

The Thing  
in the Woods

Fletcher Pratt

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**FLETCHER PRATT and B. F. RUBY**

# THE THING IN THE WOODS

The opening paragraphs of this story have been rewritten by Fletcher Pratt especially for this collection. Thanks are due him for this extra labor, which has markedly improved the tale. G.C.

Ralph Parker rubbed his fingers across goggled eyes. It looked as though it had moved. He bent more closely over the fungus bed and twisted his head to cut out the annoying refractions. The thing was certainly out of alignment with the other four mutants.

From the other side of the room Barkeley said, "What is it now? Another case of *Agaricus giganteus*?"

Parker gave an inarticulate gurk. The reference was to one of the less successful experiments he had made in the vaults beneath the Central Packing Company's building. Instead of the expected giant mushrooms, they got a collection of tiny purple pinpricks, almost as impalpable as dust, which sailed sporelike through the air of the laboratory to settle on everything and there reproduce themselves. After that

experience they had to close the laboratory for a month and kill every living thing in it to get rid of the pin-point plague.

"No," he said. "It's too big. And growing. Ought to be useful for something, but it looked as though it wiggled."

Barkeley set down the tube he was working with, and came over to look. Just as he glanced down it happened again. The little grey-brown ball turned over, at first tentatively, as though trying its paces; then more rapidly. It rolled to the side of the fungus bed and swung back, as though seeking a way to surmount the wooden rim of the box.

"Mobile," said Barkeley solemnly. "Ralph, we've got something unknown to the history of botany."

Parker turned and shook him by the hand. "I don't think Central Packing will pin any medals on us for it," he observed. "I doubt if the thing's edible, and that's all they're interested in upstairs there. But it's certainly going to make a piece of reputation for a couple of guys named Parker and Barkeley. Watch it while I get some magnifying goggles. I want to see the external features."

Coming through the door on his return, he was arrested by a shout from his assistant. "Hey! This damn thing has visual sense!"

"How do you know?" demanded Parker.

"Why, it was rolling and I stuck this cardboard in front of it, and it turned away. I've tried it three times now."

"Let's see," said Parker, peering at the bed. "Oh—that's all right. It's only slightly photo-sensitive. Likes light and rolled away from the shadow cast by your cardboard."

"Yeah?" said Barkeley. "Well, how about this? Watch, now."

He held the cardboard in front of the pea-like object at a slight angle so that the overhead light was fully reflected on it, and approached it to the fungus. The thing turned over and moved away before it was touched.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Parker. "Almost as though it had senses. There's a kind of tiny green fan at one side that I'll bet contains chlorophyll, so it can probably convert atmospheric carbon dioxide into carbohydrates."

"But what will it do for nitrogen? See any sign of roots?"

"No-o-o; unless... There's a tiny green line around its middle, almost as though it really were a pea. May be an atrophied or vestigial root. I hope it isn't a fatal mutation."

"So do I," said Barkeley devoutly. "If this thing lives, it's going to be worth observing. Say, I have an idea. It seems to go for light, and your little green plume would indicate that it can use it. Why not build a special pen for it on the roof, where it can get sunlight?"

That was the small beginning of a major problem. Left to sunlight and its own devices, the tiny fungoid prospered. It basked in the sunlight of the roof, rolling here and there, and seeming more definitely than ever to be provided with

senses, for when placed in shadow it always rolled toward the nearest spot of light. By the third day it had attained the size of a grape; the line around its equator was more and more pronounced, but it still showed not the slightest sign of rooting. By the fourth the median line had split along and formed what was apparently a kind of pouch, whose purpose was completely obscure. But it was on the eighth day when Barkeley came dashing into the underground laboratory, visibly excited.

"Come on up to the roof and see what our little friend is up to now!" he invited, visibly excited.

"Our little friend," Ralph said slowly, looking up from the slide rule, "is going to be exactly as tall as the Central Packing building in one month, if it keeps on growing at the present rate."

"Yeah, if!" laughed Barkeley. "So would you if you had kept on growing as fast as you did when you were a baby."

"Why didn't I?" Parker insisted seriously.

"I suppose there's something that stops growth, isn't there?"

"Exactly. At least it's supposed there's a growth-arresting hormone. But suppose the fungus—or, well we won't worry about that! What do you think you've discovered now, Columbus?"

