetites,” said Pollard, as we went inside.

We found his big house comfortable enough, with long, low-ceilinged rooms and broad windows looking riverward. After putting our bags in a bedroom, and while his housekeeper and cook prepared dinner. Pollard escorted us on a tour of inspection of the place. We were most interested in his laboratory.

It was a small wing he had added to the house, of frame construction outside to harmonize with the rest of the building, but inside offering a gleaming vista of white-tiled walls and polished instruments. A big cube-like structure of transparent metal surmounted by a huge metal cylinder resembling a monster vacuum tube, took up the room’s center, and he showed us in an adjoining stone-floored room the dynamos and motors of his private power-plant. Night had fallen by the time we finished dinner, the meal having been prolonged by our reminiscences. The housekeeper and cook had gone. Pollard explaining that the

servants did not sleep in the place. We sat smoking for a while in his living-room, Dutton looking appreciatively around at our comfortable surroundings.

“Your hermitage doesn’t seem half-bad. Pollard,” he commented. “I wouldn’t mind this easy life for a while myself.”

“Easy life?” repeated Pollard. “That’s all you know about it, Hugh. The fact is that I’ve never worked so hard in my life as I’ve done up here in the last two years.”

“What in the world have you been working at?” I asked. “Something so unholy you’ve had to keep it hidden here?”

A mad scheme

pollard chuckled. “that’s what they think down in the village. They know I’m a biologist and have a laboratory here, so it’s a foregone conclusion with them that I’m doing vivisection of a specially dreadful nature. That’s why the servants won’t stay here at night.

“As a matter of fact,” he added, “if they knew down in the village what I’ve really been working on they’d be ten times as fearful as they are now.”

“Are you trying to play the mysterious great scientist for our benefit?” Dutton demanded. “If you are you’re wasting time—I know you, stranger, so take off that mask.”

“That’s right,” I told him. “If you’re trying to get our curiosity worked up you’ll find we can scam you as neatly as we could five years ago.”

“Which scamming generally ended in black eyes for both of you,” he retorted. “But I’ve no intention of working up your curiosity—as a matter of fact I asked you up here to see what I’ve been doing and help me finish it.”

“Help you?” echoed Dutton. “What can we help you do—dissect worms? Some weekend, I can see right now!”

“There’s more to this than dissecting worms,” Pollard said. He leaned back and smoked for a little time in silence before he spoke again.

“Do you two have any knowledge at all of evolution?” he asked.

“I know that it’s a fighting word in some states,” I answered, “and that when you say it you’ve got to smile, damn you.”

He smiled himself. “I suppose you’re aware of the fact, however, that all life on this earth began as simple uni-cellular protoplasm, and by successive evolutionary mutations or changes developed into its present forms and is still slowly developing?”

“We know that much—just because we’re not biologists you needn’t think we’re totally ignorant of biology,” Button said.

“Shut up. Dutton,” I warned. “What’s evolution got to do with your work up here, Pollard?”

“It is my work up here,” Pollard answered.

He bent forward. “I’ll try to make this clear to you from the start. You know, or say you know, the main steps of evolutionary development. Life began on this earth as simple protoplasm, a jelly-like mass from which developed small protoplasmic organisms. From these developed in turn sea-creatures, land-lizards, mammals, by successive mutations. This infinitely slow evolutionary process has reached its highest point so far in the mammal man, and is still going on with the same slowness.

“This much is certain biological knowledge, but two great questions concerning this process of evolution have remained hitherto unanswered. First, what is the cause of evolutionary change, the cause of these slow, steady mutations into higher forms? Second, what is the future course of man’s evolution going to be, what will be the forms into which in the future man will evolve, and where will his evolution stop? Those two questions biology has so far been unable to answer.”

Pollard was silent a moment and then said quietly, “I have found the answer to one of those questions, and am going to find the answer to the other tonight.”

We stared at him. “Are you trying to spoof us?” I asked finally.

“I’m absolutely serious, Arthur. I have actually solved the first of those

problems, have found the cause of evolution.”

“What is it, then?” burst out of Dutton.

“What it has been thought by some biologists for years to be,” Pollard answered. “The cosmic rays.”

