

The MOON Beasts

by
William P. Locke



All of a sudden the scattered debris near began literally to fly to pieces; stems, branches, boughs and soil were resolved into a swirling cloud of mottled dust before the pulverizing blast.



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CHAPTER I - A Travel Talk

J. EVERHART STEWART, globe trotter, big game hunter, sponsor and member of several scientific expeditions to distant and unexplored regions, was delivering one of the Sunday afternoon illustrated lectures and travel talks at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. His subject was "Among the New Guinea Pygmies," and with both verbal and visual pictures he carried his audience on a reconstructed journey of a recent expedition into the interior fastnesses of the largest and least known island on earth. He particularly dwelt on the difficulties encountered in surmounting the well nigh impenetrable jungle extending even to the very shores of this inhospitable land.

"We ascended the largest river," he explained in introduction, "in our special light draft steamer as far as we could, continually sounding our way to follow the winding channels. Then we used our seaplane to reconnoiter further and map out a number of clearings indicating the probable location of Pygmy settlements. Having determined our objective, our real task was before us—to force our way through the matted tangle of jungle and reach the home grounds of the never before visited savages. We ascended to the headwaters of such streams as were on our course by the wonderful ability of our Dyak boatmen—brought with us from Borneo—in overcoming the many rapids and other obstructions. Eventually we could proceed no further by water and then were obliged to hack our way into the bordering wall of rank vegetation.

"Our progress then became slow. Indeed. A mile a day was about our average, although on some days we did not advance one-fourth that distance. After a week or so at this kind of work we began to have serious misgivings about being able to reach the selected clearing which was, we estimated, fully half a hundred miles further. And it is more than probable that we would never have been successful in our accomplishment and been able to show you these scenes of the Pygmies in their home surroundings had it not been for a quite

unexpected, very extraordinary and most fortuitous circumstance. This was nothing less than a broad, comparatively clear roadway running in the general direction in which we were headed and which we later found passed within a few miles of our goal.

“But when I say ‘roadway’ don’t conjure in your minds a seemingly endless ribbon of smooth concrete, or even a common dirt road bordered by barbed wire fences. This was a road, or rather trail, the likes of which none of us had ever seen or heard through the heart of the jungle, an arboreal tunnel, bored by some unknown, strange and powerful agency; a something that had burned a strip of living vegetation into crumbling rottenness and so poisoned the soil as to effectually prevent any regrowth.

“But the jungle had by no means given up its hope of reconquest. Deprived of a foothold in the soil it had gone aloft and arched over the scar, dropping festoons of vines and creepers in its endeavor to fill the void. As the pictures show it was not altogether what might be called an open road, but compared to chopping our way, as we had been doing, it afforded immeasurable relief. The probable cause was a subject for endless discussion then and ever since but no satisfactory explanation has yet been vouchsafed. But more of that later.

“I will now take you to our outfitting head-quarters and acquaint you with the personnel of this expedition and we will begin our journey to the land of the Pygmies.”

As he finished his very interesting talk and prepared to leave the stage, an usher handed Mr. Stewart a card. He glanced at the unfamiliar name and then read the penciled note on the reverse— “Would like a few minutes—Am sure I can explain your jungle road.”

“Well, well!” he ejaculated, “That’s surely interesting.

“Bringing in the gentleman.” A clean cut, comparatively young man of good appearance accompanied the usher on his return.

“My name is Joseph S. Crawford as you see by my card, and I’m much pleased to meet you personally, Mr. Stewart. I greatly enjoyed your lecture, and was particularly

interested, I might say 'flabbergasted' if you will pardon the expression, when you began to describe that jungle road. That accounted for two of them and, I feel sure,—I'm confident there must be another that hasn't yet been discovered."

"I—er—I don't quite understand," Stewart answered with a puzzled expression. "I can't make out your interest unless—Were you ever in New Guinea?"

"No, sir. Never. We found ours much closer than that."

"You found—what?"

"I've had the experience of also following a path or road such as you described, but through the Northern underbrush not over a thousand miles from here. I know and actually saw what caused it and had good reasons to believe there might be one or two more; but did not quite expect they were so far away, at least to hear of them there. Perhaps we'll hear of the third soon—maybe in China or Siberia,"

"And what was this cause you claim to have seen in your case, Mr. Crawford?"

"That is something that cannot be described off-hand, Mr. Stewart. I, you, or no one else in the world would guess it in a thousand years unless they had an experience similar to mine. Even now it seems incredible, a fantastic dream. But I assure you there is a very sinister and marvelous power at the back of it, a power beyond earthly limitations and present knowledge, and one that may have direct consequences to the future existence of all life on this planet as we now know it. Would it be possible to arrange to discuss this matter in a more convenient place and at greater length than we can here? I am sure you will be more than interested in what I have to tell—"

Crawford's Tale

TEN minutes past eight, conventional greetings over, chairs drawn up, cigars lighted, and an expectant expression on Mr. Stewart's face. And Crawford began. This is the story he told.

I am going to follow the plan of your talk of this afternoon, and tell things in sequence as they happened. But you must not expect as finished a recital as was yours, nor can I give the convincing proof of photography. However, I have with me a few souvenirs which, considering your experience, might be classed as evidence, and will be presented shortly.

A year ago last July, an old pal and co-worker by the name of Barry Edwards and I started on a vacation trip. (Barry left on a week-end trip or he would be here now, too.) We had, for over a year been strenuously engaged in radio research work and felt like getting as far away from inductances, capacities, electrons, and kilocycles as our time would permit. We landed up in the Lac Lareau country, among the countless lakes and streams a couple of hundred miles north of Lake Superior. Here we engaged a guide, a half-breed named Jules, and the necessary equipment for a fishing trip of several weeks. Our desire was to get into the real wilderness, away from the ordinary routes as much as possible, and we so instructed our guide. After several days of continuous paddling and numerous portages, we came to a very pretty, clear lake where we decided to make our permanent camp. The fishing proved all that could be expected and we were all set for a nice, enjoyable and restful time—so we thought.

But during the second night at this camp an event took place which ultimately imposed upon us a series of hardships, privations, and bewildering developments we never in the world had expected.

It was a beautiful night, a clear sky and a full moon, one of those when you don't feel inclined to retire lest you shorten your enjoyment of the bewitching beauty. Anyhow, I felt that way, and along about midnight, after Barry and Jules had sought their blankets, I got into the canoe and paddled out on the moonlit waters. The lake was about three miles long and

one wide. Near the center it made a turn at nearly right angles, so that it was shaped like the letter L. Jules had some unpronounceable Indian name for it but we dubbed it Angle Lake. One end lay to the west, the other to the south, and it was at the western end that our camp was pitched.

Slowly paddling along, I had passed the point where the southern end came into view and continued on toward the center. A faint, wavering breeze had sprung up from the south and a silvery lane of rippling moonlight extended toward the further end and the inlet by which we had entered. In contrast to the brightened waters, the deeply wooded shores were as black as a silhouette. The occasional splash of a fish breaking water, the deep r-rum of a bull frog in the weedbeds, and the gentle lapping of wavelets against the canoe were the only sounds that broke the primal stillness.

Stretched out in the bottom and drifting along, my mind lost in reveries, perhaps dozing a little, I became conscious of a sound, which I first thought was an increasing breeze sighing through the pines. As it grew gradually louder it was comparable to the distant patter of rain. Getting curious, I sat up to investigate. Everything was as serene as before, no indication of wind or rain in evidence. And yet the sound grew more distinct and closer. Listening intently, it seemed localized to a small area somewhere on the southeast shore, but as if in motion. Soon I was able to distinguish the snapping of twigs and the crashing of boughs as though some heavy body were tearing through the trees. Then the rending sound suddenly became a dull roar, and a white streak shot out of the blackness across the water. Scarce a half-mile away, a boiling, churning ridge of water like the wake of an oversized and incredibly fast hydroplane was crossing the lake; and strain my eyes as I might, no cause for this unusual disturbance was to be seen.

And then a fleeting shadow slid over the canoe and was gone. Looking up, I saw a dark shape passing the face of the moon, its outlines rather sharply defined for an instant;

then merging into a faint blot in the hazy ring which I now saw surrounded our satellite. It did not appear to be at a very great height, but that was hard to judge; and there was no doubt of its being the cause of the turmoil in the lake, for the disturbance followed directly beneath. Before I had much more than a glance, it had crossed the water. The roaring suddenly stopped, the crashing and tearing began anew, and, gradually as it had begun, the sound died out in a fainter and ever fainter sighing of wind through the pines. Soon the canoe was bobbing over a series of waves as though in the wash of a steamer; and excepting the sound of waves breaking on the shores everything became as quiet and placid as before. I took up the paddle and headed for camp.

Jules was awaiting me as I made shore. There was a suppressed excitement in his actions as we secured the canoe. I asked him if he had seen or heard anything unusual.

“Meester Joe,” he answered, “I sleep—and by and by I hear much rain. I look and see no rain. I think maybe much wind blow, but feel no wind here—hear it over there. Purty soon waves come, some, not much—no wind waves. No rain—no wind—some waves, Bien! It is what? Maybe you see something—yes?”

I told him what I had observed and then asked if he had ever seen or heard of any aircraft in these parts. The nearest he had come to seeing any were pictures in newspapers and magazines and none had ever been known to be in the vicinity. Just then Barry emerged from the tent and drowsily inquired what all the rumpus was about. I explained and we discussed the unusual occurrence for some time, finally deciding to await daylight to afford some clue.