"Wait till we get up to the roof and I show you," Barkeley promised, mysteriously.

When they arrived at the roof, Barkeley began snatching handfuls of empty air with all the appearance of a man suddenly gone crazy. At last he approached the fungus with his hand tightly closed, then with his other hand he extracted a wriggling fly and presented it to the thing.

"Well, I'll be dumb-jiggered!" Ralph exclaimed as he saw the fungus shoot out a tentacle from its middle and sweep the fly into its equatorial pouch. "It's insectivorous!"

After that Ralph realized that its nitrogen supply was acquired in this way and he kept Barkeley busy supplying the fungus with insects and caterpillars. It seemed to have an insatiable appetite for them and it now began to have an odor of strongly ammoniacal character. From this fact Ralph concluded that it probably could not digest proteins like an animal; they were evidently merely split up by putrefaction in the pouch and the thing just soaked up the ammonia and other soluble compounds produced, just as a plant would.

Every day Ralph measured its growth and, so far, he could see no reason to revise his startling prediction. It was now as big as the fruit of an eggplant and while its actual size was not alarming, its rate of growth was astonishing. And those central tentacles—

"Well!" Ralph said to himself. "If that thing were as big as I and it snatched at me with one of those tentacles, I'd say my prayers!"

Routine work had piled up in the laboratory while Parker and his assistant had been playing with the fungoid mutant of

which their lord and master, the General Manager of the Central Packing Company, knew exactly nothing. Fascinating though it was, they were obliged to confine themselves for a while to necessary lab work. But each evening they went up to observe it before going home.

Then one night, as they watched in the dusk, they heard a squeal and hastened closer just in time to see the fungus chasing something. It was a mouse. Somehow, the poor thing had strayed into the bed and it didn't have a chance against the hungry fungus. This way and that, the fungus rolled swiftly after the desperately squealing mouse. And finally, after chasing it across the bed, the fungus, now the size of a watermelon, steamrolled the frantic rodent to death and swept it into its digestive pouch.

"Well," remarked Barkeley, "that solves the feeding problem anyway. If it'll eat a mouse, we can feed it chunks of meat."

"Yeah," replied Parker. "But what worries me is that it's increasing in size so rapidly. It might get dangerous!"

They had to enlarge and strengthen the pen and provide a trough into which scraps of meat could be thrown. Ralph was glad he had completed this job when he received, one Thursday, an invitation from the boss to spend the week-end at his summer home. Barkeley was invited too and both knew it was a royal command which could not be refused. So they had to leave their interesting fungus until the following Monday.

Before starting on Thursday, however, they loaded up the trough with meat scraps. Not merely a few handfuls, but a large wooden pail full to the brim.

"Can't understand why it has such an appetite for nitrogenous food," Barkeley commented. "Its tissues are cellulose, aren't they? And it gets the carbon from the CO<sub>2</sub> in the air."

"Not all cellulose. All plant forms need some nitrogen. And while this thing probably doesn't need much, its digestive apparatus is so crude, it has to eat enormous quantities of meat to get the little it requires."

This was Ralph's explanation. But he wasn't at all sure it was right. There were so many things about this carnivorous fungus he didn't as yet understand. It was mysterious. Yes, and a little alarming.

The manager was a perfect host and ordinarily Ralph and Barkeley would have had a gloriously hectic time. But all the time while they were taking a dip, or playing tennis, or sipping iced tea on the cool terrace, they were thinking of the strange thing back there on the roof.

"Will it never end?" Ralph thought wearily, as he and Barkeley endured the pleasures provided for them. They held out nobly until Sunday night. Then, after several hands of bridge, Ralph yawned and suggested that they had better turn in, as it was essential they get to the lab early next morning. He looked significantly at Barkeley, who took the hint and seconded the suggestion strongly.

At three o'clock, Ralph rapped softly on Barkeley's door.

"Hey, dopey, get up," he whispered. "Let's scam and apologize later. I just thought of something about that thing. Not worrying exactly, but—"

They dressed, let themselves out noiselessly and in a few minutes were burning up the road toward town. Barkeley, who had a bad case of accelerator-foot anyway, was making the big car do eighty or better. But Ralph, normally nervous at high speeds, hardly noticed. He was thinking of something and the more he thought about it the more anxious he got.

