lovereading.co.uk Please print off and read at your leisure

Saucer: The Conquest

Stephen Coonts

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

lovereading.co.uk

If you love reading, you'll love the unique benefits of lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author 'like-for-like' recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



Prologue

July 1947

The train eased slowly out of the blackness of the desert night into the spotlights. As the three locomotives hissed steam, soldiers piled off the train and rushed away to form a perimeter.

Newton Chadwick stood with the small knot of civilians under the lights looking up at the giant black shroud that covered the flatbed car behind the engines. It was huge, rising over seventy feet in the air.

A dozen workers in hard hats stripped the protective shroud off the large, circular object on the flatcar. Then they began the task of rigging a harness so that the crane permanently mounted beside the track—one normally used to handle steel girders used to construct towers to test nuclear weapons—could off-load the object onto a waiting lowboy.

The senior civilian turned and solemnly shook hands with each of his colleagues. Newton Chadwick was the youngest of the group, just twenty-two. A child prodigy, genius and physics superstar, he had been thrown out of four universities for drunkenness, antisocial behavior, lewd and lascivious conduct and, at the last institution, burning down his dormitory when an unattended still in the attic caught fire.

Newton was tall, pencil-thin and gawky, with flaming

red hair and an awesome collection of freckles. His father, a wealthy distributor of soda fountain equipment, had been unable to overlook the obvious fact that the youngster bore no physical resemblance to him or any of his relatives. Blaming the boy's mother, the soda fountain magnate dumped several million in a trust fund and booted young Newton out into the unsuspecting world.

Newton's odyssey after his traumatic emancipation is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that after many and diverse adventures, he was recruited by a former professor who knew the quality of the boy's mind to assist in the examination and testing of captured German rockets and the development of American ones. The professor told a variety of well-intentioned lies to the authorities, who granted Newton an interim security clearance.

Tonight, as he stood in the Nevada desert surrounded by his colleagues, all of whom possessed a breathtaking collection of academic degrees, young Newton ignored the senior scientist's comments and stared at the flying saucer being off-loaded onto the lowboy.

A flying saucer! Who would have suspected that such a thing really existed?

"It was recovered in New Mexico, I heard," one man, a Harvard Ph.D., said. "Near Roswell, after one of these things crashed during an electrical storm."

"You don't believe that, do you?" another responded. "That's just a cover story."

"But where are the people who flew it?"

"They'll never tell *us!*"

"They're probably locked up somewhere, being interrogated."

"It's a Nazi bomber. That's the only logical explanation."

"Or Soviet."

Even at his tender age, Newton Chadwick understood

that the government was perfectly capable of lying to the public, and probably had.

How the saucer came to earth and into the government's possession was immaterial. The reality was that it was right there before his eyes, a massive physical presence straight out of a Buck Rogers comic book.

The color was dark, almost as black as the night that surrounded them. The spotlights reflected from the smooth, polished surface in little pinpoints of brilliant light. The saucer was, Newton estimated, about ninety feet in diameter, perhaps a dozen feet thick in the middle, feathered toward the edges into a perfectly round, smooth leading edge. The three massive struts upon which it sat jutted from the belly. On the bottom of the struts were pads, not wheels. Protruding from the saucer's edge, covering an area of about fifteen degrees of its circumference, were four rocket nozzles, each perhaps fifteen inches in diameter. The landing gear struts and rocket nozzles were the only imperfections in the perfect oval shape that Newton could see from his vantage point.

"It's German, no doubt about it," one of the scientists insisted. "The government is trying to keep it under wraps. They don't want Uncle Joe Stalin to hear about it."

Newton thought that hypothesis highly unlikely, but he held his tongue. The German rockets that he had spent the last six months examining were much cruder in appearance than this . . . this sleek, ominous, perfectly round black shape. Neither Soviet nor German industry was capable of manufacturing anything like this. Nor was American industry—or any industrial establishment on the planet. On *this* planet.