CHAPTER II - Investigating

EARLY the next morning we paddled down the southern extension of the lake toward the locality where the strange object had crossed. From a distance we noticed innumerable

whitespecks dotting the surface. They proved to be fish—dead and belly up—hundreds of them, all kinds and sizes, from finger-long perch to three-foot muskies floating almost entirely out of the water. What a shame, we thought, that they should go to waste. I reached out and grabbed a three-pound pike intending to examine it. It broke up of its own weight and the section I held in my hand crumbled in my grasp. I threw it from me in disgust dipped my hand in the water to wash off the supposed sliminess. It came out perfectly clean and no trace of odor was perceptible! I tried it again. We found that, instead of a nauseating, decomposed organic mass as I had suspected, there was only a chalky substance, a loosely cohering plaster-of-paris replica that crumbled into powder at the merest touch. We could only marvel at this incomprehensible transformation. It had been Barry's opinion that I had seen a stray dirigible discharging its water ballast in an emergency. But I had already pointed out that it was not of the conventional shape as far as my observation went. And if it had been discharging water or sand or any material substance in the quantity necessary to cause the effects produced I surely would have been able to detect it. The finding of the calcined fish had entirely upset his theory, I could see, and left him without a reasonable supposition to advance. And as was his wont in such circumstances, he said nothing.

Noticing a break in the continuity of the deeply wooded shore line we paddled over, made a landing, and examined the surroundings. From the Water's edge a well defined trail led inland. The underbrush showed that it had been subjected to a very severe disturbance. Saplings and bushes were flattened out, boughs, branches, and even limbs from the larger trees were strewn over the ground or hanging interlocked with others and it seemed as though the disruption was more severe at the sides than directly in the center. There nearly all the leaves were stripped from the standing beech, birch, alder, and other deciduous trees, while even the pines were shorn of their needles. Had we come upon it unexpectedly, we probably would have considered it a rather peculiar windfall, the work of a miniature tornado, a

condition occasionally encountered in forest regions. But this, I felt certain, was not the effect of wind. So we searched for more definite clues as to what had been the possible cause, but found nothing enlightening. Presently Barry and I gathered together, mute questioning in each other's eyes.

“Well! how about your ballast dumping now,” I asked. “Did you find any evidence of water, sand, or anything to substantiate that theory?” He shook his head.

“I'm still guessing,” he answered. “Mighty peculiar; isn't it?” Jules joined us and the three of us sat down on a fallen log.

“Looks as though someone in this neck of the woods has put over something new,” he continued; “taking into account the fish, this wreckage, and your statement that it did not look like an ordinary plane or dirigible.”

“As far as I could make out, it bore very little resemblance to the conventional types,” I reiterated again. “It seemed to be almost flat on the bottom without any apparent underworks, or any discernable wings. Instead of the familiar cylindrical cigar shape it appeared to be only half of it—something like the semirigid type if sliced through the horizontal middle from end to end—rather blunt and thick near the bow and tapering to the stern. If it had motors, their sound was drowned by the commotion on the surface. And it sure could travel some.

“Let's see if we can estimate the speed. We'll say the lake is a mile wide along the course it came. I believe it took no more than eight or ten seconds to cross. Taking the latter estimate, it would make about six miles per minute, or three hundred and sixty miles per hour—a speed impossible with the present dirigibles. It might be some new form of plane using a flat undersurface instead of wings, but I haven't heard of any developed along that line.”

“You’ve never heard of one that leaves a trail like a herd of elephants on a stampede either; have you?” Barry came back. “So we’ll concede the oddity of shape as being no more unusual than the rest of it.”

Then he went on to say that practically all the stories of amazing discoveries and inventions usually had for their inception isolated settings like our then present surroundings. Perhaps someone had made a fact of fiction, even though it did not appear logical, and had established headquarters in that neighborhood. I suggested it might not be a bad idea to pay him or them a visit and see what it was all about. All we had to do was follow the road.

“You mean to try to find it?” he asked.

“Sure; why not?” I answered. “It isn’t often that you find something as unusual as this to pique your imagination and curiosity and at the same time have nothing to prevent trying to satisfy it. I am willing to sacrifice a few days’ fishing to find out a little more about this!”

“Yeah! But figure out how far you might have to go to find out anything,” he replied, “if, according to your computations, it was travelling six miles a minute. A hundred miles is quite a stretch in this country and that would mean about seventeen minutes flight. Heck, it could easily be over 2000 miles away by this time!”

To Go Or Not

BUT I argued. I’d had a feeling ever since I saw it that it was descending. It seemed quite a bit lower when it disappeared behind the sky-line; but it had all happened so suddenly and unexpectedly that I did not have much chance for accurate observation. Nevertheless, we might be able to find some clew to show us if it did or did not by following it for a while. I asked Jules how the going was that way.

The guide had been a quiet but interested party to the discussion. It was an unfamiliar subject to him and outside the realm of his experience. But answering the question was not.

“Plenty wild,” he answered. “No routes, no portage—travel on foot. Much swamp too. Better go when she frgeze up, than now. I no go. Jules show where to catch the feesh, make camp, cook and dat; but hunt the fly-ship wot splash the water, kill the feesh, and break the trees, yes? NO.”

And as if that settled it he got up and went back to the canoe.

“Looks like the majority rules against your motion—or rather notion,” Barry announced with a smile, idly picking up a handful of leaves and pulling them apart. I was rather disappointed, as I felt the unusual phenomena warranted some investigation—even though the solution might not be realized. I was just deciding that there was nothing to prevent my following it up for a day or two without them, when I noticed that Barry was closely examining something that had caught his attention. He went a little distance along the trail and picked up some more leaves and scrutinized them. Then he went to the outside and did the same.

Wondering what it was about, I picked up some myself and looked them over. They seemed some- what shriveled in appearance and very brittle to the touch. He came over.

“See what I see?” he asked. “If you don’t, hold them up to the light.”

I did so, and gave a start. They appeared almost transparent. Close examination disclosed that this was caused by an infinite number of minute perfor- ations so small as to be almost individually indistinguishable but so numerous that each leaf was merely a lace-like filigree of its normal outlines. Even the stems and twigs were literally shot full of holes. I picked up a branch as thick as my arm and broke it over my knee as though it were punk. Our eyes questioned each other.

“Those outside the trail are OK!” Barry stated. “Looks like something more than merely unusual was pulled off here,” he admitted. “I’m for the investigation. When do we start?”

CHAPTER III - The Perforated Trail

HERE Crawford interrupted his recital by going to his overcoat and returning with a fair-sized tin-box.

“I am going to ask you, Mr. Stewart, if you noticed any similar peculiarities in the remnants of vegetation in that New Guinea trail?”

“I can’t say that we did,” Stewart replied. “But I would not be justified in saying that there might not have been. Decay is very rapid in the tropics. All the evidence of a previous jungle growth along that trail that we encountered were patches and mounds of crumbling dry rot still bearing a faint outline of trees and logs. We made a chemical analysis of some of it, but could find no cause for the rapid decay existing along that narrow strip.”

“You were there just about a year ago, according to your statement this afternoon; that was about seven months after our experience. No! I guess there wouldn’t have been much left then. I am going to show you a sample of what you probably would have found had you been there about six months earlier.”

He opened the tin box and disclosed a piece of branch, some twigs and leaves nestling in a cotton swathing, and a magnifying glass at one end. Cautioning care in handling he passed them over. Stewart examined them intensively. He finally pinched off a small piece of the branch and powdered it in the palm of his hand. He sat staring at it for some time.

“There appears to be a similarity between this and that which we found,” he admitted frankly. “And it is not unreasonable to suppose that the cause might have been identical. But that it should have been restricted to a narrow path in so widely separated locations is quite bewildering—unless your strange flyer made New Guinea while you were searching for it up there.”

“Not that one,” Crawford replied. “I’m quite sure it did not get there. But there were possibly two others. One of those did.”

Then Crawford continued.

Well, when Barry indicated his willingness to join in on an investigation I was much pleased. We decided to start as soon as we could get back to camp and make preparations for a few days’ hike. Also, to try to induce the guide to go along. We reasoned that he was a bit scared because we showed our own bewilderment. If we could convince him that there was nothing abnormal in this and used a little diplomacy, we probably could get him to go. So we concocted a tale of a newly discovered synthetic motor fuel of exceptional power but of a highly corrosive effect on all organic substances, which the strange craft was undoubtedly using; that they were in trouble and found it necessary to dump the fuel tanks which caused all the havoc. They had probably crashed and were in need of assistance, injured or killed, and it was our duty to render whatever help we could. We recounted this as we paddled back to camp and by the time we reached it, the guide had changed his mind.

“That a boy, Jules,” Barry had answered. “We knew you were no piker.”

The day had dawned cloudy and by the time we were on our way, it looked very much like rain. We had little difficulty at first in following the trail as it was so plainly marked and ran in an almost bee-line in a northwesterly direction. Later in the day the going became more troublesome and we had to make some detours to avoid swamps and small lakes, but were always able to pick up the perforated path on the opposite side. Toward evening the murky sky drew in closer and a fine drizzle began to fall. We decided it was time to camp and selected the first likely spot, on the shore of a small lake. We had brought our tent fly for a shelter and while the others were busy erecting that and making a fire, I unlimbered my tackle and caught several nice bass. These, with some of our stores, furnished a plentiful

meal. Barry and I were both pretty tired, being unaccustomed to long marches with a heavy pack on our backs.

The rain had soon put out the fire, we were rather cramped in our shelter and about the only thing left to do was to roll in our blankets and go to sleep.

The morning brought anything but a cheerful aspect. The drizzling rain still continued and everything above and below was sopping wet. We held a consultation to decide whether to proceed or remain until the weather cleared. Our supplies were sufficient for about six days, figuring to augment them with a regular catch of fish. Jules had brought his rifle, but, as it was the closed season for most game, we couldn't count much on that except in an extremity. To idle a day meant much distance lost and so far we had seen no indications that we were any nearer our objective. Besides, the prospect of sitting still in the chill dampness without even a fire did not appeal at all. The decision was to go on. We managed a breakfast fire and a cup apiece of steaming coffee made us all feel better.

Hard Going

THE going that day was anything but easy, in fact, it became even hazardous. The underbrush was very thick and we had to keep right in the trail for the most part, continually tramping over a mass of sodden, slippery, and crumbling boughs and branches. We had soon learned to avoid stepping on the larger limbs and even such fallen trunks as lay across our path, for one's foot sank into them as though they were rotted shells. And then we had to be constantly alert to avoid being caught under falling branches and even trees which, weighted by the rain, crashed at frequent intervals along our path.

