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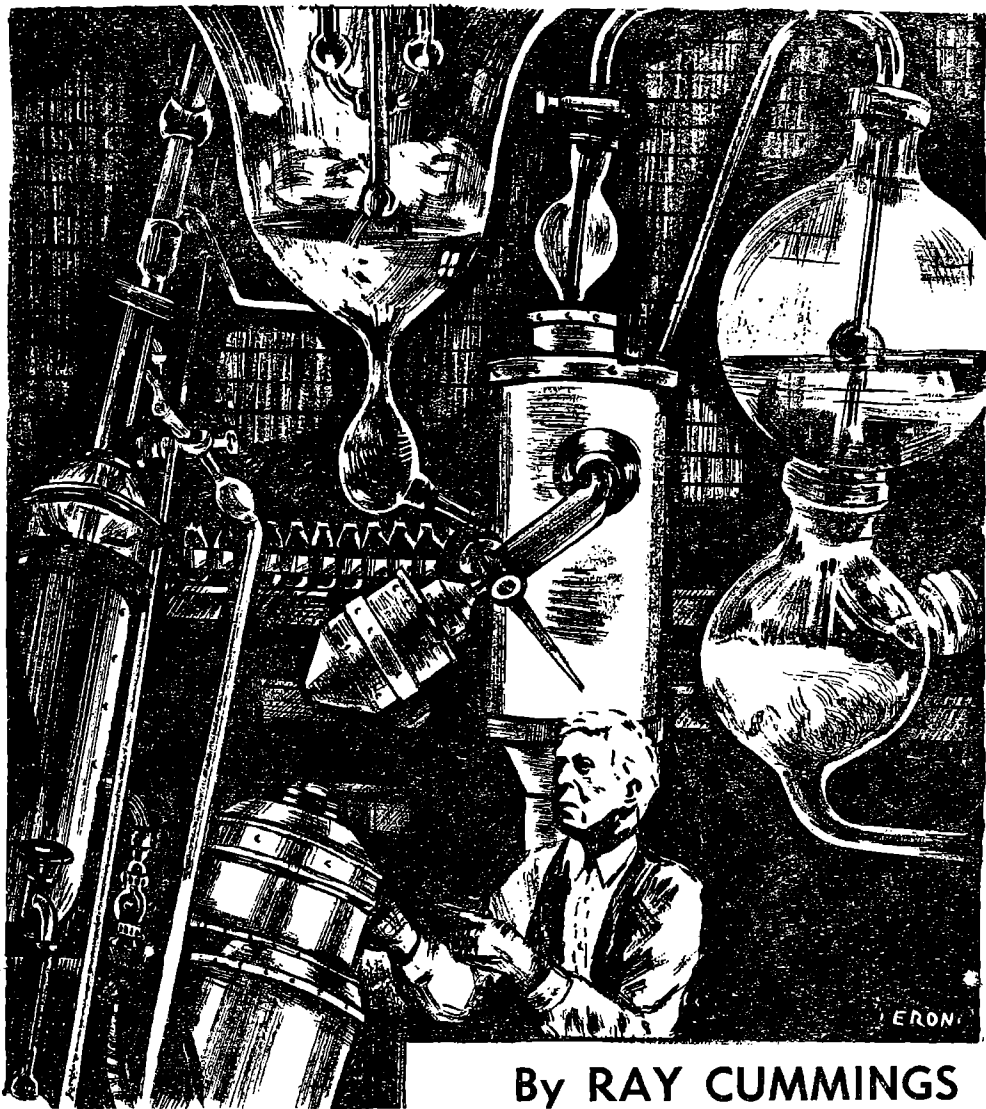
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ARTON'S METAL

Forty years—and Blakinson came back to see Georg Arton, the man whose wife he had stolen. Arton had made a discovery, a new source of wealth. Was it also—a weapon for vengeance?



By RAY CUMMINGS

THE hissing spluttering wires gave off a lurid green glare. It mingled with the opalescent sheen of the fluorescent tubes and drove the flicker-

ing shadows back into the laboratory corners. The acrid smoke rose in swirling wisps which gathered and hung in layers like ghostly shrouds up by the vaulted

ceiling of the big metal laboratory room.

Painted by the glare, the thin bent figure of Georg Arton stood at one of his metal work-tables, with his gloved hands adjusting two naked electrodes. The sparks shed from his metal-woven smock. The lurid glared on his huge goggles of amber glassite. As he moved intently at his tasks, he could have been a huge, crooked pseudo-human insect, with mailed jointed body and goggling lens-eyes—a being from another planet engaged here in something infernal.

