

VARIOUS

ASTOUNDING STORIES
OF SUPER-SCIENCE,
NOVEMBER, 1930

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Various Astounding Stories of Super- Science, November, 1930

The Wall of Death *By Victor Rousseau*

"This news," said Cliff Hynes, pointing to the newspaper, "means the end of *homo Americanus*."

Out of the Antarctic it came – a wall of viscid, grey, half-human jelly, absorbing and destroying all life that it encountered.

The newspaper in question was the hour-sheet of the International Broadcast Association, just delivered by pneumatic tube at the laboratory. It was stamped 1961, Month 13, Day 7, Horometer 3, and the headlines on the front page confirmed the news of the decisive defeat of the American military and naval forces at the hands of the Chinese Republic.

A gallant fight for days against hopeless odds; failure of the army dynamos; airships cut off from ground guidance; battleships ripped to pieces by the Chinese disintegrators; and, finally, the great wave of black death that had wiped out two hundred thousand men.

Kay Bevan – to use the old-fashioned names which still persisted, despite the official numerical nomenclature – glanced through the account. He threw the sheet away. "We deserved it, Cliff," he said.

Cliff nodded. "You saw that bit about the new Chinese disintegrator? If the Government had seriously considered our Crumbler – "

Kay glanced at the huge, humming top that filled the center of the laboratory. It spun so fast that it appeared as nothing but a spherical shadow, through which one could see the sparse furnishings, the table, the apparatus ranged upon it, and the window over-looking the upper streets of New York.

"Yes —*if!*" he answered bitterly. "And I'm willing to bet the Chinese have an inferior machine, built upon the plans that Chinese servant stole from us last year."

"We deserved it, Cliff," said Kay again. "For ten years we've harried and enslaved the yellow man, and taken a hundred thousand of his men and women to sacrifice to the Earth Giants. What would we have done, if conditions had been reversed?"

"Self-preservation," Cliff suggested.

"Exactly. The law of the survival of the fittest. They thought that they were fitter to survive. I tell you they had right on their side, Cliff, and that's what's beaten us. Now – a hundred thousand of our *own* boys and girls must be fed into the maw of these monsters every year. God, suppose it were Ruth!"

"Or you or I," said Cliff. "If only we could perfect the Crumbler!"

"What use would that be against the Earth Giants? There's nothing organic about them, not even bones. Pure protoplasm!"

"We could have used it against the Chinese," said Cliff. "Now – " He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

And if explorers had been content to leave the vast unknown Antarctic Continent alone, they would never have taught the imprisoned Giants to cross the great ice barrier. But that crossing had taken place fifteen years ago, and already the mind of man had become accustomed to the grim facts.

Who could have dreamed that the supposed table-land was merely a rim of ice-mountains, surrounding a valley twice the size of Europe, so far below sea-level that it was warmed to tropic heat by Earth's interior fires? Or that this valley was peopled with what could best be described as organized protoplasm?

Enormous, half-transparent, gelatinous organism, attaining a height of about a hundred feet, and crudely organized into forms not unlike those of men?

Half the members of the Rawlins Expedition, which had first entered this valley, had fallen victims to the monsters. Most of the rest had gone raving mad. And the stories of the two who returned, sane, to Buenos Aires, were discredited and scoffed at as those of madmen.

But of a second expedition none had survived, and it was the solitary survivor of the third who had confirmed the amazing story. The giant monsters, actuated by some flickering human intelligence, had found their way out of the central valley, where they had subsisted by enfolding their vegetable and small animal prey with pseudopods, that is to say, temporary projections of arms from the gelatinous bulk of their substance.

They had floated across the shallow seas between the tip of the Antarctic Continent and Cape Horn, as toy balloons float on water. Then they had spread northward, extending in a wall that reached from the Atlantic to the Andes. And, as they moved, they had devoured all vegetables and animal life in their path. Behind them lay one great bare, absolutely lifeless area.

How many of them were there? That was the hideous fact that had to be faced. Their numbers could not be counted because, after attaining a height of about a hundred feet, they reproduced by budding!

And within a few weeks these buds, in turn, attained their full development.

The Argentine Government had sent a force of twenty thousand men against them, armed with cannon, machine-guns, tanks, airplanes, poison gas, and the new death-ray. And in the night, when it was bivouacking, after what it had thought was glorious victory, it had been overwhelmed *and eaten!*

Proof against the poison gas, the hideous monsters were, and invulnerable to shot and shell. Divided and sub-divided, slashed into ribbons, blown to fragments by bombs, each of the pieces simply became the nucleus of a new organism, able, within a few hours, to assume the outlines of a dwarf man, and to seize and devour its prey.

But the Argentine expedition had done worse than it at first dreamed of. *It had given the monsters a taste for human flesh!*

After that, the wave of devastation had obliterated life in every city clear up to the Amazonian forests. And then it had been discovered that, by feeding these devils human flesh, they could be rendered torpid and their advance stayed – so long as the periodical meals continued!

At first criminals had been supplied them, then natives, then Chinese, obtained by periodical war raids. What would you have? The savage regions of the earth had already been depopulated, and a frenzy of fear had taken possession of the whole world.

Now the Chinese had defeated the annual American invasion, and the Earth Giants were budding and swarming through the heart of Brazil.

"Man," said the Theosophists, "is the fifth of the great root-races that have inhabited this planet. The fourth were the Atlanteans. The third were the Lemurians, half-human beings of whom the Australian aborigines are the survivors. The second race was not fully organized into human form. Of the first, nothing is known.

"These are the second race, surviving in the Antarctic valleys. Half-human objects, groping toward that perfection of humanity of which we ourselves fall very far short. As the Kabbala says, man, before Adam, reached from heaven to earth."

Kay Bevan and Cliff Hynes had been working feverishly to perfect their Crumbler for use in the Chinese wars. Convinced, as were all fair-minded men, that these annual raids were unjustified, they yielded to the logic of the facts. Should America sacrifice a hundred thousand of her boys and girls each year, when human life was cheap in China? *Boys and girls!*

It had been discovered that the Earth Giants required the flesh of women as well as of men. Some subtle chemical constituent then produced the state of torpidity during which the advance and the budding of the monsters was stayed. During the ten past years their northward advance had been almost inappreciable. Brazil had even sent another army against them.

But the deadliest gases had failed to destroy the tenacious life of these protoplasmic creatures, and the tanks, which had driven through and through them, had become entangled and blocked in the gelatinous exudations, and their occupants eaten.

All over the world scientists were striving to invent some way of removing this menace to the world. Moreover, airplanes sent to the polar continent had reported fresh masses mobilizing for the advance northward. A second wave would probably burst through the Amazon forest barrier and sweep over the Isthmus and overrun North America.

Five days after the news of the Chinese disaster was confirmed, Cliff Hynes came back from the capital of the American Confederation, Washington.

"It's no use, Kay," he said. "The Government won't even look at the Crumbler. I told them it would disintegrate every inorganic substance to powder, and they laughed at me. And it's true, Kay: they've given up the attempt to enslave China. Henceforward a hundred thousand of our own citizens are to be sacrificed each year. Eaten alive, Kay! God, if only the Crumbler would destroy organic forms as well!"

The first year's quota of fifty thousand boys and fifty thousand girls, thrown to the maw of the monsters to save humanity, nearly disrupted the Confederation. Despite the utmost secrecy, despite the penalty of death for publishing news of the sacrifice, despite the fact that those who drew the fatal lots were snatched from their homes at dead of night, everything became known.

On the vast pampas in the extreme north of the Argentine Republic, where Bolivia, the Argentine, Paraguay and Brazil unite, was the place of sacrifice. Thousands of acres, white with the bones of those whom the monsters had engulfed. Brainless, devoid of intelligence, sightless, because even the sense had not become differentiated in them, yet by some infernal instinct the Earth Giants had become aware that this was their feasting ground.

By some tacit compact, the guards who had annually brought their victims to be devoured had been unmolested, the vast wall of semi-human shapes withdrawing into the shelter of the surrounding forests while the Chinese were staked out in rows. Death, which would have been a mercy, had been denied them. It was living flesh that the Earth Giants craved. And here, on the spot known as Golgotha, the hideous sacrifice had been annually repeated.

That first year, when the chosen victims were transported to the fatal spot, all America went mad. Frenzied parents attacked the offices of the Federation in every city. The cry was raised that Spanish Americans had been selected in preference to those of more northern blood. Civil war loomed imminent.

And year after year these scenes must be repeated. Boys and girls, from fifteen to twenty years of age, the flower of the Federation, a hundred thousand of them, must die a hideous death to save humanity. Now the choice of the second year's victims was at hand.

In their laboratory, removed to the heart of the Adirondacks wilderness, Cliff and Kay were working frantically.

"It's the last chance, Kay," said Cliff. "If I've not solved the secret this time, it means another year's delay. The secret of dissolving organic forms as well as inorganic ones! What is this mysterious power that enables organic forms to withstand the terrific bombardment of the W-ray?"

The W-ray was the Millikan cosmic ray, imprisoned and adapted for human use. It was a million times more powerful than the highest known voltage of electricity. Beneath it, even the diamond, the hardest substance known, dissolved into a puff of dust; and yet the most fragile plant growth remained unaffected.

The laboratory in the Adirondacks was open at one end. Here, against a background of big forest trees, a curious medley of substances had been assembled: old chairs, a couple of broken-down airplanes, a large disused dynamo, a heap of discarded clothing, a miscellany of kitchen utensils on a table, a gas stove, and a heap of metal junk of all kinds. The place looked, in fact, like a junk heap.

The great top was set in a socket in a heavy bar of craolite, the new metal that combined the utmost tensile strength with complete infusibility, even in the electric furnace. About six feet in height, it looked like nothing but what it was, a gyroscope in gimbals, with a long and extremely narrow slit extending all around the central bulge, but closed on the operator's side by a sliding cover of the same craolite.

Within this top, which, by its motion, generated a field of electrical force between the arms of an interior magnet, the W-rays were generated in accordance with a secret formula; the speed of gyration, exceeding anything known on earth, multiplied their force a billionfold, converting them to wave-lengths shorter than the shortest known to physical science. Like all great inventions, the top was of the simplest construction.

"Well," said Cliff, "you'd better bring out Susie."

Kay left the laboratory and went to the cabin beside the lake that the two men occupied. From her box in front of the stove a lady porcupine looked up lazily and grunted. Kay raised the porcupine; in the box, of course. Susie was constitutionally indolent, but one does not handle porcupines, however smooth their quills may lie.

Kay brought her to the heap of junk and placed the box on top of it. He went inside the laboratory. "I may as well tell you, Cliff. I wouldn't have brought Susie if I'd thought the experiment had the least chance of success," he said.