On our way we had picked up a number of birds, one a large crane, a couple of rabbits and other creatures of the wilds. Their bodies were soft and granulous and readily fell apart

when touched. Apparently they had met instant death, for one of the rabbits was still sitting on his haunches in a very life-like posture.

Luckily we had a pocket compass, otherwise we would have been unable to tell our direction; and about noon it showed the course was changing some, bearing more to the north. By this time we were thoroughly drenched and my pack felt like a bushel of coal across my shoulders. The wet tent must have added quite a weight to Jules' load but he did not seem to mind it much. We did not bother to detour for ordinary creeks and sloughs encountered, but waded through them, figuring that we could not get much wetter than we were. And so we kept on through the interminable misty drizzle, slipping, sloshing, and splashing on our way.

Finally, the underbrush began to thin out and ahead of us we noted a pine clad ridge transversing our course. As our watches showed it was near sunset, the prospect of solid ground and camp put a little life in my aching limbs. Once there, Barry and I flopped down and, I suppose, had we been alone, would have remained there throughout the night. We must have dozed there in the rain, for it seemed but a few minutes when I was conscious of someone shaking me. I looked up and saw Jules, a compassionate grin on his face, motioning us to get up.

“Come,” he said. “I show you better place to sleep. And maybe eat first—yes?”

Good old Jules! He had the tent pitched beneath the overhanging bank of a little gully, a fire was sputtering, the bacon was sizzling, and the coffee-can steaming. We ate, hung up our wet clothes to dry, Barry and I rolled in our blankets and slept while the guide kept the fire going.

The third morning of our search was as dismal and gloomy as the preceding two, only the steady downpour had given place to intermittent showers. Before striking camp, we made a preliminary investigation, going along the ridge until we picked up the now familiar trail

and following it across its width of about half a mile. Here the higher ground sloped sharply and before us, apparently, was a low level plain stretching ahead and to either side as far as the low visibility permitted us to see. Out into this plain the trail continued and a checking with the compass showed the course to have passed due north and now bearing toward the east.

“Well, well I” Barry exclaimed, voicing my sentiments. “It looks as if we were out of the woods at last and will have better going. Frankly, I don’t think I’d care to put in another day like yesterday—not the way my legs feel this morning. If only this darn weather would clear up and we could see the sun again and get dried out once. Looks like there’s a long stretch of flat country ahead of us and, if those boys we’re chasing were looking for a landing place, that ought to be it.”

“Fine,” I agreed. “Maybe we’ll find out something now.” The guide, who had been intently studying the lay of the land a little distance apart, now come over. He gave us an enigmatic smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

“Find out much here, yes,” he answered. “Over there find nothing. This all big muskrat swamp—no can cross.” He finished with a comprehensive wave of his arm that included all the flat country we were overlooking.

Further questioning brought out that the swamp was all of twenty miles in length, east and west, and nearly half as wide at some places. We were then, approximately, at the center of the southern side. The ridge extended along the southern shore to the east and gradually flattened out; to the west it circled that end of the swamp, ending in a rather hilly and rough country toward the northwest.

Our hopes sank to a very low ebb. Supposing the strange craft had landed in the swamp, what chance was there of reaching it or rendering assistance to its crew? And then the mystery of its passage must remain unsolved. Only when winter’s icy breath had frozen

the surface would it be possible to traverse and explore this morass; and by then it would, no doubt, have long sunk from sight.

But there still remained the chance that it had crossed and of that we could make certain if we found the trail on the other side. And that meant at least one day if not more, of hard going to determine. Another shower came on and we decided to return to camp and talk the situation over in comparative comfort.

We summed up the situation in this wise.

We had come quite a ways with considerable difficulty and effort and we'd have that also on the way back. To return without even a clue would, to say the least, be disappointing. Perhaps another day or two would enable us to find that clue. I, at least, wanted to see if the trail came out on the other side. Barry suggested there might be an island where they could land and have their headquarters; also that it involved some new discovery particularly adapted to national defense, hence the secrecy. In that case our inquisitiveness might not be at all welcome. In fact, it might be wise to use a little circumspection. In trying to unravel something that others were very anxious to keep secret we might be doing so at some risk. The flyer simply would have to pass over us, accidentally or otherwise, and we would only be a part, of its mystifying trail. But the spice of danger only added more zest to the chase. We would at least go on to the other side and then let developments decide our future course of action. There was one thing we could not overlook. We had to eat and our stores were running low. We would have to depend more on the chase and Jules' rifle.

"No worry about starve," he assured. "Plenty rabbits, squirrels, and duck, and fish in the lakes. Plenty muskrats here too," he added with a grin. We both agreed to dispense with that last item on the bill of fare.

CHAPTER IV - A Clue

ALTHOUGH there was no indication of a break in the weather and the comparative comfort and rest in camp would have been greatly appreciated, we did not desire to lose more time than necessary. We did take a few hours rest, however, and then were on our way again. Reaching the place where we had stood some time before, we momentarily stopped and looked about. Our intention was not to follow the trail where it led toward the swamp, but continue along the ridge as far as we could in circling the eastern end. On our previous visit it had appeared to me that there was a slight difference in the physical aspect of the trail, but it was still too gloomy for dependable observations. Now the visibility was somewhat better and details more manifest.

Though still clearly defined, there did not seem to be as much wreckage as in the earlier stages and this was composed of smaller branches and boughs, the larger limbs seemingly having escaped. I picked up a few and noticed they did not crumble quite as readily. Barry, too, was making similar tests.

“Looks like they were losing or shutting off the power; don’t it?” he suggested.

“It does,” I agreed. “And if they’re not out there with the muskrats we might get a peek at them after all.”

We followed the ridge for some hours and then changed to the north, coming in closer to the edge of the swamp. Another hour or so and we saw small sheets of open water ahead. On the chance of his getting a stray duck or two we let Jules go ahead and reconnoiter. Presently we heard the crack of his rifle and saw his arm waving above the shoulder-high reeds and rushes.

“Duck soup,” we both ejaculated when we noticed a bird dangling from his hand; but we soon saw it was only a coot, or mud hen.

“Oh, well,” Barry commented. “They’re better than muskrats anyhow. I’ve eaten them when I wasn’t half so hungry as—Say, look over there,” he broke off, pointing across the water. “If my eyes don’t deceive me, there’s an old acquaintance.”

Following his direction I noticed a broad lane extending from the edge of the pond-like expanse through the coarse vegetation. We lost no time in getting to the opposite side. Sure enough, there was no mistaking the peculiar characteristics of the trail.

The perforation effect was plainly noticeable in the broader grasses, the reeds and rushes, and they were all flattened out as though some great pre-historic monster had dragged its ungainly weight through them; and they crumbled like chaff in the hand.

Here was another complication—what direction was the craft traveling in when it passed this spot? Did it make a sharp turn over the swamp and pass out here, or a larger circle and re-enter? If the latter then it was useless to follow it on land, and the other way we could not. We took a three-point bearing spaced about a quarter mile apart, made a rough calculation and concluded that the circle theory was more logical and that again the way led into the swamp. Also if our projected course was anywhere near the actual one then the trail would emerge way over on the northwest end—if it emerged at all.

There was nothing left but to retrace our steps, and though the new turn in events was rather unexpected, yet we were not disheartened, for, if we were correct in our surmise of the big circle, a forced landing was not immediately imperative. If they were looking for a likely spot to land, this stretch of flat terrain, from aloft, would appear just the place. Going at a pretty good clip, they might have decided to slack up and have a better look and then found it was not what they wanted at all. But what was more natural to suppose that being all set to land they did so at the first opportunity.

The afternoon was nearly gone when we reached our previous campsite and decided to again use the same sheltered spot. The coot was the principal contributor to the evening

meal, supplemented by a plant that grew hereabouts which, when boiled, tasted something like spinach.

The next day was spent in following the ridge in the opposite direction; and for the first time since we had started we saw the sun. Intermittently, at first, as the clouds thinned out, gradually, and by sunset the sky was clear. By that time we had rounded the southwestern end of the swamp and entered a rough, broken country, interspersed with gullies, ravines, and pine clad bluffs. Another night in camp with squirrel and young rabbit and more of the wild spinach for the evening meal. That night the moon shone brightly through the tops of the pines as they gently sighed in a wanning southern breeze.

Getting Closer

The morning dawned bright and pleasant with every indication of warmer weather, which, after the incessant rain and coolness, was very welcome to us. We got an early start and soon found it advisable to follow the higher ground a half mile or so from the swamp to avoid frequent sloughs extending into the gullies and the almost impassable underbrush that fringed its margin. We expected no difficulty in re-locating the trail if it intersected our path, as it had heretofore been so clearly defined; but after the morning had passed and we found we were along the north side and headed east without having seen any of the familiar indications, we began to feel that something was wrong. Perhaps it was in our calculations, or the craft had made a sharper turn, or had, after all, dropped in the swamp or had landed between it and our course.

We selected the latter contingency as being the one which demanded first attention. There was no wisdom in going on unless we were sure we had not passed by the object of our search. After a light lunch we zoned out quarter mile stretches of our back trail for each to

examine, with instructions to penetrate to the swamp wherever possible and to meet again at a designated spot.

Three times we met without result and Barry and I were awaiting the overdue guide at the fourth zone when he suddenly emerged from the brush. We sensed a difference from his usual lethargic manner and before we could utter a word he began nodding his head. We were pretty well excited, you can imagine, and plied him with questions. We learned that he had found the trail but not that which had made it.

“The big slough it go this way; the trail she go that way. Can’t get over. We go around this way and find him on other side, yes?” He indicated the directions with expressive waves of his arms.

“Well, Joe,” said Barry, “it looks as though we have caught up with the chase at last. It must be somewhere between us and the swamp, if it didn’t go straight up, or vanish entirely. Since we have gone to a lot of trouble to get a peep at the thing, Let’s get it.”