These weird thoughts flooded burly James Blakinson as in the doorway arcade of Arton's laboratory he stood peering, holding his breath, watching. Blakinson was no scientist. Things like this were awesome; a bit frightening. What was Arton doing?

To Blakinson's fancy, this was not the experimental workshop of a skilled physicist, but rather the lair of a dabbler in necromancy—a probing at Nature's secrets which should not be probed. A prying into the Unknown; and it seemed to Blakinson that rebellious Nature must be drawing back, snarling at this interloper. An outraged Nature, cowed perhaps for a moment, but waiting its chance to strike in reprisal—to strike and to kill this human meddler who dared trespass upon things forbidden.

Blakinson felt himself shuddering. But still he stared, watching Arton who did not yet know he was being observed. What was this thing which the townspeople said the cracked old scientist had discovered? A thing—so it was said—that would make its possessor fabulously rich. The actual creation of wealth, here in this weird, cloistered metal room? Modern magic. They said that.

And down in the village Blakinson had seen what seemed undeniable proof—the records of the assay office which had analyzed a fragment of metal that Arton had brought to them.

The unnameable metal. No one could say where it had come from, or what it was. Weird treasure. An ounce of it would be worth two decimars. How much of it did Arton have here? Was he a super-modern alchemist, transmuting baser metals into this weird alloy which among other things seemed to be a mixture of gold and platinum and radium? That's what the townspeople were saying.

THE two spluttering electrodes which Arton's gloved hands were holding were in metal clamps now. The clamps were part of an intricate mechanism so that as Arton began twirling a series of small dial-knobs, the spluttering electrodes were moving sidewise and forward, approaching each other in the empty space above the work-table. They had been a foot apart; now they were only six inches.

The goggled Arton was tense and hurried now. Blakinson, a dozen feet away in the shadows of the arcade doorway, held his breath as he watched. The two long rows of fluorescent tubes, linked in series, boiled and bubbled more furiously with a maelstrom of bombarding electrons. Arton was bending forward. His gloved hands, gripping calipers, seemed carefully measuring the location of the two hissing crackling electrodes as they neared each other.

What was this thing of riches which Arton was creating?

A layer of acrid fumes that floated up by the vaulted ceiling, fluttered in a vagrant draft of air, came down and momentarily enveloped the lurking Blakinson so that he coughed involuntarily. At the sudden sound old man Arton turned, ripped off his glassite goggles and peered. And then he gasped,

"You? Why—why *you*, Blakinson?"

The big burly Blakinson started; recovered himself. Then he looped his cape over his arm with a gesture of nonchalance; and gripped his hat and gloves and

cane in one hand—his cane, metal-tipper, with a heavy gargoyle metal knob.

"The door was partly open," he said. "I didn't use the buzzer—you seemed busy—I hated to disturb you."

He tried to smile ingratiatingly. But why should he bother? He saw the old hatred leaping now for Arton's grey eyes. Without the goggles it was the Arton of their boyhood, changed by time to be a shell of the handsome, fierly young fellow whom Blakinson remembered. Like the embers of a fire, shriveled, shrunken down yet still holding a semblance of what it was. The years had not treated Arton too kindly. He looked eighty now, though Blakinson knew he was only sixty-five—only three years older than the powerful Blakinson himself.

"So? You remembered me at once?" Blakinson added awkwardly. "Quite a while—forty years. That was in 1939 we saw each other, wasn't it?"

"In 1939—the year you stole her," Arton said slowly. His withered old voice throbbled to match the hatred of his eyes.

For that moment the two men fronted each other in the center of the lurid laboratory. They were alone here, in the metal building which was Arton's home on a lonely mound a mile from the town. Outside the latticed windows moonlight was straggling through the grove of trees which enveloped the little terraced metal structure.

For just that moment their glances crossed like swords; and an idiotic thrill of fear darted through the burly Blakinson. Idiotic because with one hand he could grip Arton's withered old throat and strangle him . . .

