

The Vanguard of a Race of Star-Roamers Probes the  
Universe for a World that is—Edible!



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# DARCONDRA

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I CANNOT vouch for the truth of all that happened on that chill January night in 1935. Such an incredible experience is all too likely to leave one with a doubt as to his sanity at the time, especially when months of suffering and shock have followed as a contingent aftermath.

But this I can vouch for—a memento that will remain with me the rest of my days, and even until death reduces my flesh to dust—a livid, crescent-shaped scar across my breast—a scar that burns

and festers anew periodically, with a pain so excruciating that it seems but yesterday that Darcondra marked me with his blighting wrath before he vanished, let us hope forever, from the ken of the race he coveted as an envoy of star conquerors.

That night I had left my study desk early, and after several hours of absorbed tinkering with the electrical experiments which were my hobby, I sat down at midnight to relax with the customary tall glass of rum toddy. The fireplace had

never seemed more cheery as I lay back, drowsing in the Morris chair. I had just picked up two new and remote stations with my short-wave set, and my old theory of inevitable television was fast materializing. I was reviewing the thesis of my next article for the *Reform World*—to defend the practicability of television—when the knock came at my door.

It was a queer sound, not at all like human knuckles would make, but more like a tiny hammer-head muffled in a leather stall.

I got up puzzledly. I hadn't expected any callers. My bachelor study and hobby lab were remotely located in Walden Park. Even in milder weather few callers interrupted my voluntary seclusion. And with the thermometer at ten below, it seemed nothing short of an emergency that had brought some one to my door at that hour.

As I turned the lock I noticed a faint radiation of warmth, as if the cold snap had broken. I opened the door and I was momentarily dazed not only by an unquestionable wave of in-rushing heat but by the remarkable aspect of my visitor.

"Good evening," I said, almost subconsciously.

"Good evening," a voice replied—a voice hollow and metallic, which, while the mouth opened and the lips moved, seemed to issue indeterminately from somewhere in the chest or abdomen.

"You are Walter Selds, the science writer?"

"I am," I affirmed a bit stiffly, looking my caller up and down in an amazement and suspicion which must have been obvious in every lineament of my face.

"You will pardon my boldness, I am sure, when I inform you that I bring a message of sensational significance to Earth science."

"Earth science?" I couldn't help emphasizing the planetary qualification, "Why, certainly—" I hastened— "I'm always interested in new discoveries. Come in."

I'd had the usual experiences of press men and science publicists with quacks and monomaniacs and it crossed my mind that here was another that had to be tactfully disposed of. But the moment the door closed behind my visitor I knew different. This man had an air of dynamic assurance—and, more; he impressed me with a vague, quickening dread.

There was something awesomely unnatural about him, an impression joltingly fortified by the inexplicable radiation of heat from his body or from something hidden in his clothes. My parlor had been comfortably warm before he entered; it was now uncomfortably hot—and the heat was remarkably like that thrown off by large quantities of rotting vegetation.

HE didn't take the overstuffed easy chair I offered, but sat down stiffly on a hard-bottomed stool beside the fireplace.

"Will you join me in a toddy?" I invited, while mentally gathering my resources for defense against any criminal violence that might threaten from this midnight visitor.

"Thanks, no," he cut me off shortly. "I have no need of stimulants as you may have observed from the temperature of my body. We will dispense with all subterfuge immediately. My mission concerns the future of all human life on this planet, and I must impress you from the beginning that any attempt you may make to thwart me will mean the swift destruction not only of you and your entire race, but every trace of human handiwork on the face of your Earth!"

So astounded was I by this blunt

ultimatum that I could only stand and stare. Under any other circumstances I'd have considered myself confronted by a lunatic, yet the metallic, triphammer tones of the voice as it delivered its imperious ukase, the emanation of alien heat, the subtly alien aspect of the man in several particulars, transfixed me with an awe and misgiving that an ignorant savage might experience upon confronting one of his idols in the flesh.

"First of all, you must be convinced of my identity," the voice rasped, the eyes burning intensely, fiercely compelling, into mine. "Study me carefully."