Cliff said nothing. He was bending over the wheel, adjusting a micrometer. "All ready, Kay?" he asked.

Kay nodded and stepped back. He swallowed hard. He hated sacrificing Susie to the cause of science; he almost hoped the experiment would fail.

Cliff pressed a lever, and slowly the ponderous top began to revolve upon its axis. Faster, faster, till it was nothing but a blur. Faster yet, until only its outlines were visible. Cliff pressed a lever on the other side.

Nothing happened apparently, except for a cloudy appearance of the air at the open end of the laboratory. Cliff touched a foot lever. The top began to grow visible, its rotations could be seen; it ran slower, began to come to a stop.

The cloud was gone. Where the airplanes and other junk had been, was nothing but a heap of grayish dust. It was this that had made the cloud.

Nothing remained, except that impalpable powder against the background of the trees.

Kay caught Cliff's arm. "Look out!" he shouted, pointing to the heap. "Something's moving in there!"

Something was. A very angry lady porcupine was scrambling out, a *quillless* porcupine, with a white skin, looking like nothing so much as a large, hairless rat. Cliff turned to Kay.

"We've failed," he said briefly. "Too late for this year now."

"But – the quills?"

"Inorganic material. But even the bones remain intact because there's circulation in the marrow, you see. And the Earth Giants haven't even bones. They're safe – this year!"

He flung himself down under a tree, staring up at the sky in abject despair.

"Look, Kay, I've got my number!" Ruth Meade smiled as she handed Kay the ticket issued by the Government announcing the lottery number provided for each citizen.

One hundred thousand young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty would be drawn for the sacrifice, and Ruth, being nineteen, had come within the limits, but this would be her last year. In a few weeks the Government would announce the numbers – drawn by a second lottery – of those who were condemned.

Then, before these had been made public, the victims would already have been seized and hurried to the airship depots in a hundred places, for conveyance to the hideous Golgotha of the pampas.

The chance that any individual would be among the fated ones was reasonably small. It was the fashion to make a jest of the whole business. Ruth smiled as she showed her ticket.

Kay stared at it. "Ruth, if – if anything happened to you I'd go insane. I'd – "

"Why this sudden ardor, Kay?"

Kay took Ruth's small hand in his. "Ruth, you mustn't play with me any more. You know I love you. And the sight of that thing makes me almost insane. You do care, don't you?" And, as Ruth remained silent, "Ruth, it isn't Cliff Hymes, is it? I know you two are old friends. I'd rather it were Cliff than anybody else, if it had to be some one, but – tell me, Ruth!"

"It isn't Cliff," said Ruth slowly.

"Is it – some one else?"

"It's you, dear," answered Ruth. "It's always been you. It might have been Cliff if you hadn't come along. But he knows now it can never be he."

"Does he know it's me?" asked Kay, greatly relieved.

Ruth inclined her head. "He took it very finely," she said. "He said just what you've said about him. Oh, Kay, if only your experiment had succeeded, and the world could be free of this nightmare! What happened? Why couldn't you and Cliff make it destroy life?"

"I don't know, dear," answered Kay. "Iron and steel melt into powder at the least impact of the rays. They are so powerful that there was even a leakage through the rubber and anelektron container. Even the craolite socket was partly fused, and that is supposed to be an impossibility. And there was a hole in the ground seven feet deep where the very mineral water in the earth had been dissolved. But against organic substances the W-ray is powerless.

"Next year, dear – next year we'll have solved our problem, and then we'll free the world of this menace, this nightmare. Ruth – don't let's talk about that now. I love you!"

They kissed. The Earth Giants faded out of their consciousness even while Ruth held that ominous ticket in her hand.

Kay said nothing to Cliff about it, but Cliff knew. Perhaps he had put his fate to the test with Ruth and learned the truth from her. Ruth made no reference to the matter when she saw Kay. But between the two men, friends for years, a coolness was inexorably developing.

They had gone to work on the new machine. They were hopeful. When they were working, they forgot their rivalry.

"You see, Kay," said Cliff, "we mustn't forget that the Millikan rays have been bombarding Earth since Earth became a planet, out of the depths of space. It is their very nature not to injure organic life, otherwise all life on Earth would have been destroyed long ago. Now, our process is only an adaptation of these cosmic rays. We haven't changed their nature."

"No," agreed Kay. "What we want is a death-ray strong enough to obliterate these monsters, without simply disintegrating them and creating new fragments to bud into the complete being. Why do you suppose they are so tenacious of life, Cliff?"

"They represent primeval man, life itself, striving to organize itself, and nothing is more tenacious than the life principle," answered Cliff.

Meanwhile the fatal weeks were passing. A few days after the tickets had been distributed, a Government notice was broadcasted and published, ordaining that, in view of former dissensions, no substitutes for the condemned persons would be permitted. Rich or poor, each of the victims chosen by lot must meet his fate.

And the monsters were growing active. There had been an extension of their activities. Tongues had been creeping up the rivers that ran into the Amazon. Suddenly a dense mass of the devils had appeared on the north coast, near Georgetown. They had overleaped the Amazon; they were overrunning British Guiana, eating up everything on their way. Georgetown was abandoned; the monsters were in complete control.

"They will be cut off from the main herd," the optimistic reports announced. "We shall deal with the main herd first. This year the sacrifice will have to be made, but it will be the last. Scientists have at last hit upon an infallible toxin which will utterly destroy this menace within a few months."

Nobody believed that story, for everything had been tried and failed. In their laboratory Cliff and Kay were working frantically. And now the coldness that had developed between them was affecting their collaboration too. Cliff was keeping something back from Kay.

Kay knew it. Cliff had made some discovery that he was not sharing with his partner. Often Kay, entering the laboratory, would find Cliff furtively attempting to conceal some operation that he was in the midst of. Kay said nothing, but a brooding anger began to fill his heart. So Cliff was trying to get all the credit for the result of their years of work together!

And always, in the back of his mind, there was a vision of the little Government ticket in Ruth's hand, with the numbers in staring black type. They had burned into his brain. He could never forget them. Often at night, after a hard day's work, he would suddenly awaken out of a hideous nightmare, in which he saw Ruth taken away by the agents of the Government, to be thrown as a sacrifice to the monsters.

And Cliff was hiding something! That made the situation unbearable.

The coolness between the two men was rapidly changing into open animosity. And then one day, quite by chance, in Cliff's absence, Kay came upon evidence of Cliff's activities.

Cliff was no longer experimenting with the W-ray! He was using a new type of ray altogether, the next series, the psenium electron emanation discovered only a few years before, which had the peculiar property of non-alternation, even when the psenium electron changed its orbit around the central nucleus of the psenium atom.

Instead of discontinuity, the psenium electron had been found to emit radiation steadily, and this had upset the classic theories of matter for the ninth time in the past fifteen years.

And Kay's wrath broke loose in a storm of reproaches when Cliff came into the laboratory.

"You've been deliberately keeping me in the dark!" he shouted. "You're a nice sort of partner to have! Here's where we split up the combination, Hynes!"

"I've been thinking that for a long time," sneered Cliff. "The fact is, Kay, you're a little too elementary in your ideas to suit me. It's due to you that I kept hammering away on the wrong tack for years. The sooner we part, the better."

"No time like now," said Kay. "Keep your laboratory. You put most of the money into it, anyway. I'll build me another – where I can work without being hampered by a partner who's out for himself all the time. Good luck to you in your researches, and I hope you'll get all the credit when you find a way of annihilating the Earth Giants."

And he stormed out of the laboratory, jumped into his plane, and winged his way southward toward his apartment in New York.

Crowds in the streets of every town on the way. In villages and hamlets, swarming like ants, and hurrying along the highways! Kay, who flew one of the slow, old-fashioned planes, averaging little more than a hundred miles an hour, winged his way methodically overhead, too much absorbed in his anger against Cliff to pay much attention to this phenomenon at first. But gradually it was borne in upon him that something was wrong.

He flew lower, and now he was passing over a substantial town, and he could hear the shouts of anger that came up to him. The whole town was in a ferment, gathered in the town square.

Suddenly the reason came home to Kay. He saw the adjoining airport, and dropped like a plummet, hovering down until his wheels touched the ground. Without waiting to taxi into one of the public hangars, he leaped out and ran through the deserted grounds into the square.

Groans, yells, shrieks of derision rent the air. The whole crowd had gone maniacal. And it was as Kay had thought. Upon a white background high up on the town ball building, the numbers of the local boys and girls who had been picked for sacrifices were being shown.

Eight boys and fifteen girls, already on their way into the wastes of South America, to meet a hideous death.

"They took my Sally," screamed a wizened woman, the tears raining down her checks. "Kidnapped her at the street corner after dark. I didn't know why she hadn't come home last night. God, my Sally, my little girl, gone – gone – "

"People, you must be patient," boomed the Government announcer. "The President feels with you in your affliction. But by next year a means will have been devised of destroying these monsters. Your children will have their sacrifice recorded in the Hall of Fame. They are true soldiers who – "

"To hell with the Government!" roared a man. "Stop that damn talk machine! Break her, fellows! Then we'll hang President Bogart from the top of the Capitol!"

Yells answered him, and the crowd surged forward toward the building.

"Stand back!" shrieked the announcer. "It's death to set foot on the step. We are now electrified. Last warning!"

The first ranks of the mob recoiled as a charge of electricity at a voltage just short of that required to take life coursed through their bodies. Shrieks of agony rang out. Files of writhing forms covered the ground.

Kay rushed to the automatic clerk at the window beside the metal steps, taking care to avoid contact with them. Within six feet, the temperature of his body brought the thermostatic control into action; the window slid upward and the dummy appeared. He turned the dial to Albany.

"I want New York Division, Sub-station F, Loyalist Registration," he called. "Give me Z numbers of the lottery, please."

"No numbers will be given out until Horometer 13," the dummy boomed.

"But I tell you I must know immediately!" Kay pleaded frantically.

"Stand away, please!"

"I've got to know, I tell you!"

"We are now electrified. Last warning!"

"Listen to me. My name's Kay Bevan. I – "

A mighty buffet in the chest hurled Kay ten feet backward upon the ground. He rose, came within the electric zone, felt his arms twisted in a giant's grasp, staggered back again and sat down gasping. The window went down noiselessly, the dummy swung back into place. Kay got upon his feet again, choking with impotent rage.

All about him men and women were milling in a frantic mob. He broke through them, went back to where his plane was standing. A minute later he was driving madly toward the district airport in New York within three blocks of Ruth's apartment.

