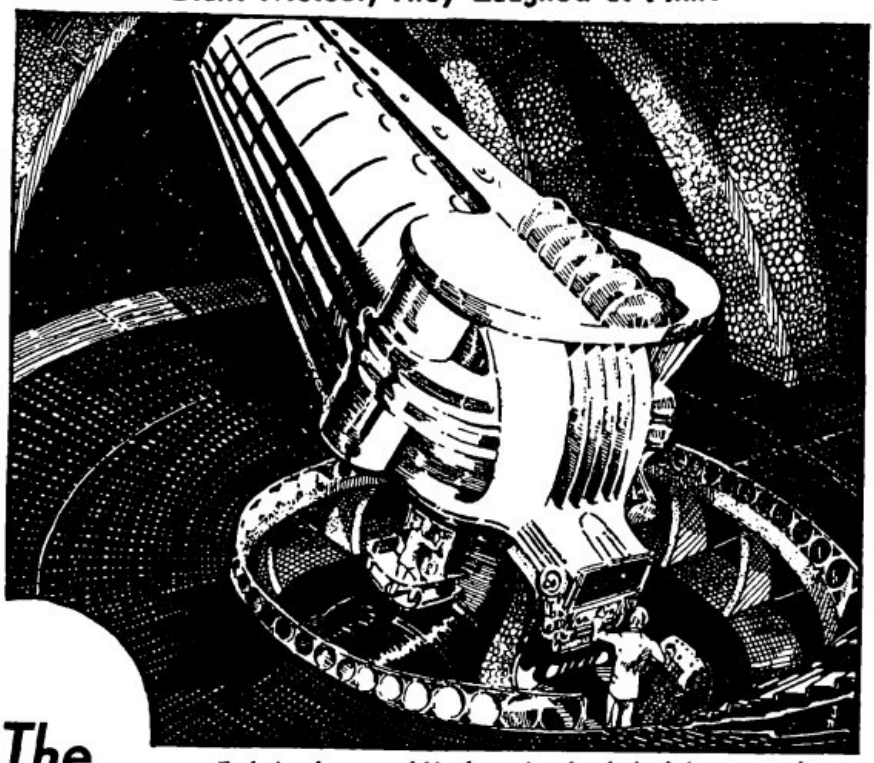
Thrilling Wonder Stories, June, 1937

He Was the World's Greatest Astronomer—Yet When He Warned Earth of the Impending Impact of a Giant Meteor, They Laughed at Him!



Each time he repeated his observations he obtained the same results.

The MOLTEN BULLET

By ANTHONY RUD

Author of "The Cain Brand," "The Griffin," etc.

THIS is the last of my long series of studies of the folk of the Lost Planet, fellow Skrygeours. Or, fellow Martians, as we have agreed to call ourselves, the name being so much more pleasing to the electric ear.

I feel a warmth and a sympathy for those Earthmen, so far ahead of us in many ways, yet totally unable to help themselves in that last dreadful calamity.

Since we have adopted their spoken and written word, in place of our thousands of clashing dialects different along each two canals, and so many of their incredible mechanisms, it is only natural that we should have devoted time to their individuals.

In passing let me say that my deepest regret has been the inability of myself and other Martian scientists, in spite of our monster selectoscope which allowed me to pick up their ether waves, their speech, and even to follow the movements of any single Earthian with understanding, to get together with their great scientific men in any sort of

talk.

We could hear and see and understand almost everything; but we could not fathom the manner in which those ether waves they called radio, were flung from place to place, and even out to us here in the center of the Universe.

They, on the other hand, were apparently several time cycles behind discovering anything similar to the Loamm selectoscope, which would have enabled them really to study us!

As I have reiterated, both physically and mentally they resembled us so closely—allowing for the differences in climate and our other natural advantages, of course—that it is almost certain we sprang from the same stock.

Either the Creator developed life on both planets in almost identical fashion, or at some past time and greater epoch of civilization we must have conquered the difficulties of interplanetary travel, and sent a space ship to colonize Earth.

I favor that theory. Though of course it might have been a landing party from Earth which started us!