"I'll bet I know what's worrying you," Barkeley spoke for the first time as they crossed the town line and he reduced the speed to legal (?) limits. "I just thought of it, myself."

"What?"

"The growth factor!"

"That's it," admitted Ralph. "Why, the damn thing must be seven feet high by now, because it was three feet Thursday night!"

"Cripes! Suppose it busted out of the pen and fell off the roof?"

"That's what I'm afraid of. If it fell on anybody—"

He did not finish his sentence because at this moment they pulled up in front of the plant. Ralph started to get out of the car to unlock the gate to the shipping yard so they could

drive into the employees' garage, when he noticed the gate was ajar. Like a flash he was out of the car to examine the lock. He saw that the lock was intact but the wooden picket to which it was affixed had been splintered.

"Either a truck has backed into it," he started to say to Barkeley, "or else—"

But Barkeley was headed on a run for the shipping platform.

"Holy fried cakes!" he yelled. "Look at this window!"

Following him, Ralph sprinted to the platform and surveyed the ruin of one metal-frame, wired glass window. Shattered, its metal mullions torn loose and bent, it looked as if a freight car had plunged through it. And clinging to its sharp edges of metal and glass were bits of brownish-white, vegetable tissue!

Both knew well enough what that meant and they mounted the stairs quickly in silence. And when they reached the stair-shaft penthouse on the roof, the open door, which was a swinging, metal-clad fire door, confirmed their suspicions.

"Well, it's gone all right!" Barkeley exclaimed.

"Yeah, of course," replied Ralph, as he surveyed the wreck of the pen. "But how did it get the penthouse door open? And where in hell is the watchman?"

"Shhh—! What was that?" Barkeley whispered.

As he spoke there was audible a faint groan. Listening in silence they heard it again and it seemed to come from the front parapet overlooking the street. Hastening to the front they discerned in the dimness the limp figure of the watchman lying across the tile coping of the parapet wall. His flashlight and revolver lay on the gravel roof beside him.

"Jake!" Ralph cried, running to him and pulling him back. "What's the matter? Are you hurt?"

There was a frightened look in the man's face and he was obviously relieved to see Ralph's familiar countenance.

"I don't know exactly what did happen, Mr. Parker," he said slowly, speaking with difficulty as he was evidently in pain. "I came up to the roof about four-thirty to punch the watchman station, when I heard a racket in that pen where you had that big fungus. I'd just started toward it when the whole pen seemed to rise right up and that thing was coming toward the penthouse. If I'd only dodged back and slammed the door it would have been all right. But I was rattled and pulled out my gun."

"Did you fire?" Ralph inquired.

"Emptied my gun at it. But say, it had no more effect than a pea-shooter. It just came toward the door, rolling like, and when I tried to get between it and the door, it reached out and grabbed me 'round the waist. Must have broke a rib from the way it hurts. But I was so scared I didn't hardly notice. It was awful, Mr. Parker, being pulled up against that thing—like a corpse it was, so cold, and it smelled something awful."

"But you got away evidently."

"I pulled and struggled like a madman. And then, all of a sudden its hand, or whatever you call it, broke right off. I must'a sprawled in a heap and was knocked dizzy. Because when I came to, the thing was gone."

"How'd you come to be up in front?"

"Why, I guess my leg was broke when I sprawled and I dragged myself up there to try to get help. But nobody came along until you fellows came."

Meanwhile, Barkeley had been searching the roof with the flashlight and returned now with a slimy object about a foot long.

"The tentacle segment, eh? Good! We're going to need that, I think," Ralph approved. "Take it down to the lab and I'll phone for the ambulance. Then we'll have to notify the police."

When Barkeley came up from the lab, Ralph met him at the ground floor, watch in hand.

"You jump in the car, Bark, and drive to the police station, while I wait for the ambulance. You've got a good chance of catching it if you sort of spiral out from the building—if this all happened at 4:30 it can't be far away. And don't tell the cop it's a wild mushroom that's escaped, because they'll put you in a padded cell."

At the police station Barkeley found a sleepy desk-sergeant who wanted to write things on a large white sheet of paper, names, addresses and other "red tape."