He dropped into a vacant landing place, checked hastily, and rushed into the elevator. Once in the upper street, he bounded to the middle platform, and, not satisfied to let it convey him at eight miles an hour, strode on through the indignant throng until he reached his destination. Hurling the crowds right and left he gained the exit, and a half-minute later was on the upper level of the apartment block.

He pushed past the janitor and raced along the corridor to Ruth's apartment. She would be in if all was well; she worked for the Broadcast Association, correcting the proofs that came from the district headquarters by pneumatic tube. He stopped outside the door. The little dial of white light showed him that the apartment was unoccupied.

As he stood there in a daze, hoping against hope, he saw a thread hanging from the crevice between door and frame. He pulled at it, and drew out a tiny strip of scandium, the new compressible metal that had become fashionable for engagement rings. Plastic, all but invisible, it could be compressed to the thickness of a sheet of paper: it was the token of secret lovers, and Kay had given Ruth a ring of it.

It was the signal, the dreaded signal that Ruth had been on the lottery list – the only signal that she had been able to convey, since stringent precautions were taken to prevent the victims becoming known until all possibility of rescue was removed.

No chance of rescuing her! From a hundred airports the great Government airships had long since sailed into the skies, carrying those selected by the wheel at Washington for sacrifice to the Earth Giants. Only one chance remained. If Cliff had discovered the secret that had so long eluded them, surely he would reveal it to him now!

Their quarrel was forgotten. Kay only knew that the woman he loved was even then speeding southward to be thrown to the maw of the vile monsters that held the world in terror. Surely Cliff would bend every effort to save her!

Only a few hours had passed since Kay had stormed out of the laboratory in the Adirondacks in a rage when he was back on their little private landing field. He leaped from the plane and ran up the trail beside the lake between the trees. The cabin was dark; and, when Kay reached the laboratory he found it dark too.

"Cliff! Cliff!" he shouted.

No answer came, and with a sinking heart he snapped the button at the door. It failed to throw the expected flood of light through the interior. With shaking hand Kay pulled the little electron torch from his pocket, and its bright beam showed that the door was padlocked. He moved round to the window. The glass was unbreakable, but the ray from the torch showed that the interior of the laboratory had been dismantled, and the great top was gone.

In those few hours Cliff, for reasons best known to himself, had removed the top, Kay's one hope of saving Ruth. And he was gone.

In that moment Kay went insane. He raved and cursed, calling down vengeance upon Cliff's head. Cliff's very motive was incredible. That he had deliberately removed the top in order that Ruth should die was not, of course, conceivable. But in that first outburst of fury Kay did not consider that.

Presently Kay's madness burned itself out. There was still one thing that he could do. His plane, slow though it was, would carry him to the pampas. He could get fresh fuel at numerous bootleg petrol stations, even though the regulations against intersectional flight were rigid. With luck he could reach the pampas, perhaps before the sluggish monsters had fallen upon their prey. It was said that the victims sometimes waited for days!

Something was rubbing against his leg, pricking it through his anklets. Kay looked down. A lady porcupine, with tiny new quills, was showing recognition, even affection, if such a spiny beast could be said to possess that quality.

Somehow the presence of the beast restored Kay's mind to normal.

"Well, he's left us both in the lurch, Susie," he said. "Good luck to you, beastie, and may you find a secure hiding place until your quills have grown."

Drowning men catch at straws. Kay snatched out his watch, and the illuminated dial showed that it was already two quintets past horometer 13. He darted back to the cabin. The door was unfastened, and his torch showed him that, though Cliff had evidently departed, and taken his things, the interior was much as it had been. When Kay picked up the telephotophone, the oblong dial flashed out. The instrument was in working order.

He turned the crank, and swiftly a succession of scenes flashed over the dial. On this little patch of glassite, Kay was actually making the spatial journey to Albany, each minutest movement of the crank representing a distance covered. The building of the New York Division appeared, and its appearance signified that Kay was telephonically connected. But there was no automatic voice attachment, an expense that Kay and Cliff had decided would be unjustified. He had to rely upon the old-fashioned telephone, such as was still widely in use in rural districts. He took up the receiver.

"Sub-Station F, Loyalist Registration, please," he called.

"Speaking," said a girl's voice presently.

"I want the Z numbers. All from Z5 to ZA," said Kay.

And thus, in the dark hut, he listened to the doom pronounced, miles away, by a more or less indifferent operator. When the fatal number was read out, he thanked her and hung up. He released the crank, which moved back to its position, putting out the light on the dial.

For a moment or two he stood there motionless, in a sort of daze, though actually he was gathering all his reserves of resolution for the task confronting him. Simply to find Ruth among the hundred thousand victims, and die with her. A task stupendous in itself, and yet Kay had no doubt that he would succeed, that he would be holding her in his arms when the tide of hell flowed over them.

He knew the manner of that death. The irresistible onset of the giant masses of protoplasm, the extrusion of temporary arms, or feelers, that would grasp them, drag them into the heart of the yielding substance, and slowly smother them to death while the life was drained from their bodies. It had been said the death was painless, but that was Government propaganda. But he would be holding Ruth in his arms. He'd find her: he had no doubt of that at all.

And, strangely enough, now that Kay knew the worst, now that not the slightest doubt remained, he was conscious of an elevation of spirits, a sort of mad recklessness that was perfectly indefinable.

Kay turned his torch into a corner of the kitchen. Yes, there was the thing subconsciousness had prompted him to seek. A long-shafted, heavy woodsman's ax, a formidable weapon at close quarters. Because it is the instinct of *homo Americanus* to die with a weapon in his hands, rather than let himself be butchered helplessly, Kay snatched it up. He ran back to his plane. The gas tank was nearly empty, but there was petrol in the ice house beside the lake.

Kay wheeled the machine up to it, and filled up with gas and oil. All ready now! He leaped in, pressed the starter, soared vertically, helicopter wings fluttering like a soaring hawk's. Up to the passenger air lane at nine thousand: higher to twelve, the track of the international and supply ships; higher still, to the fourteen thousand ceiling of the antiquated machine. He banked, turned southward.

It was freezing cold up there, and Kay had no flying suit on him, but, between the passenger lane and the lane of the heliospheres, at thirty thousand, there was no air police. And he could afford to take no chances. The Government police would be on the lookout for a score such desperate men as he, bent on a similar mission. He drove the plane toward the Atlantic till a red glow began to diffuse itself beneath him, an area of conflagration covering square miles of territory.

Swooping lower, Kay could hear the sound of detonations, the roar of old-fashioned guns, while through the pall of lurid smoke came the long, violet flashes of atomic guns, cleaving lanes of devastation. New York was burning.

The frenzied populace had broken into revolt, seized the guns stored in the arsenals, and attacked the great Bronx fortress that stood like a mighty sentinel to protect the port.

A swarm of airships came into view, swirling in savage fight. Kay zoomed. It was not his battle.

Now New York lay behind him, and he was winging southward over the Atlantic. All night he flew. At dawn he came down in a coast hamlet for bootleg petrol and oil.

"You come from New York?" asked the Georgian. "Hear there's war broke out up there."

"My war's down in Brazil," muttered Kay.

"Say, if them Giants comes up here yuh know what us folks is going to do? We're going to set the hounds on 'em. Yes, sirree, we've got a pack of bloodhounds, raised for jest that purpose. I guess that's something them wisecrackers at Washington ain't thought of. They took two little fellers from Hopetown, but they won't take nobody from here."

Kay fuelled up and resumed his flight southward.

After that it was a nightmare. The sun rose and set, alternating with the staring moon and stars. Kay crossed the Caribbean, sighted the South American coast, swept southward over the jungles of Brazil. He drank, but no food passed his lips. He had become a mechanism, set for on special purpose – self-immolation.

It was in a wide savannah among the jungles that he first caught sight of the monsters. At first he thought it was the rising dawn mist; then he began to distinguish a certain horrible resemblance to human forms, and swooped down, banking round and round the opening in the jungle until he could see clearly.

There were perhaps a score of them, an advance guard that had pushed forward from one of the main divisions. Men? Anthropoids, rather, for their sex was indistinguishable! Human forms ranging

from a few feet to a hundred, composed apparently of a grayish jelly, propelling themselves clumsily on two feet, but floating rather than walking. Translucent, semi-transparent. Most horrible of all, these shadowy, spheroid creatures exhibited here and there buds of various sizes, which were taking on the similitude of fresh forms. And among them were the young, the buds that had fallen from the parent stems, fully formed humans of perhaps five or six feet, bouncing with a horrible playfulness among their sires.

As Kay soared some three hundred feet overhead, a young tapir came leaping out of the jungle and ran, apparently unconscious of their presence, right toward the monsters. Suddenly it stopped, and Kay saw that it was already encircled by coils of protoplasm, resembling arms, which had shot forth from the bodies of the devils.

Swiftly, despite its struggles and bleatings, the tapir was drawn into the substance of the monsters, which seemed to fuse together and form a solid wall of protoplasm in all respects like the agglutination of bacteria under certain conditions.

Then the beast vanished in the wall, whose agitated churnings alone gave proof of its existence.

For perhaps ten minutes longer Kay remained hovering above the clearing. Then the bodies divided, resuming their separate shapes. And the white bones of the tapir lay in a huddled mass in the open.

Kay went mad. Deliberately he set down his plane, and, hatchet in hand, advanced upon the sluggish monsters. Shouting wildly, he leaped into their midst.

The fight that followed was like a nightmare fight. He lopped off the slow tentacles that sought to envelop him, he slashed the devils into long ribbons of writhing jelly, slashed until the substance blunted the ax; wiped it clean and leaped into their midst again, hewing until he could no longer raise his arm. Then he drew back and surveyed the scene before him.

It was dreadful enough to drive the last remnants of sanity from his brain. For every piece that he had cut from the monsters, every protoplasmic ribbon was reorganizing before his eyes into the semblance of a new creature. Where there had been a score, there were now five hundred!

Kay ran back to his plane, leaped in, and soared southward. His face was a grotesque mask of madness, and his cries rang out through the ether.

The victims were no longer chained to stakes. The Federation, which always acted with complete secrecy, had gone one better. It had engaged electrical engineers, kept them housed in secret places, transported them to Golgotha; and there a vast electrified field had been established, an open space whose boundaries were marked out by pillars of electron steel.

Between these pillars ran lines of electric force. To attempt to pass them meant – not death, for dead boys and girls were spurned by the devils – but a violent shock that hurled one backward.

On this great plain the hundred thousand victims sat huddled in the open. Food they had none, for no purpose was to be served by mitigating their last agonies. No shelter either, for the sight of buildings might delay the final phase. But high above the doomed there floated the flag of the Federation, on a lofty pole, a touch of ironic sentimentality that had commended itself to some mind at Washington.

