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Sunspot Purge

Clifford D. Simak

I was sitting around, waiting for the boy to bring up the first batch of papers from the pressroom. I had my feet up on the desk, my hat pulled down over my eyes, feeling pretty sick.

I couldn't get the picture of the fellow hitting the sidewalk out of my mind. Twenty storeys is a long way to jump. When he'd hit he'd just sort of spattered and it was very messy.

The fool had cavorted and pranced around up on that ledge since early morning, four long hours, before he took the dive.

Herb Harding and Al Jarvey and a couple of other Globe photographers had gone out with me, and I listened to them figure out the way they'd co-operate on the shots. If the bird jumped, they knew they'd each have just time enough to expose one plate. So they got their schedules worked out beforehand.

Al would take the first shot with the telescopic lens as he made the jump. Joe would catch him halfway down. Harry would snap him just before he hit, and Herb would get the moment of impact on the sidewalk.

It gave me the creeps, listening to them.

But anyhow, it worked and the Globe had a swell sequence panel of the jump to go with my story.

We knew the Standard, even if it got that sidewalk shot, wouldn't use it, for the Standard claimed to be a family newspaper and made a lot of being a sheet fit for anyone to read.

But the Globe would print anything - and did. We gave it to 'em red-hot and without any fancy dressing.

'The guy was nuts,' said Herb, who had come over and sat down beside me.

'The whole damn world is nuts,' I told him. 'This is the sixth bird that's hopped off a high building in the last month.'

I wish they'd put me down at the obit desk, or over on the markets, or something. I'm all fed up on gore.'

'It goes like that,' said Herb. 'For a long time there ain't a thing worth shooting. Then all hell breaks loose.'

Herb was right. News runs that way - in streaks. Crime waves and traffic-accident waves and suicide waves. But this was something different. It wasn't just screwballs jumping off high

places. It was a lot of other things.

There was the guy who had massacred his family and then turned the gun on himself. There was the chap who'd butchered his bride on their honeymoon. And the fellow who had poured gasoline over himself and struck a match.

All such damn senseless things.

No newsman in his right mind objects to a little violence, for that's what news is made of. But things were getting pretty thick; just a bit revolting and horrifying. Enough to sicken even a hard-working legman who isn't supposed to have any feelings over things like that.

Just then the boy came up with the papers, and, if I say so myself, that story of mine read like a honey. It should have. I had been thinking it up and composing it while I watched the bird teetering around up on that ledge.

The pictures were good, too. Great street-sale stuff. I could almost see old J.R. rubbing his hands together and licking his lips and patting himself on the back for the kind of a sheet we had.

Billy Larson, the science editor, strolled over to my desk and draped himself over it. Billy was a funny guy. He wore big, horn-rimmed spectacles, and he wiggled his ears when he got excited, but he knew a lot of science. He could take a dry-as-dust scientific paper and pep it up until it made good reading.

'I got an idea,' he announced.

'So have I,' I answered. 'I'm going down to the Dutchman's and take me on a beer. Maybe two or three.'

'I hope,' piped Herb. 'that it ain't something else about old Doc Ackerman and his time machine.'

'Nope,' said Billy, 'it's something else. Doc's time machine isn't so hot any more. People got tired of reading about it. I guess the old boy has plenty on the ball, but what of it? Who will ever use the thing? Everyone is scared of it.'

'What's it this time?' I asked.

'Sunspots,' he said.

I tried to brush him off, because I wanted that beer so bad I could almost taste it, but Billy had an idea, and he wasn't going to let me get away before he told me all about it.

'It's pretty well recognized,' he told me, 'that sunspots do affect human lives. Lots of sunspots and we have good times. Stocks and bonds are up, prices are high. Trade is good. But likewise, we have an increased nervous tension. We have violence. People get excited.'

'Hell starts to pop,' said Herb.

'That's exactly it,' agreed Billy. 'Tchijevsky, the Russian scientist, pointed it out thirty years ago. I believe he's the one that noted increased activity on battle fronts during the first World War occurring simultaneously with the appearance of large spots on the Sun. Back in 1937, the sit-down strikes were ushered in by one of the most rapid rises in the sunspot curve in twenty years.'

I couldn't get excited. But Billy was all worked up about it. That's the way he is - enthusiastic about his work.

