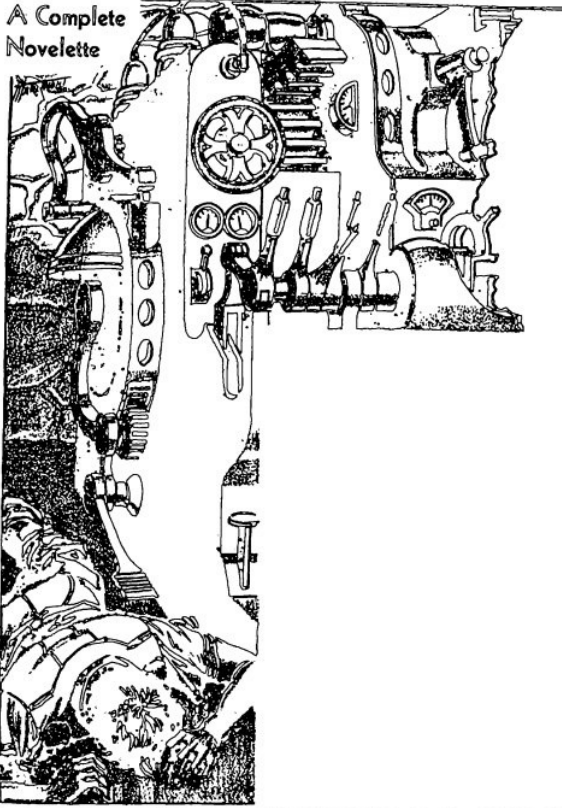


THE ISLAND of DOCTOR X

A Complete
Novelette



A Monarch of Chaos Releases the Floodgates



By
ALLAN
K.
ECHOLS
Author of "Mas-
ter of Money,"
"Hell Diver,"
etc.

He placed it at
his shoulder and
turned it toward
the gold-making
machine.

of Gold — and World Devastation!

CHAPTER I Panic

LOWELL BEST stood on an iron grille balcony in his laboratory, overlooking a giant piece of machinery that looked, as though it might be the heart of a great electrical plant. Dressed in a white smock, wearing heavy leaded goggles to protect his eyes from the blinding glare, he studied a flash of artificial lightning through a spectroscope, while the electric arc crackled between two great silver knobs above the machine and filled the air with the pungency of ozone.

He snapped an order to one of the assistants down at the switch panel and the man jerked a copper knife switch just as

Raymond Wilson, his secretary, tapped him on the shoulder. Wilson had crawled up on the iron balcony and was at his elbow.

"Your broker on the phone," he said. "They report that government bonds are going down. They've fallen ten points since the market opened two hours ago. Panic of some kind in the air, though they don't know the cause. Aren't sure, at least. Mr. Kuhn thought you'd perhaps want to get out of the market before your losses were too much."

Best took off his black glasses and rubbed his eyes as he looked out the window to adjust his vision. "Bonds down ten points! Impossible."

"Gold bonds, particularly," the secretary repeated. "It's unaccountable!"

Lowell Best did not like to have money matters interfere with his time in the laboratory, and for that reason, instead of managing his money, he had turned it over to his broker to invest in government bonds, and had promptly forgotten it.

But this was indeed serious. It was not that he cared for money, but he needed it to carry on his work. A tenth of the value of gold evaporating in two hours of one morning was a serious matter—to Wall Street, and to the whole world as well as to himself.

He thought it over while gazing out the window. He said, “No! Tell Kuhn I will not sell. It is fear that makes these depressions. People run like rabbits—and frighten each other more—and the result is panic. I won’t join in the stampede. What’s this?”

The secretary followed Best’s gaze out the window, of the laboratory to the broad expanse of green lawn that surrounded the estate.

“Gyro,” young Wilson answered. “I wonder who—”

“It doesn’t matter who it is. I have a dozen guards to keep people from coming into my gates to pry around—so they drop in out of the air. Tell Murphy to see that the man gets that mechanical grasshopper off my lawn immediately and keeps it off.”

AN airplane no larger than a coffin box, entirely without wings, with revolving vanes overhead and an idling propeller, drifted as lightly as a feather to the ground and stopped without rolling an inch.

A man got out of the tiny closed cockpit and was crossing the lawn before Murphy, the husky, red-haired ex-marine who headed the guards that patrolled Best’s Long Island estate, could reach him. Best stood at the window and watched the two men. Instead of going back to his machine, the man followed Murphy, who turned and headed toward the house.

“See why Murphy is letting that man into the house,” Best said to Wilson. “And tell him to go away. I can’t be disturbed.”

