

SPAWN OF THE COMET

OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

AN ILLUSTRATED PIGGY STORY STUDIO EDITION



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Foreword

AS THE coming of that singular visitor from sidereal space known as the "great comet of 1847" or "Green's comet," has been duly recorded by those whose duty it is to chronicle such events, I will merely mention it in passing. But mention it I must, as it is so unmistakably linked with that menace to all terrestrial life which immediately followed its departure for the cosmic vastnesses, and which came so near to terminating the tenure of mankind on the earth.

It was called "Green's comet," after Sir George Green, the eminent English astronomer who discovered it. Long before it had reached the outer limits of the solar system it blazed with a light that marked it as no ordinary visitor from the interstellar voids.

Indeed, it appeared to have so large and compact a nucleus that scientists feared the entire solar system would be upset by its visit. But when it passed the orbits of the outer planets and relative perturbations were computed, it was found that despite its great size, its mass was not so formidable as to be alarming.

Because it did not develop a tail as it neared the sun, its immense coma—the nebulosity or head, surrounding the nucleus—was thought to consist of millions of small meteoroids, while what had previously been mistaken for the outside surface of a solid nucleus was spectroscopically proven to be the outer limit of an atmosphere quite like our own, but so filled with clouds of vapor that it was impossible to see the nucleus itself.

It was believed that the comet's atmosphere was warmed and the coma made incandescent by the friction of the meteoroids as they passed through its upper atmosphere, and also by the countless thousands of collisions which took place among them.

There was one thing, however, that caused considerable apprehension. Although the earth, so I am informed, once passed through the tail of a comet without injury, astronomers had computed that on its return journey from its circuit of the sun the head of this comet would pass quite near the earth—might even collide with it.

In consequence, certain religious leaders became vociferous in their prophecies regarding the immediate end of the world with attendant fire, brimstone and such fearsome accessories. The tailless comet, surrounded by

that bright, nebulous, translucent coma of huge dimensions, was an exceedingly striking and brilliant spectacle. These prophets of destruction could nightly point to it and thereby gain many followers who garbed themselves in nightgowns and congregated on roof tops, singing psalms and waiting for the fiery chariot to come and taxi them up through the pearly gates.

But, strange to say, though on its return journey from the sun, the comet came within half a million miles of the earth—a very short distance as cosmic space is figured—and for a time looked larger and brighter than the full moon, there were no other signs of its immediate proximity than a few extra storms, earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, and a protracted and exceedingly brilliant meteoric shower.

It was that which followed this sudden and unexpected call of our bright visitor from the silent, star-strewn solitudes, which came so near to causing the end of the world, which, for the human race, amounts to the same thing.

And it is this calamity which I have set myself the task of chronicling in order that future generations may know the truth of the matter from at least one eyewitness.

Richard Perry.

I. — THREADS OF DEATH

I WAS spending the week-end in the country with Sue.

To me, Dick Perry, one of the cave-dwelling desk slaves in Chicago's busy Loop, that was the height of bliss. Sue Davis, the eminent biologist and biochemist, was my fiancée. We were at the Davis country home.

The comet had come and gone, and the earth, as well as all earthly creatures, had settled down to its former more or less well-ordered existence.

It was Saturday forenoon—one of those drowsy, peaceful, pleasant mornings in late July so characteristic of the verdant Mississippi Valley. Sue and I had gone for a stroll on the farm, had crossed a field of nodding, fragrant clover, and had paused where a single huge hackberry tree cast its speckled shade over a small grass plot.

I was lying on my back in the grass and gazing dreamily up into the clear blue sky, while Sue, seated beside me, wove a garland of clover blossoms. Feeling poetic—I was but twenty-two and Sue nineteen—I began to compare the blue eyes with that of the heavens, and the spun gold of her hair with the sunbeams that danced down through the gently waving hackberry leaves, and to compose a verse suited to my mood. But there came a droning sound, louder than that made by the thousands of bees in the clover.

"The mail plane is coming in," said Sue. "Sit up, lazybones, and watch it land. The field is only a mile from here."

As I sat up the unmistakable droning of an airplane grew louder. Looking skyward, I could not see it at first. But I did see something which I had not noticed before—a small, wispy white cloud scudding rapidly northward. Then I saw the plane coming from the west.



It appeared to me that cloud and plane were traveling at about the same speed, and if either changed its velocity or direction, they would meet. Nothing phenomenal in that, of course. I have often seen planes fly through the clouds. But here were the only cloud and the only plane in sight, and it would be interesting, I thought, if they should meet when each had so much open space in which to travel.

As they drew closer together I saw that the cloud was considerably higher than the plane.

"They won't meet, after all," I said, half to myself, half to my fair companion.

But scarcely had the words left my lips ere a strange thing happened. It appeared to me that the cloud, which was roughly disk-shaped with a few ragged streamers beneath, tilted and glided downward toward the level of the plane.

It came to me in the next instant that from our viewpoint the motions of all heavenly objects near the zenith must necessarily be relative—that the plane might have ascended toward the cloud. And yet this would not account for the apparent tilting of the cirrus disk.

Plane and cloud met. For a moment the airplane was completely concealed. But as it emerged once more into view I noticed that it was beginning a steep climb.

"He must be going to loop the loop," I said, but the words had scarcely left my lips when the motor died. It appeared that the pilot had misjudged the amount of speed necessary for the climb and had not opened the throttle enough. The plane appeared to stop for a moment—then fell backward and downward, went into a sideslip, and hurtled groundward, out of control.

Sue gripped my arm and uttered a little scream of terror. We both leaped to our feet just as the ship crashed in a pasture not more than a half mile from where we stood, and about an equal distance from the landing field.

"Oh, how terrible!" Sue exclaimed. "Let's run over and see what we can do. The pilot may not be dead."

"Not one chance in a thousand for that," I answered, "the way he crashed. But we'll hurry over anyway."

We ran across the clover field and climbed the pasture fence.

AS WE neared the wreck we saw three men, evidently from the airport, coming from the other direction. They arrived at the spot when we did.

The plane had struck with one wing down. That wing was partly crumpled by the shock of the collision. The nose was buried in the soft, boggy ground of the pasture, and the fuselage was a twisted wreck. Hanging about it like an invisible aura was a sickening, musty odor—a revolting, charnel scent, as if some ancient grave had been desecrated.

Fearing the effect on Sue of the horrible sight which I felt positive would be revealed, I suggested to her that she look the other way when two of the men from the airport went into the wreck for the remains of the pilot.

But the cries of horror which I expected to hear from the two men did not materialize. Instead, they uttered exclamations of astonishment.

The man who was standing outside the wreck called to one of them:

"What's the matter, Bill?"

"We can't find no sign of a body here," was the reply. "This crate must have been flying without a pilot."

"Maybe Jackson fell out before the crack-up," said the man outside.

"Must have been a long time before, if he did," was the answer, "because I was watching the ship come in, and I'd have seen him if he fell out. Besides, she behaved all right until she passed through the cloud:"

"He might have fallen out in the cloud," said the man outside.

"And then flew away with it? Don't talk foolish."

"Well, anyway, he's not here. Whew! What a smell! Notice it?"

"Notice it! I'm strangling!"

The three men dragged out the mail sacks, shouldered them, and moved off in the direction of the landing field.

Sue and I were turning to go when my attention was attracted by several long, silky bits of what appeared to be hair or thread, caught in the rudder. Puzzled by the presence of material of this sort in so unusual a place, I walked closer to examine it. On nearer inspection it appeared like glossy blond hair of rather coarse texture.

I touched a strand of it with an inquisitive forefinger, and an astounding thing happened. With lightning-like rapidity that part of it which dangled beyond my finger and the rudder to which it was attached, assumed the shape of a spiral spring and jerked my finger toward the rudder.

Automatically I attempted to jerk my finger away. But the effort was unavailing. Despite the apparent flimsiness of the strand which held it, it was bound as tightly to that rudder as if it had been held by a length of piano wire.

The strand, I observed, was caught in a cleft where the wood had split. I had been pulling downward from this point. I pulled a second time, this time upward, and the strand instantly came free, but it was no sooner freed from the crotch than it wrapped its remaining coils around my finger.

"What are you doing?" asked Sue.

"I have discovered something very strange," I replied, showing her my tightly wrapped finger.

"Why, it's nothing but a hair," she said, and attempted to pull it from my finger, which was already beginning to show signs of congested circulation. But she could neither stretch nor break it. And the two ends had, twisted about each other, forming a splice that was as tight and immovable as the other loops.

"Don't touch it!" I warned her, withdrawing my finger. "It's not a hair."

"Then what is it?" she asked, surprised.

"I don't know," I responded, "but something more sinister than you imagine. There are two more hanging on the rudder. Don't go near them. I'll try to get them and take them to your father for examination. Whatever they are, they seem to be endowed with life and an unbelievable amount of strength."

I obtained a dry weed-stalk near by and touched one of the remaining strands with it. To my surprise it did not move, but hung as limp and lifeless as if it had been what it appeared to be—a hair or thread.

