

# WEAPON

**John Christopher**

*This is a shock-treatment story, its warning much more familiar these days than when it was first published in 1950, yet its effectiveness undiminished thanks to the special ingenuity and skilfulness of the treatment. In recent years, science fiction's thoughts on the possibilities of the nuclear age have become noticeably more devious; sf is, after all, a genre one of whose largest preoccupations is the deliberate denial of commonplaces. It seldom, however, denies them beyond reason - for even a cliché may sometimes be true. What it can and does do - as here - is give a rational generally-accepted view new plausibility by means of a wholly fresh imaginative approach.*

I suppose they thought they had to have one representative of the Army along; possibly I got the invitation because I was once reported as saying that not all politicians were stupid and corrupt. I went on to say that in my view those that were not stupid were corrupt and *vice versa*, but that part was left out. Anyway, there I stood, on a bright spring morning, an island of brass entirely surrounded by civilians. It was easy to tell the politicians from the scientists. It was a scientists' occasion; the politicians, for once, looked abashed.

Professor Norwood, who had a reputation that even I could be expected to have heard of, called us to order.

"Gentlemen," he said, "and" - he smiled towards me - "General Sands, before we go next door I think it may be as well to say a few words. You all have some idea of the importance of our meeting here, and some of my colleagues, of course, know more about the actual work than I do, but there will be others" - another friendly smile for the general - "who are still in the dark as to what has been going on. That is natural enough, because it has been kept very secret. And it has been kept very secret because it represents the greatest weapon this - or any other country - has ever had."

That depressed me, of course. There is a belief that soldiers enjoy hearing about new weapons, but it is a belief strictly confined to civilians. No new weapon has ever been anything but a nuisance to the men who have to administer the army, however necessary it was.

"Our present research," Professor Norwood went on, "was suggested in rather an odd way. An exhibition of sketches of the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci started it all. Looking round them, I could not help being struck by the quality of anticipation in da Vinci's work. This was something over and above what one expects to find in the work of an inventor. The ordinary inventor rests on the firm base of what has gone before; his work is a development - a new twist on an old theory. But the da Vinci sketches show something quite different. Examine his projected submarine, his auto-gyro, his screw-cutting lathe... they are a wild jump from anything known in his time.

"The conventional explanation, of course, is that he was a great genius. But it so happened that the day before I saw this exhibition I had been reading again Dunne's book, *An Experiment with Time*, and as a result of this a different explanation occurred to me. You will know that Dunne's book is an account of how he and a group of other experimenters established, mainly through dreams, a kind of fore-knowledge of what was to happen. If his work is accepted, time becomes a far more uncertain factor than is commonly believed. The future is not necessarily a closed book."

I had been looking round surreptitiously while he was talking. We were in two groups: those in the know, and the rest. The former were practically at the nail-biting stage. It was something big, all right.

"More recently than Dunne's, there has been the work of Doctor Soal, who established the fact of precognition in a series of patient experiments. But I mention these things only in passing. They are important because to me, quite suddenly, they linked up with da Vinci. What if the clue to da Vinci's technical genius was simply this - prevision? What if da Vinci was doing no more than eavesdrop on the ordinary workshop chatter of the twentieth century?"

Professor Norwood looked at me again. "You see the implication," he said. I could remember talking in just that tone to very young lieutenants at Staff College. "If a da Vinci could get hold of inventions that still lay four hundred years in the future, it might be possible to do the same thing today. And we would not make the mistake da Vinci's contemporaries did, of ignoring the prophecies when we had got them.

"Nowadays, of course, we are more interested in weapons than in any other branch of technology."

Most of them turned to look at me. I could have inquired which period of human history had not been more interested in weapons than in

anything else, but I felt that the question might be thought to be lacking in tact.

"And from the point of view of weapons, you can see what an important thing this is. Throughout history the development of new weapons has been a matter of first one side and then the other getting slightly ahead. Now, for the first time, we may have the chance of moving a clear century into the lead. Our position, with this advantage, would be impregnable. Think of that. Just now we are clinging to what we know is no more than five or ten years' lead in atomic weapons. Multiply that by a factor of ten or twenty. It represents absolute safety."

The professor took a sip of water.

"Well, all that's the theory. You will want to know what we have done about it, from the practical point of view. The thing to do, of course, was to find those people who had this power of prevision, possibly in a latent form, and then to develop it. The government" - he smiled slightly in reminiscence - "once they were convinced we knew what we were talking about, helped us there. Tests - intelligence tests, character tests, aptitude tests - take place in the schools every day. We were allowed to substitute for these a test of our own; a test designed to unearth pupils with what became known as the 'P' factor.