Wilson backed down the iron ladder and Best watched the men below, and, despite his efforts, could not get his mind on his work. There was something dreadfully wrong somewhere. The stock market news merely verified his own feelings. He wondered how Claire was.

Wilson was gone five minutes when he came back excitedly. “A man from the Department of Justice,” he informed Best. “And he’ll see nobody but you.”

In his study, Best found the Government man waiting for him. The man was half a head shorter than the scientist, almost youthful, but with keen, intelligent eyes and alert movements. He showed his identification and introduced himself.

“I’m Dan Gregory,” he said. “I was sent by the Department at the specific instance of the Attorney General’s Office.”

Best offered the man a chair and a cigar. He was not at all in an affable mood, nor receptive to any suggestions that would take time away from his laboratory.

“What’s the trouble? I must remind you that I am not a scientific detective—nor a detective of any kind.”

“I understand that,” Gregory responded, not at all taken aback. “But may I ask you a question? Suppose, that, say, tomorrow, this country found all its money worthless. What would be the effect?”

“I hadn’t given such a question any thought,” Best admitted. “But offhand my answer would be that a condition somewhat like that during the bank holiday would exist.”

“Not at all. Not at all,” Gregory denied. “There was still credit then. People knew that it was only a temporary measure and that it would soon be over and things would right themselves. But suppose that suddenly no money was worth anything—nor

ever would be again—until an entirely new monetary system was created. What then?

“I’ll give you my own answer. Panic—murder—worse. Nobody’s money would be worth anything. Money would not buy food because money would be worthless. People wouldn’t sell on credit because there would be nothing of value to pay with. And when people can’t buy food, they will steal it—riot and murder to get it as they always have done.

“They will sweep down, streets and attack food supplies in great mobs as they did in the French Revolution and in the bread riots in Germany after the fall of the mark. People will not work at their jobs because there is nothing of value to pay them with.

“That means no lights, no transportation, no running water. Fires will destroy cities. Hospitals will be unable to operate. Plagues will wipe out whole cities, whole nations—”

Best leaned forward, gripping the arms of his chair. “Just what are you getting at?” he demanded. “What is this picture you’re painting—and why?”

GREGORY got to his feet, paced in excitement, his face white. “It is precisely the picture of what is going to happen to this country—to you and to me and to everybody in it—at any moment now!”

“What?”

“It is almost upon us—there are rumblings in Wall Street right now. In days—hours, perhaps—those rumblings will increase to a thunder that will devastate the world, that will sweep away the progress of all the thousands of years of mankind! And that is the simple truth.”

Wilson, sitting to the left of Best, said, “Mr. Kuhn, your broker, told me over the phone that Government bonds—”

Best jumped to his feet. “What is it, Gregory? What do you mean is happening? What is the cause of this threat? What’s the

matter with American money?”

Gregory answered: “Gold! All money and bonds are of value only because of gold, all business is done because of the value of it. All negotiable paper, all credit, is good only in its relation to gold. When gold becomes worthless everything which represents a claim against it, even indirectly, also becomes worthless.”

“That is true, of course,” Best admitted impatiently. “And I agree that all the things you have mentioned might happen if gold were suddenly to lose its value. But, man, gold can’t lose its value, because that is based on the law of supply and demand. There is only so much gold, and therefore it is precious—”

“That was the case,” Gregory came back quickly. “But it is no longer the case! *Somebody is making pure gold!*”

“*Making it?*” the other echoed.

“Right! And in such quantities that it’s only a matter of a short time until it will be as cheap as iron ore. That’s the whole trouble. It’s threatening to destroy the world. We’re asking you to help us find who is doing it—and help us stop him—before he destroys civilization.”

Best leaned over the desk before him, his head in his hands. “Making gold!” he repeated, more to himself than to anybody else. Then, with sudden decision, he said, “You’re right. It would be a world catastrophe. I will do what I can—”

A strange, sepulchral voice interrupted him, coming, it seemed, out of the very air of the room. It floated all about the occupants, held them paralyzed, yet came from nowhere in particular.

“There is nothing you can do, Lowell Best. You are too late. This is one time in your life when yours is not to lead—but to follow. What the man has told you is true—but it is only half true. There is worse to come. This is Doctor X speaking. You will hear of me often in the days to come.”

The voice died in a hollow laugh.

CHAPTER II

Weapons

WHEN that strange voice had subsided, young Gregory was already on his feet, a gun in his hand. His eyes darted around the room suspiciously, and then settled on Best.

"Where did that come from?" he demanded.

Best got up and opened a mahogany cabinet. "I haven't the least idea where it originated, but it came from the loudspeaker of this ultra short wave receiving set. It's a two-way instrument. Perhaps I can find out."