THEN Blakinson flung away his fear and smiled—crafty smile as he remembered why he had come here. "Well," he said, "aren't you going to ask me to sit down? Just happened to be spending a day in Jameston—and they told me

about you. "So I came—an old friend—after forty years—"

Still Arton could only stand, staring with that glowing hatred in his eyes. And Blakinson hooked a little padded metal bench forward with his cane and sat down. But he was very alert. Was this madness gleaming now with the hatred in Arton's eyes? What of it? Arton had discovered something, here with his puttering science. The creation of gold, platinum and radium? . . . No one knew that Blakinson was here.

If only now he could learn this secret, and go away; and the villagers would find old Arton dead, here in his laboratory. An accident, they would say. Something going wrong with an experiment, so that the old man had fallen and cracked his head, dashing out his brains against a corner post of one of these metal chairs.

How easy that would be to contrive! . . .

"In 1939—that was the year you stole her," Arton was repeating slowly. With the emotion of his hatred all the little color had faded from his sunken cheeks and pinched lips so that he was livid, with his breath a panting gasp. Was he ill? He looked it. He looked almost as though he were about to totter and fall.

Blakinson hooked another little bench forward, and Arton collapsed to it, still staring.

"Well, I'm a motor-oiler," Blakinson said with an uneasy smile, "if I stole your wife—how silly. We're men now—not impetuous, idealistic boys. Mary loved me—and I took her."

"Yes—that's right. You took her."

Blakinson laughed. "That was a little startling to you, back in 1939, wasn't it? But it isn't really outlawed by the Social Code now. 1979—and we know more about the laws of life and love now, don't we? The needs and the inherent right of love to take what it wants. I was unceremonious, forty years ago. Today I'd file

Declaration of Love with the Social Manager, Arton—but the thing is the same, whatever you call it—”

“Stop!” Arton cried. “You—you damned blasphemer—”

“And Mary would sign the Declaration—”

“You lie! She wouldn’t. She—she never really loved you. You just tricked her—”

Arton gasped it out. Then on the bench he sank back, panting, breathless; and a groan escaped him as one of his withered hands clutched convulsively at his chest. Blakinson saw that he was suddenly in horrible physical agony but still his eyes showed burning hatred for this man who had stolen his wife.

Then Blakinson jumped to his feet. “You’re ill, Arton. What’s the matter with you?”

God, the old fellow seemed about to gasp his last. If he died, his secret would die with him. A sudden apprehension shot through Blakinson. A chance to get quickly rich was here. Heaven knows, Blakinson needed it. A thousand decimars—he was short fully that much in his accounts at the Federal Citizen-Loan Bank in New York. An embezzler; they’d trap him within a month or two and he’d be outlawed for life in one of the ghastly Polar Prisons of Antarctica.

“What is it, Arton? Let me help you.” He bent over the stricken scientist.

“My heart,” Arton gasped. “Angina—”

“The shock of seeing me. Oh, I’m sorry.”

“My medicine—over there—the taboret—”

Blakinson jumped for it; came back with the small triangular vial and a glass of water.

“These Arton? How many?”

“Two—Oh, hurry—”

ARTON’S face was twisted with the terrible pain now. The opalescent glow from the electronic tubes painted his

contorted features so luridly that he seemed something less than human. His thin white fingers like claws fumbled with the agony in his chest. But still his eyes burned with that smouldering hatred. There was terror mingled with it now.

The solitious Blakinson, hurrying to administer the medicine, fearful that Arton would die before revealing his secret, saw the terror in Arton’s eyes and thought that it was only physical agony and the fear of death. He could not know that Arton feared sudden death only because it would leave unfinished something which for all these years he had wanted to do.

“Two,” Blakinson was saying. “Here they are.”

The little triangular pellets wafted up their aromatic fumes as Blakinson drew them from the vial. Arton gulped them down; then for a long time he lay on the bench, gasping, while Blakinson solicitously held his cold dank hand.

“Better now?”

“Yes—I’ll—be over it presently.”

“I’m sorry, Arton. Shouldn’t have come—giving you a shock like that. And I shouldn’t have spoken that way about things. About poor Mary. Forget it, Arton.”

“Yes,” Arton murmured. “Just—forget it. She—Mary—she died—peacefully?”

“You’re not well enough to talk,” Blakinson remonstrated. “Take it easy now.”

“But I am—well enough.” Arton was struggling erect. Color was coming back into his face; the paroxysm was over.

“Mary died—peacefully?” he insisted.

“Why sure—sure.”