Over a square mile of territory, ringed with jungle the victims lay. The majority of them ringed this terrain; that is to say, attempting to escape, they had been hurled back by the electrical charge, and, having no strength or will remaining, they had dropped where they had been hurled, and lay in apathetic resignation.

There had been screams and cries for mercy, and piteous scenes when the Government airships had deposited them there and flown away, but now an intense silence had descended upon the doomed. Resigned to their fate, they sat or lay in little silent groups, all eyes turned toward the gloomy jungle.

And everywhere within this jungle a wraith-like mist was forming at this dawn hour. From a thousand miles around, the devils were mustering for their prey, agglutinating, in order that the meal of one might become the meal of all.

Wisps of protoplasmic fog were stealing out through the trees, changing shape every instant, but always advancing: now presenting the appearance of an aligned regiment of huge, shadowy men, now nothing but a wall of semi-solid vapor. And still, with eyeballs straining in their sockets, the victims watched.

Suddenly all were seized with the same spasm of mad terror. Again they hurled themselves against the electrified lines, and again they were hurled back, masses of boys and girls tumbling against one another, and screaming in one wail that, could it have been heard in Washington, would have driven all insane. Again and again, till they fell back, panting and helpless. And solidly the wall of devils was creeping up from every side.

Ruth Deane, one of the few who had themselves in control, lay some distance back from the electrified field. From the moment when she was surprised in her apartment by the Government representatives, she had known that there was no hope of escape.

She had slipped the ring off her finger, snapped the plastic metal, and attached it to a thread torn from her dress. She had managed to insert it in the door, hoping that Kay would find it. It would serve as a last message of love to him.

Every removal of a selected victim was in the nature of a kidnapping. At dead of night her apartment had been opened. She had been ordered to dress. Nothing could be written, no arrangements made. She was already considered as one dead.

She had been hurried out of the upper entrance to the monorail, which conveyed her in a special car to the landing station. A few minutes later she had been on her way to join the camp of other victims, a hundred miles away. Within two hours she was on her way southward.

Stunned by the tragedy, none of the victims had made much of an outcry. They had been given water by the airship police. No food for boys and girls already dead. Days and nights had passed, and now she was here, faint from exhaustion, and wondering at the despair shown by those others. What difference would it make in half an hour? Besides, that Government pamphlet had insisted that this death was painless!

But an immense longing to see Kay once more came over her. There had been a time when she thought she loved Cliff; then Kay had come into her life, and she had known that other affair was folly. She had never told Kay of the bitter scene between Cliff and herself, how he had raved against Kay and sworn to win her in the end.

Cliff had calmed down and apologized, and Ruth had never seen him again. She wished he had not taken it like that. But above all she wanted to see Kay, just to say good-by.

And she tried to send out her whole heart to him in an unspoken message of love that would surely somehow convey itself to him.

The wall of devils was creeping up on every side, slowly, lethargically. The monsters took their time, because they knew they were invincible. The sobs and shrieks had died away. Collected into a mass almost as rigid as that of the Earth Giants, the victims waited, palsied as a rabbit that awaits the approach of the serpent.

A humming overhead. An airplane shooting down from the sky. Rescue? No. Only a solitary pilot, armed with a woodsman's ax.

Kay drifted down, touched ground, leaped to his feet. Chance had brought him within five hundred yards of where Ruth was standing. But Ruth had known who that lone flyer must be. She broke through the throng; she rushed to meet him. Her arms were around him.

"Kay, darling Kay!"

"Ruth, dearest!"

"I knew you'd come."

"I've come to die beside you!"

It was perhaps odd that it did not enter the head of either as a possibility that Kay should simply place Ruth in the plane and fly away with her to safety. Had the thought occurred to Kay, he might have been tempted. But such black treachery was something inconceivable by either. So long as the Federation remained, so long as man moved in an organized society, he was bound to his fellows, to fight, suffer, and die with them.

"Stand by me, Ruth. We're going down fighting."

They moved back toward the throng, which, momentarily stirred to hope by Kay's appearance, had fallen into the former apathy of despair. And now the monsters were beginning to enter the electrified zone at one point. As they passed the line of posts, the high tension current made their bodies luminous, but it had no appreciable effect upon them. They moved on, inevitably.

A score or so of semi-human forms, agglutinated into a mass, and yet individually discernible. They bore down slowly upon the crowd of victims, who pressed backward as they advanced. On the other sides, though they almost encircled the field of death, the monsters were making no maneuvers to entrap their prey. Their sluggish minds were incapable of conceiving anything of the kind. But for the electrified zone, the great majority of the victims could have effected their escape. The monsters were simply pressing forward to their meal; they did not interpret its capture in terms of strategy at all.

A new frenzy of horror seized the crowd. They fled, struggling back until the foremost in flight reached the other side of Golgotha, to be repulsed by the electrified zone there. They fell in tumbled heaps. Appalling shrieks rang through the air.

Another line of the monsters was seeping forward, converging toward the first. As the two lines met, they coalesced into a wall of protoplasm, a thousand feet in length by a hundred high. A wall out of which leered phantasmal faces, like those in a frieze.

Kay stood alone, his arm around Ruth. To follow the flying mob would but prolong the agony. He raised the ax. He looked into the girl's eyes. She understood, and nodded.

One last embrace, one kiss, and Kay placed her behind him. He sprang forward, shouting, and plunged into the very heart of the wall.

And Ruth, watching with eyes dilated with horror, saw it yield with a sucking sound, and saw Kay disappear within it.

She saw the hideous mass fold itself upon him, and a hundred extruded tentacles wave in the air as they blindly grappled for him. And then Kay had broken through, and was hewing madly with great sweeps of the ax that slashed great streamers of the amorphous tissue from the wall of protoplasm.

It recoiled and then folded once more, and Kay's mighty sweeps were slashing phantom limbs from phantom bodies; and lopping off tentacles that curled and coiled, and put forth caricatures of hands and fingers, and then, uniting with other slashed off tentacles, began to mould themselves into the likeness of dwarf monsters. Kay's struggle was like that of a man fighting a fog, for again and again he broke through the wall, and always it reunited.

And behind it another wall of protoplasm was pressing forward, and on another side a wall was drifting up. As Kay stopped, panting, and momentarily free, Ruth saw that they were almost encircled.

She saw the nature of that fight. Inevitably that wall would close about them; and, though the bones of last year's victims had been gathered up and carried away by the Federation, she guessed what would occur.

She ran to Kay and dragged him back through the closing gap. It met behind them, and again they stood face to face with the devils. Only this time, instead of a wall of protoplasm, it was a veritable mountain that confronted them, and there could be no more breaking through.

Kay thought afterward that the one touch of absolute horror was that the reforming monsters, the young ones growing visibly before his eyes, had the gamboling instinct of young lambs or other creatures. They were much more lively than the parent creatures.

By this time perhaps a third of the space within the electrified lines had been occupied by the devils. The wall was slowly and sluggishly advancing, and a fresh infiltration was drifting in on another side. As the victims were pressed closer and closer together in their flight, half of them seemed to go insane. They raced to and fro, laughing and screaming, flinging their arms aloft in extravagant gestures. One young fellow, rushing across the ground, hurled himself like a bolt from a catapult into the heart of the grisly mass, which opened and received him.

There was a struggle, a convulsion; then the mass moved on.

Kay wiped his ax. He stood beside Ruth, gathering strength and breath to fight again. What else was there to do?

Suddenly a humming sound came to his ears. Still some little distance from the monsters, he glanced back. The victims were shouting, staring upward. Over the tops of the jungle trees Kay saw a second airplane flying toward them, a larger one than the plane which he had flown.

It opened its helicopter wings and drifted downward. Kay saw a single pilot, and, in the baggage compartment something that at first he did not recognize. Then he recognized both this object and the aviator.

"It's Cliff," he whispered hoarsely. "He's brought the top!"

The crowd was milling about Cliff as he stepped out of the plane. Kay broke through their midst, shouting to them to clear a space, that it was their chance, their only chance. They heard him and obeyed. And Cliff and Kay clasped hands, and there was Ruth beside them.

The two men carried the top out of the baggage compartment and set it up.

"Thank God I came in time," Cliff hissed. "How long have we got, Kay?"

"Five minutes, I think," Kay answered, glancing at the oncoming wall. "They're slow. Will it work, Cliff? God, when I found you'd gone last night – "

Cliff did not answer. Ignoring Kay's offer of assistance, he fitted the top tightly into its socket of craolite, much heavier than the former one. Beneath this, three heavy craolite legs formed a sort of tripod.

"I looked forward to this possibility, Kay," said Cliff, as he adjusted the top and turned the clamps that held it in position. "Sorry I had to deceive you, but you we're so set on the cosmic rays, and I knew the psenium emanations wouldn't appeal to you. You wouldn't have believed. I had a hunch Ruth would draw one of those numbers... *How long?*"

The swaying masses of gray jelly were very near them. Cliff worked feverishly at the top.

"Let me help. Cliff!"

"No! I'm through! Stand back!" shouted Cliff.

Even then – he regretted it afterward, and knew that he would regret it to his dying day – even then the thought flashed through Kay's mind that Cliff wanted all the glory. Behind him the milling, screaming crowd was huddling, as if for protection. Slowly a wisp-like tentacle protruded from the advancing wall. Kay swung his ax and lopped it from the phantom body. But the wall was almost upon them, and from the other side it was advancing rapidly.

"I'm ready! Stand back!" Cliff turned upon Kay, his face white, his voice hoarse. "I've one request to make, Kay. Keep everybody back, including you and Ruth. Nobody is to come within twenty-five yards of this machine!"

"That shall be done," said Kay, a little bitterness in his tone.

"Ruth, I think I'm going to save you all." Cliff looked into the girl's face for a moment. "Please stand back twenty-five yards," he repeated.

Kay took Ruth by the arm and drew her back. The crowd moved back, their pressure moving back the vast multitudes behind them. The vast mob was almost packed into the quarter of the Golgotha; there was scarcely room to move.

Kay saw Cliff press the lever.

Slowly the giant top began to whirl. Faster ... faster ... Now it was revolving so fast that it had become totally invisible. But Cliff was almost surrounded by the wall of jelly. Only his back could be seen, and then space was narrowing fast.

Kay gripped Ruth's arm tightly. He held his breath. The crowd, of whom only a small part knew what was taking place, was screaming with terror as the mass of jelly on the other side pressed them inexorably backward. And Cliff had almost vanished. Would the machine work? Was it possible that the psenium emanations would succeed where the Millikan rays, the W-ray had failed?

Then of a sudden the air grew dark as night. Kay began to sneeze. He gasped for air. He was choking. He could see nothing, and he strained Ruth to him convulsively, while the terrified multitudes behind him set up a last wail of despair.