He turned a dial and then lifted a hand mike that was built like one of the modern French telephones, having both a transmitter and receiver built into the one handpiece. He pressed a button, then waited with the instrument to his ear. While he waited he explained:

"I usually keep this tuned in on my friend Doctor Dupree, who has a laboratory on Rock Island, off the coast of Georgia. He and I often—" Returned his attention to the phone. "Hello, Claire?"

He listened a moment to a conversation that Gregory did not hear, but there came a sudden scream through the transmitter, so loud that both Gregory and Wilson heard it.

Then there, was silence.

Best shouted, "Claire—C l a i r e! What's wrong? Why did you scream?" He looked about at the two men in the room, and there were deep lines of anxiety in his face.

No answer came to him and he repeated his call time after time. There was nothing but silence on the instrument, and finally, his face wet with perspiration, he dropped it onto the hook and turned to the men.

"There's something wrong on Rock

Island," he said heavily. "Miss Dupree was telling me that she hadn't seen her father for a week, but that he often locked himself in his laboratory for that long. However, she had important business with him and when she tried to contact him she discovered, for the first time, that he hadn't been there for a week. It was at that point that she screamed—it was as though she were being choked off—and after that the instrument was silent. I'm going down there right now and find out."

Gregory put a sympathetic hand on Best's arm, trying to calm him. "I understand," he said sympathetically, "but you are forgetting this other business—"

"To hell with the other business," Best snapped. "You don't understand. Miss Dupree is my fiancée. I don't care what happens to the rest of the world. She comes first with me."

"But," Gregory insisted, "there is another point of view that you should consider. Your personal grief and worry will be great, of course, but, on the other hand, you have a far greater duty to civilization as a whole. I am sure that she would agree with me that it is the duty of any individual to sacrifice his personal feelings—even himself and those dear to him—for the greater good of mankind."

Best paced the floor like a caged lion, pounding the palm of one hand with the fist of the other. Deep lines of struggle within him marked his face. Suddenly he stopped in front of Gregory.

"Damn it," he said jerkily, "that's just the point of it. You're right."

Then suddenly he looked sharply at the officer. "Listen, man," he said tensely, "why didn't I think of this before? Here's something. That ultra short wave radio is set on a secret wave length running up into the frequency of thirty-five thousand kilocycles. No one in the world would have *accidentally* stumbled upon the correct tuning to get me. He would have to know the frequency on

which my set is locked. That means only one thing, that this Doctor X's voice could have come from only one sending set—Doctor Dupree's."

GREGORY looked at Best with startled attention. "I don't know the technical side of it," he answered quickly. "You mean, then, that the man who is in on this gold scheme is with your friend on his island?"

"Either has Dupree prisoner—or has killed him. Here's a theory we might consider. In confidence, of course. It is only known to Doctor Dupree and myself. The doctor has been working on experiments to prove that all matter in the last analysis is simply a form of electrical energy.

"Now suppose someone finds that out, someone who is himself a scientist. This might be his reasoning: If matter can be broken down into pure energy, then it is reasonable to suppose the reverse to be true, and that pure energy can be built back up into matter. In that case, energy would have to be converted into some certain kind of matter, some element. If you could construct an element out of energy, then you could control the nature of that element. Gold is an element. It follows then that were Doctor Dupree's experiments carried out to their logical conclusion you could make pure gold *out of nothing*.

"Now, suppose some crooked scientist managed some way to get control of Dupree's work—you can see what the outcome would be. We know there's trouble on Rock Island, so that might be a possible answer. At any rate, the least we can do is to go there and find out."

"Then," Gregory speculated, "it looks as though the danger to Miss Dupree and the gold menace might be one and the same problem for us."

"Right you are," Best said with a sudden burst of energy. "We're going down

there right now."

"Good," Gregory returned. "That gyro of mine will hold two, and make two hundred and fifty miles an hour."

"We don't wait for any such slow transportation as that," Best snapped. "We're in a hurry!"

He led Gregory into an adjoining room filled with curious instruments of glass and chrome steel and black bakelite, a storeroom resembling the factory of the makers of laboratory apparatus. He turned to Wilson as he crossed the threshold and gave him an order.

"While we arm ourselves," he said, "get the rocket ready; set the firing angle and check the fuel. And be sure to double-check your trajectory against the latest wind velocity reading and barometric pressure. We can't afford to miss our objective an inch. Come on, Gregory."

In the storage room, lined with white enamel and lighted indirectly, Best went to a shelf that resembled a gun rack. There were lined up on the shelf half a dozen instruments that Gregory looked at with curiosity.