CHAPTER V - What They Found

From a bluff on the southern side we were silently gazing down into a small valley nearly enclosed by a horse-shoe shaped continuation of the ridge. Near the center we were able to make out a squat, shuttle shaped object that undoubtedly was the flyer we had been so arduously trailing the past five days. Our attention at first was centered on its immediate surroundings as much as on the craft itself. The floor of the valley had been thickly overgrown but now, excepting a fringe along the ridge, nearly every plant, bush, or tree was twisted and broken, leveled and crushed to earth. Even the soil itself was furrowed and torn by some cataclysmic force. It was as if a terrible explosion had followed the landing and we expected to see a shattered hull. But no outward appearance of damage to its

symmetrical outlines was discernible, nor was there any bit of wreckage that might have been a part. Apparently it had landed as gently as a gull settles on the waves.

We searched about for some sign of the occupants, but no trace of any was to be seen, at least from where we were. After some minutes we began circling along the ridge, advancing where screening permitted for further observation. This we did until we reached the opposite side. Still no trace of the crew was evident. Either they had left the vicinity or were still inside.

We now had a good look at all sides of the strange craft and wondered at its peculiar outlines. Had we unexpectedly come upon it we might have believed we had happened upon another "Lost World" and taken it for some monster pre-historic turtle-shaped amphibian that had just crawled up from the slime of the swamp. Of a certainty we wouldn't have tolerated the thought that it was capable of traversing the air at all, much less that it did so more efficiently and at greater speed than anything we knew of.

The general dimensions were about fifty feet in overall length, twenty feet at the widest point and fifteen at the greatest height. The top was rounded, the highest part or crown being nearer the end that lay toward the west. At that end was a rounded protuberance extending five or six feet which we had noticed while circling and took to be a sort of observation post, naturally concluding that to be the front.

On the sides the top flattened out into thick scalloped webs extending practically the entire length but merging in a streamline at both ends. The points of the scallops were drawn out to varying lengths, each ending in a round cap and resting against the side at an angle having the appearance of shores or fenders as seen on ships making dock. The front end was rather blunt, and the protuberance, I mentioned before, stuck out not unlike a Turtle's head; the rear tapered gracefully and symmetrically to a point. The general color was a bluish slate, changing to a pale orange along the edge of the webs, while the rounded ends of the angular

extensions were a transparent yellow. By contrast the crown was a large jet black oval that covered nearly a third of the area of the entire top; the protuberance was of alternating concentric rings of black and yellow. Behind and above the latter was a projecting knob of the general body color and comparatively inconspicuous. What was below the webs was hidden by the dangling projections and the scattered wreckage of trees and bushes.

“Well! What do you make of it?” Barry questioned in a low voice after we had been watching it for some time.

“Name it and it’s yours,” I returned. “It’s got me. What do you say to going in closer? Seems as if no one’s about—unless they’re inside.”

He agreed, and leaving Jules and our cumbersome packs behind we cautiously approached the rear end.

“I don’t know what to think of all this,” Barry whispered, as we were picking our way through the wreckage with as little disturbance as possible. “They’re sure able to level out a landing place. They’ve got something I’m not anxious to have turned in my direction. Let’s see if this wreckage has the same characteristics as the trail.”

We made an examination and found that it had; and from the shred-like remains of leaves and crumbling brittleness of branches and limbs, judged that here the strange force was used to a much greater extent than we had noted elsewhere. We reached and stood under the torpedo shaped stern and then could see that the underpart rounded and narrowed like the hull of a ship, but, instead of terminating in a keel in the center, there were two, separated by several feet with a rising arch between them.

We gingerly ran our fingers over the covering or sheathing and found it glassy smooth and hard, cold as steel and yet with an unmetallic feel. It was not continuous but consisted of innumerable diamond shaped plates of varying size perfectly joined. We flattened our ears against the side, listening for some sound from within. I thought I could detect a very faint

humming or throbbing but wasn't sure but what it might be due to the closed ear. I suggested we take opposite sides and make our way toward the bow. With a gesture suggesting caution Barry disappeared around to the left.

A few steps and I had reached the rearmost of the angular extensions and stopped to examine it. It depended from the overhanging web, the end a good yard from the ground which it would nearly reach when not drawn up. The web here was above my head and I could see that it sloped higher toward the front.

The drooping arm was elliptical in section, an Arm's length wide and half as thick, terminating in the nearly circular knob. Upon this I had centered most of my attention, feeling certain that from it the strange and powerful force issued. A seemingly hard, horny, semi-transparent convex substance not unlike a lens, covered the end. A furtive sideways glance into it did not reveal much, for the pale yellow coloring effectually obstructed vision.

Realizing that this device was undoubtedly mobile and adjustable to various positions, I undertook to learn by what form of mechanism it was operated. It was then that a surmise that somehow or other had persisted in the background of my mind, but which seemed entirely too absurd to warrant consideration began to assert itself.

Puzzled

SURELY, if these extensions, projections or whatever they might be called, were movable, and of that I had no doubt, then no hand of man ever fashioned a connection such as was here used. No joints or pivots were visible, just a merging of one to the other with an expansion of the covering on one side and contraction on the other. Either Nature had been simulated to the last degree—or Nature herself had been the builder. And if the latter—then this was no super man-made inanimate aircraft developed and built in secrecy, but a sentient, living monstrosity possessed of unaccountable, mysterious powers of whose

counterpart there was no existing knowledge in the annals of terrestrial creation. That this could be true seemed entirely too unreasonable for belief; and yet the presentiment persisted that it was a fact.

A slight crackling from the other side gave me a momentary start, and I was ready then and there to leave that vicinity without further notice. But the supposition that it was probably Barry, continuing his investigation without a full realization of the precariousness of our situation, held me. Wishing to substantiate my feeling, if possible, and also to acquaint and warn him, I continued toward the front, on the alert for any observable movement.

A glance here and there underneath disclosed that it was resting on projections like the teeth of a huge rack with thick horny protection on the bottom. These underparts were a greenish white, heavily scaled and decidedly reptilian in appearance.

I counted six of the arms or fins or what-nots on my side each somewhat longer than the one just passed. But the foremost was of exceptional length, so much so that it overlapped by half the neighboring one.

Just then Barry appeared around the front with such an expression of utter amazement and bewilderment as I had never seen before on his face.

“Come on,” he whispered as he pulled my arm. “We’d better get away from here—right now.”

We returned to the higher ground and selected a spot for our camp where we could keep the little valley and its strange occupant under observation without ourselves being too conspicuous. While Jules was pitching the tent and preparing a meal we sat down at the edge of the bluff in silent contemplation.

“Barry,” I finally remarked, “if you tell me you think as I do I’ll say you’re crazy.”

“Well, Old Scout,” he replied with one of those serious glances over the rims of his glasses. “I rather believe we’re both pretty much cuckoo then. But in all seriousness, Joe, that

thing out there is no hand-made or factory-built flying machine, which, I take it, is your own conclusion. But what in heaven's name is it, and where did it come from? It's alive—or was when it landed here. Some pep, too. I'll say, when feeling right. We've had a deuce of a time finding it but it's going to be a whole lot harder classifying it."

"We suspected something unusual, or we would not have come," I replied: "But it looks as though our expectations have been considerably exceeded. Why, it's preposterous to believe that creatures such as this could have eluded discovery living in this or any similar swamp only comparatively isolated. If this were in the unknown wilds of Africa or South America, it might be a tenable supposition; but here within arms' reach of the civilization of North America, it's past belief!"

We sat there theorizing and commenting. That it was neither bird, beast, reptile, or insect, we agreed, although it possessed some attributes of each and all. Also that it was a creature whose like had never been mentioned either in fact or fable to our knowledge. Where did it come from and why was it here? Even supposing that it was an inhabitant of some jungle fastness in one of the few regions yet unexplored, its phenomenal powers of flight, evidenced by its presence here, precluded the possibility of its remaining undiscovered up to this time. Since we could only reconcile ourselves to the belief that some trace must have been found —somewhere—if this monstrosity was really a contemporary inhabitant of our earth, we were forced to the seemingly more preposterous one that it was not of our world at all.

Somewhat jokingly we at first voiced this opinion, but soon saw that we were only camouflaging our true feelings. Thereafter in all seriousness we sought to analyze the situation from that point of view.

We were brought back to earth, as it were, by Jules who had quietly come up behind us.

“Some funny airship,” he observed with a questioning glance at us. “She more like a big bug, yes? You come eat now, yes?”

“Might as well,” Barry answered. “My mind’s all in a blue funk anyhow.”

CHAPTER VI - Contemplation and Conjectures

“JOE, what are we going to do about this?”

It was Barry, who reopened the discussion after we had returned to our observation post on the ledge. The long northern twilight was merging into dusk and the little valley lay ringed in somber shadows under a lemon canopy of sky. Frogs were croaking in the marsh, fireflies twinkling in the lowlands and pesky mosquitoes, brought to life by the day’s warmth, persistently followed their usual occupation.

Under these normal and prosaic conditions it was hard to believe that out there only distinguishable as a lighter colored mound, was an object entirely abnormal and foreign to these surroundings.

“One thing I’d like to know to start with,” I answered, “and that is if there’s any life left in it. If we were certain there was not we could make a thorough examination and arrange for one of us to return and announce our find, while the others remained on guard.”

“Say! Can you fancy the excitement it will make? I can see planes buzzing around here as thick as these mosquitoes are now, bringing reporters, professors and scientists.”

“Maybe,” he interposed. “Do you suppose you could get anyone to believe such a tale without some pretty convincing evidence? They’d all think you were gone bughouse, and I don’t see as I could blame them.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I returned. “As far as evidence is concerned I think we can take care of that. I’ve got the little old Kodak in my pack and I don’t think any of that excessive moisture we encountered lately got to the films.”