He arose to oblige me.

A man of medium height and weight, of undistinguished features. At first glance he might have answered the description of any of a thousand average Americans. The overcoat, suit and hat were commonplace. There was nothing unusual in the form except the rigidly erect carriage. The strangeness lay deeper than that—an odd, glowing pallor of the skin—an unnatural brightness of the eyes—and that persistent aura of pungent heat given off through his clothes.

"There is certainly nothing usual in your—er—personality," I faltered, checking a husk in my throat as I became more certain than ever of an incredible other-worldliness in the deeper aspects of my visitor.

I saw his gleaming eyes flash to the reading lamp and thought I noticed a glimmer of fear or uncertainty as he said brusquely:

"Turn out the light."

There seemed nothing to do but comply. I heard him mutter something under his breath as I pulled the switch chain, plunging the room in darkness save for the flickering flames of the fireplace. Then I was blanching at the spectral

change in this self-invited guest who was fast proving himself the master in my own house.

In the dark his face and hands glowed with a faint, phosphorescent luminosity. And through the fabric of his clothes I noticed tiny sparks flying off and vanishing like the disintegration of radium seen under a powerful microscope!

"My God!" I cried. "Who—what are you?"

"Turn on—the light." Again I noticed a slight hesitancy in his tones, some repressed association of uncertainty with the light.

AS I snapped on the light feeling like a man in a trance, my inquisitor stepped jerkily to the library table and picked up the daily paper.

He pointed to an item on the front page. "Read that."

I had already read the gruesome story. A car found burned at the side of a lonely road two days before, its owner missing, the body presumably, but unaccountably, entirely consumed in the flames. The man's name, discovered by tracing the motor serial number, had been Ralph Bates.

"My body is that of Ralph Bates!" rasped the voice. "But I am a Storla of the Cosmos, and my name in your language is Darcondra."

"Darcondra!" I repeated numbly. "You mean to say you are life from outer space?"

"Exactly!" the answer was impatient. He ripped open the paper to an inside page, tapped one finger to a brief item concerning the falling of a small meteorite in a nearby township.

"It was not a meteorite that fell that night," he informed me curtly. "What they saw was my landing upon Earth in my natural state. I am a scout, as you call it,

for the legions of my kind, who are at present swarmed on the edible worlds of Alpha Centauri, your nearest star system.”

“Edible worlds?” I echoed the startling phrase, which seemed to choke me in its utterance.

“Precisely. Perhaps you know, or have theorized, that life is relative, as is true of all states of matter and even distances in terms of infinity?”

“Yes,” I stammered, “Herbert Spencer expounded that theory years ago and others have elaborated on it since.”

“It is, of course, a mere theory with you regarding life in the Universe, but you have seen, or will see, that it is a fact with the Storlas, who have seen it demonstrated in a myriad other forms of life throughout space. We Storlas are ionized protoplasm, that is as nearly as I can convey a definition of our substance in your language with its mental limitations.

“Our sole means of subsistence is the energy you call electricity, whose source originates in the magnetism of a planet body. We live somewhat like your storage batteries, and when we exhaust the stored energy of a world we migrate to another and other worlds. Incidentally, when we leave a world, it is in the process of disintegration for want of the magnetic preservative you call gravitation.”

I looked in frank horror into the hard, brilliant eyes, felt a qualm of nausea stealing through me from the waves of alien heat that beat incessantly upon me from this infernal visitation in human guise.

“And what have I to do with all this?” I muttered. “You astound me with statements of incredible powers, yet you come to me as if I could be of service in my feeble earthliness.” Sarcasm crept into my tones, a desperate sarcasm, for I wavered between a conviction of my own madness and the terrible dread that the

millennium was at hand. “For instance—you might demonstrate how you assumed the form of this Ralph Bates whom you have evidently murdered.”

THERE was no hint of irony or resentment, no emotion whatsoever in his voice or manner as he replied—only impatient haste, and an egotistical indifference to me as a personality or even an important factor in his opposition.