The saucer wasn't from *this* planet! That realization crystallized in Newton's mind.

But if it wasn't made on earth, then where?

It must have been flown here. By whom?

". . . An opportunity of a lifetime," the senior man was saying. He rubbed his hands in excited anticipation.

No one responded to that. The rest of the members of the group stood mesmerized as the crane lifted the saucer onto the massive lowboy. It took ten minutes to strap it down—ten long minutes of absolute silence among the watching scientists, each of whom was lost in his own thoughts.

Finally, when the saucer was secured, the lowboy and a convoy of army trucks full of armed soldiers crept away from the lights into the darkness of the desert night.

When the remaining soldiers had disbursed and the small knot of scientists stood alone beside the motionless train, the senior man again broke the silence. "Washington wants an encrypted report of our preliminary examination by tomorrow evening. The interest is at the very highest level. We'll start at seven in the morning."

A few people muttered replies, but Newton Chadwick didn't. He was staring into the night that had swallowed the saucer.

He couldn't sleep that night. The army installed the wizards in a large tent and issued each of them a cot and sleeping bag. Lying on his cot in the darkness, his nostrils full of the sage and juniper scent of the high desert, he lay listening to the whisper of the wind, thinking about the saucer.

The existence of the saucer required each person who saw it to throw out the preconceptions of a lifetime. Somewhere out there in the vast nothingness of space, somewhere far away in space and time—for Chadwick well knew the two were inexplicably linked, which was one of the great mysteries of life—there were other intelligent creatures; they had built this saucer, and it was now here . . . on earth. On this small planet orbiting a nondescript star

on the edge of a humongous galaxy that wheeled endlessly on a hidden axis in the infinite void.

Newton Chadwick was a child of his place and time, and he didn't know what to make of it. Sure, he had read his share of science fiction as a youngster—and that was precisely what it was, fiction. He had seen the Buck Rogers matinee features, watched space cowboys shoot it out with aliens bent on conquest. Or worse. Mind candy for a Saturday afternoon.

The saucer changed everything. Everything!

The other men on cots weren't sleeping either. They coughed and tossed restlessly, but no one was breathing deeply or snoring. Physicists, mathematicians, working engineers—they were from the nation's finest universities and large industrial concerns. No doubt they were also wondering what they would find when they opened the saucer in the morning. And, because they were human, thinking about how the discoveries they would make would build careers and reputations.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, Chadwick eased from his sleeping bag, stepped into his clothes and shoes, and slipped out of the tent. The night sky was full of stars, countless points of light flung carelessly into the inky blackness by . . . by . . . God?

Young Chadwick had never thought much about God. He had been dipped in religion as a child when his father and mother dragged him to church at irregular intervals, but little of it had stuck. Tonight, staring upward at the gleaming stars in the obsidian sky, he realized that if there were a God, He was a whale of a lot larger than the white-haired old man depicted on the stained glass windows of that church in New Jersey.

And there was the Milky Way, a ribbon of light that stretched from horizon to horizon, a galaxy of countless stars.

For the first time in his life Newton Chadwick felt as if he were marooned on a small island in an endless sea, confined to a tiny spit of sand, unable to escape.

One of the wizards was a slim older man with wispy white hair surrounding a tanned bald pate who habitually sucked on a pipe. He was the gloomiest of the lot the following morning, saying little in response to the excited inanities and speculations of his colleagues as they ate a hasty breakfast in an army mess tent. He ate in silence as they discussed the possibility that one of the creatures who had flown the saucer might still be in it. "Did the army open the thing?" No one knew.

Finally someone drew him into the conversation with a direct question. "I wish I weren't involved in this," he said gloomily. "I wish I were back in my lab at the university happily ignorant of the existence of that thing." He jerked his head in the direction of the hangar that held the saucer.

"What are you saying, Fred? The arrival of the saucer is the most exciting thing to happen on this planet since Christ rose from the dead."

