

CLASSICS TO GO

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S. M. TENNESHAW



Amazing Stories

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Last Call For Doomsday!

S. M. Tenneshaw

A deep shudder shook Jay Wales. He wished now he hadn't had to come back here to Earth this last time. He wanted to remember the old world of man as it had been, not as it was now in its dying hour.

"It seems impossible that it will really happen," said Hollenberg, the docket captain.

He wasn't looking at Earth. He was looking beyond it at the glittering stars.

Wales looked too. He knew where to look. He saw the faint little spark of light far across the Solar System.

A spark, a pinpoint, an insignificant ray upon the optic nerves—that was all it was.

That—and the hand of God reaching athwart the universe.

"It'll happen," said Wales, without turning. "September 27th, 1997. Four months from now. It'll happen."

The rocket-ship was suddenly convulsed through all its vast fabric by the racking roar of brake-jets letting go. Both men exhaled and lay back in their recoil-chairs. The thundering and quivering soon ceased.

"People," said Hollenberg, then, "are wondering if it really will. Happen, I mean."

For the first time, Wales looked at him sharply. "People where?"

Hollenberg nodded toward the window. "On Earth. Every run we make, we hear it. They say—"

And here it was again, Wales thought, the rumors, the whispers, that had been coming out to Mars, stronger and more insistent each week.

There in the crowded new prefab cities on Mars, where hundreds of millions of Earth-folk were already settling into their new life, with millions more supposed to arrive each month, the rumors were always the same.

"Something's wrong, back on Earth. The Evacuation isn't going right. The ships aren't on schedule—"

Wales hadn't worried much about it, at first. He had his own job. Fitting the arriving millions into a crowded new planet, a new, hard way of life, was work enough. He was fourth in command at Resettlement Bureau, and that meant a job that never ended.

Even when the Secretary called him in to the new UN capital on Mars, he'd only expected a beef about resettlement progress. He hadn't expected what he got.

The Secretary, an ordinarily quiet, relaxed man, had been worn thin and gray and nervous by a load bigger than any man had ever carried before. He had wasted no time at all on amenities when Wales was shown in.

"You knew Kendrick personally?"

There was no need to use first names. Since five years before, there was only one Kendrick in the world who mattered.

"I knew him," Wales had said. "I went to school with both Lee and Martha Kendrick—his sister."

"Where is he?"

Wales had stared. "Back on Earth, at Westpenn Observatory. He said he'd be along soon."

The Secretary said, "He's not at the Observatory. He hasn't come to Mars yet, either. He's disappeared."

"But, why—"

"I don't care *why*, Wales. I want to know *where*. Kendrick's got to be found. His disappearance is affecting the Evacuation. That's the report I get from a dozen different men back on Earth. I message them, 'Why are the rocket-schedules falling behind?' I tell them, 'It's Doomsday Minus 122, and Evacuation must go faster.' I get the answer back, 'Kendrick's disappearance responsible—are making every effort to find him'."

After a silence the Secretary had added, "You go back to Earth, Wales. You find Kendrick. You find out what's slowing down Evacuation. We've *got* to speed up, man! There's over twelve million people still left on Earth."

And here he was, Wales thought, in a rocket-ship speeding back to Earth on one of the endless runs of the Marslift, and he still didn't know why Evacuation had slowed, or what Lee Kendrick's disappearance had to do with it, and he'd have precious little time to find out.

They were sweeping in in a landing-pattern now, and the turquoise had become a big blue balloon fleeced with white clouds. And Hollenberg was far too busy with his landing to talk now. The rocket-captain seemed, indeed, relieved not to be questioned.

The rush inward, the roar of air outside the hull, the brake-blasts banging like the triphammers of giants, the shadowed night side of the old planet swinging up to meet them....

When he stepped out onto the spaceport tarmac, Wales breathed deep of the cool night air. Earth air. There was none

like it, for men. No wonder that they missed its tang, out there on Mars. No wonder old women in the crowded new cities out there still cried when they talked of Earth.

He braced back his shoulders, buttoned the tunic of his UN uniform. He wasn't here to let emotion run away with him. He had a job. He got onto one of the moving beltways and went across the great spaceport, toward the high, gleaming cluster of lights that marked the port headquarters.

Far away across the dark plain loomed the massive black bulks of rocket-ships. Dozens of them, hundreds of them. And more were coming in, on rigid landing-schedule. The sky above, again and again, broke with thunder and the great ships came riding their brake-jets of flame downward.

Wales knew, to the last figure, how many times in the last years ships had risen from this spaceport, and how many times, having each one carried thousands of people to Mars, they had returned. Tens of millions had gone out from here. And New Jersey Spaceport was only one of the many spaceports serving the Evacuation. The mind reeled at the job that had been done, the vast number who had been taken to that other world.

And it was still going on. Under colored lights, Wales saw the long queue of men, women, children moving toward one of the towering ships nearby. Signals flashed. Loudspeakers bawled metallically.

"—to Ship 778! All assigned to Ship 778 this way! Have your evacuation-papers ready!"

Wales went by these people, not looking at their faces, not wanting to see their faces.