'People have their ups and downs,' he said, a fanatic light creeping into his eyes, the way it does when he's on the trail of some idea to make Globe readers gasp.

'Not only people, but peoples - nations, cultures, civilizations. Go back through history and you can point out a parallelism in the cycles of sunspots and significant events. Take 1937, for example, the year they had the sit-down strikes. In July of that year the sunspot cycle hits its maximum with a Wolfer index of 137.

'Scientists are pretty sure periods of excitement are explained by acute changes in the nervous and psychic characters of humanity which take place at sunspot maxima, but they aren't sure of the reasons for those changes.'

'Ultraviolet light,' I yawned, remembering something I had read in a magazine about it.

Billy wiggled his ears and went on: 'Most likely ultraviolet has a lot to do with it. The spots themselves aren't strong emission centers for ultraviolet. But it may be the very changes in the Sun's atmosphere which produce the spots also result in the production of more ultraviolet.

'Most of the ultraviolet reaching Earth's atmosphere is used up converting oxygen into ozone, but changes of as much as twenty percent in its intensity are possible at the surface.

'And ultraviolet produces definite reaction in human glands, largely in the endocrine glands.'

'I don't believe a damn word of it,' Herb declared flatly, but there was no stopping Billy.

He clinched his argument: 'Let's say, then, that changes in sunshine, such as occur during sunspot periods, affect the physiological character and mental outlook of all the people on Earth. In other words, human behavior corresponds to sunspot cycles.

'Compare Dow Jones averages with sunspots and you will find they show a marked sympathy with the cycles - the market rising with sunspot activity. Sunspots were riding high in 1928 and 1929. In the autumn of 1929 there was an abrupt break in sunspot activity and the market crashed. It hit bedrock in 1932 and 1933, and so did the sunspots. Wall Street follows the sunspot cycle.'

'Keep those old sunspots rolling,' I jeered at him, 'and we'll have everlasting prosperity. We'll simply wallow in wealth.'

'Sure,' said Herb, 'and the damn fools will keep jumping off the buildings.'

'But what would happen if we reversed things - made a law against sunspots?' I asked.

'Why, then,' said Billy, solemn as an owl, 'we'd have terrible depressions.'

I got up and walked away from him. I had got to thinking about what I had seen on the sidewalk after the fellow jumped, and I needed that beer.

Jake, one of the copy boys, yelled at me just as I was going out the door.

'J.R. wants to see you, Mike.'

So I turned around and walked toward the door behind which J.R. sat rubbing his hands and figuring out some new stunts to shock the public into buying the Globe.

'Mike,' said J.R. when I stepped into his office, 'I want to congratulate you on the splendid job you did this morning. Mighty fine story, my boy, mighty fine.'

'Thanks, J.R.,' I said, knowing the old rascal didn't mean a word of it.

Then J.R. got down to business.

'Mike,' he said, 'I suppose you've been reading this stuff about Dr. Ackerman's time machine.'

'Yeah,' I told him, 'but if you think you're going to send me out to interview that old publicity grabber, you're all wrong. I saw a guy spatter himself all over Fifth Street this morning, and I been listening to Billy Larson telling about sunspots, and I can't stand much more.'

Not in one day, anyhow.'

Then J.R. dropped the bombshell on me.

'The Globe,' he announced, 'has bought a time machine.'

That took me clear off my feet.

The Globe, in my time, had done a lot of wacky things, but this was the worst.

'What for?' I asked weakly, and J.R. looked shocked; but he recovered in a minute and leaned across the desk.

'Just consider, Mike. Think of the opportunities a time machine offers a newspaper. The other papers can tell them what has happened and what is happening, but, by Godfrey, they'll have to read the Globe to know what is going to happen.'

'I have a slogan for you,' I said. "Read the News Before It Happens."

He didn't know if I was joking or was serious and waited for a minute before going on.

'A war breaks out,' he said. 'The other papers can tell what is happening at the moment. We can do better than that. We can tell them what will happen. Who will win and lose. What battles will be fought. How long the war will last-'

'But, J.R.,' I yelled at him, 'you can't do that! Don't you see what a hell of a mess you'll make of things. If one side knew it was going to lose-'

'It doesn't apply merely to wars,' said J.R. 'There's sports. Football games. Everybody is nuts right now to know if Minnesota is going to lick Wisconsin. We jump into our time machine, travel ahead to next Saturday. Day before the game we print the story, with pictures and everything.'