"As I recall, the news of the Resurrection made a great many people very unhappy," Fred responded. "The saucer story will be greeted the same way. Who do you think is going to be overjoyed at the news? The clergy? Industrialists? Union leaders? The politicians? When they pause for a moment's thought—and I'll freely admit that they rarely exercise their brains for that long—the politicians are going to realize that the arrival of a spaceship flown by intelligent creatures from another solar system is going to rock civilization. May even shatter it."

"Anarchy? Are you predicting anarchy?"

Fred toyed with the remnants of his breakfast. "A man my age should probably stay out of the business of crystal ball predictions. However, I do think our report is going to

give official Washington one hell of a scare. My gut feeling is we are wasting our time. We'll never be allowed to say a word about anything we see or do here today, and yet no one here will ever be able to forget it. We'd all be better off not knowing."

The discussion swirled around the table, but Newton Chadwick didn't participate. He rarely did. The senior men had careers, tenured faculty chairs and hard-earned reputations to worry about. He didn't. Newton forked eggs and potatoes, drained a second glass of milk and left the tent while they pondered the shape of the world in the coming Age of the Saucer.

The saucer was parked in a large hangar at an unused air base in the desert wastes. The wizards rode for an hour on the bus to get there. One of the officers handed out a special badge to each man, who was required to wear it on a chain around his neck as if it were a set of dog tags. They were all in such a hurry to see the saucer again that they donned the tags without protest and queued up to get past another soldier, a sergeant, who scrutinized each badge even though he had just watched the officer hand them out and the wizards put them on.

As usual, Chadwick found himself at the end of the line. He ground his teeth and waited his turn.

There it was! Sitting under the lights on its legs, apparently undamaged by the rough handling it had recently received.

They found the entry hatch on the belly of the saucer quickly enough. As the rest of the group fondled the machine and examined the rocket nozzles and tried to see through the canopy into the dark interior, three of them worked on getting the hatch open. Twenty minutes later they were still at it. They would have spent the day staring at the mechanism if one of them had not kept his hand on it

for about ten seconds, then tried to manipulate it. Now it opened.

"It is sensitive to heat," they cried to their colleagues as they gathered on hands and knees under the saucer to examine the mechanism. As they excitedly discussed how this minor miracle might be physically accomplished, Newton Chadwick wriggled between them and slithered up through the hatch.

The interior was dark, lit only by the overhead lights from the interior of the hangar that penetrated the canopy. And it was empty of the creatures, living or dead, who had flown the saucer. A much relieved Newton Chadwick began a hasty inspection.

There were seats equipped with seat belts. Humans, Chadwick concluded. Or humanoids, humanlike creatures. Controls, a pilot's seat, white panels where the instruments should be . . . pedals for the pilot, a stick on the right and left. And a headband. Much like an Indian's headband that he and his friends had worn in play not too many years ago.

He picked up the band and inspected it as closely as he could in the gloom. As he did so, several of his colleagues worked up the courage to join him in the saucer's interior.

"I see you're still alive, Chadwick," the senior man said acidly. Obviously the boy didn't know his place in the pecking order, but what could you expect from a youth with his credentials?

"He's our mine canary," the second man announced. His displeasure was also evident. "If there are horrible bacteria waiting in here to smite us, at least we have five minutes."

Chadwick couldn't resist. He coughed, grabbed his throat and made a retching sound. The older scientists scurried back out the hatch.

Newton donned the headband. Well, the saucer people apparently had heads about the same size as his, which was

seven and an eighth in baseball caps. *Remember to insert that tidbit in the report to Washington,* he told himself as he looked around on the panel for something to make the headband do something.

Hmm . . .

"Are you alive in there, Chadwick?"

"I feel quite feverish, sir." They liked it when he called them sir. "Vision fading, coming and going."

