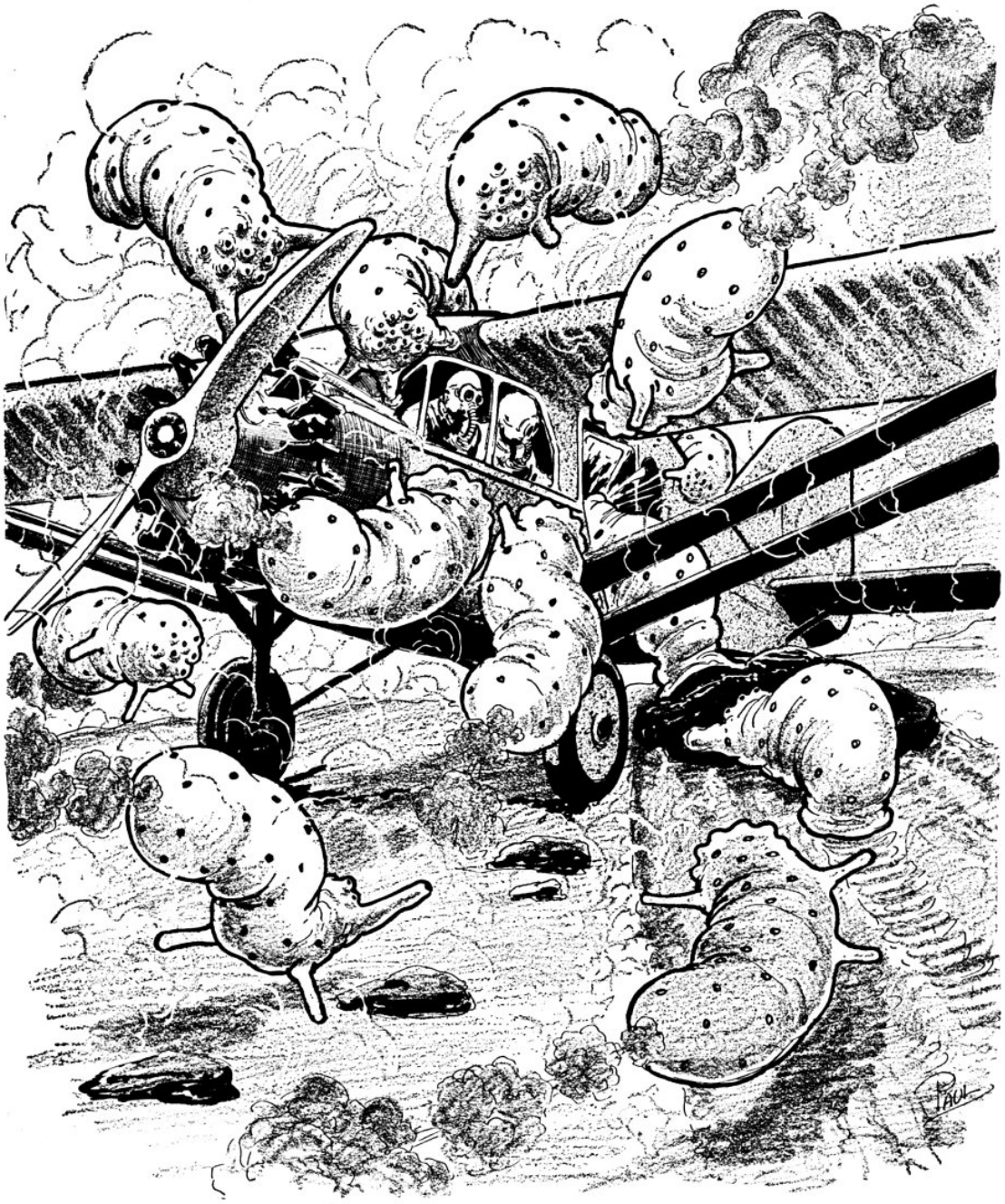
Wonder Stories, February, 1932

The Challenge of the Comet

By ARTHUR K. BARNES



(Illustration by Paul)

The door creaked, gave slightly, then burst open with a sharp crack. The ugly vapor rushed into the cabin.

NEWSPAPER readers will recall the curious incident of the poison fog that swept over Belgium early last winter. They will also remember how the matter suddenly dropped from sight after only one or two follow-up stories. There were good and sufficient reasons for this hushing of the affair, and these reasons are now for the first time being given to the public at large, since all possibility of a dangerous reaction has passed. The writer has seen fit to put the sequence of incidents into the form of a story—indeed, the elements of romantic adventure are so pronounced that they permit of almost no other treatment—for purposes of readability. (For obvious considerations names of persons and places are slightly altered.—A. K. B.)

SCORES DIE IN BLACK FOG IN BELGIUM

Deadly Mist Strangles Men and Animals; Vapors Invade Paris

Paris, Dec. 5.—(Exclusive)—A black fog which crept out of the North Sea is spreading terror over northwestern Europe tonight, and in the district of the Meuse Valley in Belgium near Liege, it is responsible for more than three-score mysterious deaths.

It is in the little town of Engis of 4,000 inhabitants, a few miles from Liege, and the villages roundabout where the ghastly terror is most strongly manifest. Following the terrible storm of four days ago there has been a thick blinding fog, so thick that it has been impossible to see across the streets, and accompanied with intense cold.

On the first day eleven persons died with symptoms of suffocation, but as they were all suffering from chronic asthma, it was believed at first that the cold, thick atmosphere was too much for them.

In the last twenty-four hours, however, a number of healthy persons were mysteriously stricken down, men, women and children. Some passed out quietly in their beds and others were suddenly and fatally overcome while walking in the streets. Victims falling on the sidewalk, unable to walk, writhe for a few moments and pass into coma which usually ends in death. The effect seems to be that of simple strangulation but it is impossible to say that it is not caused by some powerful poison paralyzing to the nervous system.

Sixty-four persons are officially dead from the fog, but as reports are coming in from small hamlets in the vicinity, the probable death toll will be considerably higher. Several persons have been taken to the hospitals suffering from mysterious poison. The doctors who are administering oxygen stimulants expect to save their lives, but they confess their total inability to make a diagnosis, saying that the symptoms might be caused by any one of a dozen kinds of gas poisoning. The strangest thing about the fog terror is that while it is confined chiefly to a few square miles on both sides of the Meuse, the inhabitants have been struck down simultaneously at widely different points. Sometimes one person out of a group of three or four is struck down, while the others are not affected. Animals, too, are subject to the strange malady, and many farmers are bringing their cattle and horses into their kitchens, nailing blankets over the windows to keep out the deadly fog and are huddling together for protection.