“I heard—that was years ago—I heard, Blakinson, that you weren’t—treating her very well. But you had gone to the Soviet then—I couldn’t find you. Then I heard that she had died—over there—”

"Don't let's talk of it," Blakinson said soothingly. "All that you heard—that was a lie. Mary was always very happy." He gazed around the opalescent-glowing room. The apparatus on the big metal table along the opposite wall was still humming; the electronic tubes were still bubbling with fluorescence.

"You're quite a scientist I hear," Blakinson added. "Different from me—I'm just a money-monger." He expanded his bulky chest. "Done pretty well by myself—piling up the decimars. How have you fared, Arton? They tell me you've struck riches here."

HE HELD his breath for the answer. Queer how Arton's face lighted up. And his eyes sparkled.

"I'm just about to strike it rich now," Arton said. A new vigor had come to his weak, quavering voice. He stood up, swaying.

"Easy," Blakinson said. "Don't overtax your strength."

"I'm all right now. I feel—much better now." His glowing eyes clung to Blakinson's face. "Would you—would you want to see what I'm doing? Shall I explain it to you—how it works?"

Falling into Blakinson's trap. So easy! It was like Arton to be fatuous. He had always been naive, trusting. He had been the last one to realize what was going on between his wife and his friends. Forty years hadn't changed him. He was willing now to show Blakinson his secret.

"If it won't tire you," Blakinson said. "Mighty interesting, of course." He struggled to hold his voice casual. "What have you done, discovered a way to create gold? And radium?"

"And platinum," Arton said. "Those metals—queerly combined—and queerly radioactive. A nameless metal. But I don't exactly create it. No, you won't call it that."

He was shakily walking back to his

work-table, donning his goggles. "Rather, I produce it," he added. "Or, let's say, I find it and make it exist. I secured one little piece—that was about a month ago, but I've been disappointed ever since. All I've got is what seems to be an even baser metal than lead. And sometimes I just get nothing. There seems to be a lot of empty space around here, mingled with the metal."

Just a demented old fellow. Disappointment struck at Blakinson. Was Arton, with premature senility and the angina that starved his heart of its blood—was he just addle-witted now? Forty years of brooding because he had lost his wife, so that now he was having hallucinations of his own scientific genius?

But somehow, it didn't seem just that. "Why—that's too bad," Blakinson stammered. "Needs perseverance, you mean? Trial and error, until you get what you're after."

"Exactly so." Behind the huge glassite goggles, Arton's eyes were masked. But his lips were smiling. "That's it, Blakinson. You always get—what you're after if you never give up. No matter how long it takes, your chance will come."

"That's right," Blakinson agreed.

"And when your chance comes," Arton said, "you seize it. Because maybe it only comes just once . . . Here, put on a pair of goggles. The light—it's worse than actinic—might damage the retina. We'll try again—see what we can get this time."

Blakinson could feel his heart pounding as he donned the goggles, backed away and stood watching.

"I'll finish the trial I was starting when you came," Arton added.

"I hope we get something good."

"So do I. You never can tell. You see, it seems to be a fragment of tiny metal bricks—a queer nameless metal that doesn't run uniform. It seems to be only streaked—spotted, you might say—with metals of value to us. And there is so

much space where you get nothing . . . Watch now. It only takes a moment."

BREATHLESSLY Blakinson stared. The calipered mechanisms that held the naked ends of the electrodes were very slowly approaching each other again. At the height of a few inches above the table, they were drawing together. Then from above, a white horizontal wire, fine as a grey human hair, was lowering. A mechanism held it so that it was stretched nearly the length of the big table—a synchronized mechanism bringing the horizontal wire down to contact the two moving electrodes when they were about an inch apart.

Blakinson saw Arton take a swift backward step, with a hand and arm up to shield his face. The tiny stretched white wire contacted the electrodes. There was a puff of blue-white glare; a second in which Blakinson heard a queer indescribable puff of sound—a strangely gruesome little sound as though something were struggling.

The inch-long gap between the electrodes as the wire connected them flashed with the blue-white light. But through his goggles Blakinson saw a tiny ghost-like thing hovering in the glare—a blob that hung for a split-second and then sank, quivering a little until in another split-second it was falling. Then it hit the metal table with a thump.

The puff of white glare was gone. The smoking electrodes drew rapidly apart. The white wire had burned and broken. On the table a glowing bit of metal the size of a man's fist was lying, with a wisp of acrid smoke rising from it.

Arton ripped off his goggles. His hands were trembling.