“Gee! Did you really bring it?” he enthusiastically exclaimed. “That will certainly help a lot. That gives us a plan of action. Our first move will be to get some pictures in the morning, and then see if an inquest is in order, for we wouldn’t want this ‘bird’ to fly away while we are doing our advertising, leaving us, apparently, the perpetrators of a most colossal hoax. But why didn’t you use the camera this afternoon?” he asked.

“Gosh, I was too astonished and excited to think of it,” I replied. “But how are we going to find out if it’s dead or alive—tickle it in the ribs—say ‘scat’ or what?”

“Your levity is not as senseless as it sounds,” he retorted. “How about tickling it with a bullet or two?”

That sounded all right to determine the question. But supposing it didn’t like that kind of a test and started for home—wherever that was. Then we’d be out of luck. On the other hand we couldn’t induce or compel it to stay anyhow if it decided to take leave. It would have taken at least two weeks before we could expect any of the right people out here and there was small chance that it would be so obliging as to hang around that long if it could help it.

Besides, as Barry aptly expressed it, “There’s no hotel or even delicatessen around here,” we were likely to run pretty shy on eats in a few days. So we thought it advisable to make whatever investigations we could first and then settle if it were alive or dead.

“Perhaps it’s nocturnal in its habits,” I suggested. “Supposing we stand watch tonight and see if anything happens.”

It was midnight when I relieved Barry at the post.

“Anything doing,” I asked. “Haven’t heard a thing out of the ordinary,” he answered, “and, of course, couldn’t see anything in this stygian darkness. You will have an advantage, for the moon will soon be high enough to light things up (Town there. You can serve as a change of diet for these pesky mosquitoes—I’m as full of holes as that trail we followed.”

Then followed a period of “watchful waiting” and continual smoking while a lopsided moon crept above the tops of the encircling pines. Before long its light fell full upon the strange creature and was reflected in scintillating lines of radiance as though it were an enormous jewel lying on its black velvet bed.

I had ample time for contemplation and strange conjectures. Could it really be that a being from some other world had happened here, I asked myself. If so, it was the first instance known to mankind, Or was it? I recalled reading every now and then some press items of strange aircraft having been seen to pass where none were known to be. And some of these tales even antedated by years the period of practical flight. Perhaps there was really a background of fact in support of these observers whom we so willingly and contemptuously credited with pipe dreams. And then, what of the tales of winged fire-breathing dragons and other fabled creatures for whose invention no logical counterpart has ever existed, to our knowledge, among the vast, diversified host of earthly fauna?

If this one could traverse space and reach our little globe was it not logical to assume that others might have been able to do the same? The lack of actual confirmation presumed that such was a very infrequent occurrence. Perhaps it is our gravitational force, our atmosphere, with its attributes of pressure and resistance, or our temperature or other terrestrial peculiarities that are unsuitable and hindered more frequent visits.

Further Investigation

OUR atmosphere should of itself be no deterrent to anything capable of traversing the emptiness of interplanetary or stellar space; its pressure, however, could be harmful to an organism not adapted thereto; and its resistance undoubtedly so, if traveled at great speed. As for temperature, cold could seemingly be disregarded for there is hardly a comparison with

that which is attributed to outer space; though sufficient to preclude the alternative of excessive heat. Still these forces and conditions, though in all probability contributing factors, did not of themselves appear to constitute an impenetrable barrier to previous landings. No doubt there were others that must be considered, but their identity could only be determined by a better understanding of the visitor.

Was it a larger or smaller world from which it had come? Its size and apparent weight fostered belief that it would hardly be a larger sphere. Certainly it could not be from giants like Jupiter or Saturn, for it would require an enormous expenditure of force to overcome their attraction. Mars or Venus appeared more likely since conditions there more nearly approximate our own. But allowing a similarity of conditions then why not more frequent visits? Well, it was a puzzle all right.

A flash, apparently the reflection of the moonlight on some mirror-like object, caught my eye and aroused me from my meditation. I fancied I saw something moving on top and near the front of the creature, something that was slowly rising and swaying back and forth. I strained my eyes to make sure, but the harder I looked the more they blurred in the indistinct light. The most I could make out was something long and slender with an enlargement at the end, something that resembled a long arm with a big fist or knob on the end.

As I watched it seemed to slowly turn and like the flash from a lighthouse, a greenish-red phosphorescent disc, the size of the knob came into view and was gone. I expected a further movement or at least a repetition of the flash but the extension appeared motionless thereafter. Then I must have dozed for of a sudden I noticed it was daylight. Everything looked just as it had the evening before —I couldn't see anything to which the movement observed during the night might be attributed; and later when I acquainted Barry and he seemed rather skeptical I began to have some doubts about it myself.

Following our prearranged plan, as soon as the light was right, we took a number of snap-shots from different points of vantage. As the sky was cloudless and the bright sunshine flooded the little valley, we felt sure of getting some good pictures. Then we were ready to determine if a closer inspection might be safely attempted.

We borrowed the guide's rifle and a few of the remaining cartridges and took our stand on the ledge. By this time Jules had his own opinions regarding this "airship" and the ledge was as close as he cared to venture. We might as well have used a bean-shooter for all the effect the twenty-two's produced. They merely glanced off and went singing among the trees on the other side. Somewhat encouraged by lack of response we went closer and began throwing stones at it. It makes me smile when I think of the incongruity of the spectacle we presented. There we were a couple of practically unarmed mortals throwing stones at a fifty-foot monster of unknown temperament, but amazing power. All that was lacking were fur pants and a movie camera to make a perfect setting for a cave-man thriller.

We tried to avoid hitting what we considered vulnerable spots, as we had no intention to harm it if still alive and arouse it to possible fury or sail away. We only attempted to determine if a moderate disturbance was likely to produce some movement or action making it unsafe to venture closer. As nothing happened we gradually closed in until we were again beside the overhanging rear. For a final test we gave it a few smart raps with a fair-sized club.

"Well, if it ain't done for, it's mighty lazy," Barry commented, as he wiped the perspiration from his face and glasses, for the day was becoming increasingly hot, and there in the glen the sun beat down mercilessly. We figured there wouldn't be any great risk inspecting it, if we went about it quietly.

However, as we went along examining and commenting about this and that feature, we gradually and unconsciously began to lose our excessive caution. From the ground we

could not observe much more than we had the previous day, though we took our time in noting the various peculiarities. Together we looked into the lens-like end of one of the annular arms, and wondered what mysterious force it was that could sustain and propel so great a bulk and cause such unwonted terrestrial havoc and how it was produced.

“I’d like to get a close-up of that big oval on top,there,” Barry remarked; “and then that appendage up in front to see if it is nose, mouth, eye, or what have you. Think we can make it?”

I thought we could but remarked that the going up might be a whole lot safer than the coming down.

“Oh, bosh,” he replied. “This thing hasn’t twitched a muscle or its substitute since we got here. It’s just like an overgrown turtle, ready to pull into its shell and wait until the excitement’s over. It’s probably as dead as King Tut’s sacred Ibis.”

We made a sort of scaling ladder by trimming a suitable sized spruce, leaving stubs of branches for rungs. His insistence that as suggestor he was entitled to priority won his point and while I steadied the makeshift ladder he carefully ascended, after first removing his shoes. A few preliminary test steps to which no reaction followed and he disappeared over the edge. I stepped out to where I could see him. He was on all fours at the edge of the oval, his head and shoulders swaying as though trying to encompass in one glance some action or disturbance occurring throughout its extent.

For several minutes he was thus engrossed, when catching sight of me over his shoulder he motioned me to come up. Also shoeless I climbed the sapling as he steadied it from above.

“What is it,” I questioned.

“Go up and look,” was his only response.

On hands and feet I crept up the sloping back, noticing that despite the hot sun it felt cold and clammy. At first I saw nothing so peculiar in the large shining black oval except the oddity of its contrast with the rest of the surface; but soon I did not wonder at Barry's rapt attention.

As I looked more intently I became aware of lambent vibrating rings of color, of flickering rainbows seemingly cascading in endless flowing streams. The entire oval was apparently as black as tar but all the colors that are ordinarily dead in that substance were here in living form.

Now I knew the reason for his peculiar action. I unconsciously did the same, trying to unravel the workings of the marvelous chromatic kaleidoscope. After some minutes I began to get an understanding of its general design.

A hard, horny, transparent covering an inch or so thick, covered the oval, as the crystal of a watch covers its face. Beneath this crystal were numerous alternating concentric rings composed of triangular pyramids and radial corrugations.

The Living Rainbow

BOTH pyramids and corrugations varied proportionally in size; the former from scarce an eighth inch in base line at the top of the crown to a full three-quarters near the edge; the latter from mere lines to quarter-inch tubes.

The pyramids, black as though made of polished jet, were arranged with interlocking bases in double rows; and filmy flames of iridescent colors traversed their sides. The radial bands, only half the width of those of the pyramids, seemed nearly transparent and appeared to be a connecting medium or circuit for the latter. The narrower and finer bands, those surrounding the apex, were practically colorless, only a black sheen emanating therefrom. But almost imperceptibly this changed to a light purplish tint and this, as it passed through

each succeeding pyramidal ring, was intensified until it became a deep violet, then fading merged into the various shades of indigo, then of blue, green, yellow, orange and red, until the red merged into a dull rosy glow, disappearing in transparent; pulsations in those bands near the edge.

Imagine a huge oval opal in the interior of which the fires of an endless living rainbow are imprisoned; in which the flames of multi-shaded colors flow and stream and yet never pass; and, interposed with the merging and intermingling shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, annular bands of myriad diamond points, each facet in itself a miniature of the whole—then you may gain some conception of the wonderfully beautiful organogeny on the back of that ungainly monstrosity.

“What do you think of that; pretty nifty, eh?” Barry inquired as he joined me for another look. “Glow worms and fireflies compare with this like a candle with a desert sunset; only this is optically much weaker—you’ve got to get close to see it.”

“Looks to me as though the functions were for producing directly opposite effects,” I answered. “Your bug or worm converts energy into luminescence; apparently this converts luminescence into energy.”