I HAD great hopes for Albert Einstein Ammerton. He was more like a Martian than any of the other scores of Earthmen I had studied. If any man on Earth ever could have invented our selectoscope, or its equivalent, Ammerton would have been the man.

According to their time reckoning, which I have explained earlier, Ammerton was born in their year 1937, A.D. Though we might have regarded him notably backward, and odd in some respects, from his very earliest years he was far ahead of his fellow Earthians. He was a mathematical genius. At the age of eleven he had graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and already was in a fair way to becoming recognized as the greatest Earthian authority on mathematical variants. When he was fifteen, and acting as third assistant at the great Sandraes Observatory, he worked out a correction to the parallax of Neptune—an error which had gone undiscovered for more than a century.

Development of this kind, usual with us on Mars, was something more than phenomenal on Earth. Ammerton was called a prodigy. Like our great astronomer and calculator, Ebii Loamm, who had conquered the binomial theorem at the age of forty months, Ammerton was a trifle narrow in after life. He did not become insane, however, (You will recall that Loamm, after inventing the selectoscope, went violently mad at the age of two hundred, in the very prime of his young Martian manhood.)

Ammerton's greatest interest lay in the far stretches of the Universe. He was human enough, in his odd moments though, to court and marry a beautiful young woman, one Elspeth Sandraes, daughter of the multi-millionaire Earthman who had given this observatory its great 300-inch mirror telescope.

So no one was greatly surprised when in 1963, at the death of the observatory chief, Albert E. Ammerton was promoted over the head of the then assistant chief, one Hans Becker, and given supreme authority in the Sandraes Observatory.

Note that name, Hans Becker. He was much like many Martians you and I know—selfish devils, consumed by inner furies, men who believe that all that they desire should be handed to them, irrespective of their real desserts.

With the selectoscope I followed Becker and Ammerton, and flatter myself I understood them from bones to brains. It is too bad they were not radio engineers, for if so it is certain we would know now the one great Earthian secret which escaped us.

(Even now, after one of our Martian centuries—equal to 178 Earth years—I often

puzzle over what those early radio broadcasters were trying to tell us, when they kept repeating over and over again that statement about the music going round and around. It did, and so did their words, of course, but as far as giving us the hint we sought, it seemed irrelevant!)

Hans Becker was about forty years of age, haughty and arrogant of manner. He was a competent astronomer, of course, painstaking and methodical, until a pair of things happened to upset him greatly.

FIRST, the beautiful heiress, Elspeth Sandraes, married Becker's young rival, Ammerton. Second, Ammerton received the coveted post as head of the observatory. As the chief assistant, Becker believed that he should have received the appointment. And it is probable that he did love the girl. A good many men of assorted ages did.

How Becker did rage! I was fascinated by him, and followed him on the long walks he took over the countryside. He walked fast in spurts, sometimes raising his right leg stiffly in a sort of wooden-soldier march, sometimes stopping short to lift his fists to the uncompromising stars, and shout curses which ought to have turned green the face of the moon.

Becker's own white face would grow red, then purple, while his thinning thatch of yellow hair bristled with the electricity generated by his venom.

All that first year Ammerton, happy with his new wife and the great camera-telescope, was unaware of the hatred and jealousy seething in Becker's heart. In fact Ammerton was extremely blind, never finding out about this personal grudge until at last it was almost too late to do anything about it.

In all their relations at the observatory, Becker was courteous, suave and obedient to his new chief, bending often from the waist in that stiff, rather jerky bow which was characteristic of him. But his inner thoughts must have been black and slimy enough. He vowed aloud in a shout to the distant stars—and to my selectoscope—that he would devote the remainder of his life to vengeance.

It was Amrherton's career as Earth's foremost astronomer, which Hans Becker ruined—and ruined so insidiously, after a long period of seeming harmony with his chief, that the plotter achieved his object in full before Ammerton as much as suspected that he was the victim of a conspiracy.

Becker came of a German family of clockmakers, and himself had served an early apprenticeship in that trade. So he was deft with delicate machinery, intricate little affairs of springs, pawls and ratchets. He studied the finer adjustment mechanisms of the awesome camera-telescope, and then busied himself for weeks in a secret workshop in the cellar of his home.