He rubbed his hands and purred.

'I'll have old Johnson down at the Standard eating out of my hand,' he gloated. 'I'll make him wish he never saw a newspaper. I'll take the wind out of his sails. I'll send my reporters out a day ahead-'

'You'll have every bookie on your neck,' I shouted. 'Don't you know there's millions of dollars bet every Saturday on football games? Don't you see what you'd do?

You'd put every jackpot, every betting window out of business. Tracks would close down. Nobody would spend a dime to see a game they could read about ahead of time. You'd put organized baseball and college football, boxing, everything else out of business. What would be the use of staging a prize fight if the public knew in advance who was going to win?'

But J.R. just chortled gleefully and rubbed his hands.

'We'll publish stock-market quotations for the coming month on the first of every month,' he planned. 'Those papers will sell for a hundred bucks apiece.'

Seeing him sitting there gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. For I knew that in his hands rested a terrible power, a power that he was blind to or too stubborn to respect.

The power to rob every human being on Earth of every bit of happiness. For if a man could look ahead and see some of the things that no doubt were going to happen, how could he be happy?

Power to hurl the whole world into chaos. Power to make and break any man, or thing, or institution that stood before him.

I tried another angle.

'But how do you know the machine will work?'

'I have ample proof,' said J.R. 'The other papers ridiculed Dr. Ackerman, while we presented his announcement at face value. That is why he is giving us an exclusive franchise to the purchase and use of his invention. It's costing us plenty of money - a barrel of money - but we're going to make two barrels of money out of it.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'O.K.,' I said. 'Go ahead. I don't see why the hell you called me in.'

'Because,' beamed J.R., 'you're going to make the first trip in the time machine!'

'What!' I yelled.

J.R. nodded. 'You and a photographer. Herb Harding. I called you in first. You leave tomorrow morning. Five hundred years into the future for a starter. Get pictures. Come back and write your story. We'll spring it in the Sunday paper. Whole front-page layout. What does the city look like five hundred years from now? What changes have been made? Who's mayor? What are the women wearing in the fall of 2450?'

He grinned at me.

'And you might say, too, that the Standard no longer is published. Whether it's the truth or not, you know. Old Johnson will go hog wild when he reads that in your story.'

I could have refused, of course, but if I had, he would have sent somebody else and tied the can on me. Even in 1950, despite a return to prosperity that beggared the flushest peak of 1929, good jobs in the newspaper field were not so easy to pick up.

So I said I'd go, and half an hour later I found myself getting just a bit excited about being one of the first men to travel into time. For I wouldn't be the very first. Doc Ackerman had traveled ahead a few years in his own machine, often enough and far enough to prove the thing would work.

But the prospect of it gave me a headache when I tried to reason it out. The whole thing sounded wacky to me. Not so much the idea that one could really travel in time, for I had no doubt one could. J.R. wasn't anybody's fool. Before he sunk his money in that time machine he would have demanded ironclad, gilt-edged proof that it would operate successfully.

But the thing that bothered me was the complications that might arise. The more I thought of it, the sicker and more confused I got.

Why, with a time machine a reporter could travel ahead and report a man's death, get pictures of his funeral. Those pictures could be taken back in time and published years before his death. That man, when he read the paper, would know the exact hour that he would die, would see his own face framed within the casket.

A boy of ten might know that some day he would be elected president of the United States simply by reading the Globe. The present president, angling for a third term, could read his own political fate if the Globe chose to print it.

A man might read that the next day he would meet death in a traffic accident. And if that man knew he was going to die, he would take steps to guard against it. But could he guard against it? Could he change his own future? Or was the future fast in a rigid mold? If the future said something was going to happen, was it absolutely necessary that it must happen?

The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. But somehow I couldn't help but think of it. And the more I thought about it, the worse my head hurt.

So I went down to the Dutchman's.

Louie was back of the bar, and when he handed me my first glass of beer, I said to him: 'It's

a hell of a world, Louie.'

And Louie said tome: 'It sure as hell is, Mike.'