"We found quite a few; the factor differed widely in intensity. Those children that scored very high in the tests were awarded scholarships to a school that we had specially set up. There, over and above the normal procedure of education, they were studied for their aptitude in 'F'. We found a number of different ways in which the factor could be brought out - variations in diet, living conditions, and so on.

"We concentrated particularly, of course, on coaching our star pupils. From two or three we got extremely good results right from the start. And it was these good results that revealed the really big problem we had to contend with - selectivity. We got plenty of material, but it wasn't the kind of thing we were looking for. We found that the 'P' factor operated according to the psychological scope of the individual. A boy naturally musical came up with interesting fragments from unwritten sonatas and symphonies, but gave us nothing on the technological side. We had to find someone who would have the 'P' factor plus a natural scientific bent. None of our first crop passed satisfactorily; we had to go back to the schools and look again."

One of the politicians that I did not recognize interrupted:

"As a plain man, Professor, there's one question I would like to put.

How could you be sure the results were really prophetic, and not just the sort of queer dreams that children have?"

The professor tapped the despatch case *on* the table in front of him.

"I have a manuscript here," he said, "that was produced in our first year - seven years ago. It has been kept in our files. Three months ago it was published, still without having been released by us, as a chapter in a best-selling novel. That's the sort of proof we've had.

"But to get back to our early troubles. We had to find the right blend of 'F' and scientific talent. We got it only two years ago. Meanwhile we had been going ahead with the others, testing and refining, harnessing the 'P' factor to our needs, learning more and more about it, with the object of putting it, as it were, on tap.

"So, when we found the combination we were looking for, we knew just how to deal with it. The aim we had set ourselves was of bringing back a blueprint of the greatest weapon in the world a hundred years from now. That meant the boy had to be taught the essentials of draughtsmanship. And he had to be tried out on the nearer future. We rehearsed him over periods from one to ten years ahead. The results were excellent. We found that he could be put in a hypnotic trance with the command to filch a particular idea from a particular future, and he would deliver the goods every time."

The professor paused and let his gaze roam round our little gathering.

"Gentlemen," he said, "today is the day of our success. We are so confident of it that we have invited you all here to see it with us. An hour ago the boy, Rudolf Leyton, was left in the adjoining room under the hypnotic instruction that he was to draw in full detail the weapon that will dominate the world in 2064. We shall now go in and inspect the result."

Someone muttered something about "Security". The professor held his hand up.

"You need not worry about security. Remember what we are seeking. It will take trained minds possibly months to comprehend fully what you are going to see now. You might call this a ceremonial occasion. Are we all prepared?"

There was a general murmur of agreement. Professor Norwood came down from his dais and moved through us towards the door at the end of the room. He nodded amiably as he came abreast of me.

"I hope this is going to put you and your colleagues finally out of business, General. You don't mind my saying that, do you?"

I said: "That's perfectly all right, Professor. Sometimes I wish something might happen to put you and your colleagues out of business. I don't think either of us can be very hopeful, though."

"Oh, I am!" he replied. "I really am, you know. Generals need a state of affairs where the two sides are fairly equally matched. With this, you will all have to resign and join the police force."

I followed him to the door, turning over in my mind visions of an old age spent in directing traffic. I got edged out in the genteel rush for the door and was last in to the adjoining room. There was a large table, well supplied with sheets of drawing-paper; on the other side a boy of about ten - it had not occurred to me before that he would be so young - was slumped forward, asleep.

Professor Norwood went forward and stood beside him. "Wake up," he said. "Wake up, Rudolf." The boy woke up, raising his head and looking with bewilderment at the press of people on the other side of the table. But they were not interested in him. They crushed forward to the table and the white sheets of paper. The boy got up and walked away from the table unregarded. He came past me, and I felt in my pocket and found some sweets for him. Then I went forward to join the others.

There was a drawing there, all right. A good clear drawing. They were all looking at it, and not one of them had the faintest idea what it was.

Professor Norwood bent over the drawing for perhaps half a minute. He straightened up again.

"It will have to be worked on," he said. "Of course, as I said, we could not expect to grasp the principle on sight. We'll get our best people on it."

The politician who had interrupted him in the other room said: "I wonder... It seems to me that this whole business may have been a waste of money. I'm not a scientist, but that drawing doesn't look to me like the best weapon of 2064." The professor began to protest. I said: "To me it does."

They turned round to look at me. Even the sceptical politician smiled.

The professor said: "Surely, General, you don't mean to tell us that you know what it is?"

"Yes," I said. "It's the greatest weapon of the world of a hundred years from now."

I began to draw on my gloves, because there was no point in remaining.

"It's a very good drawing - of a crossbow."