Chemists in preliminary efforts to analyze the air have discovered the presence of some strange and presumably deadly gas but they could not identify it. The probability of the deaths being due to some man-made gas was weakened by the fact that a couple was mysteriously asphyxiated at Calais last night apparently from the same cause as the Belgian victims. Parisians this morning gasped and complained of strange pains in their

> lungs, although no fatalities have been reported here...

The managing editor of the New York *Globe* tossed the newspaper clipping on the desk and looked around. He bellowed out:

"Darrell! Darrell! Where the hell's Darrell?"

A copy boy came skidding to a stop. "Mr. Darrell's upstairs, sir."

"Get him!"

Jack Darrell, the Globe's star reporter, slouched into the local room and threaded his way across to the huge desk with the sign, "Manag. Ed." conspicuously tacked on it. He thrust a stick of gum into his mouth and grinned at his superior.

"Why the sweat?" he asked.

The Great Man scowled, lips twitching. "None o' your lip. See this?" He thrust the despatch at the reporter. "Take the next boat over and get on to this. It looks big."

"Okay, boss. *Carte blanche?*"

"*Carte blanche.* Police aid if you need it."

"Check. I'll be seein' ya." The room quivered as Darrell's two hundred pounds thudded across the floor and out the door. He was busily chewing gum.

The day Darrell's boat reached England, after a speedy run across the Atlantic, one of London's notorious pea-soup fogs rolled in from the channel, choking the city streets with slowly moving traffic and blocking all navigation in the Thames. The great steamer was forced to stand off just outside port to await a thinning of the fog. The reporter chafed restlessly at the delay and seized the chance for a chat when three of the crew of one of the tug-boats came aboard while the two captains conferred. After an exchange of greetings, cigarettes, and matches, Darrell asked:

"Do I understand that this fog is like the so-called poison fog that spread over Belgium a few days ago?"

The sailor gave him a queer look. "No, it's not just the same. The poison fog was black. It wasn't dangerous around here, of course. But it was black here just like where it did so much damage."

"Umm-hmm. Scary?"

"Well, it was sure weird enough. Some of the fishermen were pretty badly rattled. It's been four days already and there's still a hundred wild tales about the flying Dutchman and a lot of other sea horrors. Two nights ago a vessel went ashore on Jersey, and not a trace of the crew could be found. Ship in fine condition, too. You know how things like that get around." The man shrugged.

DARRELL smiled, but another of the sailors, an uneducated fellow, bristled. He said:

"Garn! I hearn what you says 'bout them bein' wild tales, but I seen 'um with my own eyes. What's more, even afore the fog come in—two nights afore—I seen su'thin' you won't never believe."

"And what was that?"

"I ain't a-goin' t' tell."

Darrell was forced to wheedle the man with all his powers of persuasion before he would tell, and then the latter gave in only because Darrell offered to pay him if the information were suitable to print in the "big newspaper in New York."

"Well," the sailor spoke reluctantly, "like I says, it was a coupla nights afore the fog come. I were comin' home kinda late when I happened to look up at the sky. It were sorta cloudy, but comin' right outa one o' they clouds were a great big purple ball, big as the moon. An' it kept comin' right on down till it disappeared in the ocean 'way toward the north. There was pretty lights every little while, too, all around it."

The sailor set his lips obstinately as though prepared for disbelief. Darrell stared at him for a moment. Then he winked and grinned.

"Pre-war, eh?"

The man spat on the spotless deck.

"No sech thing. I seen what I seen."

The first sailor spoke up. "I'm afraid you can't account for it that way, sir. Billings don't drink."

"No?" Darrell raised an incredulous eyebrow. Then, after a moment's thought, he filed the curious story away in one of the compartments of his mind where he kept odds and ends of knowledge when working on a case. Some time the pertinent bits stored away there would suddenly click into a pattern and give the reporter one of his famous hunches. Until then ... Darrell shrugged. No harm in thinking it over, anyhow.

Later in the day the sun burned away much of the mist and the boat docked. Darrell immediately took a cross-channel plane and landed in Paris that afternoon. The fog pall was still hanging over most of Belgium and northern France. In Paris itself an impenetrable blanket shrouded everything and the sun shone feebly on the city gleaming with a blackening hoar crest. Darrell shivered during his short taxi ride to the offices of the University of Paris, where he had once been a student. He sighed with relief as he finally entered the big building that sheltered him from the dank, swirling mist.

Jack Darrell, since he enjoyed a considerable reputation as the "scientific reporter," had entree in certain circles where the ordinary newspaperman did not. Much of his education had been along scientific lines, and he had a good grasp of all the popular, and some of the more obscure, phases. He had established a great number of friendships among the notables of the scientific world, and he was frequently asked to cover important experiments and conventions in preference to other and more readily available reporters. Hence, he had no difficulty in getting from the University administration the address of the one man he wanted to see—a famous chemist and astronomer. Professor Binet, he was informed, was in Liege at the moment. Excellent. Would the clerk kindly direct Mr. Darrell to the meteorology department? He would—second floor and third door on the right.

Once in the room he sought, Darrell lost no time in stating his problem.

"I want to know," he said, "from what direction the recent storm came that is supposed to have brought with it the poisonous fog now over Belgium."

The answer came without hesitation. "Northwest by north. A plot of the course of the storm seems to lead back across the North Sea, between the Orkneys and the Shetland Islands, and thence to heaven knows where."

"I see. Were there any unusual disturbances that might have caused such a damaging storm?"

The meteorologist shook his head. Then he smiled. "Maybe the comet did it."

Darrell laughed politely at the ancient jest. Ten years ago the professors in the department had regularly poked fun at the popular fallacy that credited comets with affecting the weather. Ten years ago the students regularly laughed obligingly at the old wheeze. They were probably going through the same routine today. Darrell sighed mentally.

"I wasn't," he said, "aware that there was any comet recently."

"Oh yes. Quiet a large one shortly before the disaster. Poor visibility, however, spoiled observation. Besides, who cares a rap about comets?" The man sounded bitter toward a world that refused to become excited over an obscure comet when hundreds of people were dying from a terrible and mysterious cause.

Darrell infused a world of sympathy and understanding in his answering, "I see."

AFTER a few more courtesies, the reporter gently pried himself loose from the rather garrulous instructor and left. He took a train for the Belgian border and prepared himself for a dismal ride. It was. The tiny train jerked

along, stopping at every station and filling the cars with soot and cinders. By straining the eyes, one might see a few hundred feet on either side of the tracks, but all else was blotted out by the long streamers of black fog that writhed away from the train in the air current created by its passage.

At each halt Darrell opened his window to catch a cautious breath of air. On every station platform there was a group of peasants, hands over their mouths, talking gloomily about the end of the world. While the train was on the move, great bleak stretches of abandoned, mist-dimmed farms met the eye. Work had ceased; industry of many kinds had been stifled. Northwestern Europe faced a severe crisis.