I drank a lot of beer, but I didn't get drunk. I stayed cold sober. And that made me sore, because I figured that by rights I should take on a load. And all the time my head swam with questions and complicated puzzles.

I would have tried something stronger than beer, but I knew if I mixed drinks I'd get sick, so finally I gave up.

Louie asked me if there was something wrong, and I said no, there wasn't, but before I left I shook hands with Louie and said good-by. If I had been drunk, Louie wouldn't have thought a thing of it, but I could see he was surprised I acted that way when he knew I was sober as the daylight.

Just as I was going out the door I met Jimmy Langer coming in. Jimmy worked for the Standard and was a good newspaperman, but mean and full of low-down tricks. We were friends, of course, and had worked on lots of stories together, but we always watched one another pretty close. There was never any telling what Jimmy might be up to.

'Hi, Jimmy,' I said.

And Jimmy did a funny thing. He didn't say a word. He just looked right at me and laughed into my face.

It took me so by surprise I didn't do anything until he was inside the Dutchman's, and then I walked down the street. But at the corner I stopped, wondering if I hadn't better go back and punch Jimmy's nose. I hadn't liked the way he laughed at me.

The time-machine device was installed in a plane because, Doc Ackerman told us, it wouldn't be wise to try to do much traveling at ground level. A fellow might travel forward a hundred years or so and find himself smack in the middle of a building. Or the ground might rise or sink and the time machine would be buried or left hanging in the air. The only safe way to travel in time, Doc warned us, was to do it in a plane.

The plane was squatting in a pasture a short distance from Doc's Laboratories, situated at the edge of the city, and a tough-looking thug carrying a rifle was standing guard over it. The plane had been guarded night and day. It was just too valuable a thing to let anyone get near it.

Doc explained the operation of the time machine to me.

'It's simple,' he said. 'Simple as falling off a log.'

And what he said was true. All you had to do was set the indicator forward the number of years you wished to travel. When you pressed the activator stud you went into the time spin, or whatever it was that happened to you, and you stayed in it until you reached the proper time. Then the mechanism acted automatically, your time speed was slowed down, and there you were. You just reversed the process to go backward.

Simple. Simple, so Doc said, as falling off a log. But I knew that behind all that simplicity was some of the most wonderful science the world had ever known - science and brains and long years of grueling work and terrible disappointment.

'It will be like plunging into night.' Doc told me. 'You will be traveling in time as a single dimension. There will be no heat, no air, no gravitation, absolutely nothing outside your plane. But the plane is insulated to keep in the heat. In case you do get cold, just snap on those heaters. Air will be supplied if you need it, by the oxygen tanks. But on a short trip like five hundred years you probably won't need either the heaters or the oxygen. Just a few minutes and you'll be there.'

J.R. had been sore at me because I had been late. Sore, too, because Herb had one of the most beautiful hangovers I have ever laid eyes on. But he'd forgotten all about that now. He was hopping up and down in his excitement.

'Just wait,' he chortled. 'Just wait until Johnson sees this down at the Standard. He'll probably have a stroke. Serve him right, the stubborn old buzzard.'

The guard, standing just outside the door of the ship, was shuffling his feet. For some reason the fellow seemed nervous.

Doc croaked at him. 'What's the matter with you, Benson?'

The guy stammered and shifted his rifle from one hand to another. He tried to speak, but the words just dried up in his mouth. Then J.R. started some more of his gloating and we forgot about the guard.

Herb had his cameras stowed away and everything was ready. J.R. stuck out his fist and shook hands with me and Herb, and the old rascal was pretty close to tears.

Doc and J.R. got out of the ship, and I followed them to the door. Before I closed and sealed it I took one last look at the city skyline. There it shimmered, in all its glory, through the blue haze of an autumn day. Familiar towers, and to the north the smudge of smoke that hung over the industrial district.

I waved my hand at the towers and said to them: 'So long, big boys. I'll be seeing you five hundred years from now.'

The skyline looked different up there in the future. I had expected it to look different because in five hundred years some buildings would be torn down and new ones would go up. New architectural ideas, new construction principles over the course of five centuries will change any city skyline.

But it was different in another way than that.

I had expected to see a vaster and a greater and more perfect city down below us when we rolled out of our time spin, and it was vaster and greater, but there was something wrong.