Breaking the stalk in two, I caught the two strands between the two pieces of weed-stalk, and turned them until I had enough purchase to pull them from the cleft. I continued to turn them until they were wound around the stalks. Then Sue and I left for the house.

The walk of a mile and a half to the Davis home occupied only twenty-five minutes. But before we had traversed half that distance my finger, which had turned blue and begun to throb unmercifully, started to bleed where the strands surrounded it. These strands, which I was unable to pull off, continued to sink deeper into my flesh as if they slowly contracted, and I was conscious of a burning sensation, as if some powerful corrosive were searing the wound.

Upon entering the house we found Sue's father, Professor Absolom Davis, working in small but excellently equipped experimental laboratory.

A small man with a pointed, iron gray beard, he is scarcely taller than his daughter, who is five feet two. Yet he has always appeared to me as a man of concentrated, dynamic energy. Despite the fact that we had apparently interrupted some intensely engrossing experiment as we burst unceremoniously into his laboratory, he beamed cordially at us through his large, thick-lensed glasses, and exclaimed:

"Well, well! Back so soon? Did you have a pleasant stroll?"

I briefly related to him the incidents that had just taken place—showed him the strands I had wrapped around the sticks, after warning him not to touch them, and also exhibited my tightly wrapped finger.

After examining it for a moment, he poured some alcohol into a test tube and, plunged the numbed digit into it. There was no result except an increased burning sensation where the strands had broken through the skin.

Wrinkling his brow in puzzlement, he put some alcohol into a second test tube, and into this dropped a small quantity of clear, pungent-smelling liquid. I was ordered to plunge my finger into this, but the result was no different than before, except that the burning was slightly intensified.

AFTER watching it for a moment, the professor prepared a third solution, using distilled water instead of alcohol, and dropping into it something with a peculiar, almond-like odor. Almost instantly the two spliced tendrils uncurled,

and upon removing my finger from the test tube I was able to unwind the coils as easily as if they had been common thread.



Directing me to thoroughly wash my hands at once, the professor took a pair of surgical scissors and cut off a piece of the substance which had been wrapped around my finger.

The stuff seemed difficult to cut, and snapped like a piece of steel wire when severed. Then he put it under a compound microscope and examined it. The experiment which he had previously been conducting seemed completely forgotten in the excitement of this new investigation.

"What is it?" I asked, after washing my hands.

He continued to peer through the microscope, slightly moving various adjustments. Without replying to my question, he took the piece he had been examining and immersed it in a blue solution. Again he slid it under the microscope. Then he snipped off a second piece, immersed it in a pink solution, and carefully examined it.

Presently he looked up. Apparently the question which I had asked some minutes before had just broken through his preoccupation.

"I don't know what it is," he said, "except that it is organic and apparently constructed of thousands of long, thin, and extremely tough contractile fibres

in a clear plasmic substance which is interlaced with chains of fatty cells that indicate the presence of some sort of a nervous system. This, to judge from the way the strands behave, is both motor and sensory. There are also waxy cells which evidently contain the corrosive digestive fluid which cut through your skin so readily. Here, look for yourself."

I peered through the microscope, but to my untrained eye it appeared that a thin cable, partly pink and partly translucent, crossed the round field. There were specks, blotches, and chains of tiny globules, but they meant nothing to me.

While Sue was looking at it, the professor prepared a slide by coating it with some sticky substance. Then he carefully snipped off a small piece of one of the strands I had brought in on the two stalks, so it fell on and stuck to the slide.

This done, he removed the slide containing the pink-stained fragment, and put the sticky slide in its place.

After examining it for some time in silence, he took down a large glass mortar from a shelf. Holding the two sticks containing the wound strands over this, he snipped off a piece about two inches in length, letting it fall into the mortar.

Then he went outdoors. A few minutes later he returned with an earthworm about six inches in length wriggling in his fingers.

"In the interests of science," he said, and dropped the worm into the mortar. It fell on the strand which he had previously placed there, and which, at the touch of the worm, seemed instantly galvanized into life. With amazing speed it coiled itself around the squirming creature. Then the coils slowly tightened, the worm becoming more convulsive in its movements, and leaving little streaks of slime on the smooth surface of the mortar as it lashed about in all directions.

Presently the worm was cut in two. Between the severed halves lay a small, slime-smeared coil of what looked like hair. Slowly this coil opened until it had reached its previous length of about two inches. The head end of the worm, more active than the tail, again blundered against the threadlike thing. Once again it was seized in the thin, powerful coils, then slowly cut in two.

"What is it, professor?" I asked.

Continuing to stare at the contents of the mortar through his thick glasses, he replied:

"At present I can only say that it is, without a doubt, a clue to the disappearance—the almost certain death—of Jackson, the aviator. Beyond that I can tell you nothing definite—not unless further experiments reveal something which I have not yet discovered. Run along, now, you and Sue. I must be alone. There is important work to be done. There are investigations to be made which may be of incalculable benefit to the human race—may even save humanity from the worst menace by which it has ever been confronted!"

II. — BLEACHED BONES

SUE and I lunched together, served by Wong, the efficient Chinese butler. The professor never took lunch, and Mrs. Davis had driven to Sterling, a near-by town, for the purpose of doing some shopping. Late that afternoon she returned.

A small, sweet-faced, white-haired woman, Mrs. Davis is rarely perturbed. Sue and I were consequently amazed to hear her talking excitedly to the professor in the laboratory. Then both of them came into the drawing-room where we were seated.

"Some strange things have been happening to-day," she said as she greeted us. "Banker Crolius, of Sterling, while driving home from the country club in his roadster, suddenly disappeared. A farm hand who saw him in the car only a moment before his disappearance, describes a strange cloud which was mingled with the dust thrown up by his car, but which separated from it and sailed away as soon as the car overturned in the ditch. The motorcycle policeman who found the empty car reported that there was a nauseating odor around it, but no sign of Crolius."

"He must have shared the fate of Jackson," I said.

"Without a doubt," said the professor. "But that is not all. Look at this; it's positively ghastly."

He passed me a copy of the evening paper which his wife had just brought from Sterling. Together, Sue and I scanned the glaring headlines, and read the article which followed:

TAMPICO CITIZEN BADLY INJURED BY FALLING SKULL

Believed to Be That of Missing Aviator, Jackson

William Aldrich, a citizen of Tampico, was seriously injured today while walking on the main street of his home town, when a human skull which had apparently fallen from the sky struck him on the right shoulder. It fell with such force that he was knocked down. Examination by a physician revealed two broken bones beneath a very painful bruise. Near the fallen skull the metal frames and broken glass of an aviator's goggles were found.

A moment later a number of other bones, which Dr. Brown of Tampico pronounced those of a human being, fell nearly a block from where Mr. Aldrich had been struck down. These bones were so white and dry that the

doctor declared they must have been exposed to the weather for a long period of time.

Among these bones were found a cigarette lighter, some coins, a bunch of keys, several buttons and buckles, and a wrist watch on an aviator's identification bracelet. Despite the fact that Pilot Jackson disappeared not more than two hours before this happened, it is thought that he has been murdered in some mysterious way, and his bones dehydrated and dropped, for the bracelet is his, and descriptions of the other articles tally with those he was known to have carried.

"Do you think they were really Jackson's bones?" I asked the professor.

"I think it highly probable that they were," he replied.

"But how—"

"Come into my laboratory, Dick," he said. "I have something to show you."

As Professor Davis led me into his laboratory, his eyes sparkled with excitement behind his thick-lensed glasses. He bent over the mortar into which he had dropped the mysterious fragment of hairlike substance and the earthworm, earlier in the afternoon. Then a look of amazement came over his features.

"Really," he said, "this is most remarkable! Look here, Dick. The creature has grown more swiftly than I thought possible."

I, too, looked into the mortar.

To my surprise I saw that the two inch piece of the odd material had a mushroom-like growth on one end. This end was raised nearly an inch above the bottom of the bowl as if the mushroom growth were a little balloon, gradually lifting the hairlike strand. But this was not all, for sprouting beneath the cap were many other hairs, shorter than the original one, but of the same diameter and evidently growing at an astonishing rate of speed.



"Do you know what it is?" I asked.

"I believe," said the professor, "that we are confronted by a creature unknown to science, and up to the present day, entirely outside the experience of mankind. Unless other similar incidents have occurred recently, the strange fates of Jackson and Crolius are unique in the annals of the world. Without a doubt, Crolius and Jackson met the same fate—were attacked either by the same creature or by one like it. And this"—pointing to the thing in the mortar—"is perhaps a reproduction of that creature. I say 'perhaps' because even among the creatures known and classified by science we find numerous instances of offspring which, in certain stages of their existence, bear very little resemblance to their parents."

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that the hairlike strand was an egg or spore from which this creature in the mortar is developing?"

"Not precisely that," replied the professor. "It seems that we have to do, here, with a creature that reproduces itself by fission or subdivision—or at least a creature which has the power to do so, even though it may normally reproduce its kind by spores, spawn or eggs."

