

ADVENTURES OF FUTURE SCIENCE

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# WONDER Stories



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"THE MOON TRAGEDY"  
by Frank R. Kelly

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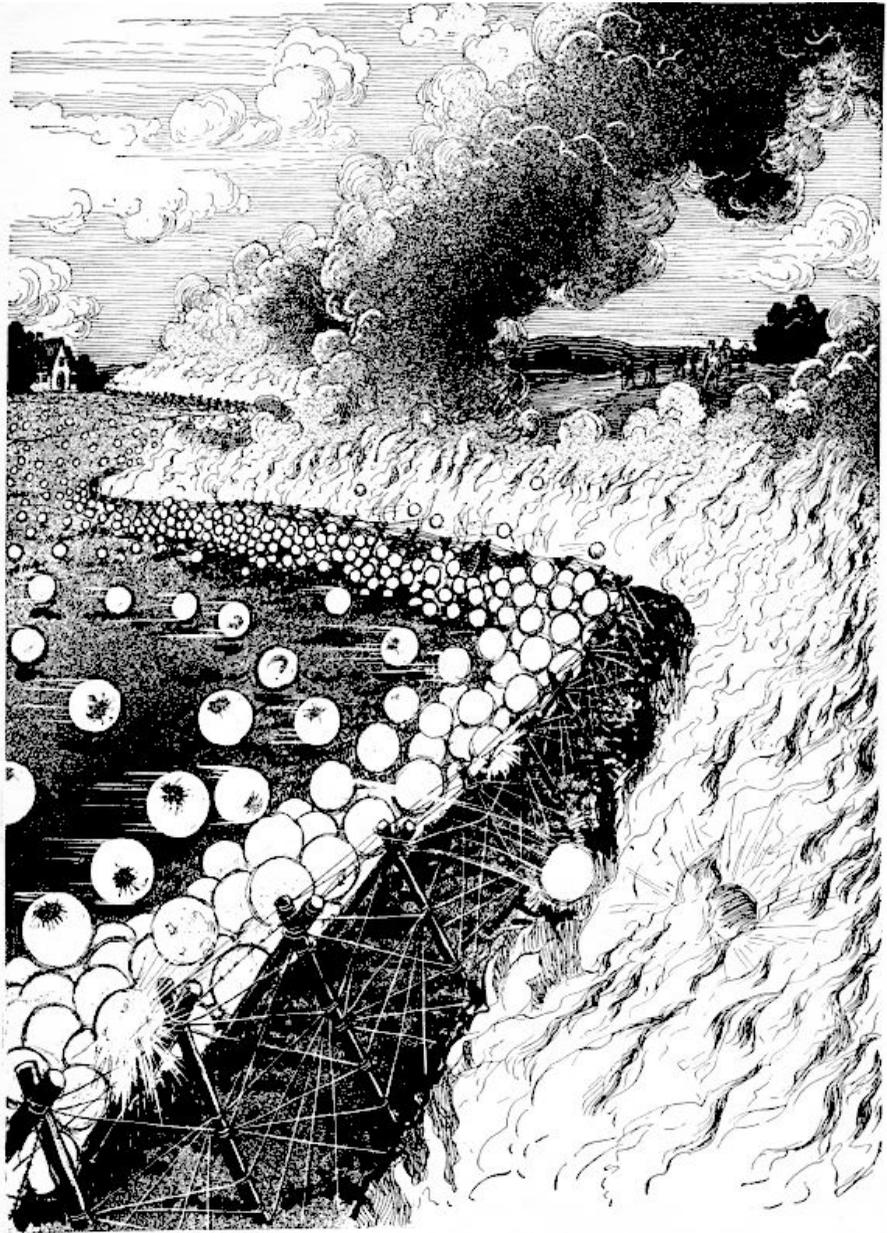
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*(Illustration by Paul)*

Driven by the fury of the gale, thousands of the spheres bounded across the country, piling up on the barb wire fence. Others jumping the fence went sizzling into the flames beyond.

# SPHERES OF HELL

Also published under the title *The Puff-Ball Menace*

By

**John Wyndham**

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris

First published *Wonder Stories*, October 1933.

Warfare is becoming increasingly a matter of scientific cleverness and power. A nation of 100,000,000 people, who had no arms other than shotguns would be at the mercy of an enemy many times smaller who was armed with the latest of killing devices. This has been amply illustrated in the prostration of the giant China before the clever little Jap.

Scientific ingenuity for warfare has been turning lately to the development of little known biological devices. In this field there is almost no limit to the fiendish contraptions to make warfare a hell on earth. This story is a case in point, with a startling and surprising climax.

## Prelude

The Prince Khordah of Ghangistan was in a bitter mood. His council, seated cross-legged upon a semicircle of cushions before him, had come to know too well that look of dissatisfaction. Of late it had seemed to dwell perpetually upon his dark features. The members of the council were aware of his words before he spoke, so often had they heard them.

“To all great nations,” he observed, “might is right. Today we hear much talk of the rights of small nations—and to what does it amount? Nothing but so much dust in the wind to fill the eyes of those who would see.”