“Ionized protoplasm, as we have evolved,” he explained swiftly, “may take any shape and appearance of substance it chooses provided actual contact can be effected with a model. You have a process by which you transmute metals to a certain degree. In the concentration of copper, for instance, you may immerse a piece of scrap iron in a sulphuric or hydrochloric acid bath, and in time the iron is replaced by copper. Precipitation, I believe you term it, the Douglas-Hunt process. It is the identical principle by which I assumed the physical matrix of Ralph Bates. I am not, of course, actually mere protoplasmic flesh. Note this—”

He stepped to the fireplace, plunged one hand into the red-hot coals, which glowed white immediately, blistering the room with heat. For nearly a minute he held his hand in that miniature furnace before he withdrew it and displayed the member uninjured. Before I could recover from my amazement, he turned to the library table, picked up a curved oriental knife that I used as a letter opener, and as I staggered back in stupefaction, he calmly passed the blade through his neck as if the flesh were mere butter.

Holding the severed head in its hands, the headless corpse confronted me motionlessly for several minutes with no sign of bleeding. Then the arms moved mechanically, set the head back on the

stump of the neck, where it fused in place immediately, a tiny band of sparks showing briefly where the ghastly incision had been made.

Darcondra's lips moved again, the eyes awakening with supernal life.

"You observe," he droned on, "how futile would be any effort to oppose me in my wishes. Your bullets, explosives, acids, even your death-rays could not destroy me. I neither breathe nor eat as you do. You might rend me to atoms with your bombs, and I would re-coalesce immediately, wreaking a frightful vengeance of utter destruction upon my would-be assassins. As for my destructive powers—if I exerted but a fractional degree of the dormant heat possible for me to generate and radiate at will, I would fuse you and this house to powdered ash. The entire neighborhood would be left a charred ruin, where not even plant life could ever find root again."

My terror knew no bounds now. Either I had gone stark mad or I faced the most terrible peril that had ever descended upon mankind and Earth. Edible worlds! Devouring conquerors of the cosmos, sweeping from star system to star system, sapping the very foundations of life from the matter that fostered it!

Surely no man had ever visualized such a crisis, let alone confronted it in cold reality. "I alone knew of this thing. One puny, protoplasmic human against this indestructible demon of stellar space—this godless monster who was the vanguard of a world-destroying horde.

I panted in the insufferable stench of body heat. Sweat bathed my brow and palms that was not wholly due to temperature. I must carry on—must in some way circumvent this Caliban's ghastly designs.

"But I still can't understand what I can do for one of your infinite powers."

I GASPED, hands clenching as I steadied my tottering will to think and act with some measure of effectiveness.

"You are convinced, then, that I am what I have said—that nothing you or your race can do can thwart me?"

"I can't help believing the testimony of my senses," I confessed, weakly.

"Then you will cooperate fully if I promise mercy to your race?"

"Mercy!" I cried. "What mercy could such monstrosities offer who sap the very foundations of a world's existence?"

Again no smile, no human reaction whatever. Like a relentless, intellectual machine, Darcondra droned on.

"You have no choice but to accept my propositions on my own terms." He snatched up the knife with which he had severed his head, clenched it in his fist. A blinding, choking wave of heat seared my face. Then the knife fell leadenly to the floor, a lump of cooling, blackened slag which no longer retained even its virtue of malleability.

"I accept!" I cried. "Tell me what you wish, but in the name of universal life, let me intercede for the innocents of my kind. Anything—anything—"

He sat down mechanically, and I thought I caught a crafty evasion in his fishy glare.

"There is an interference to our migration here—a mere trifle"—unmistakably I noticed again that flicker of uncertainty—"you have an unprecedentedly crude means of utilizing the natural energy which is the Storla's life flame. I refer to your electricity. These power systems are offensive to us and will cause us no end of irritation and inconvenience when we come in great numbers after my return to Alpha Centauri with reports of an edible world in this

system. You are a well known authority on science publicity, in a position to communicate effectively with the presses, the radio broadcasting units and the seats of political power. In fact, it was your signature to various news features that prompted me to trace you through the directory. Under my direction you will inform all necessary authorities that the electrical power systems throughout the entire world must be completely demolished as soon as possible.”