"I think that we can safely assume, in this case, that the division was accidental so far as the intention of the creature itself is taken into account. The hairlike tentacle was caught in the airplane rudder when creature and

plane were both traveling swiftly at right angles to each other's courses. As a result three of these tentacles caught in the splintered rudder were torn loose and carried down with the ship. With my scissors I farther divided the tentacle before placing it in the mortar.

YOU WILL observe that those tentacles which are still coiled around the sticks on which you brought them have neither moved nor shown any signs of growth. Our experience shows that they will not move unless touched by living organic matter—food. And food, which I supplied in the form of an earthworm, is undoubtedly the reason the piece in the mortar was enabled to grow.

"I have been watching this one closely, and have learned something more. The tentacles themselves, as we have learned before, are not stimulated to action except when touched by organic food, but once the umbrella-like crown has grown above them, they are led to the food by the crown's perception of motion. The worm, as you will observe, has all been devoured, or rather, absorbed, except a few segments from the posterior extremity. These segments are quite near the original and longest tentacle, but they are motionless. The growth of the creature has ceased for a lack of food, with this food quite near it, yet I saw it travel toward and capture the wriggling anterior end again and again until it had consumed all of it.

"We have here an analogy with the two tragedies which took place to-day. Swift movement, apparently, had attracted the parent of this creature to its prey, both in the case of Jackson and that of Crolius—assuming, of course, that both men were taken by the same monster."

"Then," I said, "you are of the opinion that this little creature in the mortar is a miniature replica of the thing that took Jackson?"

"That," said the professor, "is only problematical. It may be of an entirely different form. To draw an analogy from a creature well known to science, and probably the one most closely resembling this creature with which we have to deal, take the chrysaora, a kind of jellyfish. In one state of its existence it is a minute, flat, worm-like affair. This eventually settles down on the sea bottom and turns into a hydra—a tube-like organism with threads. The hydra not only reproduces many other hydras, but eventually turns into the segmented strobila, like a stack of saucers. This, in turn, produces the free-swimming disk-shaped medusa, which is the adult jellyfish.

"But while the Jellyfish is in the hydra stage, many strange monsters, entirely different in appearance from any of these creatures, have been

produced by artificial division. For that reason it is possible that the individual we have here is nothing like the parent from which it sprang. The fact that the creature more nearly resembles a jellyfish than any other earthly creature—that it is in fact a sort of medusa of the air—makes this analogy all the more plausible."

He pushed the few remaining posterior segments of the earthworm into contact with the trailing tentacle, then watched reflectively while the creature, drawing its umbrella-like cap down to the morsel, slowly consumed it.

Scarcely had the last trace of the earthworm disappeared, ere the creature rose once more, but this time it was able to lift the weight of the tentacle, and started to float upward like a toy balloon dragging the string to which it is attached.

Galvanized into action by this unexpected development, the professor jumped for a butterfly net which was hanging on a hook near-by. His swift motion evidently attracted the creature, for it darted after him, its long original tentacle as well as the shorter ones it was developing, outstretching toward him. But despite his age, the professor was as dexterous through long practice with a butterfly net as is many a younger man with a racquet or foil, and with a quick movement he brought it down over his quarry.

On a table in one corner of the room was a large, finely meshed cage. This cage contained a half dozen cocoons and three large, brightly colored cecropia moths which had just emerged, and which the professor had confined for later observation.

Opening the door of the cage, the professor pushed in the butterfly net, permitting his captive to float up out of the meshes. Then, removing the net, he closed the door and watched the thing floating about in the air near the top of the cage, while he mopped from his brow the perspiration which his sudden and unaccustomed exertions had engendered.

"I suppose the thing will eat my cecropias," he said, "but in the meantime we may learn something more of the habits of this medusa of the air."

Scarcely had he spoken, ere one of the cecropias spread its newly opened wings and started to fly across the cage. With a quick dart, the medusa pounced upon it, and its tentacles wound themselves around the fat, soft body. For a few seconds, the moth fluttered helplessly—then it fell to the floor of the cage, while the wiry tentacles of its remorseless enemy sank deeper and deeper into its yielding thorax and abdomen.

It was the professor who first noticed that the medusa—for such we had begun to call it—no longer depended on its tentacles for the absorption of its food, but had developed a number of small, slightly projecting sucker mouths which all but covered the under surface of the cap. With these it was able to assimilate much more rapidly than before.

In an incredibly short space of time the cecropia had completely disappeared, while the medusa, its cap now doubled in size and its tentacles uniformly about three inches in length, slowly floated about the cage, the frilled edges of its cap rippling like thin fabric stirred by a breeze, but actually doing the work of propelling the creature through the air.

"What do you suppose makes it float?" I asked.

"I've been wondering," replied the professor. "Possibly it has the power to generate a gas lighter than air, which keeps it up. It might, for example, have the power to separate the pure hydrogen gas from the moisture in the air. By Jove! If that is it—"

The professor hastily secured a large test tube, a razor-sharp scalpel, and his butterfly net. Cautiously opening the door of the cage, he inserted the net and soon had the medusa in its folds. Immersing the creature in a large pan of water, he held the inverted, water-filled test tube down over it, and sliding the scalpel under the edge, inserted it in the creature's cap. A tiny bubble arose in the tube.



The professor plunged the scalpel into a different spot, and another bubble traveled to the top of the tube, the creature's arms writhing meanwhile like a nest of snakes. Again and again he pricked the cap until about a half inch of water in the test tube was displaced by gas.

Permitting the rest of the water to run out of the tube, and tossing the medusa back into the cage, where it no longer floated about in the air, but lay writhing and squirming on the floor, the professor carried the tube, still inverted, to a nearby table.

"If this is hydrogen, Dick," he said, "I've found a way to rid the world of this menace."

"How is that?"

"By fire," he answered. "A spark, a shell, a rocket, or an explosive bullet will turn each creature into a roaring furnace of flame."

Standing the inverted tube on the table for a moment, he picked it up with a test tube holder. Then he lighted a taper and held the flame in the mouth of the tube. Nothing happened. He thrust the flame still higher. It sputtered and went out.

"No use, Dick," he said. "Had that been hydrogen, we should have had a small explosion. It's something else. I'll have to make further tests."

Still keeping the tube inverted, he inserted a rubber stopper in the mouth. Then he stood it upside down on the table.

At this moment Sue entered through the door which led to the drawing room.

"Mother and I just heard fearful news on the radio," she said. "Thirty-six airplanes in various parts of the country have crashed. The occupants have not been found. More than a hundred people have disappeared while driving their automobiles, and most of the machines have been wrecked as a consequence. Recognizing the fact that something in the air must have snatched these people from their machines, the government has sent scout and combat planes to investigate. Similar reports have been received from Canada and Mexico, and the air forces of these two countries are patrolling the skies in an effort to learn the cause of the mystery. What does it mean? What can we do?"

"It means," said the professor soberly, "that I must get in touch with the War Department at once and tell them what little I know. Then I must, somehow, continue my experiments."

III. — THE THING IN THE LABORATORY

AFTER DINNER the professor and I returned to his laboratory. He had called the War Department, and supplied them with such information as he had.

We found the caged medusa more than doubled in size, floating about as if searching for more prey. The cecropias had all been devoured. The punctures made by the professor's scalpel had disappeared, and the cells which he had deflated were not only increased in size proportionately to the animal's growth, but completely filled out with gas once more.

While I watched it moving about, the professor tested the gas which he had confined in the tube. Presently he called to me:

"I've found it, Dick. It's helium. How the creature obtains it so rapidly is a mystery to me, as there are only four parts to every million parts of air, and proportions in its organic food must be very slight. But it is unmistakably helium, so fire will only be effective against it in such local areas as it can reach directly."

"But what about explosive shells?" I asked.

"The monsters could be blown into fragments, of course," he replied, "but remember, each fragment would become a new monster. Fighting these giant medusae of the skies with shells would simply mean multiplying them."

"Then what can we do?" I asked.

"That," he replied, "is what we must find out as quickly as possible. In order to do this we must take some risks. We must experiment and observe until we can find the weak spot in this creature's defense. I am about, to sacrifice tomorrow's roast for the good of the cause."

So saying, he went out, and I heard him talking to the cook in the kitchen. A moment later he returned with a raw leg of lamb which he thrust into the cage.

The medusa, evidently attracted by the movement, soared downward, tentacles extended, as we had previously seen it do when attracted by the motion of organic matter. A tentacle touched the raw meat and in a moment the creature had settled down over the roast to feed.

The professor sighed.

"My favorite food," he said, "but it is going in a good cause. And we have, so the cook tells me, a smoked ham which will go well with some fresh eggs."

The medusa fed noiselessly, but with apparent voracity. As the meat dwindled in bulk, the body of the medusa increased in size, its tentacles lengthened proportionately.