He glowered upon his councillors. Each appeared occupied in interested study of the mosaic floor; the beauty of its patterns was more soothing than the expression on the Prince’s face. More than one grimy forefinger scratched in its owner’s beard in order to give a misleading suggestion of thought. The council was formed entirely of old men. Not that old men are always wise, but they do have the advantage of less fiery ambition. And, whether one is a Prince in Ghangistan, or a Big Shot in Chicago, too much ambition at court will prove embarrassing. The ambitions of most of the council rose little higher than a bountiful supply of food and drink and an occasional change of wives. The Prince continued to address unresponsive figures:

“What can we do? These English, and other foreigners, trifle with us. They do not so much as stir to consider our demands. We are treated like children—we, of Ghangistan, whose temples and palaces were weathered when these English hid in caves; whose ancestors reach back unbroken to the creation. We offer them war and they laugh as one laughs at the ferocity of a cornered mouse. Here we must sit, impotent, while they pour over our country the froth and ferment of their way of life in mockery of the wisdom of our sacred ancestors.”

Again the Prince paused and looked questioningly about him. At the lack of response he shrugged his shoulders; some of the spirit seemed to go out of him and he threw out his hands in token of helplessness.

“—And we can do nothing. We have no big guns, no airplanes. We must sit by and watch our ancient race seduced from its Gods, and hear the voice of wisdom drowned by the sounding emptiness of materialism.”

He finished dejectedly. His anger had subsided beneath fatalism and he brooded amid the respectful, if slightly bored, silence of the council. One ancient looked up and studied the Prince. He allowed a decent interval to elapse before he inquired:

“Is it permitted to speak?”

The Prince regarded him with but little lifting of his despondency.

“It is permitted to you, Haramin,” he agreed.

The old man stroked his beard for some moments in placid reflection.

“It has seemed to me,” he began with slow deliberateness, “that, already, we are more affected by the Westerners than we acknowledge. Even our methods of thought have become curiously colored by their mental processes. We begin now to distort our pure wisdom to fit their strange conventions.”

A murmur of protest ran round the council, but none dare give full voice to his indignation, for the old man was privileged.

“Explain the full meaning,” commanded the Prince.

“It is well shown by an example, My Prince. See how these Westerners wage war. First they send a declaration to warn their enemies—is this not absurd? Then they use against that enemy a series of weapons similar to his own—which is plainly ridiculous. They have, in fact, rules for war—a conceit worthy only of children or imbeciles.

“We, in our wisdom, know better. We know that wars should be won or lost; not childishly prolonged until both sides give up for very weakness and weariness. And yet”—he paused and looked around him—“and yet we sit here lamenting our lack of weapons—lamenting that we cannot meet our oppressors on their own ground. It is a foolishness to consider the standards of the West in war.”

The Prince Khordah frowned. The tone of the other’s speech displeased him, but he was aware that some deeper thought had prompted it. He asked coldly:

“Is it necessary, here, Haramin, to lurk like an old fox in a thicket of words?”

“I have a nephew, Prince, a man of great learning in the ways of the West, yet retaining the wisdom of his ancestors—he has a plan which should interest Your Highness.”

The Prince leaned forward. At last they seemed to be getting somewhere.

“Where is this nephew, Haramin?”

“I have brought him to await Your Highness’ summons.”

The Prince struck a silver gong beside him. To the entering servant he said:

“The nephew of Haramin waits. Let him be brought before us.”

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Ralph Waite’s father beamed genially across the dinner table.

“It’s good to have you home again, my boy,” he said. “How long do you think you can manage?”

Ralph, a lusty, fair-haired young man, turned towards him.

“Only the weekend, I’m afraid, dad.”

Mrs. Waite looked up with a little wrinkle of concern and disappointment.

“Is that all, dear? Don’t you think if you wrote nicely to them they might let you stay a little longer?”

Ralph checked a rising smile.

“I don’t think it would be much good writing nicely to Amalgamated Chemicals, mother,” he said gravely.

“I suppose you know best, dear, but—”

Mr. Waite broke in with some little excitement.

“I’ve got something to show you after dinner, Ralph. Quite the most remarkable thing in all my gardening experience.”

His eyes were on his plate so that he missed the look with which his wife favored him.

“But, dear,” she began, “Ralph will want to—”

Ralph checked her with a glance. Of course he wanted to go and see Dorothy. His real desire was to rush off at this very moment, but he knew his father’s enthusiasm for his hobby. The old man would be sadly disappointed if he could not impress his son with his latest horticultural triumph. After all, Ralph reflected, the old boy got little enough pleasure. Fancy being pushed away in a little Cornish town like this for the rest of one’s life.

“What is it?” he asked.

Mr. Waite chuckled.

“You’ll see, my boy. All in good time—all in good time.”