“The cosmic rays?” I echoed. “The vibrations from space that Millikan discovered?”

“Yes, the cosmic rays, the shortest wavelength and most highly penetrating of all vibratory forces. It has been known that they beat unceasingly upon the earth from outer space, cast forth by the huge generators of the stars, and it has also been known that they must have some great effect in one way or another upon the life of the earth.”

“I have proved that they do have such an effect, and that that effect is what we call evolution! For it is the cosmic rays, beating upon every living organism on earth, that cause the profound changes in the structure of those organisms which we call mutations. Those changes are slow indeed, but it is due to them that through the ages life has been raised from the first protoplasm to man, and is still being raised higher.”

“good loRd, you can’t be serious on this. Pollard!” Dutton protested.

“I am so serious that I am going to stake my life on my discovery tonight,” Pollard answered, quietly.

We were startled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I have found in the cosmic rays the cause of evolution, the answer to the first question, and that tonight by means of them I am going to answer the second question and find out what the future evolutionary development of man will be!”

“But how could you possibly—”

Pollard interrupted. “Easily enough. I have been able in the last months to do something no physicist has been able to do, to concentrate the cosmic rays and yet remove from them their harmful properties. You saw the cylinder over the

metal cube in my laboratory? That cylinder literally gathers in from an immense distance the cosmic rays that strike this part of earth, and reflects them down inside the cube.

“Now suppose those concentrated cosmic rays, millions of times stronger than the ordinary cosmic rays that strike one spot on earth, fall upon a man standing inside the cube. What will be the result? It is the cosmic rays that cause evolutionary change, and you heard me say that they are still changing all life on earth, still changing man, but so slowly as to be unnoticeable. But what about the man under those terrifically intensified rays? He will be changed millions of times faster than ordinarily, will go forward in hours or minutes through the evolutionary mutations that all mankind will go forward through in eons to come!”

“And you propose to try that experiment?” I cried.

“I propose to try it on myself,” said Pollard gravely, “and to find out for myself the evolutionary changes that await humankind.”

“Why, it’s insane!” Dutton exclaimed.

Pollard smiled. “The old cry,” he commented. “Never an attempt. has been made yet to tamper with nature’s laws, but that cry has been raised.”

“But Dutton’s right!” I cried. “Pollard, you’ve worked here alone too long—you’ve let your mind become warped—” “You are trying to tell me that I have become a little mad,” he I said. “No, I am sane—perhaps wonderfully sane, in trying this.”

His expression changed, his eyes brooding. “Can’t you two sees what this may mean to humanity? As we are to the apes, so must the; men of the future be to us. If we could use this method of mine to take all mankind forward through millions of years of evolutionary development at one stride, wouldn’t it be sane to do so?” ;

My mind was whirling. “Good heavens, the whole thing is so crazy,” I protested. “To accelerate the evolution of the human race? It seems somehow a thing forbidden.”

“It’s a thing glorious if it can be done,” he returned, “and I know that it can be

done. But first one must go ahead, must travel on through stage after stage of man's future development to find out to which stage it would be most desirable for all mankind to be transferred. I know there is such an age."

"And you asked us up here to take part in that?"

"Just that. I mean to enter the cube and let the concentrated rays whirl me forward along the paths of evolution, but I must have someone to turn the rays on and off at the right moments."

"It's all incredible!" Dutton exclaimed. "Pollard, if this is a joke it's gone far enough for me."

For answer Pollard rose. "We will go to the laboratory now," he said simply. "I am eager to get started."

I cannot remember following Pollard and Dutton to the laboratory, my thoughts were spinning so at the time. It was not until we stood before the great cube from which the huge metal cylinder towered that I was aware of the reality of it all.

Pollard had gone into the dynamo-room and as Dutton and I stared wordlessly at the great cube and cylinder, at the retorts and flasks of acids and strange equipment about us, we heard the hum of motor-generators. Pollard came back to the switchboard supported in a steel frame beside the cube, and as he closed a switch there there came a crackling and the cylinder glowed with white light.