Each of the instruments resembled the stock and chambers of a submachine gun. But projecting from the cylindrical chamber which in a Thompson gun would have represented the cartridge case, and on this instrument was converted into a complicated series of electrical fixtures and a coil suggestive of an armature, there pointed a cylindrical glass tube eighteen inches in length and two inches in diameter. At the muzzle end of the hollow glass there was a silver, knoblike electrode.

BEST handed one of these queer guns to Gregory, along with a leather packet that clipped onto the belt like a cartridge case. There were tiny, silk covered wires with nickel plugs hanging loosely like telephone switch plugs from the box, another of which Best clipped to his own belt.

"And what are these for?" Gregory asked, bewildered, and examining the queer weapon by putting the stock to his shoulder and taking aim.

"That's a disintegrator gun," Best said, leading the way out of the room. "I haven't time to explain the details now, but it is a variation of the Coolidge tube. It works just like any other gun, as far as trigger and sighting action, are concerned. It works whenever you push the plugs of those free wires into the generator box at your belt and pull the trigger. Be careful of it."

"Disintegrator? It looks like a disinfecting squirt gun—something we were going to kill potato bugs with."

"Not potato bugs," Best answered grimly. "Gold bugs."

CHAPTER III The Stronghold

"COME this way," Best said, leading Gregory through the lab and out the back door.

"What's this?" Gregory asked. "A coast defense gun?"

He was staring at a platform of concrete, on which was mounted something that looked like one of the big cannon used in forts, except that the chromium plated barrel was more than four feet in diameter and very short in proportion to its length. It was mounted on a revolving turret, and had the machinery to control its elevation and direction, all registering on dials on a panel on the side of the instrument. Wilson was working a mathematical calculator when they arrived.

Gregory commented, "I saw a man shot out of one of those things in a circus once. Do we land in a net?"

"We just use that to get direction," Best explained. "We get into a rocket that is self-propelled, once it gets into the air. It is

fueled with liquid oxygen and a firing device. You'll hardly know you were in it."

"I hope not," Gregory said. "I'm young—and have my whole career before me," he laughed.

"It will still be before you," Best assured him, glad to see that the young man faced his new experience with a sense of humor and without dread. Best's admiration for the youth jumped several degrees. "Rockets will be common modes of travel in a few years. They're perfecting the delivery of mail with them now."

Beside the rocket projector stood the rocket car, like a great chrome plated shell, with the bullet end pointed and made of some transparent substance like the windshield of airplanes. There was a door flush in the side, large enough to accommodate a man entering.

"In you go," Best said hurriedly. "Ready, Wilson?"

"Right, sir."

There was sufficient space inside the shell for Best and Gregory and their weapons. They stood on a spring floor while Wilson manipulated the shell into the cannon by means of electric carriages, as in the case of the ammunition for large cannon. The tops of their heads were close to the nose of the shell, and they could see out through the clear composition of which the nose was built. Best gave a signal.

Even inside the shell the hissing noise could be heard as the propulsion fluid was ignited. The sh-sh-sh grew louder in a gradual crescendo, like that of a giant skyrocket.

"Say, we're in the air," Gregory stammered. "Great guns—"

"You named it exactly. They are great guns. We'll be there in less than a minute."

Looking down out of the nose of the rocket they could see the earth's horizon receding as they sped upward in a high trajectory. Farms became mere checkerboard squares of different color, rivers became

narrow silver or grey ribbons winding across the checkerboard. To their left and far below was a broad and slick expanse of turquoise blue, dotted here and there with vessels the size of corks.

They had hardly had time to look around when, before them and below, a tiny speck in the blue began to loom larger and larger, like a passenger engine approaching a news reel camera at terrific speed.

There was only time for one glimpse of the island when they were swallowed up by it, and bathed in darkness and in silence.

“Alcatraz!”

“Yes,” Best answered. “Doctor Dupree’s island is similar in appearance, and just as impregnable by ordinary means of entrance. He wanted isolation.”

THE projectile had entered a hole, an artificially constructed target for the rocket, and plunged downward as the hole narrowed. As it sank and the hole became narrower, the force of the air that it compressed slowed it up. The hole ran downward under the sea, then curved upward, then dropped back sharply like the barb of a fishhook. Thus the rocket followed its artificial path, slowing down under the pressure of the air it compressed, then came to rest, nose upward, just as an elevator with the cable broken might drop down its chute and land easily, due to the air forming a cushion for it.

Best opened the door and stepped out, followed by Gregory. They were in utter darkness. Best turned and placed a cautionary hand on Gregory’s arm.

“Hook up your weapon, but don’t use it until, you see me fire first. I know all Doctor Dupree’s household, and we don’t want to kill any of them. Stay beside me.”