The town of St. Brian lies not far from the south coast of Cornwall. A swift river, the Bod, flows through it on its way to join the English Channel at a point where it is almost the Atlantic Ocean. To the north one can see those strange, dazzling white cones which are the refuse of the clay pits, and from the higher points it is possible to trace the course of the Bod right down to the sea in the south. The houses are mostly built of grey stone, their roofs clamped down tightly upon them lest they should be whirled off by the gales which in winter sweep in from the Atlantic. In sheltered spots where they are able to take advantage of kindly climate, flowers and plants thrive, as was excellently testified by Mr. Waite's garden.

Dinner concluded, he led the way importantly across a stretch of smooth lawn to the thick hedge masking the far corner of his ground. As they reached a gap, he paused, and with something the manner of a showman, waved his son forward.

"There, my boy," he said proudly. "Just take a look at that."

Ralph, as he stepped forward to the hedge was fully prepared to be impressed, but at the sight which met him, the nicely turned phrases he had thought up for the other's gratification fled away. He stared speechlessly for a moment, then:

"What on earth's that?" he demanded.

"Ah, I thought it'd surprise you. Fine growth, what?"

"But—but what is the thing," persisted Ralph, gazing in horrified fascination.

"Well," Mr. Waite admitted doubtfully, "I don't think it's been named yet—sort of experiment they got me to try out. A new form of marrow or something of the sort, I gather. Wait a minute and I'll get the letter . . ."

He bustled back across the lawn while his son turned to regard the "fine growth" with renewed interest. Experiment or not, he decided that it was quite one of the most unwholesome looking plants he had ever seen. Almost spherical, it reminded him mostly of a pumpkin with a diameter every bit of two feet.

But it was not so much the size which was responsible for his surprise as the color. It lay before him, clammily glistening in the evening sunlight, a ball of blotchy, virulent yellow. The ground all around it was bare, and it lay on one side attached to the earth only by a poor, twisted wisp of a stalk, as foolishly disproportionate as a pig's tail.

"Must be a good weight—a thing that size," he muttered to himself.

With some distaste he inserted his hand beneath it, and then stared at the thing in blank surprise. It weighed possibly a pound.

He was still staring at it when Mr. Waite returned with a paper fluttering in his hand.

"Here you are. That and the instructions for growing are all I know about it."

Ralph took the typewritten letter. It was headed "Slowitt & Co.," and underneath, in smaller type was added: "agents for Experimental Growers Company."

"Dear Sir," he read. "In the course of our experimental work we have succeeded in evolving a new form of vegetable. We have the greatest hopes that this extremely prolific plant will successfully adapt itself to a great range of climatic conditions. In so far as we have been able to reproduce the various conditions in our laboratories, the results leave nothing to be desired, and we now feel that the time has come to put the plant to test in the actual climates it will have to face.

"Our agents, in pursuance of our instructions to find persons likely to be interested in this development, forwarded us your name as that of a consistently successful exhibitor at a number of fruit and vegetable shows, and as one who takes an interest in the scientific side of

horticulture. We have, therefore, great pleasure in asking you if you would consider assisting us in the introduction of this new form . . .”

## Mysterious Growths

Ralph read far enough to enable him to grasp essentials.

“This is all very well, dad,” he remarked. “But what on earth’s the good of the thing? It must be hollow—have you felt its weight?”

“Oh, that’s all right. It says in the growing instructions which they sent with the seeds, that one must not be surprised at the extraordinary lightness—I gather that when it is full grown it begins to solidify or harden. Though it is a queer looking thing, I’ll admit, and so were the seeds.”

He fished in his pocket and found an object which he handed over.

“I kept this one out of curiosity. You see, they’ve enclosed it—or, rather, several of them—in a kind of capsule. The instructions were emphatic that the capsule must not be opened in any circumstances.”

“Then how—?”

“You just bury the whole thing and water it very plentifully—I suppose that dissolves the capsule and lets the thing begin to grow. It certainly shows a fine turn of speed. You’d never guess how long it is since I planted this chap.” He stirred the yellow ball with his toe.

Ralph did not attempt the guess. “How long?” he inquired.

“Three days,” said his father with pride. “Only three days to reach that size. Of course, I’m not sure how long it will be before it’s any use, but it’s started very well, and—”

But Mr. Waite’s intended lecture was frustrated. His wife’s voice tactfully summoned him to the house.

“Don’t tell anyone about this yet, my boy. I promised to keep it quiet till the thing should be full grown,” he said as he hurried across the lawn.

Ralph thankfully departed on his intended visit.

Later, he was unable to remember whether it was curiosity or absence of mind which caused the one remaining seed capsule to find its way into his pocket.

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Dorothy Forbes had expected Ralph earlier. She had even employed sundry of her waiting moments in inventing such reproaches as might be becoming in a lady slightly neglected. It was a pleasant mental exercise, but little more; Ralph’s method of greeting did not allow of the interview being placed on a dignified basis.

Instead of venting displeasure, she smoothed her frock, shook back her fair hair, wondered for a moment why one should blush quite so warmly, and suggested that there was a swing seat in the garden.