"My God, man!" Barkeley cried explosively. "Do you realize that thing's loose on the street now? It may be crushing women and children to death right this minute!"

Galvanized into action by Barkeley's angry burst, he jabbed a bell summoning two cops with sawed-off shot guns, and briskly ordered them to take Barkeley with them in the scout car and round up the thing. One of the cops drove, while Barkeley and the other cop sat with riot guns in hand ready to leap out when they spied the beast. It was still too early for there to be many people on the street, but what few were out stared curiously after the scout car as they circled in swiftly widening circles about the Central Packing building.

"We could easy miss it this way," one of the coppers growled when they were five or six blocks from the building. "The Sarge ought to have waited for an alarm."

"Yeah?" said Barkeley. "And have it kill half a dozen people first?"

"Phooey," the cop sneered. "It ain't no worse'n a lion, is it? And I remember when old Leo got out of the Zoo he didn't do nothin' at all—just hid in a corner like a scared kitten, till they come an' got him."

"What in hell is it, anyway?" the other asked.

"Giant agaricus," said Barkeley, suppressing a grin as he wondered what they'd say if he told them it was a mushroom. "It's seven feet high and' it'll mind these riot guns about as much as an air rifle."

"What are we goin' to do when we find it then? And how in hell are we going to locate it?" was the somewhat less assured response.

"Run it down with the car if we can. And as to finding it, if you notice a rotten smell, we are probably near it," was Barkeley's reply.

They were on the outskirts of the town before Barkeley's nostrils detected the tell-tale emanation of the fungus. Even in this small town the circling process had taken nearly half an hour and it was now broad daylight. The view was less obstructed here, city buildings having given place to scattered farmhouses and green pastures on the gentle hillside that led to a thinly wooded strip.

The circling process could not be continued any longer and Barkeley had to be guided by his nose. Observing that the odor was getting fainter he directed the driver to turn around and was gratified to notice that after going a quarter of a mile it grew perceptibly stronger. As they came to a fork in the road, Barkeley directed the driver to turn. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a commotion in the pasture near a farmhouse.

He strained his eyes and the next moment shouted to the driver:

"Step on it! I see it in that pasture and it's after some animal!"

The little car bounced over the rough road as it shot ahead when the driver jammed his foot down on the gas. Leaning out the side, Barkeley was ready to jump when they got near enough.

"Here!" Barkeley shouted. "Stop her here!"

He leapt from the car and all three stood petrified for a moment by the ghastly spectacle they witnessed.

An awkward brown calf, terror in its appealing eyes, was being chased this way and that by the huge rolling fungus. Bleating wildly, the helpless animal dashed madly to and fro, but the huge brownish-white ball rolled rapidly in pursuit no matter which way it went. Steadily the pursuer gained on the calf, despite the victim's frantic efforts to escape; the animal's agonized bleats became like the wail of a terror-stricken child. Then it stumbled...

In an instant the great bulk of the spherical fungus rolled upon its hindquarters. Inexorably the heavy ball rolled forward toward the calf's head and the sound of the crushing bones could be heard even where Barkeley and the cops stood. The cries of the helpless beast were terrible, like a gasping scream, as the thing rolled slowly forward, squeezing the animal flat.

Seemingly the fungus knew its victim was dead, for now it rolled off and waved its outspread fan-head in a gloating

madness of blood thirst. The great thing, seven feet in diameter, despite its grotesque spherical shape, seemed like a blood-crazed cannibal; a thing of cellulose, yet strangely like some colossal savage ancestor of man. It was grasping the mangled calf with its powerful tentacles now, lifting it toward the equatorial pouch—

But Barkeley was tugging frantically at the wooden rails of the fence, pulling it apart, while he yelled to the men to get the car headed for the opening he was making. Obeying him, one of them got into the car, faced the car toward the opening and started forward. Barkeley had the fence down but the car lacked sufficient impetus to plough through the ditch. The engine died.

"Damn it, man!" Barkeley swore. "Why didn't you get a start? Try and back her up and—"

As he spoke, he heard a gun go off with a terrific bang. He looked up to see the other man, who had approached the fungus with his riot gun and fired from a distance of a few feet. As he looked the unfortunate fellow was snatched up by the swift, powerful tentacle and drawn against the nauseous pouch. Before Barkeley could utter a cry of warning, the other policeman leapt out, riot gun in hand, and ran to his companion's aid. He was right on top of the fungus when he fired but the heavy charge seemed to do no more than tear off a little fleshy bark.