Together they crept through a long, dark tunnel until Best bumped into a door. He groped through the darkness until his hand found the latch. Before moving it, he held his

ear to the door.

There was a low humming on the other side of the door, and underfoot he heard a strange thumping noise that he had never heard on any of his previous trips to the doctor’s laboratory,

“The lab is on the other side of this door,” Best whispered to Gregory. “And somebody is working in it. Have your gun ready and we’ll break in. But be very careful—don’t use the weapon until after I use mine. Ready?”

“Righto,” Gregory answered tensely. “Let’s get going.”

Just as Best turned the knob of the door with a silent motion the hum of the machinery in the laboratory died down to silence.

Best cursed under his breath. “They must have heard us,” he snapped over his shoulder. “Rush them.”

He kicked the door wide and, with Gregory beside him, stood on the threshold of the laboratory.

It was empty of human beings. Dark, except a flame which burned with a still, eerie light under a glass retort shaped like a cannon ball. Out of the glass neck of the retort there came a pungent odor of steaming chemicals as the fluid bubbled within.

“They heard us and ducked, all right,” Gregory commented.

The sepulchral voice of Doctor X came to them, filling the laboratory with a hollow and uncanny reverberation.

“We heard you, and you are welcome on this island,” came the ironic words. “You will dispense with your weapons so that you may be greeted as visitors should.”

Best jerked his weapon to his shoulder and whirled around, looking for the source of the voice. In his mind he knew that the owner of it was safely ensconced out of harm’s way, but it was a reflex action that came to him naturally.

Gregory became a thing of fury. His own weapon was gripped at his hip by the butt and the hand grip. He crept forward with eyes squinted, peering through the gloom. The trigger finger of his right hand squeezed the trigger. He jerked very hard.

The gun remained silent—but a strange thing happened. There sounded in the still laboratory the shatter of glass, the puffing strange sound of smoke suddenly billowing out.

In the direction in which the silent gun pointed, following the sweeping motion from side to side as Gregory weaved forward, always in front of the gun's muzzle, there came smoke, the crash of glass, the hiss of steam, from the work benches that lined the wall.

The silent, deadly disintegrator was doing its work. Glass retorts full of chemicals exploded into a balloon of pungent steam, shattered glass, and then existed no more—left the work benches mere shadowy skeletons of what had stood there a second before.

Best saw the damage and shouted to Gregory: "Hold it. Take your hand off the grip of the weapon!"

The arc of the weapon touched the retort with the blue flame under it.

THERE came a shattering explosion that rocked the building. Heavy, black, rolling smoke rolled in great billows toward the two men, then melted as fast as it had appeared. There was a great gaping hole in the wall of the laboratory, and standing in the inside gloom they could see the bright blue of the ocean around them.

"That will be enough," came the weird voice that again filled the laboratory. "You are not very polite guests. Stop where you are and drop those weapons. No—lay them down carefully. I want to know more about them."

"If such a fiend ever got his hands on these things—" Gregory exclaimed.

He lifted his weapon high over his head to crash it to bits on the concrete floor.

Then he froze like a cast-iron statue, the hands over his head still gripping the gun.

Best turned and tried to follow suit. Gregory had seen the danger, and he was right. Best attempted to throw his weapon at his feet. He couldn't do it! He, too, was as paralyzed, as still as though he had gazed upon the face of Medusa with the snaky locks. A curse formed on his lips, he would have sworn aloud—but the lips would not move. They were in complete paralysis.

Not fright, but utter amazement seized Best, a feeling of utter helplessness so unreal that he could not believe it; his mind absolutely refused to accept it. His muscles strained and twisted, but for all the outer evidence of his efforts he might have been trying to get out of a block of solid concrete molded to his very form.

Something inside Best told him that he was only making matters worse, that his only chance lay in getting control of himself and letting events take their course. He got a grip on his mind.

And then it came to him suddenly that he was completely in the power of the mysterious and unseen Doctor X. He knew now why he couldn't move.

And he would never move until the doctor was ready to release him.

There was a long period of silence in which Best and Gregory stood held in the grip of the invisible force that imprisoned them, their bodies racked by mere torture of being unable to move.

It was an exquisite form of torture, more terrible than any that might be inflicted by machines or other ingenious devices. And Doctor X was giving them plenty of time to realize their helplessness.

After what seemed ages the voice of the doctor again filled the room. "You should now be convinced that I am not to be taken

lightly. And that it would be better for you to obey the commands that I give you than for you to try to fight me. I am going to give you a chance now.