He could see nothing, and he stood with the ax ready for the onset of the monsters, more terrible now, in their invisibility, than before. Then of a sudden there sounded subterranean rumblings. The ground seemed to open almost under Kay's feet.

He leaped back, dragging Ruth with him. Slowly the dust was settling, the darkness lessening. A faint, luminous glow overhead revealed the sun. Kay was aware that Cliff had swung the top, so that the psenium rays were being brought to bear upon the second mass of the monsters on the other side.

The sun vanished in appalling blackness. Again the dust-choked air was almost unbreathable. The shrieks of the crowd died away in wheezing gasps; and then a wilder clamor began.

"The earthquake! The earthquake!" a girl was shrilling. "God help us all!"

Kay stood still, clutching Ruth tightly in his arms. He dared not stir, for all the world seemed to be dissolving into chaos.

Slowly the dust began to settle again. Perhaps five minutes passed before the sunbeams began to struggle through. A cloud of grey dust still obscured everything. But the wall of protoplasm was gone!

Cliff's voice came moaning out of the murk, calling Kay's name.

Kay moved forward cautiously, still holding Ruth. He seemed to be skirting the edge of a vast crater. At the edge of it he found the top, revolving slowly. And Cliff's voice came from beside the top.

"Kay, we've won. Don't look at me. Don't let Ruth see me! Look down!"

Kay looked down into the bottomless pit, extending clear across the plain to the distant jungle. An enormous canyon cloven in the earth, filled with the slowly settling cloud of dust.

"They're there, Kay. Don't look this way!"

But Kay looked – and could see nothing except a pile of debris, from the bottom of which Cliff's voice issued.

"Cliff, you're not hurt?"

"A – a little. You must listen while I tell you how to clean up the monsters. It's the psenium emanation. It has the same effect when our method is applied to it. It disintegrates everything inorganic – not organic.

"I thought, if I couldn't get them, I'd crumble the earth away – bury them. They're underneath the debris, Kay, a mile deep, buried, beneath the impalpable powder that represented the inorganic salts and minerals of the earth. They'll never get out of that. Protoplasm needs oxygen. They'll trouble us no more.

"You must take the top, Kay. Use our old method. You'll find its application to the psenium emanation written in a book fastened beneath the hood. Wipe out the rest of them. If any more come, you'll know how to deal with them."

"Cliff, you're not badly hurt?" Kay asked again.

"Don't look, I tell you! Keep Ruth away!"

But the dust was settling fast, and suddenly Ruth uttered a scream of fear.

And a strangled cry broke from Kay's throat as he looked down at what had been Cliff Hynes.

The man seemed to have become resolved into the same sort of protoplasm as the Earth Giants. He lay, a little heap, incredibly small, incredibly distorted. Flesh without bones, shapeless lumps of flesh where arms and legs and body frame should have been.

Cliff's voice came faintly. "You remember the leakage through the rubber and anelektron container, Kay. The W-rays even fused the craolite socket. The psenium rays are stronger. They destroy even bone. They're fatal to the man who operates the machine, unless he follows the directions. I've written them out for you, but I had – no time – to apply them."

His voice broke off. Then, "Good luck to you and – Ruth, Kay," he whispered, absent inaudibly. "Don't let – her – look at me."

Kay led Ruth gently away. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, sobbing. "He died to save us Kay."

It was like a return from the grave for the amazed boys and girls who – since the onset of the monsters had destroyed the electric lines – poured out of the plain of Golgotha to life and freedom.

Many of them had gone mad, a few had died of fright, but the rest would come back to normal, and the world was saved.

Hunger was their greatest problem, for, despite Kay's hurried flight to the nearest occupied post, it was difficult to convince the Federation officials that the devils were really gone, buried beneath a mile of crumbled earth. And Kay had to be back to mop up other, smaller bands that had spread through the forests.

It was six months before the last of the monsters had been obliterated, and then Kay, now one of the highest officials in the Federation's service, was granted a lunarian's leave of absence pending his taking command of an Antarctic expedition for the purpose of destroying the remaining monsters in their lair.

He took this opportunity to be married to Ruth, in the church in his native town, which was *en fête* for the occasion.

"Thinking of Cliff?" Kay asked his bride, as she settled in his plane preparatory to their starting for the honeymoon in the Adirondacks. "I think he would be happy if he knew. He saved the world, dear; he gave his best. And that was all he wanted."

The Pirate Planet

BEGINNING A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Charles W. Diffin

Like rats in a cage, the planes of the 91st Squadron were darting and whirling.

CHAPTER I

Lieutenant McGuire threw open his coat with its winged insignia of the air force and leaned back in his chair to read more comfortably the newspaper article.

A strange light blinks on Venus, and over old Earth hovers a mysterious visitant – dread harbinger of interplanetary war.

He glanced at Captain Blake across the table. The captain was deep in a game of solitaire, but he looked up at McGuire's audible chuckle.

"Gay old girl!" said Lieutenant McGuire and smoothed the paper across his knees. "She's getting flirtatious."

The captain swore softly as he gathered up his cards. "Not interested," he announced; "too hot to-night. Keep her away."

"Oh, she's far enough away," McGuire responded; "about seventy million miles. Don't get excited."

"What are you talking about?" The captain shuffled his cards irritably.

"Venus. She's winking at us, the old reprobate. One of these star-gazers up on Mount Lawson saw the flashes a week or so ago. If you'll cut out your solitaire and listen, I'll read you something to improve your mind." He ignored the other's disrespectful remark and held the paper closer to see the paragraphs.

"Is Venus Signalling?" inquired the caption which Lieutenant McGuire read. "Professor Sykes of Mt. Lawson Observatory Reports Flashes.

"The planet Venus, now a brilliant spectacle in the evening sky, is behaving strangely according to a report from the local observatory on Mount Lawson. This sister star, most like Earth of all the planets, is now at its eastern elongation, showing like a half-moon in the big telescopes on Mt. Lawson. Shrouded in impenetrable clouds, its surface has never been seen, but something is happening there. Professor Sykes reports seeing a distinct flash of light upon the terminator, or margin of light. It lasted for several seconds and was not repeated.

"No explanation of the phenomenon is offered by scientists, as conditions on the planet's surface are unknown. Is there life there? Are the people of Venus trying to communicate? One guess is as good as another. But it is interesting to recall that our scientists recently proposed to send a similar signal from Earth to Mars by firing a tremendous flare of magnesium.

"Venus is now approaching the earth; she comes the nearest of all planets. Have the Venusians penetrated their cloak of cloud masses with a visible light? The planet will be watched with increased interest as it swings toward us in space, in hope of there being a repetition of the unexplained flash."

"There," said Lieutenant McGuire, " – doesn't that elevate your mind? Take it off this infernally hot night? Carry you out through the cool reaches of interplanetary space? If there is anything else you want to know, just ask me."

"Yes," Captain Blake agree, "there is. I want to know how the game came out back in New York – and you don't know that. Let's go over and ask the radio man. He probably has the dope."

"Good idea," said McGuire; "maybe he has picked up a message from Venus; we'll make a date." He looked vainly for the brilliant star as they walked out into the night. There were clouds of fog from the nearby Pacific drifting high overhead. Here and there stars showed momentarily, then were blotted from sight.

The operator in the radio room handed the captain a paper with the day's scores from the eastern games. But Lieutenant McGuire, despite his ready amusement at the idea, found his thoughts clinging to the words he had read. "Was the planet communicating?" he pictured the great globe – another Earth – slipping silently through space, coming nearer and nearer.

Did they have radio? he wondered. Would they send recognizable signals – words – or some mathematical sequence to prove their reality? He turned to the radio operator on duty.

"Have you picked up anything peculiar," he asked, and laughed inwardly at himself for the asking. "Any new dots and dashes? The scientists say that Venus is calling. You'll have to be learning a new code."

The man glanced at him strangely and looked quickly away.

"No, sir," he said. And added after a pause: "No new dots and dashes."

"Don't take that stuff too seriously, Mac," the captain remonstrated. "The day of miracles is past; we don't want to commit you to the psychopathic ward. Now here is something real: the Giants won, and I had ten dollars on them. How shall we celebrate?"

The radio man was listening intently as they started to leave. His voice was hesitating as he stopped them; he seemed reluctant to put his thoughts into words.

"Just a minute, sir," he said to Captain Blake.

"Well?" the captain asked. And again the man waited before he replied. Then —

"Lieutenant McGuire asked me," he began, "if I had heard any strange dots and dashes. I have not; but ... well, the fact is, sir, that I have been getting some mighty queer sounds for the past few nights. They've got me guessing.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting. Captain; they're about due now – " He listened again to some signal inaudible to the others, then hooked up two extra head-sets for the officers.

"It's on now," he said. "If you don't mind – "

McGuire grinned at the captain as they took up the ear-phones. "Power of suggestion," he whispered, but the smile was erased from his lips as he listened. For in his ear was sounding a weird and wailing note.

No dots or dashes, as the operator had said, but the signal was strong. It rose and fell and wavered into shrill tremolos, a ghostly, unearthly sound, and it kept on and on in a shrill despairing wail. Abruptly it stopped.

The captain would have removed the receiver from his ear, but the operator stopped him. "Listen," he said, "to the answer."

There was silence, broken only by an occasional hiss and crackle of some far distant mountain storm. Then, faint as a whisper, came an answering, whistling breath.

It, too, trembled and quavered. It went up – up – to the limit of hearing; then slid down the scale to catch and tremble and again ascend in endless unvarying ups and downs of sound. It was another unbroken, unceasing, but always changing vibration.

"What in thunder is that?" Captain Blake demanded.

"Communication of some sort, I should say," McGuire said slowly, and he caught the operator's eyes upon him in silent agreement.

"No letters," Blake objected; "no breaks; just that screech." He listened again. "Darned if it doesn't almost seem to say something," he admitted.

"When did you first hear this?" he demanded of the radio man.

"Night before last, sir. I did not report it. It seemed too – too – "

"Quite so," said Captain Blake in understanding, "but it is some form of broadcasting on a variable wave; though how a thing like that can make sense – "

"They talk back and forth," said the operator; "all night, most. Notice the loud one and the faint one; two stations sending and answering."

Captain Blake waved him to silence. "Wait – wait!" he ordered. "It's growing louder!"

In the ears of the listening men the noise dropped to a loud grumble; rose to a piercing shriek; wavered and leaped rapidly from note to note. It was increasing; rushing upon them with unbearable sound. The sense of something approaching, driving toward them swiftly, was strong upon Lieutenant McGuire. He tore the head-phones from his ears and rushed to the door. The captain was beside him. Whoever – whatever – was sending that mysterious signal was coming near – but was that nearness a matter of miles or of thousands of miles?