Almost before we realized it, the body of the creature was more than a foot in diameter, while the tentacles had reached a length of nearly eighteen inches, yet the roast was not more than half consumed. Then a queer thing happened. The cage began to fill with vapor—silvery white like a cirrus cloud on which the sun is shining. And I began to grow increasingly conscious of a sickening, musty odor like that I had noticed at the wreck of Jackson's plane.

The professor, alert scientist that he was, seized a glass tube and a rubber plug for each end. Then he rushed out into the Kitchen. A few moments later he returned with the tube packed full of crushed ice. He wiped it thoroughly with a towel, then opened the door of the cage and thrust the tube into the densest part of the vapor.

When he withdrew it, it was covered with large drops of moisture.

These he scraped into a test tube which he held up to the light for a moment, shaking it slightly as if to note its viscosity. Then he went to the table, put it in a test tube rack, and quickly prepared a number of solutions in other tubes. Into each of these he dropped a minute quantity of the liquid he had collected—pausing in each instance to note the result.

In watching him, I had forgotten to keep an eye on the cage. Presently I thought of it once more and turned to look at it. To my surprise I saw that it was completely hidden by a dense cloud of vapor—a disk-shaped cloud that was a perfect miniature copy of that into which Pilot Jackson had plunged, never to emerge.

The professor looked up from his experiments.

"Water, Dick," he said, "nothing but water. The mystery is, how is it able to collect and hold a cloud symmetrically around it? I rather suspect—"

He paused in amazement as he suddenly noticed how large and dense the cloud had become around the cage.

"Why, this is astounding, Dick," he said. "I had no idea it could grow so huge on a few pounds of meat. Perhaps we had better—"

He was interrupted this time by a rending crash, which came from the interior of the cloud. Then it rose toward the ceiling, and on the table our startled eyes saw the remains of the cage with its four sides bulged out, its top

tilted back, and its frame splintered. Lying on the bottom of the cage, as white as if it had been kiln-dried, was the leg bone which had been in the roast.

The disk-shaped cloud, now nearly four feet in diameter, was floating around the edges of the ceiling, evidently looking for a means of egress from the room. Beneath it trailed more than a hundred squirming, wriggling tentacles, partly concealed by several little ragged streamers of vapor.



"Don't move, Dick," said the professor softly. "We are both in deadly peril. I have a plan."

Slowly, cautiously, he reached beneath the table. He groped there for a moment, then brought out a gasoline blowtorch. Turning a valve, he filled the generator. Then he struck a match and ignited it.

I noticed that when he made the quick motion necessary for the lighting of the match, the tentacles of the creature floating above us suddenly extended toward him as if attracted by the movement.

The professor noted this, also, and worked the air pump of the torch slowly and carefully, while he kept an eye on the medusa. The creature had halted, its tentacles still extended toward him, as if undecided whether to attack or not. Presently it began to float slowly in his direction.

Knowing that he would be unable to get his torch going in time to use it effectively, I looked about for a weapon. Across the room, at a distance of about ten feet from me, was the professor's golf bag. The driver and brassie reared their heads invitingly above the other clubs. If I could but get one of them!

The medusa drew nearer and nearer to the professor, who coolly continued to work the pressure pump. The torch began to roar, but I knew it would not be in operation for at least another half minute, and the exploring tentacles were now less than a foot from the Scientist.

Had I been content to move slowly, I might have averted that which followed. But I arose with rash haste and leaped toward the golf clubs.

Before I could make a second move, with a suddenness that was appalling, the monster pounced on me. At the first touch of those wiry tentacles I felt a terrific shock, as if a powerful electric current had passed through my body. Every muscle was numbed, stiffened. I was unable to move a finger.

A second shock followed—a third. There was a roaring in my ears; there rose a penetrating stench like that of burning feathers. I could feel the wiry tentacles biting into my flesh, yet the numbing waves that came from them rendered the wounds almost painless.

The roaring sound increased. I heard a horrible, wailing shriek. Then things went black before my eyes and I lost consciousness.

WHEN I came to my senses once more, I was lying on a davenport in the drawingroom. The professor was holding a phial of some pungent aromatic beneath my nostrils, while Sue and Mrs. Davis chafed my hands.

I blinked, sat up, and tried to remember what had happened. Then it all came back to me—the grip of wiry tentacles, the roaring sound, the numbing shocks, the sickening stench, and that horrible shriek. I remembered it as sounding something between the wail of a steam siren and the scream Of a woman.

"Better lie down for a while, Dick," cautioned the professor. "You've had a narrow escape. If that animated galvanic battery had been just a little more powerful you could never have recovered from those shocks."

I leaned back on the cushions, for it made me giddy to sit up.

"I passed out when the thing screamed, or at least I thought it screamed," I said. "What followed?"

"When you thought it screamed," said the professor, "you were right. It screamed not once, but again and again. It roared before it screamed. Didn't you hear it roar?"

"I heard a roaring sound," I replied. "I didn't know whether it was made by the torch or the creature."

"Possibly it was both," said the professor. "The roaring of the monster sounded very like the roaring of the torch, except that it was louder. It began to roar as soon as its tentacles touched you. I could tell by the spasmodic jerking of your muscles that it was sending an electric current through your body, and quite a powerful one."

"There are a few animals already known to science which have this power. Some of them are deep sea creatures, but the electric eel of Brazil is the most striking example. This eel, when its electrical organs are fully charged, is said to be capable of rendering a man or a large animal unconscious from electric shock. So it is not surprising that this creature, so many times larger than the largest electric eel, was able to do the same for you with a number of shocks."

"My torch began to function just as the creature attacked you, and I first tried to rescue you by burning off the wiry tentacles. But it had so many of these in reserve that the task seemed endless. I, too, was attacked and had the creature's store of electrical energy not been depleted by the shocks it had sent through your body, it is probable that both of us would have been rendered unconscious and ultimately devoured. As it was, I was rapidly becoming helplessly entangled in the tentacles, so I turned the torch on the monster's body. It was then that it shrieked—not once, but many times. The volume of its terrible voice was astounding; its weird tones were horrible to hear!"

"But the torch finally won. All the tentacles let go except those which had been burned off, and the thing, after bumping around on the walls for a time, flew against the window screen with such force that it was ripped from the frame. Then it disappeared, still screaming weirdly, into the night."

"I made a very weak solution of prussic acid and painted the remaining tentacles with this. There were quite a few around your arms, legs and body. One also was tightly bound around your forehead. All relaxed instantly when the solution was applied. I then used it on the tentacles which still clung to me, after which Wong and I carried you here."

"Was it prussic acid solution you used on my finger this morning?" I asked.
"That stuff that had a bitter almond odor?"

"That was it," replied the professor. "Prussic acid has a paralyzing effect on the nervous system. It is a good thing that I learned, this morning, that it will cause the tentacles of these creatures to relax. It would have been dangerous to have had to experiment with the longer tentacles in the position they had gripped you this evening."

"I have always thought," I said, "that the touch of prussic acid to the human skin was poisonous, particularly to a cut surface, and that one whiff of the fumes was usually deadly."*

"So it is," replied the professor. "In a sufficiently strong solution it would be deadly to apply it to an abraded skin, arid' one whiff of prussic or hydrocyanic acid gas is usually lethal. But the solution I used was diluted sufficiently to make it safe for application to the human skin, or even to an open wound. I purposely made a weak solution this morning, intending to make it a little stronger if necessary, but as you saw, it worked."

At this moment, Wong entered with a tea tray and a steaming pot of fragrant Darjeeling.

I sat up for my cup of tea, and we discussed the strange incidents of the day.

Then Mrs. Davis ordered us all to bed with a firmness that would not be gainsaid.

EARLY the next morning Wong awakened me with a gentle knock at my door, and upon my bidding him enter, brought me a demi-tasse and cigarettes.

"Plofessey Davis like see you along lab'toly plenty quick," he said.

"Tell him I'll be right down," I replied.

I dressed and hurried downstairs. The professor was waiting in his laboratory.

"Dick," he said, "something has happened since last evening that has, it seems to me, a rather sinister significance. I haven't told my wife or Sue, as I don't wish to alarm them."

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Come with me," he replied. "I told my wife you and I were going for a walk, so we can go out without arousing her suspicion. Sue, I believe, is still sleeping. The poor child is exhausted after the ordeal of yesterday."

After threading our way among the various outbuildings, we entered the lane between a corn and wheat field which led to the pasture. Traversing the

lane, we came to the pasture itself. Sue and I had crossed it only the day before, and it had revealed at that time, only the undulating, blue grass.

But overnight there had sprouted, near Its center, a colony of gray-white growths, varying in height from three to nearly twelve feet. They were roughly cylindrical in shape, and their tops were fringed with squirming, wiry tentacles, some of which reached nearly to the ground, while others stood at various angles at or near the horizontal, and still others reached skyward.

That the movements of the tentacles were not due to the morning breeze was quite evident from the fact that they moved in all directions. The cylindrical stalks, also, bent in various directions from time to time, almost as if they were bowing to each other, and those that bent toward us revealed cavernous openings at their tops, greatly resembling the mouths of anemones.