“You are being held fast by a field of electrical force that paralyzes your muscles. As long as you are in that field you will be helpless, and I can throw such a field about you at any time and at any place I wish. Best, you will probably recognize this as the Steinach field. You probably saw the experiments at Schenectady. I tell you this to convince you of the futility of your trying to do anything about it—even with your disintegrating guns—which I want, incidentally.

“And now,” the voice continued, “I am going to reduce the field while one of my men relieves you of the weapons. But be sure the slightest move on your part, will cause the return of the field. It is impossible for you to do anything except give up your weapons. And, I might add, Best, that I have Miss Dupree at my disposal, and if you insist on being obstinate she will suffer for your foolishness. Think of her. Take their guns, Karlov.”

Best felt his muscles relax as the field of electricity was reduced around him. His first impulse was to whirl on the man whose footsteps he heard behind him, and disintegrate him with the weapon. But he held himself back, not on his own account, but on account of the girl. She was in the mad monster’s power, and he shuddered to think what would happen to her if he were dead. Alive, he had at least a chance to continue matching wits with the man.

HE gave Gregory a signal, and they handed their weapons to a gigantic fellow with unruly black hair who had come out of the door and stood behind them, reaching out his arms to take the weapons. When the man retreated with the guns and left them helpless, Best’s

heart sank. Now they, along with Claire and her missing father, were also at the disposal of this madman, who called himself Doctor X.

He looked at young Gregory, whom he had brought into this death trap, and he felt sorry for the youth who had followed, not on account of loved ones, but purely from a sense of duty. He had bravely risked himself in a world which was more than strange to him, a world of an almost unbelievable science where men fought with strange weapons; he had marched into that with a joke on his lips and determination in his heart. He was the stuff that heroes—and martyrs—are made of.

Gregory must have suspected what was going on in Best’s mind. At any rate, he looked around, and then he smiled a crooked, but a very pleasant and youthful smile.

“It’s one of the breaks,” he said. “You pay your money and take your chances.”

“Shame about you,” Best admitted.

“What about yourself?” Gregory demanded quickly. “You have more to lose than I have. Thank God no girl was crazy enough to love me while I was in this game. It would only be misery for her. Where do we go from here, I wonder?”

“I don’t even know *whether* we go from here,” Best answered, returning his smile. “But anyway, I’m glad to have met you.” He was trying to make light of it, and he offered his hand.

Gregory shook hands with him with mock seriousness. “Same to you, sir. I’ll be seeing you some time—I hope.”

CHAPTER IV The Dungeon

ROCK ISLAND was a place of mystery, with only one dock where boats could be landed. The house that Doctor Dupree had built was constructed of solid stone—cut out of the rock—leaving fast underground crypts and subterranean rooms, where he carried on

his experiments, and where Lowell Best had been the only man ever permitted to visit. And Best had not seen all there was on this island, as he now learned.

Best was stripped to the waist, standing in front of the strangest machine it had ever been the privilege of man to see, a work which had taken Dupree a lifetime of research and labor to build. It was his god, the thing he worshiped, and the thing to which he had dedicated his life.

Best had known about this work, and had kept abreast of the experiments. He had known when the Joliots, the son-in-law and the daughter of Mme. Curie, of radium fame, had first bombarded lithium atoms with alpha particles and found that the resulting collision had produced a boron atom and a neutron which totaled a greater mass than the combined original matter. They had, then, definitely *produced matter from pure energy*.

Following out these experiments, Doctor Dupree had succeeded in producing any element at will. This process was most complicated, but he had mastered it—and had kept it secret, realizing his obligation not to upset the equilibrium of the social world. He was a far-sighted man.

And now Lowell Best stood in front of the complicated laboratory mechanism, stripped to the waist and sweating like a stevedore, far down in the depths of the rocky base of the island. In a room off to the left young Gregory sweated and cursed over a hot stream of yellow metal that was guided into ingot sized molds, each no larger than a brick—but a brick of pure gold.

Lowell Best, himself, was tending that strange machine!

When he and Gregory had submitted themselves to being made prisoners it was with the thought that as live prisoners they would have more chance to accomplish their ends than had they rashly put up resistance and been killed instantly.

They had been captured by a voice—but now they were being guarded by Karlov, the burly brute who had relieved them of and now carried one of the weapons they had brought with them.

They were not alone in the cavern. This guard stood over a dozen other men who slaved over the molds into which the gold was being poured. He was gigantic in size, with black hair that fell tangled over shifty black eyes gleaming with his desire to use his new weapon on his prisoners.

Best was sweating over his machine when the brute came up to him and watched him work, leering at him. “How do you aristocrats like doing’ real labor?” he sneered. “Tain’t so good, bein’ a nursemaid to a machine, eh?”