Another tentacle shot out! And he too was dangled in the air while the fungoid monster waved his fan head in a perfect fury.

It had dropped the mangled calf and it seemed trying to decide which of its three victims to engulf.

Would it hurl them to the ground and crunch out their lives too?

Barkeley did not wait to see—

Leaping into the scout car, he threw it into reverse and backed up to get a start. Then, putting it into first gear, he jammed down the accelerator and let the clutch in. For one sickening instant as the car plunged forward, the front wheels dug into the mud of the ditch and the rear wheels began to spin. The fungus still dangled the helpless policemen in the air but any minute it might dash them to the ground and roll them to death.

Then the rear wheels began to take hold again. The car jerked forward up the banks of the ditch and through the fence opening—

Would the thing retreat? he wondered as he bumped across the pasture toward the flesh-maddened monster which thrashed its victims about in the air with its powerful, slimy tentacles. It was the only chance. He remembered how it had fled from the cardboard in the laboratory pen. Maybe it would flee from the approaching car.

Reaching smoother ground, the car gained speed and bore down on the fungus with increased effect. Closer and closer. But still the agaric didn't budge! At last, when the car was

hardly ten feet away, the thing dropped its squirming victims, folded its fan-head, and rolled swiftly away—

Swerving abruptly to avoid running over the men, Barkeley continued pursuit. But it was useless. On smooth ground he might have been able to run it down. But on this bumpy field, the odds were all in favor of the fungus. Gradually gaining distance, it reached the opposite side of the pasture where Barkeley saw it crash through the fence and disappear in the woods.

Returning, Barkeley found the two policemen ruefully brushing off their clothes, unhurt except for minor bruises where the tentacles of the fungus had encircled their bodies.

"Back to the station," Barkeley cried. "And step on it! That thing will come back and the citizens have got to be warned to stay indoors until it's caught."

But on the way back, Barkeley noticed that the streets were deserted. Although it was the hour when the citizens would normally be on their way to shops and offices, not a soul was to be seen.

At the police station he found Ralph waiting for him.

Barkeley and the policemen told their exciting story while police reporters interrupted with curt demands for answers to questions, jotting down notes on scraps of paper, and then scampered to telephones.

"We ought to have a radio-warning broadcast, Ralph," Barkeley advised in an anxious voice.

"It has already been done," Parker told him. "Didn't you notice that nobody's on the streets?"

"Oh yes, I did," Barkeley admitted. "But can't we get out the reserves and corner the thing?"

"No good!" exclaimed Ralph. "You ought to know from your experience policemen and guns are no good against that thing. We've got to wait for it to return and when it does I'm ready for it!"

His remark was overheard by Chief of Police, Harry Parsons, who had listened with a fishy eye to Barkeley's and the policemen's tale. Ralph had gone over the Chief's head in asking the Mayor to send the radio-warning and Harry Parsons was plenty sore. It was plain he thought the whole thing much ado about nothing.

"Listen, Parker," he said, with an undisguised sneer. "When the police department needs your help I'll ask for it. Now get out of here and stay out or I'll lock you up."

"Okay," said Ralph cheerfully. "I was going anyway."

"Where to now?" inquired Barkeley as they issued from the police station.

"Not far," Ralph said, smiling. "Just around the corner, in fact."

To Barkeley's surprise, Ralph led him to Fire Headquarters where he flopped into an easy chair near the switchboard and offered Barkeley a cigarette.

"See that apparatus?" Ralph said, pointing to the motor-pumper engine which stood in front. "And the tank truck?"

"Yeah, but what—?"

"That's what we fight the thing with, when it comes back for lunch."

Barkeley knit his brows. He was accustomed to Ralph's mystifying ways but this was a little too much.

"What's in the tank truck?" he inquired, completely baffled.

"Nothing," replied Ralph, succinctly. "But there will be in a minute. See that Standard Chemical Co. truck backing up there? Watch and see."

As Barkeley watched, several men began to shovel into the manhole of the tank truck some black crystalline substance. And then they hoisted several steel drums up on the tank truck and ran their contents, water-white and slightly fuming, into the tank.