“You’re on, Joe,” he agreed. “That is a compounding spectroscopy with an Nth power: —a short wave converter that we poor mortals haven’t even imagined yet—a color screen that would make a rainbow jealous. I think I can make a pretty good guess now where this ‘baby’ gets its power.”

“You mean sunlight, I suppose,” I answered. “That’s going back directly to the ultimate source of energy. That seems to imply that its natural environment would be somewhat similar to terrestrial conditions—probably more but not less solar radiation. Then

one might presume that its habitat would be on a neighboring planet and not the more distant ones.”

“Not necessarily,” he replied. “You’re probably overlooking the fact that the earth’s atmospheric envelope offers quite a resistance or obstacle to certain rays; perhaps curtains some altogether. If our Heaviside layer can deflect radio-waves back to earth, why couldn’t it obstruct or deflect certain incoming waves as well? Then a planet, unburdened with such a hindrance, though it received far less light and heat, might yet receive a much greater volume of those rays than we do; Mars a little more, Mercury too much, Jupiter and Saturn doubtful from a habitable standpoint on account of their supposed plastic state — so we may have to go to Uranus or Neptune — maybe even to some other solar system.”

While Barry was talking I used my hands to shade the various spots to better use the color display. It seemed that where the direct sunlight was obstructed, there was a wavering, a fading of intensity in the flowing streams. Using my cap to provide a larger screen I found it practically obliterated the display beneath. Bringing it to his attention, for some moments we both were busy shoving our caps here and there. So engrossed had we been in our examination of this extraordinary structure that we practically forgot our situation. I began to realize, at length, that this display would hardly be taking place if the creature were entirely lifeless. Then we plainly heard a shout and turned to see from whence it came.

CHAPTER VII - A Pantomime Conversation

NOW I suppose I should say that our eyes stared in horror and our hair stood on end with fright; but I can’t exactly recall just what my sensations were. I know I stared all right and think I felt more foolish than frightened, at first, though, I’ll admit, feeling a few nearzero shivers circulating in the spinal marrow.

For as we turned we suddenly discovered we were being watched; and what was watching us was a greenish-yellow, slightly elliptical disc set in a hood like a monk's cowl at the top of a tapering neck, longer, thicker, and rougher than an elephant's trunk—a periscopic eye, more than a foot across, motionlessly focused and meeting our stare two yards above our heads.

“Sit still,” Barry whispered.

“Don't move,” I warned.

And like sculptured images we sat there scarce daring to take a breath. For minutes that seemed hours we suffered that owlish, unblinking stare, expecting we knew not what. The suspense and inaction were worse than the unexpected discovery. A cold sweat was beginning to ooze from every pore and muscles of my arms and legs began twitching from the strain of maintaining the uncomfortable position.

“Shall we make a break for it?” I managed to mutter.

“And get turned into sponges most likely,” he answered with an articulation no steadier than my own. “Hold on; maybe we can wait it out.”

But he should have taken his own admonition to “hold on”, for just then he slipped and in trying to recover made quite a commotion. We expected an immediate blast of some kind from that baleful eye, but it only maintained that unceasing stare.

Then suddenly the cowl-like top closed over it like a knight shutting the visor of his helmet, opened, closed, and opened a number of times. Then the peak of the cowl began to wag in varying periodic vibrations. These movements were repeated over and over in the same definite order with an intermediary and seemingly questioning stare. Finally a rhythmic swaying of the long stem-like neck was added to the other motions.

“Barry, I believe it's trying to communicate with us,” I suggested.

“Looks that way,” he replied; “but I can’t quite make out if it’s a greeting, a requiem or a request to vacate the premises.”

“It may have some intelligence and is trying to find out if we have any,” I continued.

“If it has it knows we haven’t—or we wouldn’t be here.”

“Just the same,” I went on; “it’s no use to let it think we are dumb-bells entirely. Suppose we do a little wigwagging too—make some motions with our heads and arms.”

“I’d rather make a lot with my legs and feet,” he answered calmly. “But go ahead if you think it’ll do any good; might as well do that as nothing.”

Thereupon I began to wave my arms, slowly and cautiously at the start, and soon saw that this seemed to interest it, for the movements ceased and it returned to its fixed stare. Gaining confidence, I arose although the footing was none too secure. As I did so, I saw Jules close to the front of the creature, his rifle trained on the now motionless hood. He saw me too and his expression was easily read.

For an instant I debated in my mind. Had he been holding an elephant gun or a large calibre rifle, I might have decided differently; but his little twenty-two was nothing to take a chance on under the circumstances. I held up my hand and shook my head.

Then I began a pantomimic exhibition for the benefit of our host. I snapped the visor of my cap up and down, swayed my head and in general tried to imitate as nearly as possible the movements we had observed. This immediately brought a repetitional response.

“Joe, if you could only wiggle your ears it would help a whole lot, I think,” Barry irreverently interposed. He was not trying to be funny—it was just his nature. Serious minded and countenanced he seldom cracked a smile, but underneath that reserve was a fountain of rich humor; and particularly under stress or excitement it spurted forth most unexpectedly.

I continued, but to make the exhibition more realistic, now endeavored to convey an explanation as well as an apology for our intrusion. Trying to show that, being inhabitants of

this mundane sphere, we happened in the vicinity, discovered its presence and because of our inquisitive though harmless nature, endeavored to find out what it was all about. We thought there might be something interesting up here and of course had to come up to find out. Our intentions were of the best—regretted the inconvenience—sorry to disturb its rest and so forth.

The Organic Movie

IF it did not understand this at least it gave close attention for the orb never deviated from my direction.

“Fine, Joe,” Barry exclaimed at the conclusion; “I could almost make out the drift of it myself.”

“Oh, shut up,” I returned, somewhat peeved. “Here I go trying to square things and all you do is set there and make criticisms. But, if I’m not mistaken, it’s your turn now.”

Obviously the stare was now transferred to his person, and as obviously one could read the implication—“Now, what have you to say?”

“I’m not much on deaf and dumb talk; but I guess I’m it,” he admitted as he began a similar course of philological maneuvers.

“You chide me for criticising; do you?” he said to me. “Well, if you’d have made your pow-wow a little plainer I wouldn’t need to repeat it. I’m thinking you started something; if this one-eyed, universal hybrid fancies this entertainment, we’ve got a steady job—as long as we can keep it up.”

As he continued, his motions were interspersed with running comment, like a vaudeville juggler cracking his jokes during his act. Later I was able to appreciate the humor of the situation, but at the time it certainly was serious enough.

“If you want to see all the unwelcome emotions registered at one time—look at Jules’ face,” he went on. “He’s a real guy at that I’m telling you—if we’d have kept our caps away from that ‘auroraborealis’ this wouldn’t have happened—I hope the other eye don’t pop up from nowhere—Talk about equipment; this thing’s got everything but wheels — Whew! But it’s hot. There, I hope I’ve squared myself.”

We anxiously awaited the result of our efforts. Soon there followed a momentary wagging of the peak and then the long periscopic affair began to telescope and shorten until the hood was but a yard above its back.

A change began to take place in the orb; a gauzy, milky film quickly overspread and displaced the greenish-yellow transparency, and on this film shadow-like spots and patches formed and flitted. Somehow their outlines and movements brought a sense of familiarity. I wondered—and then curiosity again getting the better of discretion, cautiously crept close enough to get a fair view.

An involuntary cry of amazement escaped me as I realized what I was looking at; for there on that gauzy film were two figures, undeniably human, standing on a sloping surface apparently going through a form of calisthenic exercises. It took but a moment to recognize the scene.

There we were, plain as day. Barry’s long, lanky form on one side, mine on the other, repeating the identical movements we had just completed. But, whereas we actually had made them in succession, they were now shown simultaneously.

The images, entirely colorless, were as plain and distinct as a photo-engraving and seemed similarly formed of high and low lights through the medium of the gauzy film.

Although the slight convexity of the orb produced a somewhat spherical field there was little distortion.

“Well, I’ll be—. What next!” I heard Barry exclaim softly and in awed tones, as he too moved closer and observed the picture. This soon began to fade out and in its place a round object began to form, gradually developing into a shining sphere wrapped in a scattered covering of fleecy wool, through which darker patches bordered by faint lines and tracings, like the cracks in old ivory, could be seen. Something led me to expect a definite outline in the arrangement of the patches and inclosing tracings and I was not disappointed.

“It’s the Earth,” I whispered; “and I can make out the American continents.” He gave an answering gasp.

For a few minutes we watched a miniature of old mother earth swimming majestically in space, actually but a few feet from our eyes but apparently thousands of miles away. Then the hooded eyelid dropped and the peak again went through its wagging movements.

“I’ve got it, Joe,” Barry exclaimed. “It means—that’s us.”

When it opened the orb again was black. But soon another image began to form, one that resolved into another sphere, also bright and shiny but devoid of any obscuring covering and seemingly of greater extent, for it covered the entire surface. The more distinct configurations soon indicated, however, that it was because of a closer view rather than a larger object that the impression of size was gained.

But this was not a true sphere, rotund as the previous one, but more of an oval; an egg-shaped combination of sphere and cone whose surface was extremely rough, deeply scarred and pitted. As we watched the image enlarged and overspread the limits of the orb and our attention necessarily concentrated on the part in view.

This was a section of the conical hemisphere, and apparently we were approaching it at a tremendous speed. Nearer and nearer we came as if on the wings of thought, and more and more distinct became the rugged outlines of the unfolding terrain.

Vast saw-tooth ranges, mountainous cliffs and spires bordered immense crater-like pits, whose depths were partly hidden in sharply-defined, inkyblack shadows from the encircling elevations. It appeared as if some great and long continued bombardment of super-projectiles had caused those gigantic shell-holes—had, in fact, literally blown away the original spherical contour and altered its shape to a jagged conical mound.

Toward one of the largest of these craters our course was directed and such was its extent that before any detail of the towering rim was discernible, it overflowed the field of vision and passed out of sight. On and on we plunged and now the bottom seemed to swiftly rise to meet us. Then the speed suddenly slackened and in the airplane view spread below we began to distinguish various features.