After changing trains at the border, the reporter passed the time away by writing up a "local color" article, filled with, the anecdotes and superstitions he had run across so far, and tremendously interesting. Before he knew it, he had arrived at Liege and was stepping from the car in company with a little huddle of men and women who seemed to cling together for mutual protection. It was early evening. The train, a long ribbon of gleaming light squares, puffed away. The town was in complete silence.

Scattered oblongs of yellow light shone blurred through the mist, but no sounds could be heard. It was as though the place was deserted utterly. Darrell turned up the collar of his coat and hurried off down the slippery streets. He knew Liege very well, and preferred to walk the short distance to the address he sought. He breathed as shallowly as possible during the five minutes' journey.

Professor Paul Binet was a small man and bore a curious resemblance to a bird. His head was bald except for two tufts of hair above his ears. Two beady eyes, set deep in the sockets; flitted ceaselessly from object to object. A pointed nose looked ludicrously like the beak of a bird. All his movements were jerky and fluttering.

The Professor was preparing to retire to his combination laboratory-observatory for the evening when a sharp knock sounded. He scowled, hopped across the room, and yanked the door open suddenly. A huge form bulked in the darkness there.

"What is it?" demanded Binet.

"Boo!" said the stranger and, tossing his bag in ahead of him, the man calmly thrust the spluttering Frenchman aside and entered the house. Once in the lighted room he turned and faced Binet again. The latter threw a hand to his forehead in the extravagant gesture of the French and burst out in delight:

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* Jacques! My old friend! Well, devil take my soul. Do come in. Here—a chair..." The professor erupted in a flurry of mad activity as he made his guest welcome. Finally, after settling down, Darrell spoke, affectionately.

"A far cry from the University of Paris, eh, Paul?"

Binet answered solemnly, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Jacques,"—the professor's English was perfect when he wished to make it so, but always insisted his pronunciation of Jack's name was pleasanter to the ear—"Jacques, I swear to you the University lost its attraction when you left. My star pupil!" He chuckled.

"Well, the years have not done you ill, Paul. The world's leading authority in astro-chemistry should not complain."

Binet waved a hand deprecatingly. "Tut! Nothing. Too much study, I fear, is the price I have paid for fame, what little is mine. Life—the zest is gone. I live in the world of dreams. No action now, as in the old days."

Darrell painstakingly peeled the wrapper from a piece of gum, tossed it carefully into a wastebasket, and looked at his friend.

"You don't find the wholesale slaughter of your neighbors by a mysterious poison gas a matter for excitement?"

"Eh! Very interesting, perhaps."

Darrell grinned and thrust the gum into his mouth. “You have been studying the matter? . . . Good. I’ve been assigned to cover the affair. We must get together.”

“Fine. I shall show you my tests...”

Darrell waved the impetuous scientist down. “Wait a minute. Were you here when the fog first came in?”

“But yes. I’m here on sabbatical leave from the University...”

“Good. Will you describe the mist to me?” The reporter drew a notebook and pencil from his bag and settled back. Binet spoke.

“Well, that first terrible Friday morning the fog was already in when I awoke. At first there was an impenetrable blanket which made it impossible to see more than a few inches. Then that lifted a little, leaving only a sort of indefinite haze which reduced the field of vision, but did not seem to have any consistency of its own. Floating in this haze you could see wide pockets of grayish vapor, which gathers in low places in compact masses. I noticed the papers erroneously called it a ‘black fog,’ but then journalists are notoriously inaccurate.” Binet smiled slyly.

“Yeah?” Darrell laughed. “Never mind us; get on with the story.”

“Well, this gas does not mix with the general haze, Jacques, and you can tell to an inch where the thick vapor begins. It is only those people who have breathed this who have died. I tried inhaling a tiny bit myself. Even a few wisps makes one dizzy and gives a burning sensation in the chest. I took samples and tried to analyze it.” Binet frowned.

“It’s not very heavy gas, slightly more so than the air. I rather believe that the only thing that holds it here is the thick fog. When the fog lifts, the gas will go, too. As for the elements,” the little Frenchman shrugged, “I can’t identify them. Traces of carbon monoxide, yes. Traces of cyanogen, yes. But the main portion—” he shrugged again.

CHAPTER II
Darrell Explores

DARRELL chewed thoughtfully in silence. Then, “Rather a horrible experience.”

“Oh, it's only the mystery that frightens one. People writhing and gagging on the ground, clutching at their throats—that’s nothing new. But when they are struck down by an unknown and almost invisible force, that’s something else again.” Binet leaned forward earnestly. “I tell you, Jacques, it was like—like—well, like something from another world!”

“Another world!” The phrase burst from the reporter’s lips. Jack felt a sudden tingling sensation run up his spine and pringle at the base of his scalp. He sat bolt upright, eyes thinning away to slits as he stared into vacancy. Slowly, precisely, the isolated bits were falling into place, a pattern was being formed. The purple ball, the comet, the gas—an imperfect pattern, but a fit nevertheless. Jack Darrell had a hunch. He swore softly to himself.

Darrell said, “Paul, you were in the observatory the night the comet came closest to earth?”

Binet started visibly. “Eh—yes. Poor visibility. I had been watching its approach for some time.”

“It was a large one?”

“I—a—made no measurements, you understand, but I would judge it to be a rather large one. Why?”

Darrell ignored the question. “How large?”

“Well, not as large as the famous Comet of 1845, which had a nucleus 8,000 miles in diameter. Nor was it as large as Donati’s Comet. But it was big enough. About 5,000 miles, roughly. I have no idea as to the dimensions of the coma[1]. Possibly 75,000

[1] Professor Binet was here referring to the cloud-like mass that surrounds the nucleus of a comet.

miles."

"Quite a world in itself, then. Plenty large enough, at any rate, to harbor some form of life."

Binet's lips split in a smile, but there was no mirth in it. He squirmed uneasily in his chair. "Why, Jacques, how ridiculous! Life on a comet! Ha, ha! You are tired, my friend. Sleep now, talk tomorrow. Come."

The professor rose to lead Darrell to his room, but the latter did not move. "Sit down, Paul. You can't put me off like this. You have evidence that such life exists. You wish to hide it from me." Darrell laughed genially. "Paul, if you don't tell me what you saw the night the comet passed, I shall shake it out of you."

Binet glanced about him unhappily. "But I saw nothing, Jacques."

Darrell leaned forward and thrust a forefinger almost in the other's face. "I'll tell you what you saw. You saw a huge purple globe descend through outer space, apparently from the comet itself, and disappear into the North Sea!"

Binet gasped and sagged back in his chair, astounded. "Then—you saw it, too?"

Darrell grinned delightedly. "No. I haven't seen anything. I just put two and two together and got a hunch. But I'm surprised, Paul, that you should try to hide it from me. Why was that?"