The wind, blowing from them to us, carried the revolting charnel smell that had become so familiar to us.

"What are they?" I asked.

"You know as much as I," replied the professor. "They may be one of the life phases of the cloud-medusae. From the similarity of their tentacles, and the analogy we have in our submarine medusae, as well as the similar, I might say identical stench that emanates from them, I am inclined to think this is the case. Yet they might be a totally different race of creatures, which have traveled to us simultaneously with the medusae, from the space wanderer which we believe is responsible for this unprecedented invasion. Only a careful observation of them will tell."

While we were talking, Jake Smith, the professor's farm hand, approached, driving a herd of cattle before him with the assistance of a young collie. The racket they made—the clatter of hoofs, the bawling of cattle and calves, the barking of the dog, and the shouts of the man—seemed to have a magnetic effect on the strange growths before us, for instantly all bent toward the herd, mouths gaping and tentacles wriggling menacingly.

With the herd were three calves which showed a tendency to wander. While the collie was bringing in one of these strays another got away and scampered straight toward the mysterious growths. As it drew near them, all bent toward it, and when it would have run between two of the tallest, the nearer, arching its cylindrical stem like a striking serpent, suddenly pounced upon it and bore it struggling and bawling, aloft, hopelessly entangled in the myriad tentacles.



Then the mother cow, evidently attracted by the cries of distress of her doomed offspring, dashed after it. By the time she reached the thing that held her calf aloft, the little creature's cries had ceased. She ran helplessly around the stem for a moment, then backed up as if about to charge it head on. But she backed within range of the tentacles of three more of the horrible monstrosities, which instantly bent over and seized her, holding her helpless.

The farm hand and dog rushed after her, but the man was warned off by the professor, and he succeeded in calling off the dog before it was too late.

"Go back to the house, Dick," said the professor. "Bring my blowtorch as quickly as you can. Also my twelve-gauge pump gun and twelve-gauge double barrel, with as many shells as you can carry. I'll stay here and watch. Hurry!"

As fast as my legs would carry me, I dashed toward the house. I found the professor's blowtorch in the laboratory where he had left it the night before; and having gone shooting with him many times, I knew where to find the weapons.

Slipping into a hunting coat, I loaded the game pockets with the torch and all the ammunition they would safely bear. Then, taking the two guns, I hurried back to the pasture.

The professor had. approached to within fifty feet of the outer line of monsters. One of these, the one which had captured the calf, had grown

considerably taller. Whereas it had been about twelve feet in height before, it was now nearer eighteen and still growing. The remains of the calf, still clutched to the mouth-like opening at the top, were barely visible as a rounded, dark mass showing here and there in the wilderness of tentacles which surrounded it.

The three creatures that had captured the cow had also increased in size, and what we could see of the helpless bovine had dwindled tremendously. They continued their arched position over the carcass, feeding noiselessly, and apparently without any competition among themselves, unless it was one of speed.

"Quick!" said the professor. "Give me the torch. I can be generating it while you load the gun."

I handed him the torch and proceeded to load the two shotguns.

"What can we do with shotguns against these monsters?" I asked.

"Nothing, at present," he replied, lighting the generator of the torch and working the pressure pump, "but if a certain theory of mine is correct we will soon have considerable use for them."

"Which gun do you want?" I asked.

"The double barrel," he replied. "When you start you will probably have to shoot straight and often. I only want the double barrel in case of an emergency, as I plan to use the torch. Give me about a dozen extra shells."

I HANDED him the shells, and he put them in his pockets after looking at the wadded ends.

"Number fours," he said. "About as good as any, I guess. Did you bring nothing but fours?"

"I also brought a dozen loads of buckshot," I replied, "and one box of number twos."

"We'll try the fours first, at any rate," he said. "Now I want you to watch the creature that captured the calf."

I looked, and saw that it had now reached a height of about twenty feet. Its victim seemed entirely consumed. But the startling thing I noticed was the strange metamorphosis that was taking place in the shape of the creature itself. The cylindrical body seemed to be separating into a number of diskshaped segments, piled one on top of the other like stacked dishes. Tentacles were beginning to branch out from the top of each segment.

"If I am not mistaken," said the professor, "the top segment will presently arise and sail away, or rather attempt to sail away, for as soon as it flies clear

of the others, I want you to shoot it down. If it is far enough from them to make it safe for me to approach it, I can then destroy it with the torch."

It was not long before a dense cloud of vapor formed around the top segment. Suddenly it rose and turned over, dropping the whitened bones of the calf. Then it sailed slowly away over the heads of its fellows, its wiry tentacles trailing below. As soon as it was beyond range of their tentacles, "I fired into the most dense part of the cloud. It dipped slightly. Again I fired, and it slowly sank to the ground.

"Watch the next one," shouted the professor, running to the one I had brought down, torch in one hand and shotgun in the other. "Don't let any of them get away."

As he turned his torch on the writhing, squirming mass that lay on the ground, it gave vent to a shriek similar to the one which had rung in my ears the night before. Again and again it shrieked under the relentless flame. The noise distracted my attention for a moment and I looked back at the monster I was supposed to be watching, just in time to see a second cloud-covered medusa sail away. Two shots brought this one to the ground as they had the former. Meanwhile the shrieks of the first creature ceased and the professor moved on to the second to start another pandemonium with his searing torch.

Pushing four more shells into the magazine, I waited for the next medusa to arise. The farm hand had, meanwhile, come up with another blowtorch and a double-barreled shotgun.

"The professor told me to pen up the cows and bring these," he said.

"Light your torch," I told him. "As soon as you get it going you can help the professor."

"What in tarnation's he burnin'?" asked Smith, priming his own torch. "Smells like feathers or old shoes, or somethin'."

"It's worse than either," I replied. "When you get your torch going I'll show you what to do."

Before the farm hand succeeded in getting his torch to roaring, two more medusae arose, and I brought them down. But, unfortunately, I fired at one too soon and it fell among its treelike fellows where the professor did not dare to approach it.

The professor was searing his fourth medusa when I shot down the sixth, telling Smith to watch the professor, then imitate him.

Before the seventh arose, the fifth, which I had shot down among the others, got up once more, thus affording me a demonstration of the marvelous

recuperative powers of these creatures. Although I must have riddled and emptied practically every helium-filled cell in its body, it had closed the rent and refilled them in this marvelously short space of time. This time I was careful not to shoot until it had cleared its treelike fellows.

Twenty flying medusae in all arose from the stalk that had devoured the calf. When I had shot down the last one, I saw that the three creatures that had seized the cow had relinquished her dry bones, and were also forming into segments. It was evident that I would have to do some fast shooting when these segments started to fly.

Before the first one arose, Sue came cantering up on Blue Streak, her favorite saddle horse. It was her custom to ride each morning before breakfast, and hearing the shooting, she had ridden out to investigate.



"What are these things, and what in the world are you doing?" she asked.

"They are medusae passing through one of their life stages," I replied, "and I'm shooting them down as fast as they start to fly, while your father and the hired man kill them with the torches."

"Can't I help you?" she asked. "Please let me do something."

"My supply of shells is running low," I said. "You might dash back to the house and get me as many as you can carry—fours, twos, and threes."

"Splendid!" she replied, wheeling her mount. "I'll bring my gun, too, and help you."

I had thought to keep her out of danger for the time being by sending her back to the house, but to my horror, the first three disks from the three monsters that had devoured the cow, rose, turned over, and sailed after her, evidently attracted by the rapid movement of her mount.

I brought down the foremost with two quick shots, but in my haste and anxiety I missed the second, so I was forced to waste two more charges on it. I fired my last shot at the third, causing it to sag slightly, then pushed another shell into the magazine and quickly pumped it into the chamber. But to my horror I saw that I dared not fire again. The medusa was now so close to Sue that to fire would mean that she and her mount must surely be struck.

Shouting to the others to attract their attention, I started after Sue on the run. But before I had taken a dozen steps I groaned in anguish as I saw the monster dart downward, its tentacles encircling horse and rider. The roaring sound which it made as it attacked was punctuated by screams of pain and terror from girl and horse as the electrically charged tentacles seized them.

"Turn your horse, Sue!" I shouted. "Ride this way!"

But Sue was by this time enveloped in the dense cloud which surrounded the monster's disk-like body.

IV. — BESIEGED WORLD

THE medusa was clinging tenaciously to horse and rider when I shouted to Sue to turn her mount. She must have heard me, for the horse suddenly wheeled and came galloping in my direction.

I could not see Sue, who was completely enveloped by the cloud which surrounded her attacker, but knew that she must be struggling frantically in its clutches, from the way it moved.

Calling to Blue Streak, I seized his bridle, but he was so terrified he dragged me fully a hundred feet before I could bring him to a stop.

In the meantime the professor and Smith arrived with their guns and torches. They started in at once, burning the writhing tentacles first. This frightened the horse still more, and he pranced while I clung to the bridle.