It had a dusty and neglected look.

It had grown in those five hundred years, there was no doubt of that. It had grown in all directions, and must have been at least three times as big as the city Herb and I had just left behind.

Herb leaned forward in his seat.

'Is that really the old burg down there?' he asked. 'Or is it just my hangover?'

'It's the same old place,' I assured him. Then I asked him. 'Where did you pick up that beauty you've got?'

'I was out with some of the boys,' he told me. 'Al and Harry. We met up with some of the Standard boys and had a few drinks with them later in the evening.'

There were no planes in the sky and I had expected that in 2450 the air would fairly swarm with them. They had been getting pretty thick even back in 1950. And now I saw the streets were free of traffic, too.

We cruised around for half an hour, and during that time the truth was driven home to us. A truth that was plenty hard to take.

That city below us was a dead city! There was no sign of life. Not a single automobile on the street, not a person on the sidewalks.

Herb and I looked at one another, and disbelief must have been written in letters three feet high upon our faces.

'Herb,' I said, 'we gotta find out what this is all about.'

Herb's Adam's apple jiggled up and down his neck.

'Hell,' he said. 'I was figuring on dropping into the Dutchman's and getting me a pick-up.'

It took almost an hour to find anything that looked like an airport, but finally I found one that looked safe enough. It was overgrown with weeds, but the place where the concrete runways had been was still fairly smooth, although the concrete had been broken here and there, and grass and weeds were growing through the cracks.

I took her down as easy as I could, but even at that we hit a place where a slab of concrete had been heaved and just missed a crack-up.

The old fellow with the rifle could have stepped from the pages of a history of early pioneer days except that once in a while the pioneers probably got a haircut.

He came out of the bushes about a mile from the airport, and his rifle hung cradled in his arm. There was something about him that told me he wasn't one to fool with.

'Howdy, strangers,' he said in a voice that had a whiny twang.

'By Heaven,' said Herb, 'it's Daniel Boone himself.'

'You jay birds must be a right smart step from home,' said the old guy, and he didn't sound as if he'd trust us very far.

'Not so far,' I said. 'We used to live here a long time ago.'

'Danged if I recognize you.' He pushed back his old black felt hat and scratched his head. 'And I thought I knew everybody that ever lived around here. You wouldn't be Jake Smith's boys, would you?'

'Doesn't look like many people are living here any more,' said Herb.

'Matter of fact, there ain't,' said Daniel Boone. 'The old woman was just telling me the other day we'd have to move so we'd be nearer neighbors. It gets mighty lonesome for her. Nearest folks is about ten miles up thataway.'

He gestured to the north, where the skyline of the city loomed like a distant mountain range, with gleaming marble ramparts and spires of mocking stone.

'Look here,' I asked him. 'Do you mean to say your nearest neighbor is ten miles away?'

'Sure,' he told me. 'The Smiths lived over a couple of miles to the west, but they moved out this spring. Went down to the south. Claimed the hunting was better there.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Maybe hunting is all right. I do a lot of it. But I like to do a little farming, too, And it's mighty hard to break new ground. I had a right handsome bunch of squashes and carrots this year. 'Taters did well, too.'

'But at one time a lot of people lived here.' I insisted. 'Thousands and thousands of people. Probably millions of them.'

'I heard tell of that,' agreed the old man, 'but I can't rightfully say there's any truth in it. Must've been a long time ago. Somebody must have built all them buildings -although what for I just can't figure out.'

The Globe editorial rooms were ghostly. Dust lay everywhere, and a silence that was almost as heavy as the dust.

There had been some changes, but it was still a newspaper office. All it needed was the blur of voices, the murmur of the speeding presses to bring it to life again.

The desks still were there, and chairs ringed the copy table.

Our feet left trails across the dust that lay upon the floor and raised a cloud that set us both to sneezing.

I made a beeline for one dark corner of the room; there I knew I would find what I was looking for.

Old bound files of the paper. Their pages crackled when I opened them, and the paper was so yellowed with age that in spots it was hard to read.

I carried one of the files to a window and glanced at the date. September 14, 2143. Over three hundred years ago!