Binet's voice was weak as he answered. "You are a journalist now, Jacques. And I know that the ethics of journalism are usually summed up in a few words. News first..."

"...and to hell with everything else." Darrell smiled. "That's often enough the case, but it does not apply here."

"Then you really grasp the significance of these events?"

"I understand, Paul, that if what we believe to be true is true, then the world is facing a crisis the like of which has never been faced in the history of civilization."

For long minutes the hands of the tiny china clock on the mantel crept slowly around. Outside, save for an occasional slamming door or murmur of talk, a city of silence had settled down for the night. Within, a barely perceptible chill began to creep over the room where the only sound was of the clock ticking, ticking...

Binet stirred restlessly. Darrell said:

"Perhaps I put it too strongly. After all, this is mere assumption on my part..."

The professor waved a hand abruptly. "No. No. True enough, I myself watched the purple globe—and, by the way, it was more a pale bluish violet than purple—almost from the time it left the comet. There was no other astral body from which it conceivably could have come. I saw it only intermittently, and tried to make myself believe it was a figment of an overworked imagination. But no."

"You believe you are the only one who saw it at the time?"

"I have no idea. As I have said, visibility was poor for some days. During the first night the globe was not distinguishable unless one looked carefully. During the day it clouded up badly, and I doubt whether it would have been visible in daylight, anyhow. The second night it vanished into the North Sea before I had more than an occasional glimpse. If anyone else observed it, you may be sure that they'll keep quiet about it."

"What—what do you think it was?"

BINET jumped up and paced the floor in short, rapid strides. Now that Darrell had taken the bull by the horns, he was more than willing to face the issue squarely. He said:

"I think it was the same thing that you think it was, Jacques. A space car! Something that enabled living creatures to cross the great distances and intense cold of interstellar space from the comet to the earth. That it is comet gas we are dealing with I do not doubt, since both carbon monoxide and cyanogen are found in comet tails, in almost identical

percentages as found in the ‘poison fog.’”

Darrell grunted deep in his throat. “You understand, Paul, that further conversation will get us nowhere. From now on—action! I’ll see what I can do to locate the source of this peril, whatever it may be; you continue your experiments and figure out some way to deal with it.”

A crafty look flickered across Binet’s face and Darrell knew he had already gone far in that direction. The reporter stepped to the door and tossed his wad of gum into the darkness. Ten minutes later both men were sound asleep.

Next morning, when Darrell awoke, the sun had filled his room with molten gold. Stumbling sleepily to the window, he looked out and found that the fog had vanished utterly. As far as the eye could see, from Binet’s little place on the edge of the town, the Belgian countryside was barren of any trace of mist or gas, bathed in dew sparkling in the early morning light.

The simple peasants were again going about their work, happy prayers of thanksgiving on their lips. Already the dark days were half forgotten. Darrell’s smile, as he turned from the window, was a bit grim when he thought of the invisible cloud of menace still brooding over them, the more terrible because unseen and unknown.

Not far from Liege was a small airport and Darrell, with the proverbial power of the press, judiciously pulled a number of strings and procured the use of a small cabin plane for the day. With no other pilot than himself, shortly after nine o’clock, the stout little airship roared away from the field and headed northwest toward the ocean. A short time passed, and Darrell left the land, struck out across the vast wrinkled blue stretches of the North Sea, following a carefully charted course as indicated by the maps fastened to the instrument panel.

Hours went by, and the reporter’s only companionship was the steady droning of the sturdy engine. Far away on the left the craggy outlines of the north Scottish coast crept by, softened by a bluish haze. Ahead on either side of his course, two dull splotches on the horizon showed the Orkneys and the Shetland Islands. Between them lay one lonely outpost, a tiny bit of earth devoted to goat-raising, Ware Isle. Beyond that lay nothing...

Darrell suddenly jerked upright in his seat and snatched at his binoculars. There was something strange about Ware Isle. The reporter strained his eyes as he approached nearer and nearer. The island looked uncommonly large, but rather tenuous, somehow. As though it were not all solid rock... The watcher’s breath was suddenly expelled in a long whistle. Ware Isle was covered from one end to the other with a dark blue-gray gas that piled high above it in dense, impenetrable banks. It billowed sluggishly as Darrell’s plane drew near, but seemed to be fastened down in some fashion so it was unable to spill off the island into the sea to be carried away by the slight breeze. It resembled, thought the observer incongruously, a circus tent in the wind.

Darrell circled down close, throttled the engine, and examined the curious phenomena carefully. There appeared to be a slow but steady dissipation of the gas from above, but the total volume did not perceptibly decrease. The answer to that was easy, muttered Darrell to himself. More was being generated below. But how; by whom?

The reporter squirmed in his seat. He searched long for some evidences of the “purple globe” of which he had heard, but was forced to conclude that it had either been destroyed or was hidden down in that deadly cloud below. Nor was he able to catch sight of any movement that might indicate living creatures of some sort. At this juncture a glance at the gasoline gauge warned him to be getting back. Reluctantly he turned the plane about and headed for Belgium again. When he turned into the little yard that fronted

Professor Binet's bungalow, the dying sun was throwing a fan of crimson pillars into the sky.

After a hastily bolted meal, Darrell mumbled something unintelligible and hurried out into the night. The discourtesy went unnoticed by the scientist, who frowningly returned to his laboratory. Darrell's first call that evening was to the administrative buildings, where he made inquiries concerning the geography of Ware Isle. He was referred to the university. Here he was handled about from department to department in the inimitable European manner, but by dint of an inexhaustible patience, the reporter finally managed to secure the information he desired. Ware Isle, in brief, was a low, rocky hump, with a narrow strip of beach on the southwest side which would permit of an airplane landing under favorable conditions. Darrell was chewing vigorously as he left the school.

Jack's next stop was at the telegraph office near the station. Here he devised the following radiogram:

MANAGING EDITOR NEW YORK GLOBE
TERRIBLE CATASTROPHE LOOMS STOP FOR GODS SAKE HUSH MATTER UP STOP KILL ALL FOLLOWUP STORIES STOP CONTACT AP WORLD WIDE NEWS ETC AND TELL TO LAY LOW AND AVERT PANIC STOP

DARRELL

As the girl clerk counted over the words in the message, she took pity on him and said:

"You can make this cheaper by omitting these 'stops.'"

DARRELL smiled grimly. "Girlie," he said, "those 'stops' are just what I want to say."

Some purchases at a clothier's and a gunsmith's completed the newspaperman's round of visits for the evening, and he went back to the cottage tired but satisfied. Binet was working in the laboratory when Darrell entered and he shouted out.

