

The Weapon by Frederic Brown (1906 – 1972)

The room was quiet in the dimness of early evening. Dr. James Graham, key scientist of a very important project, sat in his favorite chair, thinking. It was so still that he could hear the turning of pages in the next room as his son leafed through a picture book.

Often Graham did his best work, his most creative thinking, under these circumstances, sitting alone in an unlighted room in his own apartment after the day's regular work. But tonight his mind would not work constructively. Mostly he thought about his mentally arrested son—his only son—in the next room. The thoughts were loving thoughts, not the bitter anguish he had felt years ago when he had first learned of the boy's condition. The boy was happy; wasn't that the main thing? And to how many men is given a child who will always be a child, who will not grow up to leave him? Certainly that was rationalization, but what is wrong with rationalization when— The doorbell rang.

Graham rose and turned on lights in the almost-dark room before he went through the hallway to the door. He was not annoyed; tonight, at this moment, almost any interruption to his thoughts was welcome.

He opened the door. A stranger stood there; he said, "Dr. Graham? My name is Niemand; I'd like to talk to you. May I come in a moment?"

Graham looked at him. He was a small man, nondescript, obviously harmless—possibly a reporter or an insurance agent.

But it didn't matter what he was. Graham found himself saying, "Of course. Come in, Mr. Niemand." A few minutes of conversation, he justified himself by thinking, might divert his thoughts and clear his mind.

"Sit down," he said, in the living room. "Care for a drink?"

Niemand said, "No, thank you." He sat in the chair; Graham sat on the sofa.

The small man interlocked his fingers; he leaned forward. He said, "Dr. Graham, you are the man whose scientific work is more likely than that of any other man to end the human race's chance for survival."

A crackpot, Graham thought. Too late now he realized that he should have asked the man's business before admitting him. It would be an embarrassing interview—he disliked being rude, yet only rudeness was effective.

"Dr. Graham, the weapon on which you are working—"

The visitor stopped and turned his head as the door that led to a bedroom opened and a boy of fifteen came in. The boy didn't notice Niemand; he ran to Graham.

"Daddy, will you read to me now?" The boy of fifteen laughed the sweet laughter of a child of four.

Graham put an arm around the boy. He looked at his visitor, wondering whether he had known about the boy. From the lack of surprise on Niemand's face, Graham felt sure he had known.

"Harry"—Graham's voice was warm with affection—"Daddy's busy. Just for a little while. Go back to your room; I'll come and read to you soon."

"Chicken Little? You'll read me Chicken Little?"

"If you wish. Now run along. Wait. Harry, this is Mr. Niemand."

The boy smiled bashfully at the visitor. Niemand said, "Hi, Harry," and smiled back at him, holding out his hand. Graham, watching, was sure now that Niemand had known: the smile and the gesture were for the boy's mental age, not his physical one.

The boy took Niemand's hand. For a moment it seemed that he was going to climb into Niemand's lap, and Graham pulled him back gently. He said, "Go to your room now, Harry."

The boy skipped back into his bedroom, not closing the door.

Niemand's eyes met Graham's and he said, "I like him," with obvious sincerity. He added, "I hope that what you're going to read to him will always be true."

Graham didn't understand. Niemand said, "Chicken Little, I mean. It's a fine story—but may Chicken Little always be wrong about the sky falling down."

Graham suddenly had liked Niemand when Niemand had shown liking for the boy. Now he remembered that he must close the interview quickly. He rose, in dismissal.

He said, "I fear you're wasting your time and mine, Mr. Niemand. I know all the arguments, everything you can say I've heard a thousand times. Possibly there is truth in what you believe, but it does not concern me. I'm a scientist, and only a scientist. Yes, it is public knowledge that I am working on a weapon, a rather ultimate one. But, for me personally, that is only a by-product of the fact that I am advancing science. I have thought it through, and I have found that that is my only concern."

"But, Dr. Graham, is humanity ready for an ultimate weapon?"

Graham frowned. "I have told you my point of view, Mr. Niemand."

Niemand rose slowly from the chair. He said, "Very well, if you do not choose to discuss it, I'll say no more." He passed a hand across his forehead. "I'll leave, Dr.

Graham. I wonder, though . . . may I change my mind about the drink you offered me?"

Graham's irritation faded. He said, "Certainly. Will whisky and water do?"

"Admirably."

Graham excused himself and went into the kitchen. He got the decanter of whisky, another of water, ice cubes, and glasses.

When he returned to the living room, Niemand was just leaving the boy's bedroom. He heard Niemand's "Good night, Harry," and Harry's happy "Night, Mr. Niemand."

Graham made drinks. A little later, Niemand declined a second one and started to leave.

Niemand said, "I took the liberty of bringing a small gift to your son, doctor. I gave it to him while you were getting the drinks for us. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Of course. Thank you. Good night."

Graham closed the door; he walked through the living room into Harry's room. He said, "All right, Harry. Now I'll read to—"

There was sudden sweat on his forehead, but he forced his face and his voice to be calm as he stepped to the side of the bed. "May I see that, Harry?" When he had it safely, his hands shook as he examined it.

He thought, only a madman would give a loaded revolver to an idiot.

Summary:

A stranger named Niemand enters Mr. Graham's house. Niemand has come to get Graham to rethink his weapon, but Graham is uninterested, not to mention annoyed, wondering how to rid himself of the stranger. When Graham fetches a drink, Niemand visits Graham's mentally handicapped son, Harry. He gives Harry a gift. When Graham sees what it is, he sweats.

Commentary & Spoilers:

"only a madman would give a loaded revolver to an idiot." What Niemand has done is paralleled Graham's action in a cruel way. The gun, of course, is a nuclear weapon, and the idiots whoever is in charge of them. Depending on your perspective, you may or may not agree that the metaphor is perfect, but it provokes thought.

Brown signals immediately what he's up to: "The room was quiet in the dimness of early evening." Earth, too--this room we inhabit--is ultimately a limited space. When discharging something so sweeping as a nuclear bomb, the effects spread, making the Earth feel smaller. The dimness also presents a problem in limiting our ability to see. And it is evening, or the death of day, should a grand nuclear war occur.

Like M.R. James' "Casting of the Runes," we can't be certain who the madman or mad scientist is in this case. Possibly both. Niemand made his point, but his ethics are dubious at best. The same could be said of Graham.

This is not only one of my favorite Fredric Brown stories but also a favorite in SF. Brilliant execution. Go forth and read.

Notes:

- Niemand means "nobody" in German.
- Graham means "gray home."
- Harry means "persistently harass."
- Chicken Little -- the chicken who said "The sky is falling" although it was not. Niemand hopes this story is always true..

Why the loaded revolver?

Niemand tries to make Graham realize what's really going on in the world and how mad and naïve he is. Graham doesn't feel responsible for what people may do with knowledge he's giving to them. Niemand switches the roles, so Graham realizes himself how mad it is to give an ultimate (more or less) weapon. Maybe Brown wants to show us the same. Knowledge is force, but just if only you have it. If not you but others have that force (in this story it's Harry), you better prepare your funeral service