"Get a doctor! Quickly." The call was repeated, which caused the soldiers to scurry about in a frenzied way. Chadwick ignored the commotion: He was too busy pulling and pushing the half dozen knobs and levers on the instrument panel. Surprising that there were so few. He had seen the cockpit of a four-engine airliner, which was stuffed with dials and gauges and dozens of levers . . .

Aha. The entire panel came to life when he pulled out one of the red knobs.

He stared at the white panels, which changed colors and became almost transparent. Symbols appeared.

And he saw into the heart of the machine.

The headband . . . My God!

He tried to organize his thoughts, and saw the presentations on the panels before him change as fast as thought.

It was some kind of calculator, like the Univac. He had read of it, a giant machine that filled a building and could be used to make scientific calculations. This was like that, only . . .

His mind galloped on. How does the saucer work? Where did it come from? Who flew it? He got immediate answers to these questions, although he didn't fully comprehend the information he saw.

As fast as thought.

"What in hell are you doing in there, Chadwick?"

Now the senior man crawled in. Before he could see the displays, Chadwick pushed the red power button in. The

panels turned white and the humming in the compartment behind him died.

"Jesus Christ, you damned fool! Are you running this machine? What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to find out what makes it go," Chadwick answered curtly and, stuffing the headband into his pocket, turned around to study the back wall of the cockpit, which must provide access to the machinery he had heard.

What the senior man would have said we will never know, because he was joined by four of his colleagues, and they were instantly lost in a discussion of the wondrous things they saw about them.

Newton Chadwick, on the other hand, found the latches to the machinery compartment hatch, figured out how they worked and scuttled through. From his pocket he produced a small flashlight. With it on, he closed the hatch behind him. The scientists standing shoulder to shoulder in the cockpit paid no attention.

The discussion that evening in the mess hall was curiously antiseptic, Newton thought. During dinner the scientists had been animated, filled to overflowing with wonder and awe at the things they had seen that day. They chattered loudly, rudely interrupted each other and talked when no one was listening. When the mess trays were cleared away and mugs of coffee distributed by soldiers in aprons, the senior man pulled out a message pad and pencil and laid them on the table before him. The conversation died there.

"What should we tell Washington?" he asked, all business.

His colleagues were tongue-tied. None was ready to commit his ideas to paper and be held accountable by his professional peers into all eternity. "We don't know enough," Fred muttered. He was the unofficial spokesman,

it seemed to young Newton, who sat in one corner watching and listening.

Chadwick had said nothing during dinner. As a young man he had learned the truth of the old adage that learning occurs when one's mouth is shut. He had listened carefully to all the comments, dismissing most, and collected the wisdom of those who had a bit to offer.

He had no intention of opening his mouth, so he was startled when the senior man said sharply, "Chadwick, you were scurrying around inside that saucer today like a starving mouse. What do you think?"

Young Newton pondered his answer. Finally he said cautiously, "I don't think the Germans made it."

"Well, fiddlesticks! I think we can all agree on *that*." The senior man surveyed the faces around the table over the top of his glasses. "Can't we?"

"Maybe the swastika burned off when it entered the atmosphere," some spoilsport suggested.

They wrangled all evening. At ten o'clock the senior man left, thoroughly disgusted, and trekked through the Nevada night to the radio tent. There he wrote the report to Washington. He read it through, crossed out a sentence in the middle and corrected the grammar. Finally he signed the form and handed it to the radio clerk to encode. He took solace from the fact that the message was classified and would never, ever, be read by his faculty colleagues at the university. He paused to light his pipe as the clerk read his composition.

"Can you make that out?" he asked gruffly.

The clerk looked at him with wide eyes. "Seems clear enough, sir."

The senior scientist left the tent in a cloud of tobacco smoke.