"Come back here, Jacques. Enter my little museum; see the sights; ten cents an hour." The high pitch of his voice betrayed his excitement. Darrell entered the long back room and stood diffidently by the doorway. It was oddly shaped. Three times as long as it was wide, the front part of the room had a low-hanging ceiling. At the rear end, the room widened abruptly and the ceiling swept up into a glass-roofed dome, with movable sections through which to thrust the telescope that squatted heavily on the floor. Two long benches ran down either wall, cluttered with the chemist's familiar apparatus—test tubes, retorts, beakers, vacuum tubes, coils, generators, and a hundred odds and ends identifiable only to the initiated. Binet hurried up to his friend.

"You were successful today, Jacques?"

"Eminently so." Darrell gave a brief sketch of his activities.

The professor chuckled and rubbed his hands. He bounced up and down on one foot eagerly as he spoke. "Tomorrow—it will be a highly interesting day, eh?"

Darrell fumbled for a package of gum.

"Interesting?" he asked drily. "It's gonna be the riskiest few hours either of us have ever seen." It was characteristic of them that they took for granted that both would return to the island on the morrow.

The little Frenchman chortled. Darrell said:

"The old war-horse is feeling his oats, I see."

Both laughed, and Binet then sobered. "We must be methodical. It would be best if we were to recapitulate the salient facts before I show you what I have done today."

"Excellent. We know that some sort of creatures, living on the comet, constructed a space-car and traveled to the earth, landing on Ware Isle in the North Sea. Presumably this

car contained the deadly gas with which we are familiar and yet not familiar enough. Somehow the space-car itself was broken up or else hidden on the island. Now our visitors are established on Ware Isle and are manufacturing the gas which destroyed human life so effectively when carried to the continent by storm."

Binet wriggled his fingers reflectively. "You mix assumption with probable truth very neatly, but your summary does well enough. The globe—a shimmering pale bluish-violet light—was formed by an electronic stream passing clear around the ball of gas and acting as a shell to hold it in. The blue-violet color was due to the action of the gas with which the stream was associated."

"An electronic stream!" Darrell's tone was skeptical. "Why—"

"Just so," interrupted Binet. "It shows a remarkable advancement in electrical science to control electrons to such an extent. However this may be, I have proven to my own satisfaction that such is the case. Sit down and listen."

Darrell perched gingerly on an acid-stained wooden chair.

"It is common knowledge," said the scientist, "that the electronic stream, if it could be produced in sufficient volume, would offer a source of power far greater than anything yet devised for travel through space. Thus far physicists have been unable to produce enough to be of practical value, but this does not mean that other races on other worlds may not be able to do so.

"Indeed, the comet creatures have done so, because that is how they propelled their unique space-car from the comet to the earth. How do I know? Well, when they approached the earth's atmosphere it was necessary to decelerate, eh? And to decelerate it is essential that they throw out an electronic stream in front of the ship as a brake to retard speed.

"When this happened, within the thin outer stratosphere, the freed electrons were attracted by the earth's magnetic lines of force and for a short period whirled about them. The result was a miniature aurora borealis surrounding the car. This was clearly observable every time the navigators let loose a blast of the repelling stream from in front."

Darrel nodded comprehendingly. The potential power of the electronic stream was an old story to him, and he followed Binet's exposition without difficulty. The scientist continued.

"As further evidence for the existence of the electronic stream, I conducted a small experiment." Binet pointed to a bit of apparatus on one of the benches, including a small flask of the dark gray vapor, a small piece of platinum foil with electric wiring to heat it, and some devices, unfamiliar to the reporter, to control the experiment. "By running a small stream through the gas I find the color is identical with that observed on the violet globe that traveled from the comet to the earth."

Darrell jotted down a few notes and said:

"Perfectly clear. Is there anything else?"

Binet picked up another piece of apparatus, resembling somewhat a heavily-built noseguard. He handed it to Jack.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

The reporter smiled and nodded. "A home-made gas mask. Obviously not an oxygen mask. Therefore you've been able to construct a filter that will enable one to breathe the air right through the poison mist. I congratulate you."

"Precisely, Jacques. And with the mask I've fixed up a pair of goggles with leather guards to protect the eyes. Though I'm not sure, it may be that prolonged exposure to the gas will injure the eyeball."

"Even more excellent, Paul. You've done well."

The little Frenchman grew pink behind

the ears and waved a hand deprecatingly. “Tut! Don’t speak of these things. Me, I’m going to bed and rest for tomorrow. You, too, Jacques. You are tired.”

Jack looked at his friend curiously as he rose to go to his room.

“Have you,” he asked, “any idea what we are going to do tomorrow? It would hardly be discreet to fly out to that island of death and deliberately deliver ourselves into the hands, or paws, of these creatures.”

Binet’s eyes sparkled and rolled laughably. “What do we care? You are young. And I—well, perhaps the old master has yet another rabbit up his sleeve, eh?”

He playfully punched the reporter’s bulky arm and shoved him from the room. Darrell yawned and pulled out his shirt. Kicking off his shoes, he scuffed to bed, flung himself down, and slept heavily until dawn.

At six o’clock in the morning the two men arrived at the airport and stepped up to Darrell’s hired plane. They carried a few packages—lunch, two gas masks, some chemists’ apparatus. The professor also held under his arm a small black box about the size of a camera. Darrell noticed it and asked casually:

“Expect to get any pictures in that dark fog?”

Binet’s bird-like head peered up at the other. “Pictures? No, my friend, this is not a picture camera,” He aimed the box at Darrell, and the latter saw that instead of the usual single shuttered hole in the ordinary kodak, this box had two openings. He frowned, shrugged, and climbed into the plane, intent on warming the motor.

CHAPTER III
On the Island

SOME hours later the throbbing of the airplane engine again made itself heard over Ware Isle. Binet eagerly scrutinized the place, but could see nothing but what Darrell had seen the day before. The great mass of dark vapor still heaved restlessly, covering the island. The blue sea lapped quietly at the blurred shoreline. All was still.

Quickly and silently the two men made their simple preparations before the descent into the fog. The gas masks were strapped on; Binet’s crudely constructed goggles were also fitted over the eyes. For a brief moment the friends looked at each other steadily. A short, fierce grip of the hands, and Darrell depressed the nose of the plane.

For a space, the whirling propeller sheared a clear path through the dark cloud-like mass, but as the plane continued downward, it was suddenly swallowed up in a vast, stifling gray shroud. The engine coughed, spluttered jerkily, and whispered itself into silence. The ship lurched sickeningly, plunged. The reporter leveled off abruptly, muttered with eyes upraised, and executed a perfect three-point landing. Flying blindly, over absolutely unknown territory, Darrell struck the one tiny stretch on the entire island suitable for safe landing!

Professor Binet, pale beneath his mask, turned to the other.

“Jacques,” he said with a catch in his voice, “never in my life have I seen such a bit of flying. Never.”

Darrell lifted a wafer of gum to his mouth, and threw it aside because of the gas mask on his face. “Luck of the Irish, Paul.”