Then during one afternoon, when honest astronomers sleep, Becker brought his devilish little gadget to the observatory and fitted it to the great telescope. It concerned tiny fractions of a degree in setting, and was so small itself and placed so well out of the way that no one could suspect its presence, save possibly the subordinate in charge of cleaning, oiling and care of the expensive instrument. And that subordinate was Hans Becker himself!

A tiny electric switch in the adjoining office had to be thrown, in order to affect the telescope. When the switch was not in contact, the instrument was perfect as usual. But Becker, by merely moving that switch arm back and forth, could make one observation faulty, while another taken the next minute, would be accurate!

The error there on Earth was perhaps three one-hundred-thousandths of an inch. Two and one-half billion miles away on Neptune, for instance—a planet much nearer than any star—that tiny discrepancy had

magnified itself so greatly that an astronomer could break his heart endeavoring to understand it.

OR, he could believe that stars and planets suddenly and irresponsibly had left their prescribed orbits, like so many off-center-weighted golf balls in flight, and were slicing and hooking themselves into the heavenly rough.

Becker was far too wise in his plotting to allow anything like this, uncontrolled and incredible, to happen. What did seem to occur was calmly regulated and consistent, even though startling. You see, astronomy was so exact a science that when even a tiny error showed its head, it created a sensation throughout the world. It is quite as if in a high school geometry class a young sophomore went to the blackboard and demonstrated to the astounded teacher that in a certain right-angle triangle he had discovered, the sum of the squares of the two other sides did *not* equal the square of the hypothenuse!

Becker waited until his chief launched a series of observations. These had to do with the earth's present orbit, and inferentially with the eccentricity of that orbit from one million years B.C. until the present day. Ammerton little realized that he was going to find anything more wrong than might be accounted for by the difference in modern and old-time instruments. Croll, Leverrier and Stone, working out these calculations first, had been handicapped by telescopes outdated by more than a century.

But Ammerton's results certainly did begin to come out differently! At first he was inclined to doubt, to think that possibly the great instrument itself must be in error. But tireless checks over all the great coordinates of the heavens, finally convinced him that he was on the right track, and that those old figures, believed in the way lamas believe in Buddha, were in gross error!

Becker stayed right with his chief all night long every night for months, helping take the photos, tabulating results, and making intricate calculations.

When not in the observatory, Ammerton was walking around wide-eyed and preoccupied. His wife scarcely knew him. He muttered long strings of figures to himself. The thing he had come upon was stupendous, unbelievable!

Yet everything checked. Each time he repeated his observations he obtained the same amazing results. Of course it had been difficult indeed for those poor fellows with their primitive apparatus, back in the nineteenth century. But even so, it was hard to conceive that they had been this far wrong.

At last Ammerton's final doubts were satisfied, though. He sat down to write the epoch-making article for the *Journal of Astronomy*, which would give these new results to a wondering world.

Heretical statements such as this were the meat of the new exposition, which would make savants gasp:

> It must not be supposed that the eccentricity, in obedience to the laws, relating to planetary eccentricities, oscillates between the absolute maximum and the absolute minimum, the perihelion shifting continuously forward. On the contrary, the successive maxima and minima-are very unequal, and are attained after very unequal intervals.

Becker looked startled and shocked when he read. He stammered around, and then suggested fearfully that it might be wiser to break the news somewhat more gently. Would not Herr Ammerton consider sending out a few hints first, and postpone the actual publication of his revolutionary article until some future time?

THIS got the scientist's back up—as it was intended to do.

"By the cosine of Caraneus, *no!*" cried

Ammerton, banging his clenched fist on the table in passionate emphasis. “I’ll never quibble or qualify! When I’m right, I’m right—and everyone must know and understand!”

“Of course you know best, chief,” murmured the hypocritical Becker, bowing stiffly from the hips. “And what a poke in the eye is coming to you, you handsome sap!” he gritted under his breath, concealing jubilance under the usual mask of grave suavity.