The swing seat was such a success that it was quite half an hour before an object on the other side of the garden caught Ralph’s eye and caused him to sit up, staring. Just visible over the top of a cucumber frame was a curved section of a familiar yellow surface.

“Good Lord,” he said.

“What?” asked Dorothy. Following his line of sight, she added: “Oh, that’s one of Daddy’s secrets—you’re not supposed to see it.”

“Well, now I have seen it, what about a closer view?”

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter, but don’t tell him you’ve seen it.”

A few seconds sufficed to settle any lingering doubt. The plant behind the frame was identical with that in his father's garden, though possibly a few inches smaller.

"That's queer," Ralph murmured.

Dorothy nodded, though she misapplied the remark.

"I think it's horrid. I told Daddy I'm sure it's unhealthy, but he only laughed at me. Somehow I hate the thing. There's such a nasty, poisonous look about that yellow."

"He's keeping it secret?"

"Yes—he's very jealous about it. He says it will make him famous one day."

Ralph nodded. This made it queerer still. He considered for a moment. Two people, each thinking himself unique, were growing this most unprepossessing vegetable.

"What about a little walk?" he suggested.

Dorothy, with a slight surprise at the sudden change of subject, assented.

It was a wandering stroll, apparently aimless. Nevertheless, it took them close to a number of back gardens. Altogether they counted over twenty of the yellow balls.

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When Ralph returned home to London it was obvious that in a very short time there would be no more concealment of the strange growths. They were swelling to prodigious sizes with a swiftness which was rendering secrecy impossible. Already two peppery gentlemen who had considered themselves favored experimenters had discovered one another's rivalry and were indulging in wordy unpleasantness.

It could not be long before all twenty, and other, undiscovered growers would hear about it and join in the indignation. Dorothy's next letter, therefore, did not astonish him when it announced that the cats were out of the bag and the gardeners of the town of St. Brian were in full cry for one another's blood.

"When our fathers discovered that they were rivals," she wrote, "it was bad enough. But now there are more than a score of them tearing their hair and threatening legal proceedings. It isn't only in St. Brian, either. We've heard reports that hundreds of gardeners both in Cornwall and West Devon are growing the things.

"Ours is so big, too. It's over four feet in diameter now, and looks more evil than ever. I'm beginning to feel a bit afraid of it—I know that sounds silly, but it's the truth. I told Daddy the other day that there was something wicked about it and that I was sure that it was never meant to grow in England, but he only laughed and said neither were potatoes. All the same, I think the balls are beastly things. I hear that some boys cut the stalk of one near Newquay and rolled it down the cliffs so that it burst—I'd like to do the same with ours, only I hate the idea of touching the thing—ugh."

The earlier part of the letter caused Ralph some quiet smiles. He knew very well the temperament of the amateur gardener with all its jealousies and enthusiasms, and the prospect of the warfare which must now be disturbing the community could give the unprejudiced onlooker no little amusement. But he grew more serious as he recalled the sickening appearance of those growths when they were only two feet in diameter—already they had swelled to four . . .

Unreasoning as Dorothy's dislike of them might be, he found himself able to understand it and to sympathize with it. He was worried by the feeling, for he preferred reason to prejudice.

Nevertheless the matter was gradually slipping into the back of his mind until it was recalled a few days later by a paragraph tucked away at the foot of a newspaper column.

“Several cases are reported from Newquay, the well-known, Cornish holiday resort, of an outbreak of rash which is puzzling the local doctors. It is thought that the condition may be consequent upon prolonged or injudicious exposure of the skin while sunbathing.”

For a moment he was puzzled to know when he had lately thought of Newquay, then he remembered that it was near there that the yellow ball had been pushed over the cliffs.

Dorothy’s next letter informed him that a state of excitement was prevailing all over the West Country. The inhabitants, it appeared, had split into two schools of thought on the subject of the yellow balls. The growers and their friends were noisily upholding their rights to grow what they liked on their own land, while the opposition, without apparent grounds for the statement, proclaimed that the things were unhealthy.

They shared, Dorothy surmised, her revulsion against them. Some days before a minor riot of protest had taken place in Bodmin. In the course of it, three balls had been slashed open.

After he had finished the letter, Ralph turned to his newspaper and found information which brought wrinkles of speculation to his forehead.

The cases of rash at Newquay had become serious. One of the victims had died and the others were in a precarious condition—it was, according to the correspondent, impossible to state definitely that the rash was the cause of death, but he evidently had more than suspicions.

And then followed the information that the same, mysterious rash had made its appearance at Bodmin, coupled with an assurance that it could not, in the later cases, be in any way attributed to sunbathing.

Thoughtfully, Ralph withdrew his father’s seed capsule from his pocket and regarded it.

“I may be a fool. It’s probably just coincidence, but it’s worth investigating,” he told himself.

Before he sought his own office, he called in at the laboratory of a friend who worked in the bio-chemical department of Amalgamated Chemicals, Ltd.

Two days passed before he heard any result of the examination of the capsule. Then Arnold Jordan, the bio-chemist, entered his office just as he was finishing off for the day.

“You’ve tackled it?” asked Ralph.