A faint glow filtered through the windows of the little cabin, and both men turned to peer into the impalpable dusk that surrounded them. Darrel jumped back as though burnt.

“C———!” he burst out. “Look at that monster!”

Binet scurried to Jack’s window and stared out. Hovering near the plane was a vast bulk of dirty brown, slimy flesh. Scattered over it were occasional black specks. Five or six feet long, and almost as wide, the creature

appeared to be a gigantic, bloated slug. Stranger still, it did not rest on the ground, but floated in the gas, propelling itself by short bursts of the gray vapor from one end! For some minutes the hideous thing moved around the plane as though inspecting it carefully, then suddenly sped away with a great smoke-like blast from the tail.

Darrell turned to look at Binet. “Well,” he said, “I’ll be damned.”

The professor smiled slightly. “Did you expect to find a race of human beings here?”

“We-ell, no. Of course not. But these fantastic things... Are you trying to tell me that you knew what we’d find?”

“Not at all. But I assumed it would be something totally new to us; hence I am not surprised to find these surprising creatures.” He pointed to the opposite windows of the cabin. “There’s a little token of our visitors’ good-will lying on the beach outside.”

Darrell looked out. In a crumpled heap on the sand lay what had once been a goat-herder. He had been dead for several days, and most of the features had disappeared in a welter of putrefaction. The chest had caved in. Darrell retched and turned away.

“You will notice,” said the scientist coolly, “that the gas appears to have completely destroyed the lungs and surrounding tissues...”

The reporter, still slightly sick, found time to marvel at the sudden change in his friend. Formerly irritable, jumpy, filled with a nervous energy, now a stone effigy could be no more cold and impassive.

“Here comes our friend again...”

Both men pressed their faces to the window. The huge slug-like creature had returned, and behind it came nine or ten others, almost identical in shape and movement. Observed from the front, it seemed as if ten round pairs of huge lips, fish-like, were sucking at the ends of invisible pipes. They slowly surrounded the plane and hung nearly motionless in the thick atmosphere, with occasional tiny puffs of vapor to keep from settling to the ground. Incredible. Darrell began to laugh hysterically, then stopped abruptly.

“These damn’ things look like a bunch o’ nightmare cigars.”

Binet’s cool tones acted as a douche on Darrell’s shaken nerves.

“They are bloated so as to be light enough to navigate through this gas. The propelling is accomplished by means of drawing the gas in at one end of the body and expelling it violently from the other, much as some of our sea animals, particularly shell-fish, swim. In effect, a natural modification of the rocket principle, which perhaps explains their use of that principle in space flight.” The Frenchman leaned casually back in the passenger’s seat as if lecturing to a class.

“YEAH?” Darrell grinned faintly and turned again to the window. One of the huge, misshapen comet creatures had settled gently to the ground and was approaching the airship. The reporter swore again, even more violently than before, and beckoned to Binet. Even the latter was startled to see the animal’s mode of progress on land. A piece of its flesh seem to bulge, stretch forward, and extend at least two feet from the body. Then the rest of the body flowed into the outstretched portion without visible effort of any kind! The process was repeated regularly, at intervals of about ten seconds. Advance was slow and sure. Jack, pop-eyed, became aware of Binet’s voice.

“... proves them to be very simple, structurally. The one-celled amoeba moves about in the same fashion, by thrusting forward the pseudopod, and flowing into it. These creatures have no more than a few cells to each individual. Doubtless those dark specks that show here and there are the nuclei of the cells.”

“I’ve heard it said,” murmured Darrell,

"that the single-celled animal, given the proper environmental and evolutional conditions, would develop into the most intelligent of all forms of life."

"Quite possible. And it seems, Jacques, to be borne out by the present instance. These beings are doubtless past masters of electrical science, so much so that they can control the electronic stream."

Darrell had become himself again under the soothing influence of Binet's calm voice.

"Yes," he said, and turned to the window. Then, "Well, I'll be———. Get a load of this."

The comet creature on the ground was preparing to force open the cabin door. A few feet from the front of the plane a long, shallow rock pushed through the sand, sleek and black from long ages of washing by the sea, barely visible in the dull, smoky atmosphere. One end of the animal fastened itself to this rock. The other end, gaping horribly as it shaped itself into a sort of suction cup, plastered onto the door. Slowly the creature contracted in the center, bulging grotesquely. The door creaked, gave slightly, held for a moment, then burst open with a sharp crack. The ugly gray vapor rushed into the cabin.

The reporter remarked conversationally, "The gas mask is excellent, Paul. There is no discomfort at all. I trust yours is all right."

Binet chuckled. "Fine, Jacques, fine. But I see our visitors wish to make better connections." He pointed to the open doorway.

Another of the comet creatures had floated down, fastened itself to the door sill for purchase, and was inserting a long pseudopod into the cabin. Darrell shrank back to the farther wall, but in vain. The slimy tentacle pursued him and wrapped around his waist: Darrell felt a curious but unmistakable tingling sensation. He spoke to Binet.

"I say, Paul, this beast is electrical. I can feel a current even through my coat. Something on the order of the electric eel, I suppose."

The little Frenchman nodded interestedly. "Not surprising. If they are capable of generating a current of sufficient strength with their bodies alone, it's not to be wondered at that they have progressed far in that direction."

"That's all very well, Paul, but the sensation of having one of these things put an arm around me is not too pleasant. And I don't intend to..." The reporter tore free and whipped a hand to his pocket. There was a crackling noise, and for a single dazzling instant a streak of pale blue flame split the air between the body of the creature and Darrell's coat. The reporter stiffened and fell to the floor, a look of frozen amazement on his face. The stench of burnt leather filled the cabin.

Binet's perspective was abruptly changed. No longer did the strange beasts seem merely curious specimens, harmless subjects for articles in the scientific journals. Instead, they had become invested with a definite, tangible menace, a challenge to the supremacy of man. The professor made no move as a second of the comet beings fastened a pseudopod on his arm and gently tugged toward the doorway.

He followed without resistance. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his friend dazedly rising to his feet, all fight for the moment shaken from him. A minute later, and both were being conducted in an unbelievable caravan across the beach and toward the interior of the island, escorted by a dozen of the huge things floating slowly on all sides.

THE bedding ground for the alien race was located in a low spot back from the sea a short distance. The depression was covered over with an inch or two of muddy water, turning it into a sheet of ugly slime, which gave off an odor so nauseating as to be almost unbearable even with the masks on. Two of the creatures

were wallowing slowly in the miniature swamp.

Off to one side, on a little hillock, rested a large ball of some leaden colored metal. It blended so well with the gas that the two men could scarcely distinguish the outlines from a distance of ten yards. It seemed about fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, perhaps larger, and the surface was broken by a number of apertures. From the upper of these holes, a steady stream of the blue-gray vapor slowly rose. As the two friends became aware of a faint humming from the generator, they exchanged significant glances.