It was during those days, following the mailing of his treacherously deluded article, that my fullest Martian sympathy went out to poor Ammerton. Not only had he been betrayed in his lifework, but all the natural and unnatural misfortunes men are heir to, started ganging up on him. He fell ill with influenza. His wife died in childbirth, and the baby with her. And then when at long last Ammerton managed to stagger to his feet, facing every disaster like a strong man should, resolved to bury his sorrows in work, he found even that chance for forgetfulness slipping away from him!

The friendly editor of the *Journal of Astronomy* had sent him a message, hinting that after having read the cosmic surprise in the long article, he wondered if Ammerton were not poking out his neck a bit too rashly. He suggested a careful recheck of results.

Ammerton, out of himself with grief and physical illness at the time, answered this with curt savagery, quite unlike his usual manner. So in due course the article appeared. The magazine editor realized it would boom circulation, even though it did ruin Ammerton. And then, of course, there was the slight possibility that the man was right. He had a worldwide reputation for care and thoroughness in his work.

The sensation was all that anyone expected. Then for a few weeks—silence. Finally, when other observers had gone over the ground, there came the frigid, stern word that Ammerton must be quite mad. This came from Professor Emmanuel Liebling, of Prague.

An Associated Press interview with another noted astronomer, Dr. Wilfred Graham of Lick Observatory, appeared in many of the chief newspapers. Dr. Graham said flatly that his learned contemporary was mistaken.

Less dignified savants all over the earth jeered loudly. Why, any eighteen-year-old freshman in college astronomy could take a twenty-foot ’scope and show how ridiculous these findings were!

The Judas plot of Hans Becker had worked to perfection.

Now he added the master touch. Spurred out of his grief, indignant beyond words, Ammerton plunged into a complete recheck of his work. And his second batch of results was identical with the first, to a dozen decimal place!

He called in Becker to see. But now, appalling though it was, results were totally different! (Becker, of course, had thrown off the switch.)

Sweating even in that chill mountain observatory, shaking with a palsy of sudden horror, Ammerton suddenly broke. He yelled insanely, flung his fists aloft, and ran from the observatory gibbering in momentary madness.

If Hans Becker right then and there had dismantled his secret apparatus-of-error, he would never have been discovered. Like many another criminal, however, he could not keep from overdoing it. He saw that his chief’s great brain was practically unhinged now. One more shock, one more senseless happening which reason could not explain, and the mental ruin of the young scientist would be complete. That, and nothing less, was Becker’s goal.

BACK now into the observatory rushed the wild-appearing Ammerton. One can realize

just how far from his usual mental moorings he had drifted, by what he did then. He actually cleaned the lenses of a ponderous eyepiece, unused since the first days of testing the giant camera-telescope, and *looked through this eyepiece into the heavens!*

Becker waited. The opportunity for his final coup would arrive, he thought, but this was not it.

Ammerton was sweeping the night sky, his own mind chaotic. He chanced to cross the orbit of Polyphemus. This gigantic asteroid-comet, which for many centuries had come near—dangerously near—the Solar System, once each eighty-three years, now was out of sight from any save the very largest modern telescopes on Earth. It may have been causing the jitters just then, to the ice-blooded inhabitants of far-away Uranus, if any.

Ammerton's keen observer's brain, still not addled as were his emotions, caught and fastened to a strange thing. There was something peculiar and disturbing about the asteroid-comet, showing out there against the blue-black of interstellar space as a faint streak of orange fire.

Polyphemus had a kink in his tail!

In plain words, his tail should have been slightly curved, if he were pursuing his ordinary course. Instead, there was a wide bend in it! That meant trouble.

Ammerton instantly realized the possibilities. They were so monstrous that the thought acted like an ice-pack on his fevered head. The distortion of the tail meant that somehow and sometime the asteroid-comet had abruptly changed course!

As a possible result, he might hit and explode one of the planet members. Or another catastrophe, thought Ammerton with horror, might lose Earth its sun—letting all inhabitants of that planet freeze to death in a few hours. Or it might even head Earth straight into the sun, to be swallowed up in boiling, molten oblivion!