“But I can’t guarantee—” I was momentarily stunned.

“Of course they will think you mad,” Darcondra interrupted impatiently. “I anticipate that. But you will follow up the ultimatum with an announcement of a demonstration to prove my existence, my absolute power. On a set day I will destroy utterly any designated aggregation of matter. I will permit your powers to choose what shall suffer the test, and at the stated hour I will consume it. If other demonstrations are necessary they shall be provided with largess—but without further choice of your powers as to where my vengeance shall fall. Sporadic destruction will continue until the powers of all Earth nations begin a concerted demolition of all electric power conduits, storage and generator plants. There must be no vestige of artificial electrical generation on Earth when the Storlas arrive.”

“And the mercy you offer humanity?” I implored. “What shall I tell them—some hope to hold out for our survival as a race?”

Darcondra did not speak for a moment.

“There are other worlds,” he said presently and with obvious indifference. “We may assist you in devising transportation to another world in your system. Beyond that I can promise nothing.”

I knew then that Darcondra’s offer of clemency was but a subterfuge. This monster of alien life had no morals, no compunction whatever as to honor in gaining his ends in the frightful foraging of his fellow hosts. I did not breathe my conviction, but I knew from then on that if I served as mediator for Darcondra I would be an instrument of humanity’s destruction—nay, even of Earth’s destruction as a habitable planet in space.

ONE dim ray of hope remained—the one hint of weakness I had been able to discern in this terrible creature’s supernal armaments. Electricity! Our “crude” method of harnessing the invisible power that permeated the Universe. At every mention of electricity in Earth connotation I had observed a fear—if fear it could be called—of our voltage conduits and power stores.

Emotionless though he was, I had perceived this dread behind Darcondra’s subterfuges of “irritation,” “inconvenience.” This ghoul of worlds would never have trifled with indirect negotiations if our electrical developments were actually a “mere trifle” in the Storlan conquest of Earth.

“It will require thought—it is a great undertaking,” I stalled, desperately. One hand, slippery with sweat, fumbled to a box of cigarettes on the table. I took one with trembling fingers, placed it between my lips.

“No thought is necessary!” Darcondra rebuked me impatiently. “Merely dictate duplicate telegrams to all the departments of power by means of your telephone.”

He was watching my cigarette with a curiosity tinged with contempt. He didn’t seem to notice my hand move to the electric lighter on the table, wired from a plug in the floor. In my flair for electrical

apparatus, a parlor lighter was but one of many a freak extravagance in such appliances.

Darcondra's hand rested along the edge of the table as he sat rigidly, staring at me coldly, compellingly. The lighter switch, in the process of opening and closing, invariably emitted an arc of crackling, hot sparks, which could induce an unpleasant shock if contacting one's flesh.

Suddenly, with my heart in my mouth, I opened the switch and shoved the tiny, sputtering arc at Darcondra's inert hand. I knew I faced probable instant death, but I was hardly prepared for all that ensued.

Darcondra leaped back, uttering a grating screech. His eyes bulged in livid terror, fixed in fearful fascination on the sizzling tongue of flame from the arcing lighter.

I feigned surprise, abject apology, with all the courage I could muster. Darcondra's fear and fury reacted apparently spontaneously. His clothes smoked with a flicker of released heat. I saw his pallid, glowing skin redden like blown embers before he regained full self-control, an instant later.

As I drew back the lighter, switched it off, he was glaring at me as if he would read my mind. Those terrible eyes were asking, "How much does he know? Can he suspect the truth?"

"I was overwrought—I didn't realize," I groveled. "It is only a lighter for this weed we smoke."

"It is nothing," he said coldly, completely recovered, once more a consummate master of guile. "I am amused by this vandal means you employ in utilizing the vital forces of the Universe. It is a deplorable waste. All such devices must be destroyed with their sources of generated power. You will begin

mediation at once." And he pointed to the telephone on a small table at one side the archway between the parlor and my laboratory where the lights were turned out.