"You see how it works, Blakinson? You see how much bigger that metal chunk is than the space between my electrodes? That's on expansion apparently; with the transmutation there comes an

expansion—a doubling of bulk, you might say. It's weird—fascinatingly weird."

"What did we get?" Barkinson murmured. "What did you make that chunk of metal out of? I didn't see that you used anything. It just looked like empty space between those electrodes."

"Eh? Oh yes, quite so."

Was Arton demented? He was ignoring the smoking chunk of metal. With swift shaky steps he was rolling the two little chasses that held the electrodes to opposite corners of the room.

"What's that for?" Blakinson demanded. "What is that chunk of metal you produced? Valuable?"

"It's too hot to examine yet," Arton said. "We'll see in a moment. Move aside—watch your head."

Blakinson stepped aside to avoid the thin white wire which Arton had now strung from one corner of the room to the other. . . . The chunk of metal on the table seemed to have green-gold ore in it. Was it radioactive also? Worth a fortune maybe.

Barkinson gestured. "What do you figure that's worth?"

"Oh, a decimar maybe. We'll estimate that when it cools off."

TEN thousand gold-standard dollars!

And Arton probably had a lot more like that around here. Why wait? Why not strangle the old buzzard now—smash his head against one of these chairs . . . Into Blakinson's triumphant, murderous thoughts Arton's excited voice pounded:

"Watch closely now. We'll create, as you might say, a lot of it at once. There ought to be a million decimars worth of it lying around here. Let's bring it out and have a look at it. What you say?"

With a thrill of cupidity, Blakinson stared. Arton was over in the corner with his hand on a switch. His goggles were off now; his eyes were gleaming, his face

white, contorted. His voice was shrill with triumph.

"As I said, Blakinson, when the chance comes it must be seized—because it may never come again. Oh, I've waited so long for this—"

It may have been that Blakinson was aware of a stabbing thrill of terror as he saw the white wire that was stretched diagonally across the big room come down and contact the electrodes in the room's opposite corners; and the trembling Arton pulling the switch to its fullest intensity. In the gigantic blue-white glare perhaps Blakinson was aware of Arton's white face, ravaged, by his incurable illness—aware of his sunken eyes burning with hatred, triumphant with a forty-year desire now at last to be satisfied.

The vast blue-white glare was mingled with the great magnification of a gruesome roaring struggle . . . Nature outraged, struggling to uphold its fundamental law that no two material bodies may occupy the same space at the same time . . . Nature struggling against this monstrous assault and inevitably winning, so that the reeking, fume-laden room was monstrously filled with alien substance that burst and shattered the walls and brought the little metal house clattering down into a trumbled, smoking mass of ruins . . .

"BUT what in God's name happened?" demanded one of the young newscasters who had just arrived.

The Shadow Squad Police lines encircled the little tree-clad mound where Arton's home had stood. But there was nothing here save a weird pile of hot metal ruins, from which smoke still drifted.

The young newscaster crowded into a group of men who were watching the workers prowling among the debris.

"Did they find his body yet?" someone asked.

"Maybe never will," a big blond fellow retorted. He was a young chemist from the nearby town. He looked awed. "My God, I took a close look at those ruins a while ago. There's metal all mingled with other metal."

Another man said: "I heard somebody say there was a ton of metallic stuff here which he must have hidden in his house. A nameless metal—looks like nothing on Earth—"

"Maybe a meteorite fell and squashed the place," somebody else suggested. "A metal that's never been on earth before? You suppose it's valuable stuff?"

"I saw a little piece of it," the young chemist said. "Gold and platinum—and radioactive, I think. Valuable? By the Gods of the Starways, if there's a ton of it here, it's worth a million decimars."

The group stood awed. "But how in the devil could that old fellow Arton have a treasure like that hidden in his house?"

"Mingled with his house," the young chemist said. "My God, I saw a steel-metal floor-beam—the floor of his laboratory, it looked like—with this weird stuff looking as if it was bursting out of the beam."

"Don't be loose-witted," a newscaster said. "A meteorite fell, only it's queer nobody saw it falling. Or there was an explosion—only queer nobody heard any."

"Two material bodies," the young chemist still was murmuring with awe, "trying to occupy the same space at the same time—"

Ironic, that no one would ever know how close he was to the truth! The nameless metal. It assayed nearly a million decimars; and after a lengthy litigation between the Municipal, the State and the Federal Governments, most of it was awarded to the Anglo-Saxon Foundation for the Advancement of Science. Which is perhaps what old Arton would have wished.