There were other terrible possibilities as we on Mars know; but those were enough for Ammerton at that time. He started new observations, making photos of Polyphemus every half hour, and calculations from them.

During the following day, unable to sleep, the scientist studied all available data on Polyphemus. He made painstaking calculations, and at ten that evening carefully swung the giant telescope to a certain position of right ascension. Careening along through space at its terrific pace, the comet-asteroid should have reached this exact point at 10 P. M. sharp, Greenwich Observatory time. Again Ammerton looked through the eyepiece of the telescope before getting ready to take the photograph.

An awed exclamation burst from his throat. Polyphemus was not there!

(I hasten to make plain that this was *not* Becker's fault. That scoundrel was lying low and waiting for a good opportunity, which he did not suspect had arrived. Ammerton had told him nothing of the blood-chilling discovery.)

With the big telescope sweeping back to the comet-asteroid's position of the previous night preliminary to some sleuthing of the star spaces, Ammerton was shocked to discover Polyphemus almost exactly where it had been the night before!

Realize what that meant! The tail had grown appreciably shorter. Polyphemus had changed direction sharply, and now was headed directly toward Earth, at an approximate speed of 3300 miles a minute!

OF course, whatever it was that had shooed it from its normal orbit, might have slowed it somewhat, or vastly increased this usual speed. Time alone could tell. But Ammerton was never to know, nor anyone else on Earth, why Polyphemus had changed its course so amazingly. No one could suspect that it was because the asteroid-comet was a mass of

highly magnetic iron, attracted to Earth's iron core!

However, unless something intervened, or the speed of Earth was sufficient to outstrip Polyphemus, this unholy game of celestial tag was bound to end in blazing catastrophe!

The mass of Polyphemus, which was indeed a super-comet, was approximately seven times greater than that of Earth's moon—or about one-twelfth the mass of Earth itself! When and if these two bodies collided, it would create such intense heat that both would be utterly consumed, and the resultant gases blown away into furthest space!

Naturally there could be no survivors on Earth, unless some of them came forward with a space ship at the last minute, and succeeded in navigating away to some other planet. If that happened, of course, the refugees would have been most welcome among us on Mars.

Chances, however, of any group of Earthmen inventing and actually building such a ship in the short space of a few weeks—the time which would intervene before a collision—were naturally very small.

However, on the fourth morning, after three nights of intensive study, Albert Einstein Ammerton announced to the reporters of a large daily newspaper that Polyphemus had gone wild, left its recognized orbit, and now was running amok to collide with Earth!

The scientist, though knowing now well enough what would be said of him in astronomical circles, thought it his sacred duty to warn the world. He himself had ceased to matter.

The reporters spread themselves, and their city editor cooperated. Am-merton's story was rendered with all due solemnity—if you were not capable of reading between the lines. It was a derisive masterpiece. While seeming to kowtow as usual to the sage of Sandraes, it really said in substance, This Guy Is A Nut, And Here Is Proof!

Other astronomers, boiling over with indignation at Ammerton's previous mistake, did not even wait until their smaller telescopes could pick up Polyphemus. They howled. They jeered. They demanded that alienists be called to consider Ammerton's case, and that immediately Sandraes himself and the trustees of the observatory, get together and discharge the crazy man.

Through it all for nearly a week, a pale-faced man with set jaw, glued his eye to the telescope and watched the onrushing doom. He had every calculation made. He knew the day, hour and second when Polyphemus would reach the outer limits of Earth's atmosphere—and then the fractional second later which would be the time of actual impact. Gripped by gravity, the speed of Polyphemus would increase terrifically, along at the last. It would probably reach the awesome velocity of 5000 miles a second!

`Earth had twenty-nine more days to live, according to Ammerton.

`All of a sudden the derisive clacking of onyx upon porphyry, the braying of human asses, and the skirl of jeering bagpipes come to an end. A few of the learned doctors tired of their fun, and turned to peer through their own little lensed barrels. Might just as well see what might have caused poor Ammerton's delusion. `Then came a brief, appalling message out of Europe:

`Dr. Luigi Genetti of the Cisalpine Observatory says Ammerton may be right! Polyphemus headed straight for Earth!