Pollard pointed to it and the big quartz-like disk in the cubical chamber's ceiling, from which the white force-shafts shot downward.

"The cylinder is now gathering cosmic rays from an immense area of space," he said, "and those concentrated rays are falling through that disk into the cube's interior. To cut off the rays it is necessary only to open this switch." He reached to open the switch, the light died.

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Quickly, while we stared, he removed his clothing, donning in place of it a loose white running suit.

“I will want to observe the changes of my own body as much as possible,” he explained. “Now, I will stand inside the cube and you will turn on the rays and let them play upon me for fifteen minutes. Roughly, that should represent a period of some fifty million years of future evolutionary change. At the end of fifteen minutes you will turn the rays off and we will be able to observe what changes they have caused. We will then resume the process, going forward by fifteen-minute or rather fifty-million-year periods.”

“But where will it stop—where will we quit the process?” Dutton asked.

Pollard shrugged. “We’ll stop where evolution stops, that is, where the rays no longer affect me. You know, biologists have often wondered what the last change or final development of man will be, the last mutation. Well, we are going to see tonight what it will be.”

He stepped toward the cube and then paused, went to a desk and brought from it a sealed envelope he handed to me.

“This is just in case something happens to me of a fatal nature,” he said. “It contains an attestation signed by myself that you two are in no way responsible for what I am undertaking.”

“Pollard, give up this unholy business!” I cried, clutching his arm. “It’s not too late, and this whole thing seems ghastly to me!”

“I’m afraid it is too late,” he smiled. “If I backed out now I’d be ashamed to look in a mirror hereafter. And no explorer was ever more eager than I am to start down the path of man’s future evolution!”

He stepped up into the cube, standing directly beneath the disk in its ceiling. He motioned imperatively, and like an automaton I closed the door and then threw the switch.

The cylinder broke again into glowing white light, and as the shafts of glowing white force shot down from the disk in the cube's ceiling upon Pollard, we glimpsed his whole body writhing as though beneath a terrifically concentrated electrical force. The shaft of glowing emanations almost hid him from our view. I knew that the cosmic rays in themselves were invisible but guessed that the light of the cylinder and shaft was in some way a transformation of part of the rays into visible light. ‘

Dutton and I stared with beating hearts into the cubical chamber, having but fleeting glimpses of Pollard's form. My watch was in one hand, the other hand on the switch. The fifteen minutes that followed seemed to me to pass with the slowness of fifteen eternities. Neither of us spoke and the only sounds were the hum of the generators and the crackling of the cylinder that from the far spaces was I gathering and concentrating the rays of evolution.

At last the watch's hand marked the quarter-hour and I snapped I off the switch, the light of the cylinder and inside the cube dying. Exclamations burst from us both.

Pollard stood inside the cube, staggering as though still dazed by the impact of the experience, but he was not the Pollard who had entered the chamber! He was transfigured, godlike! His body had literally expanded into a great figure of such physical power and beauty as we had not imagined could exist! He was many inches taller and broader, his skin a clear pink, every limb and muscle molded as though by some master sculptor.

The greatest change, though, was in his face. Pollard's homely, good-humored features were gone, replaced by a face whose perfectly-cut features held the stamp of immense intellectual power that shone almost overpoweringly from the dear dark eyes. It was not Pollard who stood before us, I told myself, but a being as far above us as the most advanced man of today is above the troglodyte!

He was stepping out of the cube and his voice reached our ears, clear and bell-like, triumphant.

“You see? It worked as I knew it would work! I'm fifty million years ahead of the rest of humanity in evolutionary development!”

“Pollard!” My lips moved with difficulty. “Pollard, this is terrible—this change —”

His radiant eyes flashed. “Terrible? It’s wonderful! Do you two realize what I now am, can you realize it? This body of mine is the kind of body all men will have in fifty million years, and the brain inside it is a brain fifty million years ahead of yours in development!”

he swept his hand about. “Why, all this laboratory and former work of mine seems infinitely petty, childish, to me! The problems that I worked on for years I could solve now in minutes. I could do more for mankind now than all the men now living could do together!”

“Then you’re going to stop at this stage?” Dutton cried eagerly. “You’re not going further with this?”