"Who are you?"

"Eh?" Darrell jerked his head around. Binet was looking at him with an inquiring expression. "Did you speak?"

The scientist shook his head. "No. I thought you said something."

"Are you Earth beings?"

Amazement widened the eyes and twisted the faces of the two men into ludicrous resemblance. Neither had spoken. Binet said:

"Wonders, Jacques, show no sign of ceasing. Thought transference! A bit startling."

"Thought transference," repeated Darrell mechanically. "But it was in English..."

The Frenchman chuckled. "No, my friend, not in English. Merely a thought projected into your mind which became automatically translated into your native medium of expression."

"But how—"

Binet waved a hand. "Are you asking me? Eh! I don't know. Psychologists tell us that the thought processes are associated with electrical impulses, somehow or other. Beyond that I cannot go."

"Can you understand?"

Binet turned to face the creature from whom these questions seemed to emanate, saying, out of the corner of his mouth, to Darrell,

"Apparently they cannot intercept thought waves except those that are directed purposely to themselves."

The professor did his best to project a coherent message from his mind. "We are Earth beings who have been sent to learn why you have come and the manner of your coming through space."

For a short time the man's mind seemed blank. Then came the answering thought. "We are from the comet ———[2] and were forced to leave our world for another because of the disintegration of the nucleus on our native comet. This group is acting as an advance guard to prepare this earth for my people to live on. When the comet returns, in a hundred years or so, the final transference will take place, with my race completely abandoning our rapidly breaking birthplace."

"Would you be willing to tell us about yourselves?"

The creature swelled up, poked out a dirty, dust-brown pseudopod, and led the professor off to one side. Darrell, when he attempted to follow, was herded back and surrounded by a number of the silent, menacing beings. Binet, after shaking his head warningly to his friend, squatted down with legs crossed under him, faced the thing that sprawled on the ground nearby, and began an amazing "conversation."

"Primarily," Binet scowled in concentrated endeavor to project his thoughts, "I'd like to know precisely the principles and construction of your space-traveling car."

"Simplicity itself. The metal ball you see there, which generates both our gas and electricity, if we need it in any quantities, acts as the center of the car. Surrounding it we build up a body of gas, in which my race lives, that is magnetically held to the central body. Outside, as a protective shell, we pass the

[2] Here followed what was apparently the name of the comet, utterly untranslatable.

electronic stream. To propel the whole mass away from the gravitational field of our comet, and to retard progress when entering the range of gravitation of another world, we use again the electronic stream. This is produced—" Here followed a series of complex and abstruse mathematical equations and formulae that puzzled Binet and might have taxed Einstein himself. Eventually the transmission tailed off into a series of what seemed to Binet to be a meaningless jumble of light flashes and buzzings.[3]

The little Frenchman politely broadcasted some vague generalities of understanding while he framed his next question.

"What is the purpose of this gas? Is it necessary for you to breathe it in order to live?"

"That, and more, too. From this gas my people gather all nourishment. It contains all the elements essential for our life. With our all-sufficient vapor we exist; without it we die."

"I see. Now that you are here, what do you intend to do? You have destroyed some of the Earth people, and vengeance may be wreaked upon you."

"We shall take possession of this world and prepare it to be habitable for us, that we may live and thrive here. By generating enough gas we can completely cover this planet. In time, since the vapor is slightly heavier than your atmosphere, it will settle and thrust your air outward as a shell resting upon the heavier gas. As for your people, I do not understand your attitude. We have come here to live. If your race dies that we may exist, that is as it should be. The strongest shall survive."'

[3] It is a curious fact that not only here, but at other times during the exchange of ideas, there were occasions when Prof. Binet received impressions that were completely unintelligible. No attempt has been made in this transcript to indicate these lapses. Indeed, Binet himself is unable to recall just what was recorded in his mind in those instances. Whether this phenomenon was due to temporary interruption of the thought-wave current, or whether the comet people possessed knowledge that is untranslatable in our idiom, cannot be determined. It remains unexplained to this day.

CHAPTER IV
Binet Acts

AND Binet, as he understood that cool, simple message, felt the same dread chill of menace he had felt before. "But," he suggested, "would you kill off women and children to suit a selfish desire? Have you no pity for the babe in arms?" The emotional side of the Frenchman was coming to the fore.

There was no answer. Plainly the big slug-like creature failed to grasp Binet's meaning, which was to be expected in a sexless, emotionless race. The scientist tried another method of approach.

"What reason have you for destroying a people who have never offended you in any way?"

Binet could almost feel the mental shrugging of the shoulders.

"We hold no animosity toward you. The strong live; the weak die. If your people are able to live with us, as you seem to be, well and good. If not, that is a misfortune that concerns us not at all. Beyond that nothing interests us for the moment."

The utter lack of compassion or emotion of any kind appalled the scientist. A picture arose in his mind—a shivering remnant of the human race, clothed perpetually in gas-masks and protective raiment, flesh slowly withering to a glabrous white as they vainly sought for sunlight through the all-encompassing mist. Binet shuddered.

He spoke again mentally. "We shall try to live with you, of course, but it is necessary for we Earth creatures to have food regularly. Have I your permission to return to the airship

and retrieve a bit of lunch the other man and I brought with us?"

"You have no intent to deceive?"

"None whatsoever," lied Binet.

The little Frenchman groped his way slowly back to the plane. When he returned to where Darrell was moodily staring at the ground, he carried the lunch package, his small, camera-like black box, and a large rubber mat from the floor of the cabin. He sat down opposite the reporter and told him briefly what he had learned while they ate. He concluded:

"Personally, I would be willing enough to have these creatures live in a secluded sector of this world, because we could learn much from them. But they are not content to do that. They need the whole Earth. No, a race of beings so utterly different from our own emotionally-keyed people could never adjust themselves satisfactorily. One of us must go. As he himself said, 'the weak die, and the strong survive.'" Binet's expression was suddenly harsh and flinty as he stared into the murk around him.

Darrell smiled without mirth. "It appears, Paul," he said with slight irony, "that we are not cast in the role of the strong at the moment."

"You think not? Tut! Jacques, you underestimate your aged and decrepit instructor." The Frenchman finished a sandwich, being careful not to inhale as he cautiously lifted the lower portion of his mask and took a bite. Darrell did likewise, and the two chewed in silence for some moments.

"What," asked the reporter, "do you intend to do?"

"Frankly, I should like very much to spend a few days here in study. My informant, however, indicated that the sooner the world is covered with the comet gas, the better it will suit him. So we haven't much time to delay. I intend to get away from the island and then destroy the gas, the comet creatures, and every other living thing on the place!"

"Indeed!" Darrell waxed very sarcastic. "I trust I shall be present to witness this miracle."