A banner screamed: 'Relief Riots in Washington.' Hurriedly we leafed through the pages. And there, on the front pages of those papers that had seen the light more than three centuries before, we read the explanation for the silent city that lay beyond the shattered, grime-streaked windows.

'Stocks Crash to Lowest Point in Ten Years!' shrieked one banner. Another said: 'Congress Votes Record Relief Funds.' Still another: 'Taxpayers Refuse to Pay.' After that they came faster and faster. 'Debt Moratorium Declared'; 'Bank Holiday Enforced': 'Thousands Starving in Cleveland'; 'Jobless March on Washington'; 'Troops Fight Starving Mobs': 'Congress Gives Up, Goes Home': 'Epidemic Sweeping East'; 'President Declares National Emergency':

'British Government Abdicates'; 'Howling Mob Sweeping Over France'; 'U.S. Government Bankrupt.'

In the market and financial pages, under smaller heads, we read footnotes to those front-page lines. Story after story of business houses closing their doors, of corporations crashing, reports on declining trade; increasing unemployment, idle factories.

Civilization, three hundred years before, had crashed to ruin under the very weight of its own superstructure. The yellowed files did not tell the entire story, but it was easy to imagine.

'The world went nuts,' said Herb, 'Yeah,' I said. 'Like that guy who took the dive.'

I could see it all as plain as day. Declining business, increasing unemployment, heavier taxation to help the unemployed and buy back prosperity, property owners unable to pay those taxes. A vicious circle.

Herb was rummaging around back in the dimness by the filing cabinet. Presently he came out into the light again, all covered with dust.

'They're only twenty or thirty years of files,' he said, 'and we got the newest one. But I found something else. Back behind the cabinet. Guess it must have fallen back there and nobody ever bothered to clean it out.'

He handed it to me - an old and crumpled paper, so brittle with age I was afraid it might crumble to dust in my very hands.

'There was quite a bit of rubble back of the cabinet,' said Herb. 'Some other papers. Old, too, but this one was the oldest.'

I looked at the date. April 16, 1985.

That yellowed paper was almost five hundred years old! It had come off the press less than

thirty-five years after Herb and I had taken off with the time machine!

Lying behind the filing cabinet all those years. The cabinet was large and heavy to move, and janitors in newspaper offices aren't noted for outstanding tidiness.

But there was something bothering me. A little whisper way back in my head, somewhere down at the base of my brain, that kept telling me there was something I should remember.

I tossed the old paper on a desk and walked to a window. Most of the glass was broken out, and what wasn't broken out was coated so thick with grime you couldn't see through it. I looked out through the place where there wasn't any glass.

There the city lay - almost as I remembered it. There was Jackson's tower, the tallest in the city back in 1950, but now dwarfed by three or four others. The spire of the old cathedral was gone, and I missed that, for it had been a pretty thing. I used to sit and watch it from this very window through the mist of early-spring rain or through the ghostly white of the winter's first snowfall. I missed the spire, but Jackson's tower was there, and so were a lot of other buildings I could place.

And every one of them looked lonely. Lonely and not quite understanding - like a dog that's been kicked out of a chair he thinks of as his own. Their windows gaping like dead eyes. No cheerful glow of light within them. Their colors dulled by the wash of seasons that had rolled over them.

This was worse, I told myself, than if we'd found the place all smashed to hell by bombs. Because, brutal as it is, one can understand a bombed city. And one can't understand, or feel comfortable in a city that's just been left behind to die.

And the people!

Thinking about them gave me the jitters. Were all the people like old Daniel Boone? We had seen how he and his family lived, and it wasn't pretty. People who had backed down the scale of progress. People who had forgotten the printed word, had twisted the old truths and the old history into screwy legends.

It was easy enough to understand how it had happened. Pull the economic props from under a civilization and there's hell to pay. First you have mad savagery and even madder destruction as class hatred flames unchecked. And when that hatred dies down after an orgy of destruction there is bewilderment, and then some more savagery and hatred born of bewilderment.

But, sink as low as he may, man always will climb again. It's the nature of the beast. He's an ornery cuss.

But man, apparently, hadn't climbed again. Civilization, as Herb and I knew it, had crashed all of three hundred years before - and man still was content to live in the shadow of his former greatness, not questioning the mute evidences of his mighty past, uninspired by the soaring blocks of stone that reared mountainous above him.