The noise and crowded confusion got worse as he neared the Administration Building. Near it the buses were unloading, the endless cargoes of people, people—always people, always those pale faces.

An armed guard outside Administration's entrance looked at Wales' uniform and then at his credentials, and passed him through.

"Port Coordinator's office straight ahead," he said.

The interior of the building was a confusion of uniformed men, and women, of clicking tabulating machines, of ringing phones.

Wales thought that here you felt the real pulse of the Marslift. A pulse that had quickened now—like the pulse of a dying man.

Bourreau, the Port Coordinator, was a stocky, bald sweating man, who had thrown off his uniform jacket and was drinking coffee at his desk when Wales came in.

"Sit down," he said. "Heard you were coming. Heard the Secretary was sending you to burn our tails."

"Nothing like that," said Wales. "He just wants to know, why the devil are Evacuation schedules falling behind?"

Bourreau drained his cup, set it down, and wiped his mouth. "Listen," he said, "you don't want to talk to me."

"I don't?"

"No, I'm the Port Coordinator, that's all. I've passed millions of people through here. Evacuation Authority sends them in here, from the marshalling point over in New York. Good people, not-so-good people, and people that aren't worth saving. But to me, they're all just units. They reach here, I shoot them out. That's all. The man you want to talk to is John Fairlie."

"The regional Evacuation Marshal?"

"Yes. Talk to him, over in New York. I've got a car and driver ready for you."

Wales stood up. It was obvious that Bourreau had been all ready for him, and was not going to take a rap for anybody. It was equally obvious that he'd learn nothing about Kendrick's disappearance from this man.

"All right," he said. "I'll see Fairlie first."

The driver of the car, a UN private, turned off on a side road almost as soon as they left the spaceport.

"No use bucking all the buses and trucks on the evacuation thruways," he said. "We use the old roads when we want to hurry. No traffic on *them* now."

The old roads. The ribbons of concrete and asphalt that once had carried thousands of cars, day and night. Now they were dark and empty.

The car went through a village. It too was dark and empty. They swung on through countryside, without a light in it. And then there was a bigger village, and its dark windows stared at them like blind eyes.

"All evacuated," said the driver. "Every village, town, farm, between here and New York was closed out two-three years ago."

Wales, sitting hunched by the open window, watching the road unreel, saw an old farmhouse on the curve ahead. The headlights caught it, and he saw that all its window-shutters were closed. Someone, some family, had left that house forever and had carefully shuttered its windows—against doomsday.

The poplars and willows and elms went by, and now and again there was a drifting fragrance of flowers, of blossoming orchids. Old apple-trees, innocently ignorant of world's end, were preparing to fruit once more.

Wales felt a sharp, poignant emotion. He asked himself, as a world had been asking for five years, *Why did it have to be?*

There was only one answer. Far out in the dark lonesomeness of the solar system, far beyond man's new Martian colonies, the thousands of asteroids that swung in incredibly intricate and eccentric orbits—they were the answer. They had been shuttles, weaving fate's web.

Kendrick had been the first to see it, to note the one big asteroid whose next passage near Jupiter would make its eccentricity of orbit *too* great. With camera and telescope Kendrick had watched, and with the great electronic calculators he had plotted that orbit years ahead, and....

Wales had often wondered what Lee Kendrick had felt like when the first knowledge came to him, when the first mathematical formulae of doom came out on the calculator printing-tape. Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin, spelled out in an equation. An electronic computer, passionately prophesying the end of man's world....

"In five years, the eccentricity of the asteroid Nereus will bring it finally across Earth's orbit at a point where it will collide with Earth. This collision will make our planet uninhabitable."

He well remembered the first stupefaction with which the world had received the announcement, after Kendrick's calculations had been proved beyond all doubt.

"No force available to us can destroy or swerve an asteroid so big. But in five years, we should be able to evacuate all Earth's people to Mars."

Kendrick, Wales thought now, had been able to give Earth the years of advance warning that meant escape, the years in which the tens of thousands of great rocket-ships could be built and the Marslift get under way. If mankind survived, it would be due to Kendrick's warning. Why should he vanish now?

Wales suddenly became conscious that his driver was putting on the brakes. They were in the outskirts of Morristown.

The streets here were *not* all dark and dead. He saw the glimmer of flashlights, the movement of dark figures, and heard calling voices.

"I thought you said these cities were all closed out?" Wales said.

The driver nodded. "Yeah. But there's still people around some of them. Looters." He stopped. "We'd better detour around here."

"Looters?" Wales was astounded. "You mean, you don't stop them?"

"Listen," said the driver. "What difference does it make what they take, when the place is closed out?"

Wales had forgotten. What difference did it make, indeed? The nearly-deserted Earth was any man's property now, when inevitable catastrophe was rushing toward it.

A thought struck him. These folk couldn't expect to take loot with them when they were evacuated. So they didn't plan to *be* evacuated.

He said, "Wait here. I'm going to have a look at them."

"I wouldn't," said the driver hastily. "These people—"

"Just wait," said Wales crisply.

He walked away from the car, toward the flashlights and the shadows and the shouting voices.

The voices had a raw edge of excitement in them, and a few were thick with alcohol. They were mixed men and women, and a few yelping youngsters.