Arnold nodded. “Yes, I’ve tackled it. And I’m not sure whether I owe you a dinner for putting me on to it, or whether you owe me a dinner for putting in the devil of a lot of work. On the whole I approve of the latter.”

“Oh, all right. You look as if some good food wouldn’t do you any harm. Come on.”

It was not until the end of the dinner, over the coffee and cigarettes, that Arnold consented to discuss his conclusions. Then he began with an expostulation.

“I do think, old man, you might have given me a bit more warning about that beastly stuff you brought along.”

“Well, I told you I had an idea it was pretty noxious,” Ralph pointed out. “But, after all, the reason I brought it at all was that I didn’t know much about it.”

“Where did you get it?” asked Arnold curiously.

His manner shed its slight banter and a look of seriousness crept into his eyes as Ralph explained.

“Good God. You don’t mean to say these things are being grown. What for?”

“Food—what else does one grow vegetables for?”

“This is a fungus.”

“I thought it looked that way, but quite a lot of fungi are edible when they’re cooked.”

## Fear!

Arnold failed to reply for some seconds; he seemed not to have heard and was staring fixedly into space. When he turned back Ralph was startled by the expression on his face.

“Do you know anything about fungi?”

“No,” replied Ralph promptly.

“Well, I’ll be short about it, but I’ll try to show you what this business means. First of all, there are two types of fungi. Either a fungus is a saprophyte and lives upon decaying matter, or else it is a parasite, in which case it exists upon living matter. As far as the saprophytes are concerned, well, you’ve eaten a good many in your time as mushrooms or cheese, or a hundred other ways, but the parasites are not so numerous—the kind which most frequently afflicts human beings is ringworm.

“Now this particular bit of evil which you kindly handed to me is neither one nor other of these forms—it is both. That is to say that it flourishes equally well on decay, or on living flesh. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

Ralph began to see.

“This thing,” Arnold continued, “is not only a parasite, but a more vicious parasite than any known. All these growths you have told me of must be scotched—utterly wiped out and obliterated before they can become ripe. Once allowed to burst and scatter their spores—” He spread his hands expressively.

Ralph regarded him nervously.

“You’re sure of this?”

Arnold nodded.

“Of the danger, I am certain. About the plant itself I’m very puzzled. Obviously the spores were enclosed in a soluble capsule so that they might be planted and brought to fruit in safety. If your information is correct, the whole thing seems to be deliberate, and on a large scale. It is not merely a case of scattering a few spores to grow haphazard, but immense trouble has been taken to induce people to cultivate the fungi so that millions of spores will be spread.” He paused and added:

“It’s up to us to try to stop this thing, old man. Somebody must, or God help thousands of miserable people.”

Ralph was silent. He remembered the mysterious rash at Newquay, and the similar outbreak at Bodmin. He recalled, too, the sight of that slimy, yellow ball in his father’s garden and his face was pale as he looked at the other.

“We’re too late,” he said. “It’s begun.”

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“Stuff,” said Major Forbes, with some violence. “Stuff and nonsense. You ought to have known better, young man, than to come to me with an old wife’s tale like that.”

Ralph gave up his attempt to convince the old man. After Arnold’s warning of the previous evening, he had caught the earliest possible train for the West Country and travelled all night. There had not been any time to lose. So far as he knew, the enormous puff-balls might burst of their own accord at any hour—quite apart from the danger of one of them receiving an accidental puncture and spreading its spores about the neighborhood.

He had arrived tired and anxious to be greeted by both his own, and Dorothy's father, with complete disbelief. In vain he put the cases of rash forward as evidence and quoted Arnold's warning. It was useless. Each, at the back of his mind, seemed determined that this was some deep ruse by rival growers to get him out of the way—and, even if the thing was a fungus, what man worth his salt was going to be scared by a mere puff-ball, however big?

"No," Major Forbes repeated firmly. "You say that your mother and my daughter are willing to leave—of course they are. Women are always wanting to run up to London for some fal-lal or other. Take 'em along with you, the change'll do 'em good, but don't come bothering me."

And there was a similar interview with his own father. Mrs. Waite attempted to smooth over her husband's irritation.

"Now, don't worry your father any more, dear. You must see that he doesn't want to come. I should like to go to London for a week or so, but don't bother him—I should have to go soon, in any case, to do a little shopping."

"But you don't understand, mother. This is really serious—it's dangerous. These things he is growing are rank poison."

Mrs. Waite looked a little distressed.

"Do you really think so, dear? I mean, it seems so unlikely—and the people who sent them don't seem to think so. They definitely said they were vegetables."

"Never mind what they said. Take it from me—or, rather, from Arnold who is an expert—that these things are deadly and must be destroyed."

"Eh? What's that?" Mr. Waite chimed in. "Destroyed? I'd like to see anyone attempt to destroy my specimen. I'd show him what's what. There's still a law in the land."

"You'll promise me, won't you, John, not to eat any of it while I am away?" Mrs. Waite spoke as though her presence should nullify the plant's poisonous quality. Her husband ungraciously conceded the point.