They stared at the stormy night sky above. A moon was glowing faintly behind scudding clouds, and the gray-black of flying shadows formed an opening as they watched, a wind-blown opening like a doorway to the infinity beyond, where, blocking out the stars, was a something that brought a breath-catching shout from the watching men.

Some five thousand feet up in the night was a gleaming ship. There were rows of portholes that shone twinkling against the black sky – portholes in multiple rows on the side. The craft was inconceivably huge. Formless and dim of outline in the darkness, its vast bulk was unmistakable.

And as they watched with staring, incredulous eyes, it seemed to take alarm as if it sensed the parting of its concealing cloud blanket. It shot with dizzy speed and the roar of a mighty meteor straight up into the night. The gleam of its twinkling lights merged to a distant star that dwindled, shrank and vanished in the heights.

The men were wordless and open-mouthed. They stared at each other in disbelief of what their eyes had registered.

"A liner!" gasped Captain Blake. "A – a – liner! Mac, there is no such thing."

McGuire pointed where the real cause of their visitor's departure appeared. A plane with engine wide open came tearing down through the clouds. It swung in a great spiral down over the field and

dropped a white flare as it straightened away; then returned for the landing. It taxied at reckless speed toward the hangars and stopped a short distance from the men. The pilot threw himself out of the cockpit and raced drunkenly toward them.

"Did you see it?" he shouted, his voice a cracked scream. "Did you see it?"

"We saw it," said Captain Blake; "yes, we saw it. Big as – " He sought vainly for a proper comparison, then repeated his former words: "Big as an ocean liner!"

The pilot nodded; he was breathing heavily.

"Any markings?" asked his superior. "Anything to identify it?"

"Yes, there were markings, but I don't know what they mean. There was a circle painted on her bow and marks like clouds around it, but I didn't have time to see much. I came out of a cloud, and there the thing was. I was flying at five thousand, and they hung there dead ahead. I couldn't believe it; it was monstrous; tremendous. Then they sighted me, I guess, and they up-ended that ship in mid-air and shot straight up till they were out of sight."

It was the captain's turn to nod mutely.

"There's your miracle," said Lieutenant McGuire softly.

"Miracle is right," agreed Captain Blake; "nothing less! But it is no miracle of ours, and I am betting it doesn't mean any good to us. Some other country has got the jump on us."

To the pilot he ordered: "Say nothing of this – not a word – get that? Let me have a written report: full details, but concise as possible."

He went back to the radio room, and the operator there received the same instructions.

"What are you going to do?" the lieutenant questioned.

Captain Blake was reaching for a head-set. "Listen in," he said briefly; "try to link up that impossible ship with those messages, then report at once to the colonel and whoever he calls in. I'll want you along, Mac, to swear I am sober."

He had a head-set adjusted, and McGuire took up the other. Again the room was still, and again from the far reaches of space the dark night sent to them its quavering call.

The weird shrillness cried less loudly now, and the men listened in strained silence to the go and come of that variable shriek. Musical at times as it leaped from one clear note to another, again it would merge into discordant blendings of half-tones that sent shivers of nervous reaction up the listeners' spines.

"Listen," said McGuire abruptly. "Check me on this. There are two of them, one loud and one faint – right?"

"Right," said Captain Blake.

"Now notice the time intervals – there! The faint one stops, and the big boy cuts in immediately. No waiting; he answers quickly. He does it every time."

"Well?" the captain asked.

"Listen when he stops and see how long before the faint one answers. Call the loud one the ship and the faint one the station... There! The ship is through!"

There was pause; some seconds elapsed before the answer that whispered so faintly in their ears came out of the night.

"You are right, sir," the operator said in corroboration of McGuire's remark. "There is that wait every time."

"The ship answers at once," said McGuire; "the station only after a wait."

"Meaning – ?" inquired the captain.

"Meaning, as I take it, that there is time required for the message to go from the ship to the station and for them to reply."

"An appreciable time like that," Captain Blake exclaimed, " – with radio! Why, a few seconds, even, would carry it around the world a score of times!"

Lieutenant McGuire hesitated a moment. "It happens every time," he reminded the captain: "it is no coincidence. And if that other station is out in space – another ship perhaps, relaying the messages to yet others between here and – Venus, let us say..."

He left the thought unfinished. Captain Blake was staring at him as one who beholds a fellow-man suddenly insane. But the look in his eyes changed slowly, and his lips that had been opened in remonstrance came gradually in a firm, straight line.

"Crazy!" he said, but it was apparent that he was speaking as much to himself as to McGuire. "Plumb, raving crazy!.. Yet that ship *did* go straight up out of sight – an acceleration in the upper air beyond anything we know. It might be – " And he, too, stopped at the actual voicing of the wild surmise. He shook his head sharply as if to rid it of intruding, unwelcome thoughts.

"Forget that!" he told McGuire, and repeated it in a less commanding tone. "Forget it, Mac: we've got to render a report to sane men, you and I. What we know will be hard enough for them to believe without any wild guesses.

"That new craft is real. It has got it all over us for size and speed and potential offensive action. Who made it? Who mans it? Red Russia? Japan? That's what the brass hats will be wondering; that's what they will want to find out.

"Not a word!" he repeated to the radio man. "You will keep mum on this."

He took McGuire with him as he left to seek out his colonel. But it was a disturbed and shaken man, instead of the cool, methodical Captain Blake of ordinary days, who went in search of his commanding officer. And he clung to McGuire for corroboration of his impossible story.

There was a group of officers to whom Blake made his full report. Colonel Boynton had heard but little when he halted his subordinate curtly and reached for a phone. And his words over that instrument brought a quick conference of officers and a quiet man whom McGuire did not recognize. The "brass hats," as Blake had foreseen, were avid for details.

The pilot of the incoming plane was there, too, and the radio man. Their stories were told in a disconcerting silence, broken only by some officer's abrupt and skeptical question on one point and another.

"Now, for heaven's sake, shut up about Venus," McGuire had been told. But he did not need Captain Blake's warning to hold himself strictly to what he had seen and let the others draw their own conclusions.

Lieutenant McGuire was the last one to speak. There was silence in the office of Colonel Boynton as he finished, a silence that almost echoed from the grim walls. And the faces of the men who gathered there were carefully masked from any expression that might betray their thoughts.

It was the quiet man in civilian attire who spoke first. He sat beside another whose insignia proclaimed him of general's rank, but he addressed himself to Colonel Boynton.

"I am very glad," he said quietly, "very glad. Colonel, that my unofficial visit came at just this time. I should like to ask some few questions."

Colonel Boynton shifted the responsibility with a gesture almost of relief. "It is in your hands. Mr. Secretary," he said. "You and General Clinton have dropped in opportunely. There is something here that will tax all our minds."

The man in civilian clothes nodded assent. He turned to Captain Blake.

"Captain," he said, "you saw this at first hand. You have told us what you saw. I should like greatly to know what you think. Will you give us your opinion, your impressions?"

The captain arose smartly, but his words came with less ease.

"My opinion," he stated, "will be of little value, but it is based upon these facts. I have seen to-night, sir, a new type of aircraft, with speed, climb and ceiling beyond anything we are capable of. I can only regard it as a menace. It may or may not have been armed, but it had the size to permit the armament of a cruiser; it had power to carry that weight. It hung stationary in the air, so it is independent of wing-lift, yet it turned and shot upward like a feather in a gale. That spells maneuverability.

"That combination, sir, can mean only that we are out-flown, out-maneuvered and out-fought in the air. It means that the planes in our hangars are obsolete, our armament so much old iron.

"The menace is potential at present. Whether it is an actual threat or not is another matter. Who mans that ship – what country's insignia she carries – is something on which I can have no opinion. The power is there: who wields it I wish we knew."

The questioner nodded at the conclusion of Blake's words, and he exchanged quiet, grave glances with the general beside him. Then —

"I think we all would wish to know that, Captain Blake," he observed. And to the colonel: "You may be able to answer that soon. It would be my idea that this craft should be – ah – drawn out, if we can do it. We would not attack it, of course, until its mission is proved definitely unfriendly, but you will resist any offensive from them.

"And now," he added, "let us thank these officers for their able reports and excuse them. We have much to discuss..."

Captain Blake took McGuire's arm as they went out into the night. And he drew him away where they walked for silent minutes by themselves. The eyes of Lieutenant McGuire roamed upward to the scudding clouds and the glimpse of far, lonely stars; he stumbled occasionally as he walked. But for Captain Blake there was thought only of matters nearby.

"The old fox!" he exclaimed. "Didn't he 'sic us on' neatly? If we mix it with that stranger there will be no censure from the Secretary of War."

"I assumed that was who it was," said McGuire. "Well, they have something to think about, that bunch; something to study over... Perhaps more than they know.

"And that's their job," he concluded after a silence. "I'm going to bed; but I would like a leave of absence to-morrow if that's O. K."

"Sure," said Captain Blake, "though I should think you would like to stick around. Perhaps we will see something. What's on your mind, Mac?"

"A little drive to the top of Mount Lawson," said Lieutenant McGuire. "I want to talk to a bird named Sykes."

CHAPTER II

Lieutenant McGuire, U. S. A., was not given as a usual thing to vain conjectures, nor did his imagination carry him beyond the practical boundaries of accepted facts. Yet his mind, as he drove for hours through the orange-scented hills of California, reverted time and again to one persistent thought. And it was with him still, even when he was consciously concentrating on the hairpin turns of Mount Lawson's narrow road.

There was a picture there, printed indelibly in his mind – a picture of a monstrous craft, a liner of the air, that swung its glowing lights in a swift arc and, like a projectile from some huge gun, shot up and up and still up until it vanished in a jet-black sky. Its altitude when it passed from sight he could not even guess, but the sense of ever-increasing speed, of power that mocked at gravitation's puny force, had struck deep into his mind. And McGuire saw plainly this mystery ship going on and on far into the empty night where man had never been.

No lagging in that swift flight that he had seen; an acceleration that threw the ship faster and yet faster, regardless of the thin air and the lessened buoyancy in an ocean of atmosphere that held man-made machines so close to Earth. That constant acceleration, hour after hour, day after day – the speed would be almost unlimited; inconceivable!

He stopped his car where the mountain road held straight for a hundred feet, and he looked out over the coastal plain spread like a toy world far below.

"Now, how about it?" he asked himself. "Blake thinks I am making a fool of myself. Perhaps I am. I wonder. It's a long time since I fell for any fairy stories. But this thing has got me. A sort of hunch, I guess."