Barkeley's quick wits began to get the idea.

"I see," he said, thoughtfully. "You did a little experimenting with that tentacle segment, I guess."

"Right," said Parker. "And I also anticipated that Chief Parsons would countermand that radio-warning. See the people on the streets?"

"The damned fool!" Barkeley ejaculated. "Why it's murder to let people out on the street, while that thing's loose. Think of it. Children will be on their way to school—"

"I know," Ralph replied, shaking his head. "The *Times* police reporter will phone the switchboard here if anything breaks. And we can only pray that we'll get there in time to prevent loss of life."

"I think I know what is in the tank truck now," Barkeley hazarded. "Will you tell me if I'm right?"

He scribbled a chemical formula on a piece of paper and passed it over to Ralph. The latter glanced at it and nodded.

"Good guess," he commented. "Of course it's an ordinary chemical known as a solvent for cellulose. But I was really amazed the way it ate up scraps of that tentacle segment. It was like magic."

As he finished speaking, the man at the switchboard looked up.

"McNamara just phoned," he informed Ralph. "The Chief's got men out with riot guns, going through the woods."

In view of the fact that the woods referred to consisted of a thin strip of grove dividing the farm lands from a newly developed residential section to the north of the town, this seemed particularly idiotic to Ralph.

"Bright idea," he remarked. "If the thing succeeds in squeezing through the woods, it'll probably roll right down Union Road."

Barkeley looked at his watch.

"That'd be bad. It's just about time—"

He was interrupted by the staccato voice of the man at the board.

"The thing's reported seen near 22 school. Cruiser No. 4 phoned from Union and Beverly Road."

As he spoke he sounded the alarm and by the time Parker and Barkeley were seated in the Battalion Chief's car the firemen were already at their places on the pumper and tank truck.

Word must have spread that the thing was loose again for they had little need of their siren in the nearly deserted streets. It took less than three minutes to arrive at the point from which the cruiser had phoned.

The sound of a shot, followed by several more, told Ralph the location of the fungoid.

"The school!" he shouted.

The Battalion Chief whirled his car around the corner, followed more slowly by the heavy apparatus. As they approached, Ralph saw to his relief that there were no children in the street or yard. Evidently they had been able to

escape. But the sound of another shot made him leap from the car and motion to the firemen to follow.

Dashing to the back of the school he saw the monster waving the fan-like protuberance at the top of its huge spherical body and trying to climb the steps of a rear entrance. At the top, vainly trying to open the heavy door and shrinking in deadly terror from the tentacles reached out for her, was a little girl.

"Why don't they open that door and get her in?" he heard someone shout.

"They can't," a patrolman answered as he withdrew a shell from his smoking riot gun and inserted another. "They don't use it and it's rusted shut or something."

The little group of police were hysterically firing as rapidly as they could into the monster's bulk. But they might as well have been firing at a lumber pile.

"If they only get that hose here in time," Ralph prayed silently.

As the long tentacles stretched out toward the little girl, Ralph heard the hoarse warnings that were shouted, and heard the sound of hammers inside trying to break open the door. And then two firemen dragged the hose around the corner and held the nozzle while the hose swelled and jerked and then began to spurt a dark fluid.

"Aim at the head," he called to the firemen. "That fan-like thing."

Amazement was written on the faces of the policemen as they saw the stream of blue-black fluid hit the fan-like head.

Before their eyes, they saw it melt, dissolving in the dark liquid. And as it did so, the tentacles suddenly ceased their movement. The direction of the powerful stream was altered now at Ralph's direction, attacking its middle, and gradually the whole thing melted like a lump of ice cream on a hot day, dwindling until there was nothing left but a pile of nauseous jelly.

"That ain't water," Ralph heard the voice of Harry Parsons exclaim. "What is it?"

"Ammoniacal cupric oxide," Ralph announced briefly. "The thing was a cellulose beast and the only way to kill it was to dissolve it."

"Listen, you!" the Chief warned him. "If you got any more baby Silly Looses up there on your roof, yuh better kill 'em off right now."

"Don't worry," Ralph replied. "I'm all through fooling with cute baby fungoids!"

[The end of *The Thing in the Woods* by Fletcher Pratt]