"All right," he said gruffly. "I'll promise you that much—though I repeat that I think the whole thing is a scare."

"Well, if you won't come, I can't make you," said Ralph, "but I do beg of you—"

Again he went over the details of Arnold's warning only to succeed in thinning his father's temper and his own. At last he turned back to Mrs. Waite.

"This is a waste of time. You'd better pack your things and get ready, mother."

"You mean now, dear?"

"Yes. At once."

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly be ready before tomorrow. There are such a lot of things which just have to be finished off."

Ralph went around again to see Dorothy.

"We'll have to wait until tomorrow," he told her. "I can't make them believe there's any danger in delay."

"Well, one day won't make much difference," she suggested.

"It might—I want to get you both out of here as soon as possible. Any moment it may be too late."

"We'll be right away this time tomorrow. Now let's talk about something else."

"I can't think of anything else: I've heard Arnold on the subject, and you haven't. Let's go out and have a look at the brutes."

---

“Hullo,” said Arnold, entering Ralph’s office. “Where the devil have you been for the last two days?”

“Down in Cornwall; trying to make my people clear out.”

“Did you?”

“Got Dorothy and my mother up here. Neither of the fathers would shift—stubborn old fools. What have you been up to?”

Arnold disregarded the question.

“You’ve done all you could?”

“Of course I have—short of kidnaping the old blighters.”

Arnold looked grave.

“I’m afraid the news is rather serious,” he began. “The morning after our chat I went round to see a fellow I know at the Ministry of Health and they welcomed me there with open arms. This thing is a good many times bigger than we thought it was. The newspapers have been minimizing—didn’t want to ruin the holiday traffic, or some rot like that. They told me there that there have been hundreds of cases of the rash and several dozen deaths. Not only that, but soon after the dead have been buried those yellow puff-balls start growing from the graves.

“Their experts were as sure as I was that this form of fungus has never been heard of before, and most of us are pretty certain that somebody has been up to some rather ugly cross-breeding, with malice aforethought. They issued orders yesterday that no more of the things were to be planted, but that was useless; already round the centers where the things have burst the place is littered with the balls.”

“Growing already?”

“Thousands of them around Newquay and Bodmin and several other places. And nobody dare touch them.”

“But aren’t they doing anything—destroying them?”

“How?”

“Can’t they—can’t they spray them with acids, or something? Do you realise that the first lot hasn’t reached its natural bursting point yet? All this second crop is the result of accidental breakage. God knows what will happen if they are allowed to burst.”

“Nobody seems to know how to tackle the situation. But they’re not lying down; they see the danger all right and they’re going after it day and night. You can see yourself that the problem is how to destroy the balls without liberating the spores.”

“There must be some way—”

“Oh, they’ll find a way, but it’s got to be drastic and well organized. The thing they’re most anxious about at present is that there shall be no panic. You know what people are like when they lose their heads. If they go wild and start smashing the things wholesale, there’ll be hell to pay. You can take it from me that the departments concerned are already making things hum behind the scenes.”

“Meanwhile, the first crop of balls must be pretty nearly ripe . . .”

---

Ralph searched the lounge of the hotel where his mother and Dorothy were staying. He eventually found Mrs. Waite occupying a comfortable armchair in a secluded corner. He greeted her and seated himself beside her.

“Where’s Dorothy,” he asked a few minutes later. “Getting ready?”

“Ready?” repeated Mrs. Waite inquiringly.

“We arranged to go out and dance this evening.”

“Oh, dear me, of course. Then you didn’t hear from her—she said she would telephone.”

“She didn’t. What was it about?”

“Well, she won’t be able to go out tonight. You see, she’s gone down to Cornwall.”

“She’s what?” shouted Ralph in a voice which echoed across the lounge.

“Yes, dear, she said she felt she must go to Cornwall,” Mrs. Waite repeated placidly.

“But, why didn’t you stop her? Surely you realize the danger—good God, she may have caught the rash—she may die of it.”

Mrs. Waite looked a little shocked.

“Well dear, I did tell her that I didn’t think you would like it. But she seemed so anxious about her father—such a nice trait in a young girl, I always think—that I didn’t feel that it was right to interfere too strongly.”

Ralph made no reply. His mother glancing at him saw that his face was drawn into tight creases. There was an expression in his eyes which hurt her. For the first time she began to appreciate that there was real fear behind his actions and talk of the last few days. Futilely she started to talk when she should have kept silent.

“Of course this may not be so very dangerous after all—I expect it’s just another of these scares. Things will be all right in the end and we shall all have a good laugh at our fears. Don’t you worry, dear, I expect— Good gracious.”

Ralph was roused out of his thoughts to see what had caused her exclamation of surprise. He looked up to find himself facing his father and Major Forbes. An hour ago he would have been pleased to see them and cheered by the thought that the whole party was now reunited; but now, his greeting was cold.

Major Forbes looked around him.

“And where is Dorothy?” he asked.

Ralph answered him bitterly.