“Of course I am! If fifty million years’ development makes this much change in man, what will a hundred million years, two hundred million make? I’m going to find that out.”

I grasped his hand. “Pollard, listen to me! Your experiment has succeeded, has fulfilled your wildest dreams. Stop it now! Think what you can accomplish, man! I know your ambition has always been to be one of humanity’s great benefactors—by stopping here you can be the greatest! You can be a living proof to mankind of what your process can make it, and with that proof before it all humanity will be eager to become the same as you!”

He freed himself from my grasp. “No, Arthur—I have gone part of the way into humanity’s future and I’m going on.”

He stepped back into the chamber, while Dutton and I stared helplessly. It seemed half a dream, the laboratory, the cubical chamber, the godlike figure inside that was and still was not Pollard.

“Turn on the rays, and let them play for fifteen minutes more,” he was directing. “It will project me ahead another fifty million years.”

His eyes and voice were imperative, and I glanced at my watch, and snicked over the switch. Again the cylinder broke into light, again the shaft of force shot down into the cube to hide Pollard’s splendid figure.

Dutton and I waited with feverish intensity in the next minutes. Pollard was standing still beneath the broad shaft of force, and so was hidden in it from our

eyes. What would its lifting disclose? Would he have changed still more, into some giant form, or would he be the same, having already reached humanity's highest possible development?

When I shut off the mechanism at the end of the appointed period, Dutton and I received a shock. For again Pollard had changed!

He was no longer the radiant, physically perfect figure of the first metamorphosis. His body instead seemed to have grown thin and shrivelled, the outlines of bones visible through its flesh. His body, indeed, seemed to have lost half its bulk and many inches of stature and breadth, but these were compensated for by the change in his head.

For the head supported by this weak body was an immense, bulging balloon that measured fully eighteen inches from brow to back! It was almost entirely hairless, its great mass balanced precariously upon his slender shoulders and neck. And his face too was changed greatly, the eyes larger and the mouth smaller, the ears seeming? smaller also. The great bulging forehead dominated the face.

Could this be Pollard? His voice sounded thin and weak to our ears. I

“You are surprised to see me this time? Well, you see a man a hundred million years ahead of you in development. And I must confess that you appear to me as two brutish, hairy cave-men would appear to you.”

“But Pollard, this is awful!” Dutton cried. “This change is more terrible than the first ... if you had only stopped at the first ...”

The eyes of the shrivelled, huge-headed figure in the cube fired with anger. “Stop at that first stage? I'm glad now that I didn't! The man I was fifteen minutes ago ... fifty million years ago in development ... seems now to me to have been half-animal! What was his big animal-like body beside my immense brain?” j

“You say that because in this change you're getting away from all human emotions and sentiments!” I burst. “Pollard, do you realize what you're doing? You're changing out of human semblance!”

“I realize it perfectly,” he snapped, “and I see nothing to be deplored in the fact.

It means that in a hundred million years man will be developing in brain-capacity and will care nothing for the development of body. To you two crude beings, of what is to me the past, this seems terrible; but to me it is desirable and natural. Turn on the rays again!”

“Don’t do it. Art!” cried Dutton. “This madness has gone far enough!”

Pollard’s great eyes surveyed us with cold menace. “You will turn on the rays,” his thin voice ordered deliberately. “If you do not, it will be but the work of a moment for me to annihilate both of you and go on with this alone.”

“You’d kill us?” I said dumfoundedly. “We two, two of your best friends?”

His narrow mouth seemed to sneer. “Friends? I am millions of years past such irrational emotions as friendship. The only emotion you awaken in me is a contempt for your crudity. Turn on the rays!”

THE BRAIN MONSTER

His eyes blazed as he snapped the last order, and as though propelled by a force outside myself, I closed the switch.

The shaft of glowing force again hid him from our view.

Of our thoughts during the following quarter-hour I can say nothing, for both Dutton and I were so rigid with awe and horror as to make our minds chaotic. I shall never forget, though, that first moment after the time had passed and I had again switched off the mechanism.

The change had continued, and Pollard—I could not call him that in my own mind—stood in the cube-chamber as a shape the sight of which stunned our minds.