It only took the two men a few minutes to get Sue out of the saddle and destroy the shrieking creature that had attacked her, but to me those minutes seemed like hours. She was unconscious, apparently from the electrical shocks. Giving Smith the reins to hold, I helped the professor as he bent over her, painting the tentacles that still encircled her body and arms with diluted prussic acid from the bottle he had in his pocket.

As I was chafing her hands, I saw the last of the medusae rise and sail away, avoiding us—probably because of the smell of its burned comrade. They had all escaped while we were fighting to save Sue. We took her to the house, where we left her under her mother's care.

That afternoon I drove to Sterling in the professor's sedan to get some oxyacetylene torches which we planned to use as weapons of defense. As I sped along over the smooth concrete pavement I was surprised and horrified at the number of colonies of stalk medusae that had sprung up overnight. Some of the cornfields were nearly obliterated by them. And in a few of the pastures I saw individuals undergoing the metamorphosis which indicated that they had been well fed.

Upon my arrival in Sterling, I stopped at a garage which I knew did welding, and tried to buy an outfit from them. They had only one, which was not for sale, but referred me to a wholesaler who would sell me as many outfits as I wanted.

I repaired to the office of the wholesaler, and bought three outfits with extra drums of gas, which I loaded into the back of the sedan. The wholesaler

told me that the government had issued a warning to use only closed automobiles and airships. Several medusae, he said, had been shot down with anti-aircraft guns, but no means had been devised of dispatching them after they fell, and they had eventually escaped. Machine gun bullets fired from airplanes, he said, had proved ineffective, although some of the medusae thus attacked had been noticed to fly erratically or sink slightly for a time.

The medusae, he said, had spread to every continent of the world, and an international conference was being held for the purpose of devising a method of combating this menace to humanity.

I stopped at a grocery store and filled every available space in the car with bacon, ham, flour and canned goods. Then, after buying all the papers I could get containing news of the latest developments of the medusae invasion, I took to the highway.'

I got back to the farmhouse without Incident, but the proximity of the stalk medusae to the edges of the road made it evident that another such trip would soon be out of the question.

Smith and the professor met me as I drove up. The latter looked into the tonneau.

"Got three outfits, I see, and a supply of groceries. Good boy! We'll need them. Let Smith have the car, now, and come up to the house."

I got out, glad to stretch my cramped limbs, and turned the wheel over to Smith.

As the professor and I walked to the house together, he said:

"I've been watching these stalk medusae, and have not only learned something about their feeding habits, but how they begin life on our earth."

"Really!" I replied. "That's important. Tell me about it."

"Yes. They begin life as microscopic, ribbon-like spores—the probable form in which, they left Green's comet to colonize our earth. The weight of one of these spores, even in proportion to its minute size, is so infinitesimal that it can float for great distances in even the slightest air currents. It seems, also, to have some electromagnetic faculty which enables it to seize and utilize magnetic lines of force, thus making it possible for it to travel in interplanetary and interstellar space. Its presence here seems to indicate that it has this power, and I have found it is unharmed by liquid air, which approaches the cold of space.

"As the creature reproduces by division, a single spore arriving on any stellar body where life and growth are possible can quickly colonize that body.

"Having arrived on earth, I find that a spore immediately sends roots into the soil like a plant, but that it also extends its tentacles in the air in search of animal food. It thus feeds above and below the soil, becoming the stalk medusa so horribly familiar to us. When it reaches a certain size, each stalk turns into twenty saucer-shaped disks, which soon become flying medusae.

"At my suggestion, the government is now experimenting with flame throwers as a means for combating the menace. They are efficient for short distances, and in such limited areas as can be covered by them, but they are far from being the solution of our problem. We must find some other, swifter way. I have ordered some supplies sent from Washington for the purpose of experimenting along these lines. They are being shipped to our local airport. But it will be difficult, if not impossible, to get them, as the roads are now blocked by the medusae, as well as the fields and pastures."

"Can't they fly over us and drop them?" I asked.

"As the shipment will contain some very powerful explosives, I'm afraid that wouldn't be practical," said the professor.

AT THIS juncture Smith came in to report that the oxyacetylene outfits were ready to use, and that quite a number of stalk medusae were springing up around the house.

The professor and I went out and found that Smith had rigged up the outfits quite ingeniously. Each one was installed on a wheelbarrow with the nozzle fastened on the end of a twelve-foot bamboo pole. This pole was laid across a rack which Smith had built on the front of the vehicle, enabling a man to move the outfit about without having to hold onto the pole or turn out the gas.

Each of us took one of the outfits and immediately began the war of extermination against the stalk medusae surrounding the house and other buildings. It was slow work, as there were thousands of them. But after several hours of strenuous endeavor, we had spaces cleared around the buildings wide enough to forestall any immediate attacks from the creatures.



We then turned our weapons over to the three remaining farm hands, who, under Smith's supervision, began widening the clear space we had made. The professor and I returned to the house.

Scarcely had we entered the drawing room when the voice of a very excellent soprano who was singing over the radio was suddenly stilled, and an announcer cut in:

"Sorry to have to interrupt the program," he said, "but I have just received an important announcement by telephone. The Chicago air scouts report that an immense number of the flying, cloud-hidden monsters that are menacing the world are congregating far out over Lake Michigan. The attention of the scout fleet was first drawn to them by hideous, howling noises, so loud that even at a distance of a mile they were easily audible above the roaring of the airplane propellers. Upon investigating, the scouts saw the monsters forming in a long line not more than two hundred feet above the lake.

"These strange creatures appeared to be carrying on an intelligent conversation with each other by means of terrific howls, and at times, seemed to be silenced by a leader, which addressed them all collectively. They are now bearing down on the City of Chicago, and every person is warned to stay within doors, keeping all doors and windows closed.

"Regardless of the heat, fires should be immediately kindled in all furnaces, boilers, stoves and fireplaces as a measure of defense. It is thought that the smoke, cinders and sparks may be distasteful to the monsters, and the fire will keep them from reaching down chimneys with their deadly tentacles. Our air force is trying to break up the line by dropping bombs on it, but as fast as a gap is opened the creatures close it once more. Take heed, everybody, on peril of your lives! Stay inside. Keep doors and windows locked. Build fires."

"Just as I feared," said the professor. "These creatures from another world, perhaps from another universe are more intelligent than they at first appeared to be. They are beginning, now, to work in groups—to exercise their intelligence as well as their instinct for the capture of food. Man has proved a wily and elusive food morsel, so they are uniting forces and trawling for him. Think of it, Dick! A group of monsters from outside space trawling for men, exactly as men trawl for fish! Seems absolutely incredible, doesn't it?"

"It does," I answered. "It also seems impossible that they should have suddenly begun talking to each other. So far we have heard, none of these creatures talked to each other before."

"I don't see anything so surprising about that," said the professor. "We discovered that they had voices, and powerful ones, when I burned the one that attacked you. It is quite possible that, although endowed with voices as soon as they reach the flying stage, they do not actually learn to converse until they reach a certain stage of development. This is true of all creatures with voices—true of man himself.

"A peculiarity of the flying medusae is that they make no sound when cut or blown to pieces. Cutting, puncturing or tearing them evidently does not hurt them. They seem to know, instinctively, that it will not kill them, but that it works actually as a form of artificial reproduction by fission, as each fragment will eventually become a new individual. Burning, however, is different. Burning destroys the living tissues beyond repair. And when they are burned, they shriek. They evidently know that burning means death."

The professor paused, then spoke very solemnly: "Dick, we have a greater menace in the medusae than even I, who recognized their extremely dangerous character from the first, ever thought possible. There is no telling how intelligent they are, or what faculties they can develop in adapting themselves to terrestrial environment. It is evident that the adults, at least, have auditory organs. They could not converse vocally without them.

"They apparently have a sense of smell, also, by which they locate their prey. The swift motion of the prey evidently aids this sense, just as waving a bottle of perfume beneath the nostrils makes the aroma more rapidly perceptible than when it is held still.

"They have, I have concluded, no organs of sight—or only imperfectly developed ones. No doubt the comet on which we believe they came has been away from the sun for so many thousands of years that its surface was constantly in darkness. The light from the meteoroids of the coma, when they are made incandescent by passage through the upper regions of the comet's atmosphere, could scarcely penetrate the thick clouds which our astronomers observed any better than they could penetrate an exceedingly dim twilight. Under the circumstances, organs of sight would have been useless, and would probably have atrophied had the creatures originally possessed them.

"It may be that under the conditions which they find on our planet, these monsters will be able to develop their organs of sight. Nor have we plumbed the limit of their intelligence. They may, for all we know, be as intelligent as man himself, or more so."

At this moment Wong entered, and bowed obsequiously.

Captain Felton like make talk Plofessey Davis a long telumphone," he announced.

"Excuse me," said the professor. "It's probably news of the supplies from Washington."

He went to the writing desk and picked up the receiver-transmitter.