“She’s gone to save you,” he said.

## Wind and Fire

“Yes, my boy,” said Mr. Waite, “we certainly owe our escape to you. You seemed so positive about the danger that I did a bit of investigating; poked about a bit among the local officials. It was old Inspector Roberts who gave me the tip—he’s always considered himself in my debt over that matter of his boy. ‘Mr. Waite,’ he said, ‘I ought not to tell you, in fact I’m breaking orders by doing so, but if you take my advice you’ll get out of the district just as soon as you can.’ ”

“Yes, it was a straight tip, by Gad,” agreed the Major. “I managed to hear a few things about the country around—pretty bad. Some fool started a panic in Launceston. Half the town was out with sticks and stones and knives, smashing all the yellow balls they could find. A man told me the ground was white with spores as if there had been a snowstorm. Some of the growers tried to interfere and there was something like a battle. Pretty much the same thing seems to have happened in Tavistock and other places in West Devon.”

Ralph looked up.

“Spores or riots,” he said, “I’m going down by the midnight train to get Dorothy out of that—what’s the time now?”

The Major snorted.

“Don’t be a fool, young man. The girl’s all right. She’ll be back any moment now, I’ll warrant. They’re not allowing anyone to enter the area now, so she’ll *have* to come back. Your father and I came out on one of the last trains allowed through.”

“What’s the time?” Ralph demanded again.

“Twenty to ten,” said the Major, “and I repeat that you are wasting your time if you go down there.”

“The news,” Mr. Waite said suddenly. “There’s sure to be something about all this.” He called a waiter and asked for the radio to be switched on. A few moments later they were listening to the calm, familiar voice of the London announcer.

The general weather report was unencouraging and the voice went on to add:

“Gale warning. The Meteorological Office issued the following warning to shipping at twenty hours, Greenwich Mean Time. Strong, westerly winds rising to gale force may be expected on all the Irish coast, English coast west of a line from Southampton to Newcastle, and English Channel.”

Ralph glanced at his father who caught his eye, but sent a warning glance in the direction of his mother. Both of them grasped the implication. Thousands of light, yellow balls attached merely by skimpy stalks—and a gale rising.

The announcer began on the news:

“We are asked by the Ministry of Transport to broadcast the following. Suspension of service. All train services between Exeter and points west thereof, have been temporarily suspended. Further details will be announced tomorrow.”

The Major looked at Ralph triumphantly.

“I told you so. They’re isolating the whole district. There’s no point in your going down. We shall have Dorothy back here in no time.”

But Ralph was unconvinced. Dorothy had set out to get to her home and he had a horrid fear that she would do so if it were humanly possible. The Major did not seem to know his

own daughter's tenacity of purpose. He stood up with determination.

"I'm going down there *now*. There are still cars, even if they have stopped the trains."

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Thump . . . thump . . . thump . . . went Ralph's mallet. It was three days since he had left London, and now he was engaged in driving stakes into the hard soil of Dartmoor. A message earlier in the day had informed him that no news had been received of Dorothy. There could be no doubt that she had been trapped in the isolated area and was now—if she had succeeded in reaching St. Brian—still forty or fifty miles to the west of him. He reflected angrily on the events which had landed him at his present occupation.

He had rushed from the hotel in search of Arnold. Before midnight he had borrowed the other's car and was travelling down Piccadilly in company with the taxis of homeward bound theatergoers. The traffic grew faster and sparser as he passed through sprawling suburbs. He looked forward to showing a good turn of speed on the great west road. But when he reached it the volume of traffic had undeniably increased once more: Long lines of trucks, not too punctilious about keeping to the side of the road, stretched before him.

A constant flow of private cars against him, unprecedented for the time of night, made it a difficult business to overtake the trucks. Ralph cursed the obstruction of the lumbering line and noticed for the first time that they were not commercial vans, but were painted khaki or grey, with army markings on their sides. He swore again. A piece of foul luck to get mixed up in army manoeuvres, but perhaps they would drop off at Aldershot. They did not. They held on the road to the west and, to his exasperation, were augmented by hundreds more.

"Anybody would think," he muttered to himself, "that there was a war on. The whole blooming army seems to be going my way."

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To add to his troubles, the wind was rising, bringing with it sharp flurries of rain. Instead of making a dash through the night as he had intended, his speed was reduced to a crawl. Only infrequently did the traffic against him allow him to cut past a few of the lumbering shapes ahead. It was full daylight long before he reached Exeter, and he passed through the narrow streets of the old city still escorted by the army wagons.

Two miles beyond, the road was blocked by a barricade. Sentries with fixed bayonets were assisting the police to turn back all private cars. The representatives of both forces were equally unmoved by his offers of money or his loss of temper.

"It's no good makin' a fuss, young feller," advised a police sergeant. "If I'd been taking money today, I could have made my fortune—and retired on it. You get back 'ome now."

There had been nothing for it but to turn his car round and drive sullenly back to Exeter. There he munched a necessary, though unappreciated meal while he decided on the next move.