He had become simply a great head! A huge hairless head fully a yard in diameter, supported on tiny legs, the arms having dwindled to mere hands that projected just below the head! The eyes were enormous, saucer-like, but the ears were mere pin-holes at either side of the head, the nose and mouth being similar holes below the eyes!

He was stepping out of the chamber on his ridiculously little limbs, and as Dutton and I reeled back in unreasoning horror, his voice came to us as an almost inaudible piping. And it held pride!

“You tried to keep me from going on, and you see what I have become? To such as you, no doubt, I seem terrible, yet you two and all like you seem as low to me as the worms that crawl!”

“Good God, Pollard, you’ve made yourself a monster!” The words burst from me without thought.

His enormous eyes turned on me. “You call me Pollard, yet I am no more the Pollard you knew, and who entered that chamber first, than you are the ape of millions of years ago from whom you sprang! And all mankind is like you two! Well, they will all learn the powers of one who is a hundred and fifty million years in advance of them!”

“What do you mean?” Dutton exclaimed.

“I mean that with the colossal brain I have I will master without a struggle this man-swarmed planet, and make it a huge laboratory in which to pursue the experiments that please me.”

“But Pollard—remember why you started this!” I cried. “To go ahead and chart the path of future evolution for humanity—to benefit humanity and not to rule it!”

The great head’s enormous eyes did not change. “I remember that the creature Pollard that I was until tonight had such foolish ambitions, yes. It would stir mirth now, if I could feel such an emotion, To benefit humanity? Do you men dream of benefiting the animal you rule over? I would no sooner think of working for the benefit you humans!

“Do you two yet realize that I am so far ahead of you in brain power now as you are ahead of the beasts that perish? Look at this ...” I

He had climbed onto a chair beside one of the laboratory tables and was reaching among the retorts and apparatus there. Swiftly he poured several compounds into a lead mortar, added others, poured upon the mixed contents another mixture made as swiftly.

There was a puff of intense green smoke from the mortar instantly, and then the great head—I can only call him that—turned the mortar upside down. A lump of shining mottled metal fell out and we gasped as we recognized the yellow sheen of pure gold, made in a moment, apparently, by a mixture of common compounds!

“You see?” the grotesque figure was asking. “What is the transformation of elements to a mind like mine? You two cannot even realize the scope of my intelligence!

“I can destroy all life on this earth from this room, if I desire. I can construct a telescope that will allow me to look on the planets the farthest galaxies! I can send my mind forth to make contact with other minds without the slightest material connection. And you think it terrible that I should rule your race! I will not rule them, I will own them and this planet as you might own a farm and animals!”

“You couldn’t!” I cried. “Pollard, if there is anything of Pollard left in you, give up that thought! We’ll kill you ourselves before we’ll let you start a monstrous rule of men!”

“We will—by God, we will!” Dutton cried, his face twitching.

We had started desperately forward toward the great head but stopped suddenly in our tracks as his great eyes met ours. I found myself walking backward to where I had stood, walking back and Dutton with me, like two automatons.

“So you two would try to kill me?” queried the head that had been Pollard. “Why, I could direct you without a word to kill yourselves and you’d do so in an instant! What chance has your puny will and brain against mine? And what chance will all the force of men have against me when a glance from me will make them puppets of my will?”

A desperate inspiration flashed through my brain. “Pollard, wait!” I exclaimed. “You were going on with the process, with the rays! If you stop here you’ll not know what changes lie beyond your present form!”

He seemed to consider. “That is true,” he admitted, “and though it seems impossible to me that by going on I can attain to greater intelligence than I now have, I want to find out for certain.”

“Then you’ll go under the rays for another fifteen minutes?” I asked quickly.

“I will,” he answered, “but lest you harbor any foolish ideas, you may know that even inside the chamber I will be able to read your thoughts and can kill both of you before you can make a move to harm me.”

He stepped up into the chamber again, and as I reached for the switch, Dutton trembling beside me, we glimpsed for a moment the huge head before the down-smiting white force hid it from our sight.