"Yes, captain? They are here, you say? I don't know how I'll be able to get them.

"All right, captain."

Putting down the phone, he turned to me.

"Don't be foolhardy, Dick," he said. "You can't go to that airport on the ground, and you have no means of flying there. Why, the attempt would be suicidal!"

"Nevertheless," I replied, "I have a plan for getting through, and I believe I can make it work."

MY PLANS for making the trip to the airport did not include the use of either the automobile or the road. The land leading to the highway was now almost a solid mass of stalk medusae, and the highway itself had been declared impassable, blocked as it was by the interlacing tentacles which grew

clear up to the edge of the concrete. I did have a plan however, which I thought quite capable of being carried into effect.

Among the farm implements was a powerful caterpillar tractor. When I told the professor that I intended to use it and take a short cut across the fields, he was dumbfounded.

"Why, Dick, that would be fatal. There isn't even a cab over it for protection. I can't think of permitting it."

"What if I turn it into a tank first?" I asked.

"Into a tank? How?"

"There are plenty of materials and tools. The old chicken house you tore down had a sheet metal roof. Fastened on two-by-fours and well braced, this will make a cab that will be as good a protection as a closed automobile. And with a few lights of glass from your greenhouse we can make a windshield that will answer our purpose. With one man driving and another using an acetylene torch, we can go through almost anything short of a stone wall. The torch will not only burn any medusae that may impede our progress, but will cut through the wire fences."



"By Jove!" exclaimed the professor. "It sounds feasible enough. Get Smith to help you build that tank. I suppose it will take several days, but the thing will be almost invincible, once it is constructed."

"I don't think it will take two of us long to build," I answered. "We should have it ready for the trip by tomorrow afternoon."

"If you do, so much the better," said the professor. "Go ahead, and while you are at it, I'll do some more experimenting."

Smith and I set to work on our tank shortly thereafter. The other farm hands, reinforced at times by the professor, kept after the stalk medusae that continued to sprout near the buildings, using the acetylene torches. But just outside the little circle kept cleared around the buildings was a solid forest of stalk medusae that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. And the air was heavy with the sickening, musty stench that exuded from their silver-gray bodies and deadly tentacles.

While Smith and I worked on our tank, Sue came out from time to time to tell us , of the latest developments as announced on the radio. Once die brought us lemonade, and again, tea, sandwiches and cakes.

According to the latest reports, the medusae had adopted their trawling tactics everywhere. Yet they appeared to be aware that their intended prey was thickest in the cities, and swooped down on them in great numbers.

Some cities were approached during fogs or rainstorms when the coming of the medusae went unnoticed, and as a result, thousands of people perished. Even the smallest towns and villages had their lookouts posted, and when a suspicious cloud was sighted whistles were blown, bells rung, and shots fired, in order that everyone might seek cover.

Thousands of stalk medusae were sprouting in city lawns and parks, and as a result every fire-making apparatus that could be secured was pressed into use.

It was not until after dinner that night that we heard for the first time of individual medusae attacking closed houses, insinuating their fine tentacles through crevices around windows and doors, keyholes, or any other openings, until they were able to find and kill the inmates by terrific electrical shocks; after absorbing them through the tentacles alone, they would move on again in search of other prey.

Householders were warned to keep torches ready, to have fires going at all times, and to keep soldering irons, pokers, tongs and shovels red-hot, to be used in case of attack. They were warned, also, that when touching a tentacle

with a metal object they should wear rubbers and either insulate the grip of the weapon they were using or wear rubber gloves.

That night we took turns watching, the professor, Smith, Wong, and I, with the furnace going full blast and every window and door tightly closed. As it was unusually warm we made a most uncomfortable night of it.

It was three o'clock on the following afternoon before Smith and I were ready to start across the fields to the airport in our tank.

Smith, who had handled tractors for many years, was to do the driving, while I managed the torch. In addition to these weapons and the pump-gun, we carried a bottle of dilute prussic acid solution and a small brush to be used for removing any tentacles that might wrap themselves around us. My right arm, which projected from the side of the cab through a hole cut especially for the purpose, was protected by sheet metal armor, and my hand, with which I grasped the pole to which the nozzle was fastened, was covered by a heavy leather gauntlet to which Sue had stitched tiny overlapping plates of metal.

Sue, Mrs. Davis, the professor, and the entire entourage were present to see us off.

Farewells and godspeeds were said, and we lumbered off across the barnyard and into the pasture lane.

At the mouth of the lane we encountered our first stalk medusae. They bent down to receive us, and their writhing tentacles whipped menacingly around us. But the tractor knocked the stalks down and trundled over them, almost as if they had not been there, while the spurting acetylene flame instantly severed every tentacle it touched.

We made slow but steady progress, leaving a writhing, squirming, stinking trail of crushed and scorched medusae behind us. After we crossed the pasture we cut our first fence with the acetylene torch, and entered what had been the clover field.

As I looked at the weird, unearthly landscape, I was struck by its ..contrast with the pleasant scene it had presented two days before, when I had lain in the speckled shade of the hackberry tree listening to the bees droning in the sweet-scented clover while Sue wove a garland of blossoms.

Where the clover had been, the ground was dry and bare between the ugly, tentacle-crowned, silver-gray stalks. The hackberry tree, stripped of its leaves and drained of its sap, stood a gaunt, lifeless skeleton, its bare limbs stretched heavenward as if in a plea for vengeance on its merciless destroyers.

The droning of the bees, the chirping of the crickets, and singing of birds—all were stilled, to be replaced by one monotonous and sinister sound—the rustling of countless millions of writhing, squirming tentacles. And the pleasant fragrance of clover and wild-flowers had given away to the disgusting decay-smell of the medusae.

We lumbered slowly across the former clover field, cut a second fence, and entered the pasture in which Pilot Jackson had crashed two days before. Here we found more and larger medusae than we had previously encountered, and our progress was for a time considerably retarded. But we got across at last, cut a third fence, and entered what had once been a cornfield.. Like the other fields we had crossed, it was completely denuded of vegetation by the rankly growing crop of the invaders from the moon.

As we approached the airport we saw with relief that the landing field had been kept clear of medusae. A squad of men using a flame thrower were kept busy destroying such sprouts as cropped up from time to time.

The surface of the entire field was blackened by the repeated burning to which it had been subjected.

When we cut our last fence and entered the landing field, we were greeted by a loud cheer from a group in front of the airport, and they crowded curiously around us as we approached.

Captain Felton, in charge of the port, greeted us cordially, and ordered the munitions loaded for us. They consisted of several cases of hand grenades, a trench mortar with ammunition, an anti-aircraft gun with ammunition, a machine gun with ammunition, and a number of unloaded shells with material for loading them. As we knew very little about these weapons we detailed a corporal named Ole Hansen to go with us and show us how to assemble and use them.

In a few minutes a sergeant reported that our cargo was loaded. After we had taken leave of the captain and stowed Ole Hansen among the munitions, Smith climbed into the driver's seat. I lighted my torch and took my position beside him.

The men at the airport cheered us and wished us luck as we trundled off over the scorched field.

Soon we were smashing and burning our way back over the path by which we had come. We made much better time than before as the medusae over which we had previously passed were badly crippled, and those on either side had many of their tentacles burned away.

It was not until we were on the last lap of our journey, crashing through the lane that led to the cattle pens, that Smith noticed something amiss at the Davis house.

"Mr. Perry!" he cried in horror. "Look! Look over there toward the house!"

I looked, and the blood froze in my veins, for where the house should have been plainly visible, I could see only a dense, silver-gray cloud. As we approached it there came plainly to our ears above the sound of our motor the roaring sound which a giant medusa makes when it attacks.

V. — THE ATTACKING MEDUSA

THAT SURE must be a big one from the size of the cloud," said Smith, as he urged the tractor forward to where the huge medusa was attacking the house.

"Ay tank we ban going to have one hal of a fight pretty quick," said Ole, as he loosened the lid of a case of hand grenades.

Smith stopped our tank about a hundred feet from the house. Then we all got out and stepped behind it, using it for a breastwork. Ole tore the lid off his case of grenades, took one out, and setting the timer, hurled it with an expert overhand throw so it exploded just above the top of the cloud. The sound it made was barely audible above the terrific roaring of the giant medusa.



A group of squirming, twisted tentacles reached out at us from the cloud mass as if in reprisal, but I burned them off with the torch.

Smith seized the shotgun, and fired six charges into the portion of the cloud where he thought the disk-like body of the monster was located, and Corporal Hansen continued his bombardment with hand grenades. But neither seemed to have any effect on the medusa.

"If the damned thing would only get mad and chase us," shouted Smith, "we could lure it away with the tank."

"Perhaps I can make it mad with the torch," I said, and started toward the house.

But Smith seized my arm.

"Hold on there," he said. "Do you want to commit suicide? One jolt from the batteries of that thing and I reckon you'll be through for keeps. Besides, you might set the house afire."

By this time Ole had used up his box of grenades. Instead of getting more, he dragged out the machine gun and began assembling it.