The sun was shining now from a vault of clear blue. It was lighting a world of reality, of houses where people lived their commonplace lives, tiny houses squared off in blocks a mile below. There was smoke here and there from factories; it spread in a haze, and it meant boilers and engines and sound practical machinery of a practical world to the watching man.

What had all this to do with Venus? he asked himself. This was the world he knew. It was real; space was impenetrable; there were no men or beings of any sort that could travel through space. Blake was right: he was on a fool's errand. They couldn't tell him anything up here at the observatory; they would laugh at him as he deserved...

Wondering vaguely if there was a place to turn around, he looked ahead and then up; his eyes passed from the gash of roadway on the mountainside to the deep blue beyond. And within the man some driving, insistent, mental force etched strongly before his eyes that picture and its problem unanswered. There was the ship – he saw it in memory – and it went up and still up; and he knew as surely as if he had guided the craft that the meteor-like flight could be endless.

Lieutenant McGuire could not reason it out – such power was beyond his imagining – but suddenly he dared to believe, and he knew it was true.

"Earthbound!" he said in contempt of his own human kind, and he looked again at the map spread below. "Ants! Mites! That's what we are – swarming across the surface of the globe. And we think we're so damn clever if we lift ourselves up a few miles from the surface!"

"Guess I'll see Sykes," he muttered aloud. "He and his kind at least dare to look out into space; take their eyes off the world; be impractical!"

He swung the car slowly around the curve ahead, eased noiselessly into second gear and went on with the climb.

There were domed observatories where he stopped: rounded structures that gleamed silvery in the air; and offices, laboratories: it was a place of busy men. And Professor Sykes, he found, was busy. But he spared a few minutes to answer courteously the questions of this slim young fellow in the khaki uniform of the air service.

"What can I do for you?" asked Professor Sykes.

"No dreamer, this man," thought McGuire as he looked at the short, stocky figure of the scientist. Clear eyes glanced sharply from under shaggy brows; there were papers in his hand scrawled over with strange mathematical symbols.

"You can answer some fool questions," said Lieutenant McGuire abruptly, "if you don't mind."

The scientist smiled broadly. "We're used to that," he told the young officer; "you can't think of any worse ones than those we have heard. Have a chair."

McGuire drew a clipping from his pocket – it was the newspaper account he had read – and he handed it to Professor Sykes.

"I came to see you about this," he began.

The lips of Professor Sykes lost their genial curve; they straightened to a hard line. "Nothing for publication," he said curtly. "As usual they enlarged upon the report and made assumptions and inferences not warranted by facts."

"But you did see that flash?"

"By visual observation I saw a bright area formed on the terminator – yes! We have no photographic corroboration."

"I am wondering what it meant."

"That is your privilege – and mine," said the scientist coldly.

"But it said there," McGuire persisted, "that it might have been a signal of some sort."

"I did not say so: that is an inference only. I have told you, Lieutenant" – he glanced at the card in his hand – " – Lieutenant McGuire – all that I know. We deal in facts up here, and we leave the brilliant theorizing to the journalists."

The young officer felt distinctly disconcerted. He did not know exactly what he had expected from this man – what corroboration of his wild surmises – but he was getting nowhere, he admitted. And he resented the cold aloofness of the scientist before him.

"I am not trying to pin you down on anything," he said, and his tone carried a hint of the nervous strain that had been his. "I am trying to learn something."

"Just what?" the other inquired.

"Could that flash have been a signal?"

"You may think so if you wish: I have told you all that I know. And now," he added, and rose from his chair, "I must ask to be excused; I have work to do."

McGuire came slowly to his feet. He had learned nothing; perhaps there was nothing to be learned. A fool's errand! Blake was right. But the inner urge for some definite knowledge drove him on. His eyes were serious and his face drawn to a scowl of earnestness as he turned once more to the waiting man.

"Professor Sykes," he demanded, "just one more question. Could that have been the flash of a – a rocket? Like the proposed experiments in Germany. Could it have meant in any way the launching of a projectile – a ship – to travel Earthward through space?"

Professor Sykes knew what it was to be harassed by the curious mob, to avoid traps set by ingenious reporters, but he knew, too, when he was meeting with honest bewilderment and a longing for knowledge. His fists were placed firmly on the hips of his stocky figure as he stood looking at the persistent questioner, and his eyes passed from the intent face to the snug khaki coat and the spread wings that proclaimed the wearer's work. A ship out of space – a projectile – this young man had said.

"Lieutenant," he suggested quietly – and again the smile had returned to his lips as he spoke – "sit down. I'm not as busy as I pretend to be. Now tell me: what in the devil have you got in your mind?"

And McGuire told him. "Like some of your dope," he said, "this is not for publication. But I have not been instructed to hush it up, and I know you will keep it to yourself."

He told the clear-eyed, listening man of the previous night's events. Of the radio's weird call and the mystery ship.

"Hallucination," suggested the scientist. "You saw the stars very clearly, and they suggested a ship."

"Tell that to Jim Burgess," said McGuire: "he was the pilot of that plane." And the scientist nodded as if the answer were what he expected.

He asked again about the ship's flight. And he, too, bore down heavily upon the matter of acceleration in the thin upper air. He rose to lay a friendly hand on McGuire's shoulder.

"We can't know what it means," he said, "but we can form our own theories, you and I – and anything is possible.

"It is getting late," he added, "and you have had a long drive. Come over and eat; spend the night here. Perhaps you would like to have a look at our equipment – see Venus for yourself. I will be observing her through the sixty-inch refractor to-night. Would you care to?"

"Would I?" McGuire demanded with enthusiasm. "Say, that will be great!"

The sun was dropping toward the horizon when the two men again came out into the cool mountain air.

"Just time for a quick look around," suggested Professor Sykes, "if you are interested."

He took the lieutenant first to an enormous dome that bulged high above the ground, and admitted him to the dark interior. They climbed a stairway and came out into a room that held a skeleton frame of steel. "This is the big boy," said Professor Sykes, "the one hundred-inch reflector."

There were other workers there, one a man standing upon a raised platform beside the steel frame, who arranged big holders for photographic plates. The slotted ceiling opened as McGuire watched, and the whole structure swung slowly around. It was still, and the towering steel frame began to swing noiselessly when a man at a desk touched various controls. McGuire looked about him in bewilderment.

"Quite a shop," he admitted; "but where is the telescope?"

Professor Sykes pointed to the towering latticework of steel. "Right there," he said. "Like everyone else, you were expecting to see a big tube."

He explained in simple words the operation of the great instrument that brought in light rays from sources millions of light years away. He pointed out where the big mirror was placed – the one hundred-inch reflector – and he traced for the wondering man the pathway of light that finally converged upon a sensitized plate to catch and record what no eye had ever seen.

He checked the younger man's flow of questions and turned him back toward the stairs. "We will leave them to their work," he said; "they will be gathering light that has been traveling millions of years on its ways. But you and I have something a great deal nearer to study."

Another building held the big refractor, and it was a matter of only a few seconds and some cryptic instructions from Sykes until the eye-piece showed the image of the brilliant planet.

"The moon!" McGuire exclaimed in disappointed tones when the professor motioned him to see for himself. His eyes saw a familiar half-circle of light.

"Venus," the professor informed him. "It has phases like the moon. The planet is approaching; the sun's light strikes it from the side." But McGuire hardly heard. He was gazing with all his faculties centered upon that distant world, so near to him now.

"Venus," he whispered half aloud. Then to the professor: "It's all hazy. There are no markings –"

"Clouds," said the other. "The goddess is veiled; Venus is blanketed in clouds. What lies underneath we may never know, but we do know that of all the planets this is most like the earth; most probably is an inhabited world. Its size, its density, your weight if you were there – and the temperature under the sun's rays about double that of ours. Still, the cloud envelope would shield it."

McGuire was fascinated, and his thoughts raced wildly in speculation of what might be transpiring before his eyes. People, living in that tropical world; living and going through their daily routine under that cloud-filled sky where the sun was never seen. The margin of light that made the clear shape of a half-moon marked their daylight and dark; there was one small dot of light forming just beyond that margin. It penetrated the dark side. And it grew, as he watched, to a bright patch.

"What is that?" he inquired abstractedly – his thoughts were still filled with those beings of his imagination. "There is a light that extends into the dark part. It is spreading –"

He found himself thrust roughly aside as Professor Sykes applied a more understanding eye to the instrument.

The professor whirled abruptly to his assistant. "Phone Professor Giles," he said sharply; "he is working on the reflector. Tell him to get a photograph of Venus at once; the cloud envelope is broken." He returned hurriedly to his observations. One hand sketched on a waiting pad.

"Markings!" he said exultantly. "If it would only hold!.. There, it is closing ... gone..."

His hand was quiet now upon the paper, but where he had marked was a crude sketch of what might have been an island. It was "L" shaped; sharply bent.

"Whew!" breathed Professor Sykes and looked up for a moment. "Now that was interesting."

"You saw through?" asked McGuire eagerly. "Glimpsed the surface? – an island?"

The scientist's face relaxed. "Don't jump to conclusions," he told the aviator: "we are not ready to make a geography of Venus quite yet. But we shall know that mark if we ever see it again. I hardly think they had time to get a picture."

"And now there is only a matter of three hours for observation: I must watch every minute. Stay here if you wish. But," he added, "don't let your imagination run wild. Some eruption, perhaps, this we have seen – an ignition of gasses in the upper air – who knows? But don't connect this with

your mysterious ship. If the ship is a menace, if it means war, that is your field of action, not mine. And you will be fighting with someone on Earth. It must be that some country has gained a big lead in aeronautics. Now I must get to work."

"I'll not wait," said McGuire. "I will start for the field; get there by daylight, if I can find my way down that road in the dark."

"Thanks a lot." He paused a moment before concluding slowly: "And in spite of what you say, Professor, I believe that we will have something to get together on again in this matter."

The scientist, he saw, had turned again to his instrument. McGuire picked his way carefully along the narrow path that led where he had parked his car. "Good scout, this Sykes!" he was thinking, and he stopped to look overhead in the quick-gathering dark at that laboratory of the heavens, where Sykes and his kind delved and probed, measured and weighed, and gathered painstakingly the messages from suns beyond counting, from universe out there in space that added their bit of enlightenment to the great story of the mystery of creation.

He was humbly aware of his own deep ignorance as he backed his car, slipped it into second, and began the long drive down the tortuous grade. He would have liked to talk more with Sykes. But he had no thought as he wound round the curves how soon that wish was to be gratified.

Part way down the mountainside he again checked his car where he had stopped on the upward climb and reasoned with himself about his errand. Once more he looked out over the level ground below, a vast glowing expanse of electric lights now, that stretched to the ocean beyond. He was suddenly unthrilled by this man-made illumination, and he got out of his car to stare again at the blackness above and its myriad of stars that gathered and multiplied as he watched.