The minutes of this period seemed dragging even more slowly than before. It seemed hours before I reached at last to snap off the rays. We gazed into the chamber, shaking.

At first glance the great head inside seemed unchanged, but then we saw that it had changed, and greatly. Instead of being a skin-covered head with at least

rudimentary arms and legs, it was now a great gray head-like shape of even greater size, supported by two gray muscular tentacles. The surface of this gray head-thing was wrinkled and folded, and its only features were two eyes as small as our own.

“Oh my God!” quaked Dutton. “He’s changing from a head into a brain—he’s losing all human appearance!”

Into our minds came a thought from the gray head-thing before us, a thought as clear as though spoken. “You have guessed it, for even my former head-body is disappearing, all atrophying except the brain. I am become a walking, seeing brain. As I am so all of your race will be in two hundred million years, gradually losing more and more of their atrophied bodies and developing more and more their great brains.”

His eyes seemed to read us. “You need not fear now the things I threatened in my last stage of development. My mind, grown infinitely greater, would no more now want to rule you men and your little planet than you would want to rule an anthill and its inhabitants!

My mind, gone fifty million years further ahead in development, can soar out now to vistas of power and knowledge unimagined by me in that last stage, and unimaginable to you.”

“Great God, Pollard!” I cried. “What have you become?”

“Pollard?” Dutton was laughing hysterically. “You call that thing Pollard? Why, we had dinner with Pollard three hours ago—he was a human being, and not a thing like this!”

“I have become what all men will become in time,” the thing’s thought answered me. “I have gone this far along the road of man’s future evolution, and am going on to the end of that road, am going to attain the development that the last mutation possible will give me!”

“Turn on the rays,” his thought continued. “I think that I must be approaching now the last possible mutation.”

I snapped over the switch again and the white shaft of the concentrated rays veiled from us the great gray shape. I felt my own mind giving beneath the strain

of horror of the last hour, and Dutton was still half-hysterical.

The humming and crackling of the great apparatus seemed thunderous to my ears as the minutes passed. With every nerve keyed to highest tension, I threw open the switch at last. The rays ceased, and the figure in the chamber was again revealed.

Dutton began to laugh shrilly, and then abruptly was sobbing. I do not know whether I was doing the same, though I have a dim memory of mouthing incoherent things as my eyes took in the shape in the chamber.

It was a great brain! A gray limp mass four feet across, it lay in the chamber, its surface ridged and wrinkled by innumerable fine convolutions. It had no features or limbs of any kind in its gray mass. It was simply a huge brain whose only visible sign of life was its slow twitching movement.

From its thoughts beat strongly into our own horror-weighted brains.

“You see me now, a great brain only, just as all men will be far in the future. Yes, you might have known, I might have known, when I was like you, that this would be the course of human evolution, that the brain that alone gives man dominance would develop and the body that hampers that brain would atrophy until he would have developed into pure brain as I now am!

“I have no features, no senses that I could describe to you, yet can realize the universe infinitely better than you can with your elementary senses. I am aware of planes of existence you cannot imagine. I can feed myself with pure energy without the need of a cumbersome body, to transform it, and I can move and act, despite my lack of limbs, by means and with a speed and power utterly beyond your comprehension.

“If you still have fear of the threats I made two stages back against your world and race, banish them! I am pure intelligence now and as such, though I can no more feel the emotions of love or friendship, neither can I feel those of ambition or pride. The only emotion, if such it is, that remains to me still is intellectual curiosity, and this desire for truth that has burned in man since his apehood will thus be the last of all desires to leave him!”

THE LAST MUTATION

“A brain—a great brain!” Dutton was saying dazedly. “Here in Pollard’s laboratory—but where’s Pollard? He was here, too ...”

“Then all men will some day be as you are now?” I cried.

“Yes,” came the answering thought, “in two hundred and fifty million years man as you know him and as you are will be no more, and after passing all the stages through which I have passed through tonight, the human race will have developed into great brains inhabiting not only your solar system, no doubt, but the systems of other stars!”

“And that’s the end of man’s evolutionary road? That is the highest point that he will reach?”