There was something wrong. Something devilish wrong.

Dust rose and tickled my nose, and suddenly I realized my throat was hot and dry. I wanted a beer, if I could only step down the street to the Dutchman's- Then it smacked me straight between the eyes, the thing that had been whispering around in the back of my head all day.

I remembered Billy Larson's face and the way his ears wiggled when he got excited and how hopped up he had been about a sunspot story.

'By Heaven, Herb, I got it,' I yelled, turning from the window.

Herb's mouth sagged, and I knew he thought that I was nuts.

'I know what happened now,' I said. 'We have to get a telescope.'

'Look here, Mike,' said Herb, 'if you feel-'

But I didn't let him finish.

'It's the sunspots,' I yelled at him.

'Sunspots?' he squeaked.

'Sure,' I said. 'There aren't any.'

My hunch had been right.

There weren't any sunspots. No black dots on that great ball of flame.

It had taken two days before we found a pair of powerful field glasses in the rubbish of what once had been a jewelry store. Most of the stores and shops were wiped clean. Raided time after time in the violence which must have followed the breakdown of government, they later would have been looted systematically.

'Herb,' I said, 'there must have been something in what Billy said. Lots of sunspots and we have good times. No sunspots and we have bad times.'

'Yeah,' said Herb, 'Billy was plenty smart. He knew his science, all right.'

I could almost see Billy, his ears wiggling, his eyes glowing, as he talked to me that morning.

Wall Street followed the sunspot cycle, he had said. Business boomed when sunspots were riding high, went to pot when they blinked out.

I remembered asking him what would happen if someone passed a law against sunspots. And now it seemed that someone had!

It was hard to believe, but the evidence was there. The story lay in those musty files up in the Globe office. Stories that told of the world going mad when business scraped rock bottom. Of governments smashing, of starving hordes sweeping nation after nation.

I put my head down between my hands and groaned. I wanted a glass of beer. The kind Louie used to push across the bar, cool and with a lot of foam on top. And now there wasn't any beer. There hadn't been for centuries. All because of sunspots!

Ultraviolet light. Endocrine glands and human behavior. Words that scientists rolled around in their mouths and nobody paid much attention to. But they were the things that had played the devil with the human race.

Herb chuckled behind me. I swung around on him, my nerves on edge.

'What's the matter with you?' I demanded.

'Boy,' said Herb, 'this Wash Tubbs can get himself into some of the damndest scrapes!'

'What you got there?' I asked, seeing he was reading a paper.

'Oh, this.' he said. 'This is that old paper we found up at the office. The one published in '85. I'm going to take it back and give it to J.R. But right now I'm reading the funnies-'

I grunted and hunkered down, turning my mind back to the sunspots. It sounded wacky, all right, but that was the only explanation.

It didn't seem right that a body of matter ninety-three million miles away could rule the lives of mankind - but, after all, all life depended on the Sun. Whiff out the Sun and there wouldn't be any life. Those old savages who had worshiped the Sun had the right idea.

Say, then, that sunspots had gone out of style. What would happen? Exactly what those files back at the Globe office had shown. Depression, ever deepening. Business failures, more and more

men out of work, taxes piling higher and higher as a panicky government fought to hold off the day of reckoning.

I heard Herb making some strangling sounds and swung around again. I was getting annoyed with Herb.

But the look on Herb's face halted the words that were bubbling on my lips. His face was stark. It was white as a sheet and his eyes were frozen wide.

He shoved the paper at me, babbling, a shaking finger pointing at a small item,

I grabbed the sheet and squinted to make out the faded type. Then I read, slowly, but with growing horror:

LANGER DIES

'James Langer, convicted in 1951 of tampering with the time machine in which Mike Hamilton and Herb Harding, Globe newsmen, set out on a flight into the future the preceding year, died in Rocky Point prison today at the age of sixty-five.

'Langer, at his trial, confessed he had bribed the guard placed in charge of the machine, to allow him to enter the plane in which it was installed. There, he testified, he removed that portion of the mechanism which made it possible for the machine to move backward in time.

'Langer, at that time, was an employee of the Standard, which went out of business a few years later.

'National indignation aroused by the incident resulted in the passage by Congress of a law prohibiting further building or experimentation with time machines. Heartbroken, Dr. Ambrose Ackerman, inventor of the machine, died two weeks after the trial.'