In Sydney they saw it. In Moscow. At Cape Town. At Buenos Aires. At Edmonton. In the course of five or six more days they all could make out Polyphemus. Give them another week, and they would be able to discern a small, glowing sun all by itself in a blank portion of the heavens, using only their

naked eyes!

BY the time that week was out increasing crowds were gathering to stay up all night and stare at Polyphemus. There was an undercurrent of mild excitement. Fear? Not a bit! Too many bearded wiseacres clad in nightgowns had climbed to the tops of neighboring hills, and there waited for the end of the world. The great Earth public was enjoying a new kind of show, but it was not in the least disturbed. Not yet, that is—

The days and nights passed. Of course long ago the comet-asteroid had completely tucked in his fiery shirt-tail; or rather, because of the sun's position directly beyond Earth, it was streaming directly behind him, and therefore could not be seen from Earth. Dr. Graham of Lick Observatory now calculated that his speed had increased to 13,700 miles a minute!

It was when he read this frightened report that Hans Becker realized the truth. A few hasty observations of his own convinced him that destruction of the earth, with everything upon it, loomed. And Becker, like many another treacherous scoundrel and egomaniac, feared hurt and death to himself with an intensity of wild, shuddering horror. It could not be! It *could* not! It—

He had to catch a grip on himself, for just then a surging horde of reporters came rushing to him, demanding his views on the all-important thing. Did Earth have any chance to escape?

Controlling his shivering, Becker pooh-poohed the idea of world destruction. Certainly Polyphemus was coming. But after all, what was the usual fate of a meteor (he knew, of course, this was no meteor!) which rushed into the rim of Earth's atmosphere?

In practically all cases, the friction set up caused it to be consumed utterly! In this case it just might be that a fragment would succeed in reaching Earth's surface; enough, let us say, to cause a perceptible jar. Or perhaps it would go unnoted, like that big meteor which fell in Arizona a few thousand years ago.

But Hans Becker, try as he did, could not believe his own words of assurance. For untold centuries the comet-asteroid Polyphemus had been a flaming bulk of molten metal and gases, careening through space. Why should it be consumed in the few seconds—or split part of a second—it would take to traverse the atmosphere of the earth?

Answer: it *wouldn't!*

In his palsied fright, Becker forgot all about the throw-switch on his desk, and its effect upon the big telescope. What a little matter this thing, and Ammerton's disgrace, seemed now! Ransacking his desk, gathering items he meant to take with him to a deep cellar or vault somewhere, Becker accidentally upset one of his desk telephones, and did not bother to put it back on its cradle.

The speaker-transmitter bumped against the throw-switch, and closed the circuit. Becker went in haste, not knowing and not caring.

Ammerton came into the observatory a half hour later, and went to the telescope. No longer was it possible to get anything save boiling, seething chaos by training the big instrument upon Polyphemus; but the astronomer had some by-product observations and calculations he wished to make. When, however, he attempted to train the telescope, he found it cock-eyed!

From that to a discovery of Becker's apparatus and the subordinate's treachery, was a short matter. Ammerton traced the wires to the switch on the desk, and found out exactly how the thing had been worked to make him go haywire on those first calculations published before the scorn and derision of the entire scientific world.

SO—he had been wrong after all— and it had

been his trusted helper who had betrayed him! From that moment Ammerton, deprived of everything, he had loved and valued in the world of men and women, forgot the impending cataclysm, except insofar as it limited his time now to a few days: Before, that space of life was ended, he meant to find Becker, who had gone from the observatory, and even from the secluded hamlet at the foot of the mountain. Becker had taken the train for New York City. Ammerton did the same. He was out to wreak vengeance upon the scheming rat.

Then those last four days of fiery terror. That is, from dawn to dusk the sky was practically as usual, save for a gathering heat haze. Polyphemus came always in the direction of the night side of the earth, as far as North America was concerned.

At night, however—if you could call it night—a full third of the sky was filled by the glowing, rushing monster! It gave far more light than ten suns. And perhaps the most horrible part of it all was that, employing plain smoked glasses, any inhabitant of the world could watch Polyphemus actually roiling and boiling and growing in size!