"Damn' grenades don't work so gude," he said, "but I bet you dis baby will give it hal."

I handed the torch to Smith, and, reloading the pump gun, began a bombardment of the upper part of the cloud. I doubt whether it had much effect on the huge, medusa, but it was all that I could do, and it relieved by feelings somewhat, for I was badly worried. We had found nobody about the place, and, for all we knew, Sue and her parents had already been killed by the monster. It might merely be lingering to absorb their bodies through its tentacles before leaving. There was no way of communicating with them if they were alive, because of the terrific roaring sound made by the attacking medusa.

I was reloading the gun for the third time, and Ole had just finished assembling his machine gun, when the sound made by the monster suddenly changed. At first I thought the professor had succeeded in burning it, causing it to shriek, but this sound was not a shriek. It was not exactly like a howl, but sounded more like a moan—a groaning, unearthly sound so loud that it nearly split my eardrums.

Petrified into inactivity for a moment by this new development, the three of us stood spellbound, watching for the creature's next move. There was a terrific agitation which lasted for some time, accompanied by the unearthly moaning and groaning in ever increasing crescendo. From time to time we could see the ends of writhing tentacles projecting beyond the periphery of the cloud mass, squirming as if the creature were in horrible agony.

"Ay tank dot teeng ban purty damn sick," said Ole, coolly loading his machine gun. "What say we give him some more hal?"

"Wait, Ole," I said. "Something has happened that we don't know anything about."

Scarcely had I spoken ere the writhing and groaning of the monster suddenly ceased and the cloud around it began slowly to dissolve.

Then, to my intense relief, I heard the voice of Professor Davis.

"Dick! Smith! Don't do any more shooting. The thing is dead, and we are all safe in the house."

As the cloud dissolved it revealed a most astounding and hideous spectacle. Sprawled over the roof, and almost completely hiding it, was the limp, sagging body of the medusa. It lay there like an immense slimy silver-gray pancake with frilled edges, its tentacles trailing limply to the ground in all directions. The body was fully thirty feet in diameter, and the tentacles were at least thirty-five feet long.

Th © professor opened the door of his laboratory. In his hand was a pair of scissors. He snipped off an end of one of the tentacles which hung in front of the door—then gingerly touched it with his finger tip. It remained motionless. He touched another tentacle, and it did not move. Then he pushed them all aside and leaped out, running toward us and shouting like a schoolboy:

"Eureka! I've found it! I've found it!" "Found what?" I asked.

"The very thing that I used in the first place to make the tentacles relax—prussic acid," he replied. "Prussic acid or some of its derivatives will do the trick."

With his scissors the professor snipped the remaining tentacles from before the door. Then he held it open for us to enter.

Sue and her mother were waiting there to greet us, and were as relieved to know that I was still alive as I was to learn that they had escaped death. They both shed tears of joy, and I must confess that, as I kissed them, my own eyes were moist.

The professor put in a call for Washington, and the imperturbable Wong brought tea.

"After you and Smith left," the professor told me, "I was busy in my laboratory, when Sievers, one of the farm hands, came rushing in, shouting that a big cloud was coming toward the house. I went out to observe it, and one look through my binoculars convinced me that it was a flying medusa. I told Sievers to bring the other two men into the house at once, and that all of them should bring their rubber boots and raincoats from their quarters.

"As swiftly as possible we closed every window and door, and started a fire in the furnace and one in the grate in the living room. Then I distributed rubber gloves—luckily I have a good supply on hand at all times for laboratory

work. In the meantime Sue primed and lighted the two blowtorches for me, and we had two of the portable oxyacetylene outfits for use, one on the first floor and one on the second.

"It suddenly grew so dark outside that we were forced to turn on the lights. I knew then that the monster had settled on the roof to begin its attack. Stationing Sievers and the other two men on the second floor, two to manage the acetylene outfit, and one to use the blowtorch, I remained on the first floor with my wife and daughter, Nora the cook, and Wong. Mrs. Davis and Nora stayed in the center of the living room, Sue guarding them with a blowtorch, while Wong and I patrolled the lower floors with the portable acetylene outfit." The professor paused for breath.

"Almost immediately," he resumed, "the long, deadly tentacles began worming themselves in around doors and windows and through keyholes. Wong and I were busy, hurrying from one place to another and burning them off, and I could tell from the sounds upstairs that the men stationed there were equally busy.

"Although the roaring of the monster made it difficult for us to distinguish what was going on outside, I faintly heard your shots and the explosions of the grenades. Sue had turned the radio on to top-volume so I might hear the latest reports while working in my laboratory, and it added its raucous notes to the bedlam of sounds.

"MOST of the announcements had to do with the war against the medusae, and one of them was being made just at an instant when I was looking into the drawing room to see how the ladies were getting along. It stated that a nurseryman near Plano, Illinois, had reported that a number of stalk medusae which had grown in a grove of cherry laurel at his nursery had collapsed as if dead, and were beginning to give off a most abominable odor.

"The statement of this fact set me to thinking. I remembered that prussic acid had apparently paralyzed the tentacles on which I first experimented. Prussic, or as it is technically known, hydrocyanic acid, is present in the cherry laurel in considerable quantities. In this case it was evident that the acid had not only paralyzed but had killed the medusae.

"Leaving Wong to patrol alone for a few moments, I rushed into my laboratory. Unfortunately, my supply of prussic acid was reduced to about a minimum—not enough even to begin with. Then I remembered that most of the cyanides have similar toxic effects to those of hydrocyanic acid; and I was

well supplied with potassium cyanide, which I use for dispatching insects. The next question was, how to poison the medusa with potassium cyanide.

"I finally decided to try shooting it through the crystals. Accordingly I removed the shot loads from two shells and replaced them with potassium cyanide. Each shell held nearly a half ounce of the crystals. Wadding and crimping them once more, I loaded my shotgun with them. Then I saturated a handkerchief with a neutralizing solution, making an emergency gas mask, and went to the door of the laboratory, I cocked both barrels, opened the door a little way, and pushing the gun out, muzzle upward, discharged them both. I instantly jerked the door shut, expecting a hundred tentacles -to dart after me, but not one appeared. Then I heard the struggles and groans of the monster and knew that my shot had told.



"After the medusa had ceased to groan and writhe, I was reasonably certain that it was dead. I did not, however, know whether or not life still remained in the tentacles. So I snipped one off and investigated. You know the rest."

At this point the telephone rang, and the professor communicated his important tidings to the Secretary of War.

That afternoon was a rather busy one for all of us. We treated machine gun bullets with potassium cyanide solution, and dropped the crystals into shotgun shells. We coated hand grenades with potassium cyanide, mixed with a flour and water paste. Then we began our war of extermination.

The machine gun, we soon found, was the most efficient weapon. After we had exhausted our other munitions, we left the shooting to the skillful corporal, while we performed the disagreeable task of removing the immense, stinking carcass of the giant medusa from the roof. We had to cut it and drag it away in sections, and this nauseating work occupied most of the afternoon.

It was soon learned that even in minute quantities prussic acid, and most of the cyanides, were deadly to the medusae. Their remarkable powers of absorption and assimilation which made their rapid growth possible acted for their destruction when the one poison that had proved so deadly to them was introduced.

It was found that if a single attached tentacle of a stalk medusa were touched with a small quantity of potassium cyanide or prussic acid solution, the entire animal would be poisoned fatally in less than ten minutes.

Airplanes armed with machine guns, the bullets of which were coated with potassium cyanide or other prussic acid derivatives, applied over a thin coating of wax to prevent any chemical action, cruised the skies in search of the flying medusae, and brought them down by the hundreds.

Such products as oil of cherry laurel-technical oil of bitter almonds, and other commercial products containing prussic acid, were found efficient as coatings for bullets.

Closely following on the heels of the first day's prussic acid warfare, a new problem presented itself. The bodies of the dead monsters seemed to putrefy almost as rapidly as they had been able to grow, and not only contaminated the air with a horrible odor, but constituted a menace to public health.

It was Professor Davis who suggested that they be used to fertilize the ground which they had so lately despoiled not only of organic life but of many of its life-maintaining elements. In the country this was done chiefly by cutting them up with sharp disk harrows, then plowing them under.

More, than a year passed before the medusae were no longer counted a menace, but in two years it was generally believed that they had been totally exterminated.

As I write the final page of this strange chronicle I am seated at the edge of a certain clover field—the field beside which I was lying in the mottled shade

of the hackberry tree nearly three years ago, while Sue wove a garland of clover blossoms—the field which I later saw denuded of all life save the hideous, tentacled stalk medusae.

Above us towers a gaunt specter—the only visible reminder of that terrible scourge that visited the earth three years ago. The dead hackberry still extends its naked limbs heavenward, but now as if in thanksgiving for the vengeance that has been consummated.

The bees are humming busily in the fragrant clover once more. The mail plane is winging its swift way, undisturbed, to the airport. And Sue, my wife, is weaving a garland of clover blossoms.