Best wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand. “I have always worked over machines,” he answered. “I like them.”

“Bah!” the man snarled. “You rich guys don’t know what labor is—slavin’ to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Well, it won’t be much longer—then you’ll work for your grub like us workin’ people—or else you’ll starve. The likes o’ you has been rulin’ the earth long enough. It’s our time now.”

“Yes?” Best answered, with an element of doubt in his tone.

IT was apparent that the man wanted to boast, and Best encouraged him. “How are you going to bring that about? People usually get just what they’re worth in this world.”

“So you think,” the man answered. “But you’ll see soon enough. Doctor X has got it all figured out. You birds make gold the most important thing in the world. And now you are going to make it the least important thing in the world. You make gold—we throw it away! We take it out and drop it from airplanes in every town in the country. Pile it

up by the side of the road—give it away to whoever wants to pick it up. Soon it won't be worth pickin' up. Then where'll you be?"

"Where?" Best asked, knowing full well the disastrous answer.

"The world's gone too far—and power is in too few hands," the anarchist answered. "The rest of us are slaves—now. But we won't be for long. We're going to destroy the machine age—destroy everything—and start all over. Then everybody has the same chance as the rest. There won't be no bosses—no laws, no nothin'."

"I see," Best answered with a casualness he did not feel.

"We're real anarchists. There's a hundred of us here with the doctor. He's the biggest one of us all. When we get through there won't be no law at all—except what we make. Everybody will be his own boss—"

"Who got up this idea—Doctor X?"

"Sure—he thought of the way to work it. He was a great scientist—but the world didn't give him no credit. Now he'll be the boss of it—make 'em eat out of his hand."

"In case this scheme of yours works," Best said to the guard, "your crowd will suffer just like the rest of the world. You won't be able to get food any more—"

The man laughed derisively.

"What do you think we been preparing for?" he demanded. "This island's all been hollowed out, and there's enough food and everything else a man needs stored here to last us a good ten or twenty years."

The man extended the disintegrating gun that they had captured from Best. "See this weapon you brought?" he gloated. "Well, the doctor and a crew tore one of them up and seen how it was made, and now they are making more just like it. The hundred of us armed with them things can control the whole world—we'll be the bosses. We got poison gas so strong that a whiff of it will wipe out an army. We got things nobody ever dreamed

of."

Best felt his heart sink as he realized that the man was painting a picture that was, if anything, less awful than what would really happen if their plans worked out. Even now, he knew, the first breath of the holocaust was sweeping the world. Something had to be done before that insane mob went out into the world with those deadly weapons.

"What you say might be true," Best said with casual unconcern, "but it won't work out. This gold making machine's already wearing out. That gear inside there is cracked now from the heat. In half an hour it will fly apart and wreck the whole thing. Then where will you be? Your dream will be blown higher than a kite—when this machine stops!"

The big man's brow darkened and his eyes showed the depth of his concern as his slow mind digested the significance of Best's statement. "Where's the break?" he demanded suspiciously, looking at the gear Best pointed to.

"In your head—ox," Best gritted, sending his balled fist like a hammer that landed on the back of the man's neck at the base of his brain. The man groaned, sank to the floor unconscious.

Best dived, caught the weapon before its fragile glass could be shattered on the floor. In a trice he had the generator box at his own waist, as he called loudly to Gregory.

The Government man joined him, grimy and breathless, looking more like a stoker from the hold of a ship than the person he was.

Best gripped the weapon and aimed at the door that led into the other quarters of the castle.

"Let's go," he snapped. "We're going to stop this thing right now—or be stopped. Coming with me?"

"Am I?" Gregory shouted, grabbing up a monkey wrench, the only weapon he could find. "Lead on, Macduff," he said. "A monkey

wrench was made to use on nuts.”

CHAPTER V
Chaos

BEST gave his disintegrator gun a hasty inspection. He placed it at his shoulder and turned it toward the gold making machine.

“That goes first,” he said. “It’s the gadget that’s causing all the trouble.”

He pulled the trigger.

Gregory gasped and rubbed his eyes. Silently, without a sound, the thing happened. It was a miracle. At one second the machine was grinding away with its maze of gears. The next second it wasn’t there—there was nothing but a small coating of grey dust on the concrete floor.

They looked at the place where it had been, and there was a great sense of relief in them.

“All right,” Best said: “Now we’ll go and give our regards to our host.”

“Here’s hoping he don’t say, ‘The same to you,’” Gregory said.

Best stood spraddle-legged before the stone wall that had kept them prisoners in the dungeon with the machine. He triggered the weapon, aiming it like a fireman handling a fire hose. The wall crumbled to dust before the power of the gun, leaving a gaping hole that opened up before a tunnel.