With a loaded pistol in his pocket, Ammerton was on the trail of his quarry. Haste was important now; and in these days of mounting horror, few people paid attention to others. Each man was searching his own soul for hope, and most were finding only the rusted tin cans, worn-out auto tires, and empty bottles of past excesses. Ammerton managed, as time grew terribly short, to learn that Becker for some reason had left New York City, (it was his fear of the falling skyscrapers) and had gone out to a place called Port Washington on the shore of Long Island.

But even finding one man in that large a place, was a hard task. Ammerton started a systematic search, since it appeared that Becker was unknown to the crowds running panic-stricken about the streets. No one-could give any information, or cared to try. Most thinking men had provisioned deep cellars, hoping against hope that disintegration of the comet-asteroid would occur, and that somehow Earth would survive—with perhaps only a few days of excessive heat.

Becker certainly had sought one of these holes. Ammerton grimly made the rounds, hoping he could be in time.

Mounting terror reached its icy, constricting fingers to clutch the heart’s and brains of all careless mankind. Business stopped. Ships put into port and were immediately deserted. Trains, city subways, airplanes—everything quit. Power was turned off. Gas plants ceased operations, and storage tanks of gasoline, oil and other inflammables, were emptied.

Frenzied throngs rushed about the streets of cities, like ants caught upon a hot plate. The arrogant New York multi-millionaire, Augustus Blick, who manufactured motor cars, was caught, crushed and trampled to death by the maddened mob besieging the largest cathedral in New York, attempting to get inside to repent their sins.

In all the world only a few real saints and Ammerton went about uncaring. And Ammerton really did care, not for catastrophe, but for completing one private affair before it came. Even Polyphemus paled before the star of his destiny. If he found Becker now, what did it matter that the end of the world arrived ten minutes later?

THAT final night the entire heaven was sealed from horizon to horizon by the glaring, molten bulk of the monster of doom. Heat outdoors became too intense for humans. The ground began to smoke. Pitchy trees in the forests suddenly burst into flames. Buildings of frame construction began to scorch and blister. Everywhere men took their families into cellars and holes in the ground, into mines.

Then by word of mouth the dreadful last-minute news was passed: Two more hours, and Polyphemus hits the outer rim of the Earth's atmosphere! Then we will know!

Ammerton, making a final dash across the street of liquefied asphalt paving, realized that when he had searched this block of buildings, in which a bank was situated, he was through. Even with every protection, he could not venture outdoors in the remaining moments—if any did remain—without shriveling up and burning to a cinder.

"Just let me see him! Just let me see him once!" he repeated over and over in half imprecation, half prayer.

One hour, fifty-nine minutes and fifty-one seconds of the period of grace had sped, when Ammerton at last succeeded in bribing his way into the crowded subterranean bank vault. The place was jammed with sweating humanity, lighted only by a few candles, and filled with the fearful din of frenzied sinners on their knees.

Becker was there. He was on his knees, arms wildly waving.

But that moment he saw Ammerton pushing through the crowd, advancing, his face a mask of grim vengeance, to level an automatic pistol.

"Don't!" shrieked the Judas.

"You betrayed me, and made me the scorn of the world!" said Ammerton, calm and implacable now. "So, the world's vengeance—"

His words were lost in the sudden, screaming awfulness high above. The heat of the earth's surface, as its atmosphere was consumed like a flimsy curtain, suddenly mounted to millions of degrees! The bank building, like all other excrescences on Earth's surface, suddenly became molten over their heads. The surface too—even before the actual impact—

But just as he himself dissolved into a wisp of smoke and nothingness, Ammerton squeezed the trigger of his pistol. Flame spurted, meeting greater flame in mid-air.

The bullet never reached its mark, for the mark had gone. The vault, along with the planet Earth, melted, became gas, exploded—all in a trice. The cupro-nickel slug from the gun melted in flight and disappeared.

But Ammerton, dissolving into fires hotter even than the imagined hell of his forefathers, believed in dying that he had avenged the wrong.