“No, I think he will change still from those great brains into still a higher form,” the brain answered—the brain that three hours before had been Pollard!—“and I am going to find out now what that higher form will be. For I think this will be the last mutation of all and that with it I will reach the end of man’s evolutionary path, the last and highest form into which he can develop!

“You will turn on the rays now,” the brain’s order continued, “and in fifteen minutes we will know what that last and highest form is.”

My hand was on the switch but Dutton had staggered to me, was clutching my arm. “Don’t, Arthur!” he was exclaiming thickly. “We’ve seen horrors enough—let’s not see the last—get out of here...”

“I can’t!” I cried. “Oh God, I want to stop but I can’t now—I want to see the end myself—I’ve got to see. ..”

“Turn on the rays!” came the brain’s thought-order again.

“The end of the road—the last mutation,” I panted. “We’ve got to see—to see—” I drove the switch home.

The rays flashed down again to hide the great gray brain in the cube. Dutton’s

eyes were staring fixedly, he was clinging to me.

The minutes passed! Each tick of the watch in my hand was the mighty note of a great tolling bell in my ears.

An inability to move seemed gripping me. The hand of my watch was approaching the minute for which I waited, yet I could not raise my hand toward the switch!

Then as the hand reached the appointed minute I broke from my immobility and in a sheer frenzy of sudden strength pulled open the switch, rushed forward with Dutton to the cube's very edge!

The great gray brain that had been inside it was gone. There lay on the cube's floor instead of it a quite shapeless mass of clear, jelly-like matter. It was quite motionless save for a slight quivering. My shaking hand went forth to touch it, and then it was that I screamed, such a scream as all the tortures of hell's crudest fiends could not have wrung from a human throat.

The mass inside the cube was a mass of simple protoplasm! This then was the end of man's evolution-road, the highest form to which time would bring him, the last mutation of all! The road of man's evolution was a circular one, returning to its beginning!

From the earth's bosom had risen the first crude organisms. Then sea-creature and land-creature and mammal and ape to man; and from man it would rise in the future through all the forms we had seen that night. There would be supermen, bodiless heads, pure brains; only to be changed by the last mutation of all into the protoplasm from which first it had sprung!

I do not know now exactly what followed. I know that I rushed upon that quivering, quiescent mass, calling Pollard's name madly and shouting things I am glad I cannot remember. I know that Dutton was shouting too, with insane laughter, and that as he struck with lunatic howls and fury about the laboratory the crash of breaking glass and the hiss of escaping gases was in my ears. And then from those mingling acids bright flames were leaping and spreading sudden fires that alone, I think now, saved my own sanity.

For I can remember dragging the insanely laughing Dutton from the room, from the house, into the cool darkness of the night.

I remember the chill of dew-wet grass against my hands and face as the flames from Pollard's house soared higher. And I remember that as I saw Dutton's crazy laughter by that crimson light, I knew that he would laugh thus until he died.

*

So ends my narrative of the end that came to Pollard and Pollard's house. It is, as I said in the beginning, a narrative that I only can tell now, for Dutton has never spoken a sane word since. In the institution where he now is, they think his condition the result of shock from the fire, just as Pollard was believed to have perished in that fire. I have never until now told the truth.

But I am telling it now, hoping that it will in some way lessen the horror it has left with me. For there could be no horror greater than that we saw in Pollard's house that night. I have brooded upon it. With my mind's eye I have followed that tremendous cycle of change, that purposeless, eon-long climb of life up from simple protoplasm through myriads of forms and lives of ceaseless pain and struggle, only to end in simple protoplasm again.

Will that cycle of evolutionary change be repeated over and over again upon this and other worlds, ceaselessly, purposelessly, until there is no more universe for it to go on in? Is this colossal cycle of life's changes as inevitable and necessary as the cycle that in space makes of the nebulae myriad suns, and of the suns dark-stars, and of the dark-stars colliding with one another nebulae again?

Or is this evolutionary cycle we saw a cycle in appearance only, is there some change that we cannot understand, above and beyond it? I do not know which of these possibilities is truth, but I do know that the first of them haunts me. It would haunt the world if the world believed my story. Perhaps I should be thankful as I write to know that I will not be believed.