"Ha, Jacques! You mock me. But wait and see. You shall be present, never fear, for I have need of those strong arms of yours to row the boat that is to take us from this place."

"Boat!"

"Yes, boat." Binet spoke smoothly. "I took the opportunity to explore up the beach a way while I went for lunch. There is a small rowboat, evidently, to judge by the odor, a goat-herder's. In it we shall depart."

"And no doubt you have fixed it with your friend, the slug, that we walk away in peace."

The scientist shook his head. "No. That is not yet arranged. It will be difficult. You will have noticed that though these creatures have no eyes, they nevertheless sense our slightest movement with their highly sensitive bodies. We shall have some difficulty in reaching the boat, I fear."

"Good," said Darrell. He drew a heavy automatic pistol from his pocket and unloaded it. In the dim light he opened a pocketknife and carefully began to split the leaden noses of the cartridges. Binet watched the operation distastefully. He said:

"Do you consider that quite ethical?"

"No more than the destruction of the civilized world."

The scientist was silent. Darrell finished his task, reloaded the gun, and expressed himself ready to leave. Binet slowly rose to his feet, peering into the mist for the strange creatures that he knew were lurking there.

"Let's walk slowly down to the beach."

The two men stumbled their way toward the water. Just as they came in sight of the sand, Binet, who had been looking back every few seconds, grabbed Darrell's arm.

"HERE they come!" Looming grotesquely out

of the thick gray gas behind them came a half-dozen of the pursuers. Instantly Darrell whirled around. His hand snaked to his rear pocket and flipped back again wreathed in a burst of flame and smoke. Four times he fired in rapid succession, and the battering concussions smashed heavily on the eardrums in the thick air. As the four dum-dum bullets ripped into the yielding flesh of the creature, great gobs were torn out of its body. It fell to the ground, a shattered thing.

In spite of the desperate urgency of their flight, by mutual consent both Darrell and Binet paused to watch the effect of the former's work. Likewise the other comet beings halted and gathered round their broken companion, as if puzzled by the strange happening. And then that age-old favorite of laboratory demonstration—cell division—took place before the watchers' very eyes! From the flesh surrounding the gaping holes in the body, the men could see the visible growth of the cell—the segmentation of the chromatin ribbon, formation of the spindle, and even the centrosomes and asters. Within less than a minute the process had closed up two of the holes, and was rapidly mending the others. A slightly phosphorescent glow revealed these operations clearly even in the gloom.

Simultaneously with Binet's jerk upon Darrell's arm, the comet creatures turned their attention again to the two men. As the latter fled toward the invisible boat, a sudden crackling came from behind. A pale blue bolt of electricity flashed out at them—and missed. The reporter quivered as he pounded down the sand. Again came the crackling, but this time Binet flung up the rubber floor mat from the plane. The blue flash struck the mat, and the scientist ran on unharmed.

Darrell swerved quickly toward the sea where he caught sight of the little boat, oars at ready, and jumped in. Binet draped the rubber sheet over his back and shoved mightily. The oars bit deep as Darrell flexed his huge shoulder muscles, and the tiny craft swept out into the sunlight that showered down in golden streams from the late afternoon sun. The great black mass of vapor still surged restlessly like some evil entity striving to clutch the fleeing men.

A hundred yards from the island, Binet spoke.

"Stop the boat, Jacques. It is now our turn to attack."

The tiny flickering fingers of electricity that slashed out at them from the dark curtain had ceased. Instead, the gas was slowly increasing in bulk, floating out over the ocean. And in this living peninsula of mist could be seen the dim bulks of the enemy, hovering menacingly there, drifting nearer and nearer.

"We had better," said Darrell, removing his mask with a sigh, "attack pretty damn' quick or our attackin' days'll be done."

"Tut!" Binet made some hurried adjustments on his black box that he had nursed so carefully. Darrell amused himself in the interval by emptying his gun at the creeping pall. At least one of his shots took effect, for there was a sudden splash, a great thrashing of the water, and silence again. The reporter chuckled loudly as he fumbled for a strip of chewing gum.

Binet settled back. "A brief explanation, Jacques. I have here a mechanism calculated to produce and project a ray of my own discovery. The effect of this ray upon the comet gas is to reduce it to its simplest form, hydrogen. Combined with my ray is a heat ray, which will burn the hydrogen as fast as it is formed. The result will be the absolute destruction of everything on the island. We are saved." The little Frenchman waved his hand in a dramatic flourish.

"You lack confidence," said Darrell drily. The mist was now within fifty yards of the boat.

Binet leered playfully, pointed the box at the cloud, and depressed a small lever. There was a sudden puff of colorless flame,

and a terrific blast of heat, all out of proportion to the flame, swept out at the two men.

"Voila!" shouted Binet excitedly. He adjusted the shutter-like arrangement on the front and again discharged his weapon toward the island, moving it in a semi-circle, spraying the top of the gas bank. A long streamer of flame flashed horizontally across the mist accompanied by a vast roaring like a thunderclap. A cloud of steam hissed upward. The terrible amounts of energy released tossed the tiny boat about like a chip. To save their faces, the friends hastily donned the gas masks again and tried to hold up the rubber mat as a shield. Darrell tugged viciously at the oars as Binet, grimly intent, kept his ray trained on the island.

The scientist said, "Notice that the oxygen and hydrogen are combining to form water, which in turn is reduced to steam in the intense heat."

"Very—interesting—I'm sure," panted Darrell, sweat rolling off his face, arms badly burned. They were three or four hundred yards out from shore.

Foot by foot, yard by yard, the destroying rays were burning away the gas. It approached the level of the island now. In a vain last stand the comet creatures huddled together and spat out blinding bolts of electricity at the avenging flame. Then, with a series of muffled pops, they burst open, shriveled, and disappeared, in dusty ash. The gasoline in the airplane caught fire and exploded, sending wreckage flying into the ocean. The metal ball of the space-car tore asunder with a prolonged, ear-shattering roar. But not until every visible inch had been razed did Binet shut off his machine.

The sudden silence was almost painful. Beneath them the sea surged wildly. Above them a huge pillar of steam was rapidly dissipating. All about the curious purplish twilight of the open sea was closing in. Without a word both men flung themselves to the bottom of the boat, blistered heads pillowed on tired arms, and slept.

Three days later a telegram was handed in at the central offices of the New York Globe.

> EVERYTHING HOTSY TOTSY DUE TO HEROISM OF YOURS TRULY AND ABLE ASSISTANCE OF PROFESSOR BINET STOP WHALE OF A STORY BUT DANGEROUS TO RELEASE RIGHT NOW STOP SLIGHT MATTER OF FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR DEFUNCT AIRPLANE IS HOLDING ME HERE PLEASE FORWARD DAMN YOU
>
> DARRELL.