MY SENSES swam giddily as I got up, the cigarette dangling cold and forgotten in my lips. My heart hammered until it seemed the rush of blood would blot out all consciousness. In that moment I prayed that I might faint. I knew the secret of Darcondra's fear—yet how could I use it? What certainty had I that my first play in a tragic drama of trial and error would win?

He followed me closely to the telephone stand. The stifling heat of his nearness, the charred scent of his clothing, so nearly aflame a moment before, unnerved me. I was no hero for an ordeal like this—yet no man, not the veriest craven, could do other than make one desperate stand to save his race and world from annihilation. If I blundered I would be destroyed with doubtless thousands of innocents in the vicinity. And then another would serve in my stead.

"Proceed!" Darcondra's voice grated harshly in my ringing ears. "Procrastination can avail you nothing."

But my eye had alighted on an empty contact socket hanging on its long connection cord beside the telephone stand and just inside the shadowed laboratory. As I sat down to the telephone my left knee was within a few inches of the terminal of the cord. It was a socket I used in experiments requiring a build-up of high voltage.

The step-up transformer on its stand against the wall inside the lab was in darkness, and I divined that its significance would not be clear to the creature even if he did discover it. In that high tension socket, near at hand, at least several thousand volts were on tap at a

turn of the switch, for I recalled leaving the transformer at a high build-up.

With my right hand I began scribbling notes and addresses on the pad beside the telephone. Darcondra watched me alertly on the right. I dipped down and up with my left hand, testing the socket switch in the movement to make sure it was open. Again my left hand strayed down to the socket as I took down the receiver with my right, called central.

Talking loudly, excitedly to cover my secret maneuvers, I worked frantically with my fingers, plucking out the contact coil in the socket sleeve, until it stuck out like a serpent's tongue. Now, with one quick turn of the socket switch, I knew that if I touched the protruding contact point, I would shrivel to ash in seconds. What it would do to Darcondra I could not foresee, nor did I care. It was my first and last chance to win.

Darcondra tensed as he seemed to notice for the first time the suspicious movements of my left hand. He started to step behind me, to investigate, when I swept up the socket as if I held the haft of a knife. One wild yell I sounded as I buried the contact point in the Storla's luminous face.

A hideous screech blended with my own mad shout. I felt a withering band of flame sear my chest as a satanic hand raked me. A blast of weltering heat—then a jagged ribbon of blue flame hissed and blazed where Darcondra stood under the high voltage circuit.

I saw his clothes wilt and wither in a smoking glare, and as I reeled forward blindly with a despairing cry I knew that the monster had vanished in the grounding of the circuit in the earth beneath the house.

THE chill of the outer night aroused me later. I dimly recall crawling on hands and

knees along the street, the house wrapped in furious flames behind me. I do not remember who found me or when. I was taken to a hospital in delirium, frightfully burned.

My recovery was tediously slow, complicated by a nervous malady allied to shell-shock. For months I was hardly ever rational. The burn on my breast, where Darcondra's hand had raked in the instant before the high voltage disintegrated him, was last to heal, its condition sorely puzzling the doctors.

It was generally presumed by my associates and the press that I was burned accidentally during an electrical experiment which also set fire to the house, and that the shock of the ordeal affected my mind. In truth, no sign of anything unusual was ever found in the ashes of my house in Walden Park.

And so I have only the scar as corroboration. Darcondra, scourge of eternity, if he was ever as real as my memory pictures him, vanished utterly in the process of some annihilating fusion with the high tension circuit. He alone could explain the phenomenon, if in his evident dread of our power, he fully understood it himself.

Now a haunting dread lives with me of what the future may hold for Earth and my fellow men. Can we long hope to evade the descent of another envoy of the Storlan hordes? And will there be one fortunate enough to thwart him in his ruthless designs as I did?

Sometimes I entertain the faint hope that Darcondra, being indestructible, was not really destroyed—that his blasted atoms reformed again in space, returning to his kind with a tale of terror that will forever absolve Earth from ultimate pillage by those scavengers of the void that somewhere, at this hour, are sweeping in meteor masks from world to world,

leaving unmortal devastation in their wake.