This is the message the clerk read:

"Team spent day examining the flying saucer, which

appears to be a spaceship manufactured upon another planet, undoubtedly in another solar system, by a highly advanced civilization using industrial processes unknown on earth. Appears to be powered by some form of atomic energy. No weapons found. Recommend that extensive, thorough examination continue on a semipermanent basis. Knowledge to be gained will revolutionize every scientific field."

The soldier whistled in amazement and went to work with the code book.

In the darkness outside the sleeping tent, Newton Chadwick sat in the sand and fingered the headband he had "borrowed" from the saucer. The magic wasn't in the headband, which was merely a fabric that contained thousands of tiny wires, each thinner than a human hair. This headband, Newton believed, was the way the pilot of the saucer communicated with the electronic brain of the machine. That electronic brain was the heart of the saucer. True, there was a nuclear reactor that used heat in a strange electrolysis process to crack water into its constituent parts. The hydrogen was then burned in the rockets. And there was a huge ring around the bottom of the ship that Newton suspected was used to modulate the planet's gravitational field in some manner.

Yet the crown jewel of the saucer was the artificial brain that talked to his brain through this headband. This headband proved that the crew of the saucer had brains very similar to ours. And there was more: Inside that device, Newton suspected, was some record of the scientific and technical knowledge that the saucer's makers had used to build it. This record was the library housing the accumulated knowledge of an advanced civilization, and it was there for the man with the wit and brains to mine it.

These older men, scientists and engineers—he had

listened carefully to their comments all evening. They still didn't understand the significance of the electronic brain, nor the headband. One reason was that they had not powered up the saucer. The other was that Newton had pocketed every headband he found, all four of them.

Given enough time, they would get a glimmer of the truth. They certainly weren't fools, even if they were conventional thinkers.

Actually there were at least three electronic brains that Newton had found. He thought about them now, wondering how so much information could be packaged into such small devices. Amazingly, they weighed about eight pounds each and were no larger than a shoe box.

He was sitting there speculating about how they might work when a soldier drove up in a jeep and rushed into the tent. In a few moments he heard the senior man swear a foul oath.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed to his colleagues. "Washington refuses to allow further access to the saucer. They want it sealed immediately. We are to return to Florida tomorrow."

Newton Chadwick leaped to his feet. He stuffed the headband into a pocket as he considered.

Inside the tent Fred declared, "They've lost their nerve. I was afraid of that."

There was a jeep parked next to the one the soldier had just driven up, one that had been provided for the use of the senior man. Chadwick walked over and looked in the ignition. The key was there. He hopped in, started the engine, popped the clutch and fed gas.

It wasn't until after breakfast, as the scientists packed, that anyone missed young Chadwick. A search was mounted, and by midmorning it was learned that he visited the saucer about two that morning. He had displayed his badge and

was admitted by the sentries, who had not been told to deny entry to badge-holders. Chadwick was inside for only thirty minutes, then drove away in an army jeep.

Despite the protests of the senior scientist, the army officer in charge sealed the saucer and refused to allow further entry, so no one knew what Chadwick had done inside it, if anything. Neither Chadwick nor the jeep could be found. Not that anyone looked very hard. The very existence of the saucer was a tightly held military secret, and the circle of persons with access to that information was very small.

Back in Florida the scientists who had visited the saucer were debriefed by FBI agents. They would be prosecuted, they were told, if they ever discussed the existence of the saucer or anything they had learned about it with any person not authorized to have access to that information. When the senior man asked who had access, he was told, "No one."

It was all extremely frustrating. The senior man retired two years after he saw the saucer. He wrote a treatise about it that his daughter thought was fiction. After his death from a heart attack, she tossed the manuscript into the trash.

The other scientists who had gone inside the saucer that day in the desert were also forced to get on with their lives while living with the memory of what they had seen. The Age of the Saucer that they had hoped for didn't arrive. Like the senior man, they too aged and died one by one, bitter and frustrated.

As the seasons came and went and the years slipped past, the saucer they had seen in the Nevada desert sat undisturbed in its sealed hangar.