One brighter than the rest winked suddenly out. There was a constellation of twinkling lights that clustered nearby, and they too vanished. The eyes of the watcher strained themselves to see more clearly a dim-lit outline. There were no lights: it was a black shape, lost in the blackness of the mountain sky, that was blocking out the stars. But it was a shape, and from near the horizon the pale gleams of the rising moon picked it out in softest of outline; a vague ghost of a curve that reflected a silvery contour to the watching eyes below.

There had been a wider space in the road that McGuire had passed; he backed carefully till he could swing his car and turn it to head once more at desperate speed toward the mountain top. And it was less than an hour since he had left when he was racing back along the narrow footpath to slam open the door where Professor Sykes looked up in amazement at his abrupt return.

The aviator's voice was hoarse with excitement as he shouted: "It's here – the ship! It's here! Where's your phone? – I must call the field! It's right overhead – descending slowly – no lights, but I saw it – I saw it!"

He was working with trembling fingers at the phone where Sykes had pointed. "Long distance!" he shouted. He gave a number to the operator. "Make it quick," he implored. "Quick!"

CHAPTER III

Back at Maricopa Flying Field the daily routine had been disturbed. There were conferences of officers, instructions from Colonel Boynton, and a curiosity-provoking lack of explanations. Only with Captain Blake did the colonel indulge in any discussion.

"We'll keep this under our hats," he said, "and out of the newspapers as long as we can. You can imagine what the yellow journals would do with a scarehead like that. Why, they would have us all wiped off the map and the country devastated by imaginary fleets in the first three paragraphs."

Blake regarded his superior gravely. "I feel somewhat the same way, myself. Colonel," he admitted. "When I think what this can mean – some other country so far ahead of us in air force that we are back in the dark ages – well, it doesn't look any too good to me if they mean trouble."

"We will meet it when it comes," said Colonel Boynton. "But, between ourselves, I am in the same state of mind."

"The whole occurrence is so damn mysterious. Washington hasn't a whisper of information of any such construction; the Secretary admitted that last night. It's a surprise, a complete surprise, to everyone."

"But, Blake, you get that new ship ready as quickly as you can. Prepare for an altitude test the same as we planned, but get into the air the first minute possible. She ought to show a better ceiling than anything we have here, and you may have to fly high to say 'Good morning' to that liner you saw. Put all the mechanics on it that can work to advantage. I think they have it pretty well along now."

"Engine's tested and installed, sir," was Blake's instant report. "I think I can take it up this afternoon."

He left immediately to hurry to the hangar where a new plane stood glistening in pristine freshness, and where hurrying mechanics grumbled under their breaths at the sudden rush for a ship that was expected to take the air a week later.

An altitude test under full load! Well, what of it? they demanded one of another; wouldn't another day do as well as this one? And they worked as they growled, worked with swift sureness and skill, and the final instruments took their place in the ship that she might roll from the hangar complete under that day's sun.

Her supercharger was tested – the adjunct to a powerful engine that would feed the hungry cylinders with heavy air up in the heights where the air is thin; there were oxygen flasks to keep life in the pilot in the same thin air. And the hot southern sun made ludicrous that afternoon the bulky, heavily-wrapped figure of Captain Blake as he sat at the controls and listened approvingly to the roaring engine.

He waved good-by and smiled understandingly as he met the eyes of Colonel Boynton; then pulled on his helmet, settled himself in his seat and took off in a thunderous blast of sound to begin his long ascent.

He had long since cracked open the valve of his oxygen flask when the climb was ended, and his goggles were frosted in the arctic cold so that it was only with difficulty he could read his instrument board.

"That's the top," he thought in that mind so light and so curiously not his own. He throttled the engine and went into a long spiral that was to end within a rod of where he had started on the brown sun-baked field. The last rays of the sun were slanting over distant mountains as he climbed stiffly from the machine.

"Better than fifty thousand," exulted Colonel Boynton. "Of course your barograph will have to be calibrated and verified, but it looks like a record, Blake – and you had a full load.

"Ready to go up and give merry hell to that other ship if she shows up?" he asked. But Captain Blake shook a dubious head.

"Fifty thousand is just a start for that bird," he said. "You didn't see them shoot out of sight, Colonel. Lord knows when they quit *their* climb – or where."

"Well, we'll just have a squadron ready in any event," the colonel assured him. "We will make him show his stuff or take a beating – if that is what he wants."

They were in the colonel's office. "You had better go and get warmed up," he told the flyer: "then come back here for instructions." But Blake was more anxious for information than for other comforts.

"I'm all right," he said: "just tired a bit. Let me stretch out here, Colonel, and give me the dope on what you expect of our visitor and what we will do."

He settled back comfortably in a big chair. The office was warm, and Blake knew now he had been doing a day's work.

"We will just take it as it comes," Colonel Boynton explained. "I can't for the life of me figure why the craft was spying around here. What are they looking for? We haven't any big secrets the whole world doesn't know.

"Of course he may not return. But if he does I want you to go up and give him the once over. I can trust you to note every significant detail.

"You saw no wings. If it is a dirigible, let's know something of their power and how they can throw themselves up into the air the way you described. Watch for anything that may serve to identify it and its probable place of manufacture – any peculiarity of marking or design or construction that may give us a lead. Then return and report."

Blake nodded his understanding of what was wanted, but his mind was on further contingencies: he wanted definite instructions.

"And," he asked; "if they attack – what then? Is their fire to be returned?"

"If they make one single false move," said Colonel Boynton savagely, "give them everything you've got. And the 91st Squadron will be off the ground to support you at the first sign of trouble. We don't want to start anything, nor appear to do so. But, by the gods, Blake, this fellow means trouble eventually as sure as you're a flyer, and we won't wait for him to ask for it twice."

They sat in silence, while the field outside became shrouded in night. And they speculated, as best they could from the few facts they had, as to what this might mean to the world, to their country, to themselves. It was an hour before Blake was aware of the fact that he was hungry.

He rose to leave, but paused while Colonel Boynton answered the phone. The first startled exclamation held him rigid while he tried to piece together the officer's curt responses and guess at what was being told.

"Colonel Boynton speaking... McGuire?... Yes, Lieutenant... Over Mount Lawson?... Yes – yes, the same ship, I've no doubt."

His voice was even and cool in contrast to the excited tones that carried faintly to Blake standing by.

"Quite right!" he said shortly. "You will remain where you are: act as observer: hold this line open and keep me informed. Captain Blake will leave immediately for observation. A squadron will follow. Let me know promptly what you see."

He turned abruptly to the waiting man.

"It is back!" he said. "We're in luck! Over the observatories at Mount Lawson; descending, so Lieutenant McGuire says. Take the same ship you had up to-day. Look them over – get up close – good luck!" He turned again to the phone.

There were planes rolling from their hangars before Blake could reach his own ship. Their engines were thundering: men were rushing across the field, pulling on leather helmets and coats as they ran – all this while he warmed up his engine.

A mechanic thrust in a package of sandwiches and a thermos of coffee while he waited. And Captain Blake grinned cheerfully and gulped the last of his food as he waved to the mechanics to pull out the wheel blocks. He opened the throttle and shot out into the dark.

He climbed and circled the field, saw the waving motion of lights in red and green that marked the take-off of the planes of the 91st, and he straightened out on a course that in less than two hours would bring him over the heights of Mount Lawson and the mystery that awaited him there. And he fingered the trigger grip that was part of the stick and nodded within his dark cockpit at the rattle of a machine gun that merged its staccato notes with the engine's roar.

But he felt, as he thought of that monster shape, as some primordial man might have felt, setting forth with a stone in his hand to wage war on a saurian beast.

CHAPTER IV

If Colonel Boynton could have stood with one of his lieutenants and Professor Sykes on a mountain top, he would have found, perhaps, the answer to his question. He had wondered in a puzzled fashion why the great ship had shown its mysterious presence over the flying field. He had questioned whether it was indeed the field that had been the object of their attention or whether in the cloudy murk they had merely wandered past. Could he have seen with the eyes of Lieutenant McGuire the descent of the great shape over Mount Lawson, he would have known beyond doubt that here was the magnet that drew the eyes of whatever crew was manning the big craft.

It was dark where the two men stood. Others had come running at their call, but their forms, too, were lost in the shadows of the towering pines. The light from an open door struck across an open space beyond which McGuire and Professor Sykes stood alone, stood silent and spellbound, their heads craned back at a neck-wrenching angle. They were oblivious to all discomforts; their eyes and their whole minds were on the unbelievable thing in the sky.

Beyond the fact that no lights were showing along the hull, there was no effort at concealment. The moon was up now to illumine the scene, and it showed plainly the gleaming cylinder with its long body and blunt, shining ends, dropping, slowly, inexorably down.

"Like a dirigible," said McGuire huskily. "But the size, man – the size! And its shape is not right; it isn't streamlined correctly; the air – " He stopped his half-unconscious analysis abruptly. "The air!" What had this craft to do with the air? A thin layer of gas that hung close to the earth – the skin on an apple! And beyond – space! There was the ethereal ocean in which this great shape swam!

The reality of the big ship, the very substance of it, made the space ship idea the harder to grasp. Lieutenant McGuire found that it was easier to see an imaginary craft taking off into space than to conceive of this monstrous shape, many hundreds of tons in weight, being thrown through vast emptiness. Yet he knew; he knew!

And his mind was a chaos of grim threats and forebodings as he looked at the unbelievable reality and tried to picture what manner of men were watching, peering, from those rows of ports.

At last it was motionless. It hung soundless and silent except for a soft roar, a scant thousand feet in the air. And its huge bulk was dwarfing the giant pines, the rounded buildings; it threw the men's familiar surroundings into a new and smaller scale.

He had many times flown over these mountains, and Lieutenant McGuire had seen the silvery domes of the observatories shining among the trees. Like fortresses for aerial defense, he had thought, and the memory returned to him now. What did these new-comers think of them? Had they, too, found them suggestive of forts on the frontier of a world, defenses against invasion from out there? Or did they know them for what they were? Did they wish only to learn the extent of our knowledge, our culture? Were they friendly, perhaps? – half-timid and fearful of what they might find?

A star moved in the sky, a pin-point of light that was plain in its message to the aviator. It was Blake, flying high, volplaning to make contact and learn from the air what this stranger might mean. The light of his plane slanted down in an easy descent; the flyer was gliding in on a long aerial toboggan slide. His motor was throttled; there was only the whistle of torn air on the monoplane's wings. McGuire was with the captain in his mind, and like him he was waiting for whatever the stranger might do.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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