My first impression was that we were observing some vast engineering or mining undertaking, for there certainly was a great amount of activity and movement going on. I could make out numerous forms resembling dredges or large steam-shovels apparently engaged in excavating, while a moving line of others were doing the trucking. As we came still nearer I felt sure my impression had been correct; and then we hovered for a while at a height from which the operations became quite distinct. But the nearer our apparent approach the smaller became the circular field of vision until now it seemed as though we were looking through a small hole in the floor of an elevated structure.

A Strange Undertaking

AND in that area thus disclosed, a most astounding proceeding was taking place. Some great undertaking was in progress but this was being done, not with mechanical apparatus as I had supposed, but with creatures the same as that whose cinematographic eye was now portraying the scene to us. And yet there was a certain machine-like action in their arrangement and movements.

Like huge steam-shovels, operating in recessional tiers, they were ranged side by side, hooded eye erect and looking much like a smoke-stack, evidently further enlarging the vast excavation. I centered my gaze upon a certain one to fathom, if possible, the reason for this activity as well as the methods employed in its consummation.

It stood, head on, a short distance from the terraced bank. I said head on, though really there was no distinguishable head as with terrestrial fauna; but, anyhow, the one with the rounded extension which subsequent events demonstrated to be the business end. Its two large front flippers, in constant undulatory motion, were pointed forward, their lensed ends directed at the bank from which the material just seemed to disintegrate as from a powerful hydraulic nozzle.

But this separated, pulverized material did not fall or settle to the surface; neither did it blow away in a cloud as one might expect. Instead it flowed in a faint, though discernible, slow-moving, tubular stream, like dust motes in a beam of sunlight, toward the rounded extension about which it clustered as do filings about a magnet's pole.

This loading process apparently required some time so I shifted my gaze to one that was moving away. With a large doughnut-like shape at its front end, and a ponderous tank-like motion, it trundled along till well away from its fellows when, gently and with no more fuss than a balloon, it rose from the surface and quickly sped out of the picture. Another took its place from a waiting line.

I then noticed a pillar-like elevation on top of which was one which, by the swaying movements of its periscope, seemed to be directing and overseeing the labor of the others. For some moments more we were permitted to look upon this scene and then it too faded from view.

Then another picture formed which at first appeared to be a repetition of the other with a somewhat different setting. But as it became more distinct, it was soon evident that

here a different motif was expressed. A circular eminence occupied the center of the picture in front of which a considerable number of the creatures were grouped.

Here none of the previous activity was in evidence. All were practically immobile except one which occupied a commanding position on top of the elevation and was evidently a leader in communication with the others by means of the revisualizing orb, emphasizing with much swaying and nodding.

The scene was highly illuminated as if in full sunlight; and yet, above the distant cyclorama of towering cliffs whose crests were sharply outlined against a black, velvet sky, there shone a crescent of pearly brightness, the crowning jewel in a diadem of starry diamond points. Like an oversized moon at the quarter phase, it hung in the inky sky in brilliant splendor.

That this had something to do with the strange gathering became evident by the many nods, and swayings of hoods in its direction. Finally after what appeared as a sort of general obeisance, several composing a small independent group, formed in a line; and, amid a universal wagging, slowly arose from the surface and began to circle about.

And now it seemed as though we too had joined them—to all appearance we might have been riding on the back of one of them, from whence we could look down and observe the terrain below. We seemed to be climbing in constantly enlarging spirals and at increasing speed, and soon their mates below appeared no larger than beetles grouped about a small sand pile.

In a short time our radius encompassed the mountainous rim of the vast pit and others equally vast came into view; and all the time the speed was increasing at a terrific rate as the three maintained their now side-by-side formation.

Over mountain heights, above yawning chasms and across crater after crater we sped until even these flattened out in dwarfed replicas of their former awesomeness. Again the

conical outline of this strange world became apparent, and with a final burst of meteor-like speed we left it behind and shot out into the black curtain of space toward the shining crescent.

Though only a moment was required to traverse the intervening distance in the picture representation, yet, as we approached, the horns of the crescent spread out over its entire surface, and again we saw before us the beaming full face of our own mother earth.

Then suddenly the hood snapped shut, the peak wagged a few times and when it again opened the gauzy film was gone and once more there was nothing but the greenish-yellow light and the blank stare.

Barry gave a soft indrawn whistle. We only looked our amazement.

“That was it,” I whispered. He nodded.

We hardly had time to wonder what was next when the periscope extended to its full height and the orb was directed toward the front. Then the two front projector arms slowly swung forward. We stood up to get a better view and saw Jules sitting on a pile of brush a score of yards away and almost in line with those terrible lenses. Apparently he was unaware of the movement, for his attention was diverted to something on the ground.

Evidently misconstruing our yells and frantic motions for him to get out of range as a call for help, he did the one thing we least desired just then. Jumping up, he pumped a few quick shots at the towering eye before we could call to him to stop. Excitement probably spoiled his aim, for I don't think any made a direct hit.

But the creature seemed to have sensed something hostile in the action and resented the effrontery. Of a sudden the scattered debris near him began literally to fly to pieces; stems, branches, boughs, and soil were resolved into a swirling cloud of mottled dust that rolled before the pulverizing blast. One look and the guide was legging it at top speed for the

shelter of the ridge. Over the hurdles of scattered brush he sped and at his very heels there followed an increasing, whistling tornado of shattered matter that quickly hid him from sight.

And then it dawned on us that it might not be a bad idea to get behind that ridge ourselves. We did not bother with any farewell waving or wagging but just went over the side without ever thinking about our improvised ladder. And the cloud of dust, rising in the opposite direction, at our heels, was made by our own unaided efforts.

“Damnation!” Barry gasped as we reached a safe spot to stop. “That’s what comes of getting excited.”

“Yes, if he only hadn’t fired,” I answered.

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” he replied, beginning to hop around on one foot. “We forgot our shoes.”

CHAPTER VIII - Drastic Measures

WE made our way toward our old lookout point and peered from behind the sheltering rocks trying to find out what had happened to Jules. There was a clean swept path to the foot of the ridge, but of him there was not a trace. The creature still remained in about the same place and now seemed engaged in widening the path in its vicinity. Like time-rotted remains of its living likeness, the scattered debris crumbled at the touch of that mysterious blast and rolled in swirling clouds before it. Even the soil offered little resistance to its action and soon there was a depression of some depth.

Then followed in actuality a repetition of the excavating scene we had witnessed on our picture journey. The rounded snout-like projection began to function and a yellow circular stream of pulverized earth flowed toward it. But the action here was not as smooth or consummated with equal ease. Eddying breezes affected the operation, disrupting the

loosened material and breaking the continuity of the flowing stream. Evidently some practice would be required for it to become accustomed to the unfamiliar conditions.

A rustling drew our attention behind us and there came Jules still looking somewhat scared and out of breath but otherwise apparently none the worse for his experience. We expressed our relief at his escape and commended him for his courage and fidelity. He looked from one to the other and then down into the glen. "D— fine airship; by h—yes," was the way he summed up his feelings.

For a while we watched the proceedings; then the powerful emissions were abruptly terminated, the lensed flippers dropped to its sides, and the hooded eye, after a close inspection of the surroundings, slowly sank until only the inconspicuous knob remained above its back. Again it had resumed its apparent comatose state. Expecting no immediate resumption of activity we returned to our camp.

"Well, Old Top. I certainly never expected to be picking nettles and brambles out of my toes got by bare-footing it away from an overgrown, oneeyed, moon-monstrosity," Barry commented as we awaited Jules' preparation of a much belated breakfast.

"Then you recognized the place where our new acquaintance conducted us by picture," I replied.

"Not much doubt about that now," he answered. "It's queer we didn't suspect it before. But then the Moon is supposed to be a defunct world, an astronomical corpse, incapable of sustaining life. We slipped up by taking for granted the generally accepted supposition. But I'm telling you a thing has to be more than dead to keep some other thing from making its living off it. That sure was some trip—to think of a revisualizing projector, I'll call it that, capable of producing visible mental impressions—an eye that works both ways. Here we poor mortals are priding ourselves by lately accomplishing mechanically, in a way, that which these monstrosities had the physical equipment to do for eons of time."

“Yes, we’ve got a long ways to go to catch up with nature,” I replied. “Most of our discoveries and accomplishments have a natural counterpart in the abstract—are merely crude copies of some functions or phenomena long in existence. And the analogy might be the more startling if our knowledge was not confined to earthly limitations.”

“But the main problem now is to determine just what this visitation means; what motive inspired the long and no doubt perilous trip. I don’t remember anything in that farewell conference as explanatory; do you ?”

“Not directly,” he answered, “but from what I saw throughout that trip I can imagine one. They didn’t dig out all those pits and craters for exercise alone ; neither was it an engineering construction in the ordinary sense. It was just plain grubbing for sustenance to my notion.”

“Taking the vital elements directly from the soil without interposition of organic growth,” I suggested.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “Which means that there is no replenishment. So in time they’re bound to run short and seek other sources of supply. Our visitor, despite its marvelous equipment and seeming intelligence, is but a scavenger, an interplanetary vulture or hyena, feeding on the carrion of dead worlds, capable of digesting the last soluble remnants. And they have started out to give us the once over.”

“But our world is a long ways from being dead,” I countered. “Still one can readily conjecture what might happen if a group of them set to work to clean up things to suit their own requirements. I imagine it wouldn’t take very long to devastate a large area, even an entire continent to a moon-like barrenness. They seem to exhibit a systematic and thorough craftsmanship in their particular line.”

“I’ll say they do,” he replied. “Our little old world would have as much chance with them here as an apple in a flock of Japanese beetles. They chewed poor, weak Luna lopsided

and stopped her natural axial rotation, destroyed the last vestige of oxygen producing vegetation and vitiated her atmosphere, making her a corpse on whose fixed, pock-ridden stare is recorded the agony of her death struggle.”