“Up that flight of stairs to the left,” Best ordered. “He will probably be in the machine shop—making those guns.”

The sudden sound of footsteps clattered behind them, and they saw that the rest of the dirty prisoners had dropped their work and followed them. Gregory signaled them to follow silently, and the bedraggled mob fell in, and they all went up the hall, silently, on shuffling, tired feet. Best halted them before a door, waited until the little crowd was behind them.

The men stood with whatever

makeshift weapons they had been able to find in a hurry, wrenches, hammers, iron rods. On their faces was grime—and the desperation of slaves to whom a strike for freedom was worth the risk of life itself.

“Ready, men!” Best snapped, aiming his weapon at the heavy iron door in the stone wall.

Before their eyes, to the audible gasp of the men behind them, the stone wall crumbled under the power of the gun, the loose stones from above dropping to the floor as though an earthquake had struck the building, leaving a ragged hole in the masonry, wide enough for the mob to crush its way through.

They poured in behind Best, into the brilliantly lighted and humming machine shop, where the anarchists toiled over their deadly weapons in the making, under the direction of a lean man with bushy white hair.

“Doctor Dupree, himself!” Best cried.

It was indeed his old friend. But a changed man. The white-haired scientist whirled at the sound of the interruption, and there was a gleaming light of madness in his eyes.

“You!” he cried.

“Right,” Best snapped. “Get out of the way. I’m destroying those things!”

The old scientist shrieked: “Never! You are not! I’ve worked all my life to get control of the world. You’re not going to stop me when I’m right on the verge of my inevitable success.” He dived for the electric field weapon which lay on the bench beside him, the white tail of his smock straight out behind him. Best took, deliberate aim and pulled his trigger. The scientist’s hands clutched at a pile of dust on the bench—the instrument disappearing just as his fingers started to tighten about it.

THE room burst into confusion. The shouting, cursing anarchists made a concerted dash for a

rack where a dozen of the completed weapons were stacked in a long row, like so many glass barreled machine-guns. Half of them had got their hands on the weapons and were strapping on the generator boxes when Best finished with the scientist.

Feet squarely on the floor, the cold grim purpose of death stamped on his face, he gave only one look at this aggregation who had already done so much toward destroying the world. Then, as though they were so many, destructive rats, he turned his gun full blast on them.

There were shrieks and cries and the ravings of men who knew their doom was upon them. But Best hardened his heart and held the gun true. It was over quicker than the eye could see. The men were crowded around the gun rack at one moment—and the next moment there was neither man nor gun rack. There was nothing—except a gaping hole in the wall that let in the pure white sunshine. A hundred deadly menaces to life were no more.

Doctor Dupree rushed over and stood before Best, his face ablaze with insane fury.

“Damn you,” he shouted. “Once again you have won out over me. I’ve secretly hated you all my life for just that thing—you always beat me. The world has given you every honor—me nothing. I would have destroyed it and you too, and have been master of what was left—would have built my own civilization as it ought to be. But you’ve won again—even won my own daughter from me—”

A new voice entered the shop, a voice that was musical in spite of the pain in it, the voice of a girl:

“Not your daughter, as you made me believe. I’ve just learned from your diaries that I was only your wife’s daughter. She was a widow and I was only a year old when you

married her. You shouldn’t have held me prisoner in your private office, nor have left a letter opener within reach for me to escape with.”

Best spun around, stood still in astonishment. Claire Dupree had joined them, her clothes torn to ribbons, the frayed ends of cords tied tightly around her wrists, but now raggedly severed, and other severed cords on her ankles. She rushed into Best’s arms.

Best held her closely, his heart drowned in gratitude that she was still alive. He buried his head in her lovely hair, and tears of relief came to his eyes.

Suddenly Doctor Dupree sprang, jerked the weapon out of Best’s free hand, turned the muzzle in an arc toward the embracing couple. Someone, among the silent prisoners behind them, uttered a loud, warning shout.

Best tried to free himself. The gun muzzle was almost upon him.

Gregory braced himself, heaved the monkey wrench through the air and caught the doctor squarely on the temple with it. The iron thumped against skull bone, then clattered to the floor.

The grey-haired man slumped downward, like a pole axed steer, red blood matting his white locks.

He lay still, dead from a fractured skull.

“I said a monkey wrench was made to use on nuts,” Gregory observed. “Where do we go from here?”

“We let sea water flood that gold cavern,” Best answered, “and destroy everything else about the place—except just enough of that gold to make a ring.”

“A ring?” Gregory repeated, puzzled.

“Yes—a wedding ring.”