I sat numb for a few minutes, my hand tightening in a terrible grip upon the paper, grinding its yellowed pages into flaking shreds.

Then I looked at Herb, and as I looked into his fear-stricken face I remembered something.

'So.' I said, and I was so mad that I almost choked.

'So, you just had a few drinks with the boys that night before we left. You just met up with some Standard boys and had a few.'

I remembered the way Jimmy Langer had laughed in my face as I was leaving the Dutchman's. I remembered how nervous the guard had been that morning.

'You didn't spill your guts, did you?' I rasped.

'Look, Mike-' said Herb, getting up off the ground.

'You got drunk, damn you,' I yelled at him, 'and your brains ran right out of your mouth. You told that Standard crowd everything you knew. And Old Man Johnson sent Langer out to do the dirty work.'

I was mad, mad clear down to the soles of my boots.

'Damn you, Mike-' said Herb, and right then I let him have it. I gave him a poke that shook him clear down to the ground, but he came right back at me. Maybe he was mad, too.

He clipped me alongside the jaw and I plastered him over the eye, and after that we went at it hammer and tongs.

Herb wasn't any slouch with his dukes, and he kept me pretty busy. I gave him everything I had, but he always came back for more, and he pasted me a few that set my head to ringing.

But I didn't mind - all I wanted was to give Herb a licking he'd remember right down to the day he breathed his last.

When we quit it was just because neither one of us could fight another lick. We lay there on the ground, gasping and glaring at one another. One of Herb's eyes was closed, and I knew I had lost a couple of teeth and my face felt like it had been run through a meat grinder.

Then Herb grinned at me.

'If I could have stayed on my feet a bit longer,' he gasped, 'I'd have murdered you.'

And I grinned back at him.

Probably we should have stayed back in 2450. We had a chance back there. Old Daniel Boone didn't know too much, but at least he was civilized in a good many ways. And no doubt there still were books, and we might have been able to find other useful things.

We might have made a stab at rebuilding civilization, although the cards would have been stacked against us. For there's something funny about that sunspot business. When the sunspots stopped rearing around out on the Sun, something seemed to have run out of men - the old double-fisted, hell-for-leather spirit that had taken them up through the ages.

But we figured that men would make a come-back. We were pretty sure that somewhere up in the future we'd find a race that had started to climb back.

So we went ahead in time. Even if we couldn't go back, we could still go ahead..

We went five hundred years and found nothing. No trace of Daniel Boone's descendants. Maybe they'd given up raising squashes and had moved out where the hunting was better. The city still stood, although some of the stones had crumbled and some of the buildings were falling to pieces.

We traveled another five hundred years, and this time a horde of howling savages, men little more advanced than the tribes which roamed over Europe in the old Stone Age., charged out of the ruins at us, screaming and waving clubs and spears.

We just beat them to the plane.

In two thousand years the tribe had disappeared, and in its place we saw skulking figures that slunk among the mounds that once had been a city. Things that looked like men.

And after that we found nothing at all. Nothing, that is, except a skeleton that looked like it might once have been a human being.

Here at last we stop. There's no use of going farther, and the gas in the tank of our plane is running low.

The city is a heap of earthy mounds, bearing stunted trees. Queer animals shuffle and slink over and among the mounds. Herb says they are mutations - he read about mutations somewhere in a book.

To the west stretch great veldts of waving grass, and across the river the hills are forested with mighty trees.

But Man is gone. He rose, and for a little while he walked the Earth, But now he's swept away.

Back in 1950, Man thought he was the whole works. But he wasn't so hot, after all. The

sunspots took him to the cleaners. Maybe it was the sunspots in the first place that enabled him to rise up on his hind legs and rule the roost. Billy said that sunspots could do some funny things.

But that doesn't matter now. Man is just another has-been.

There's not much left for us to do. Just to sit and think about J.R. rubbing his hands together. And Billy Larson wiggling his ears. And the way Jimmy Langer laughed that night outside the Dutchman's place.

Right now I'd sell my soul to walk into the Dutchman's place and say to Louie: 'It's a hell of a world, Louie.'

And hear Louie answer back: 'It sure as hell is, Mike.'