“I don’t think this visitor came here to engender friendship or for any other altruistic purpose,” I replied. “Even if so, it’s far too capable of producing mischief to be allowed to run around loose. No telling where its fancy may lead it from here. Not so pleasant to contemplate its sailing over a populous district or one of our cities, mowing a path of death and destruction. I tell you, Barry, it’s up to us to see that it don’t get away from here, not alone to prevent that, but also its return to headquarters and making a report—whatever that might be.”

“You’ve picked a big job for us,” he answered reflectively, “considering that our total offensive array consists of three men—two barefoot—one camp-axe, one pop-gun, and some pocket knives. But count me in on any plausible plan; and I don’t think Jules’ love is so fervent that he’d have any scruples. But how about the other two mooncreatures? If we were not literally hoodwinked then three left their happy homes up there among the lunar craters and started on this inspection trip.”

“They probably separated before landing,” I surmised. “We’ll likely hear something about them after we get back. I wouldn’t care to tackle more than one at a time anyhow.”

“Hardly,” he agreed.

After our meal we called a council of war. There was now no mitigating of circumstances with the guide. He readily understood the gravity of the situation and necessity for action. The great problem was to determine a feasible plan of procedure. To attack it bodily with our puny weapons would only be suicidal and beyond consideration.

That it had, apparently, been willing to cultivate our acquaintance and reveal its identity was no indication that it would give us future consideration, or could be prevailed

upon to meet our desires in any way. Therefore we were dependent upon strategy to accomplish anything.

We considered the chromatic oval and the periscopic eye as the most vulnerable spots and concentrated our attention upon them. If, as we supposed, its power was obtained from direct sunlight, filtered through the oval, and we could obstruct the light, it might not be able to rise from the surface. We inferred that it was near spent when it landed and was now recuperating; but due to the cloudy and rainy weather of the preceding days had little opportunity to do so. Or if we could in some way fasten shut the wig-wagging eyelid and blind it—but how?

“If we had a can of paint and a gunny-sack maybe we could do something.” Barry facetiously suggested.

“This is a little more than a snipe-hunting expedition,” I answered; “but your mention of a gunnysack stirs my imagination ; and I think we have one with us.”

“Where,” he asked. I pointed to our tent.

“I don’t remember— Oh, I see,” slowly nodding his head. “It might work— if we can figure out the application.”

Our shelter, as I think I have mentioned, was only a tent-fly of rain-proof canvas about eight by twelve feet. This would nearly have covered the oval but there was no way of attaching it there with any assurance of holding as the anchor ropes were entirely too short. So having determined to center our attack on the other vulnerable spot and how we would do it, we immediately set to work.

We made a rough bag over a yard in diameter and somewhat deeper with a loose hem at the opening, sewing it up with unraveled anchor rope. Through the hem we wove a length of the spliced rope in which were inserted backward projecting thorns, making a pull string that once closed would not open again. By a loop the inverted bag could be hooked to the end

of a long slender spruce sapling we had trimmed. A shorter and heavier one was prepared with a split in one end.

Bagging the Monster

AFTER Barry and I had wrapped our feet with remnants of the canvas, we moved our outfit over to the point. As there had been no apparent movement of the creature since we had left, we decided that then was as good a time as any. Quietly we descended into the glen. As before we were able to approach without being noticed, but now we kept our eyes on that knob. Carefully we hooped the bag, its mouth held open with a hoop of withes, to its pole and inserted the pull string in the cleft of the other.

“Hold it, Joe,” said Barry. “I’m going to get our shoes before the excitement begins.”

In a moment he returned with one shoe and a rueful expression.

“Look at this,” and he began pulling it apart as though it were wet paper. “If we don’t get away from here soon we won’t have anything left but our whiskers—if that,” he whispered.

Together we covered the last ten yards, Barry and I carrying the raised pole with its dangling bag, looking like a huge candle snuffer, while Jules kept pace with the other. Reaching the creature, we slowly lowered the trap until its mouth covered the knob, propped our pole against the side to hold it distended as the guide also stationed his. But it did not stir a bit. This was no surprise as we had come to believe that it was practically insensible to sound and, externally, even feeling. To what extent it was immune in the latter respect we were going to find out.

We gathered and piled a lot of loose brush about it, struck matches, and ran for the ridge. By the time we reached it, the fire had obtained a good start and the creature was

almost invisible in a cloud of white smoke. A minute went by, then two, even three, and we began to have misgivings that even this drastic measure was to succeed in arousing it.

Then suddenly through a momentary rift, we saw the bag shoot upward dragging the split pole with it as the other fell to earth. For a moment it was motionless and then a violent twisting and swaying caused the pole to fly about like the handle of a reversed bull-whip until it was jerked loose and crashed a dozen yards away!

“By all that’s holy, Joe, it worked,” Barry shouted, gripping my arm. “Look! It’s bagged!” “Unless that eye can shoot it full of holes too,” I replied.

Then it undoubtedly began to sense the fire, for suddenly as though a powerful blast from a giant bellows had struck them, the flames were flattened out, flying embers and swirling sparks flew in all directions. Now it began to move with a ponderous tank-like motion all the while trying to dislodge the obstruction to its vision.

But the red terror was not to be so easily conquered or evaded. A dozen incipient blazes sprang up here and there, from the scattered torches and before long the floor of the glen was a billowing mass of flame.

For some moments we lost sight of it, only inferring its location by a swirling spark-ridden whirlwind of flame and smoke. Then it came into view above the maelstrom of fire; it had risen and was slowly, erratically circling about. Across the glen it sailed and then blindly crashed into the wooded slope of the ridge. And then hell itself broke loose.

Lucky were we that it began to happen on the other side. We thought we had a fair idea of its power, or its latent destructiveness from what we had seen of it so far; but our imaginations never conceived anything so appalling.

Hardly had it struck when a Niagara-like roar drowned that of the fire and above the slope rose a clouded mass of foliage, of flying leaves, boughs, and branches stripped from crashing trunks by a tornado’s blast. We could trace the scythe-like movement of those

terrible front extensions as they mowed down everything before them—not alone mowed but blew to bits—and even dissolved the bits.

In a minute what had been a thickly green-grown slope of pine, spruce, birch, and ash was now a barren patch, an outstanding scar visible through a drifting cloud of brownish dust. Then out of the dust it emerged once more aloft, and still blinded. Slowly ascending, it swung about in our direction. We saw a veritable wall of fire, a tidal-wave of flame, rods high rushing toward us and we ran for our lives.

Under a slightly overhanging bank at the back of the ridge we crouched and listened, tracing the course of the monster by the roar of destruction. Several times we thought we must be in its path, and flattened our forms against our one sided trench. Once the blast actually swept the top of our bank and an avalanche of debris swept over our heads.

But soon the rending and crashing grew fainter and fainter; and we scrambled back to the top, over and through the wreckage, our eyes aloft to follow its direction. Out over the swamp we saw it, yawing and pitching like a boat in a storm-tossed sea, while a boiling, seething wake followed its course. On it went until it seemed no larger than a bird and then slowly sank and merged with the dun colored surface. A geyser of mud and water shot into the air, followed by intervals by others but of decreasing violence; and finally they ceased altogether. Over the swamp there remained nothing but its age-old desolation.

And there lies the end of that perforated trail.

CHAPTER IX - Serious Consideration

WELL, Mr. Stewart, that was the experience I wished to recount to you,” Crawford continued after a pause. “It’s getting quite late, so I won’t detain you, now at least, with the details of our return trip. How the remainder of that day and nearly all night we fought the spreading of the fire, which a heavy shower finally extinguished—of the cyclone-torn, fire-

swept appearance of that little valley and surrounding ridge—of the agony of the return; bruised, burned, hungry, shoeless, we at last reached our camp and took a week to recuperate before starting for home.

“We had agreed to say nothing about our experience until possible to substantiate it with further evidence. Since then Barry and I have been continually on the outlook for some report or news item that would indicate a similarity of circumstances, a possible clew as to the probability of the other two moon-monstrosities having reached the earth. Today was the first intimation that such really had occurred and you may imagine my interest when you started to describe the peculiar road in New Guinea.”

Mr. Stewart, who had been listening intently and uninterruptedly got up and began pacing the room.

“A most astounding experience. A well-nigh incredible tale,” he muttered; “and yet—” he stopped and pointed his finger—“say, Crawford; if I knew of any other reasonable explanation for that New Guinea condition, I certainly would classify you as a very gifted, convincing—ah—story teller. But I don’t see any other way out than to seriously consider the experiences you have related. I see,” he continued, resuming his seat, “a possible clarification of certain aspects that I have not mentioned in my lectures.

“One of them was that in questioning the natives as to probable cause of that trail through the jungle, they excitedly pointed aloft with many gesticulations from which we inferred they had seen our plane and, quite naturally, considered it the cause. And they would go miles out of their way to avoid crossing that dead strip. It might be that it was something else they saw.

“But did you not mention taking some photographs? I presume though in all likelihood they were—ah—shot full of holes, or burnt up, or lost as usually happens in all good stories.”

“Not at all,” Crawford replied. “They luckily escaped all that and I hung on to them like grim death. But they might as well have been subjected to any or all of those contingencies for all the good they proved to be—as evidence. The exposures were good and the films in perfect condition, for they showed the details of the glen with the wooded ridge in the background; but where the creature should have been there was only a dark blur of irregular outline that might be construed into most anything. It seemed as though the actinic rays were entirely absorbed in that particular region and none were reflected to the camera. To me they are convincing evidence of very peculiar phenomena; but to a mere observer they would only be a number of wasted films.”

“Quite extraordinary,” Stewart replied. “That’s something else to consider.”

“Now, I want to tell you this : I will be back here in a few weeks and will notify you in advance. Have your friend Barry with you and we will go into this more thoroughly. In the meantime I will endeavor to get reports from all recent explorations and expeditions and any other source from which information might be obtained bearing on the case.

“This may mean serious business before it’s settled; and,” he continued with a sparkle in his keen grey eyes as he arose to shake hands, “it may prove to be a mighty exciting hunt after a most peculiar game.”