"No private cars along 'ere," the policeman had said. But the trucks were going through—those same damned trucks which had hindered him all night. Hundreds of them. They were passed without question, and moreover, without a search. It ought to be possible to jump one and stow away . . .

After a number of uncomfortable miles the truck stopped. The tailboard was lowered.

"'Ere, you, come along out of it," demanded a voice. A hand fastened firmly on to Ralph's collar and dragged him painfully from his hiding place amid stakes and rolls of barbed wire. He landed amongst a group of men under the command of a sergeant. The latter came close to him, his pointed mustaches adding ferocity to his expression as he shouted:

“What the—blazes do you think you were doing in that—lorry? You come along ’ere with me.”

The officer to whom he was taken had heard him out and then regarded him seriously.

“I like your spirit,” he said, “but just listen to me a minute. You seem to know something of the situation, but you’re tackling it the wrong way. It’s no good your going over there.” He waved his hand to the west. “You couldn’t do a damned thing if you got through, except make yourself another victim. Your girl doesn’t want you to die. You know, if you give it a moment’s thought, that she’d be far prouder of you for helping to fight this stuff and beat it; for helping to blot the damned growths out and make thousands of people safe.”

“But she’s—”

“And don’t you realize that from the body of every man who dies out there, more of the yellow balls grow? If you go out there, you’ll not only be helpless, but you’ll be giving your body to feed them. No, my lad, your job is to help us to fight against the menace. This is a state of emergency and we need all the help we can get. What about it?”

Ralph at length consented with not too good a grace.

He knew the officer was right. It was his job to fight, not to throw away his life, but . . . He did not quite trust himself. Sometime the urge to find Dorothy might prove too strong for him . . .

His working partner’s voice broke in on his thoughts.

“What d’yer say to a cigarette, mate?”

Ralph delivered a final blow to the stake they were fixing, and agreed.

To right and left of them across the moorland hills stretched the long line of posts. Here and there parties of men who had completed their sections were already beginning to weave an impenetrable net of barbed wire around the stakes. Behind, on the roadway, was a never ending line of trucks loaded with more wire and yet more stakes, while closer, between themselves and the road, a sweating army of men labored to dig a broad trench.

Ralph was amazed at the organization which in two or three days had enabled the authorities to be well on the way to barricading off a whole corner of the country. At the same time he was puzzled; the purpose of the wire was obvious, but he failed to understand the reason for the broad, shallow trench. Nor was his partner, Bill ’Awkins, as he called himself, able to explain its use. But he was ready to concede that the authorities knew what they were about, and were not wasting any time.

“Yus,” he remarked, “they’re quick on the job, they are. Why, a few nights ago there was a gale warning—p’raps you ’eard it?”

Ralph nodded.

“Well, the minute they knew that, they changed their plans like a flash. This ’ere line was to ’ave been miles further forward—they’d even begun to get the supplies up there when the order for retreat came. You see, the wind in these parts is pretty near always from the west; that’s what’s got ’em scared—the idea of this stuff being swept right across the country. If it’s true what they say about some feller a-startin’ it on purpose, then ’e picked a likely place.

“’Owver, the wind didn’t come to much, after all. Most of them yeller balls just rolled a bit and then got stuck in the valleys and ’ollows and such like—blamed lucky it was, too.”

“Then all this,” said Ralph, indicating the defenses; “is in case a real storm comes along?”

“That’ll be about the idea,” Bill agreed.

## Into the Area

They smoked for a while in silence. From time to time a great plane would roar across the moor carrying food supplies to be dropped to the isolated, and, once, a large caterpillar tractor came swaying and plunging past them, bound for the west. Bill grinned as he caught sight of the men aboard it and the instruments they held.

“What are they?” asked Ralph. “Looks like a squad of divers going on duty.”

“Asbestos suits and masks,” the other explained. “And they’re carrying flame-throwers. Those’ll give the blinkin’ things a bit of a toasting.”

Some six nights later Ralph sat with a group in the stable which was their billet. One man was holding forth pessimistically.

“I suppose they’re doing a bit of good with all this flame throwing and whatnot, but it ain’t getting ’em far. It’s the plant underneath that they want to get at, not just the yellow balls. They’re only the fruit—you don’t kill an apple tree by knocking off the apples. Fungi have a sort of web of stuff spreading all through the ground around them; that’s the life of the things, that’s what they—”

There came a thunderous knocking on the door and a stentorian call to turn out.

“Wind’s rising,” said the sergeant. “You all know your jobs. Get to ’em, and look slippy.”

The wind swept in from the Atlantic at gale force. The first few puffs stirred the yellow balls and rolled them a little at the ends of their skimpy stalks. Later followed a gust which twisted them so that the stalks snapped and they were free to roll where the wind urged. As the pressure grew to a steady blast, it swept up a mass of the light balls and carried them bounding across the countryside, an army of vegetable invaders launching their attack to capture the land and destroy human beings. The wind of a week before had moved only the balls in the most exposed positions, but this time, none but the youngest and least developed had the strength in their stalks to resist the air which tore at them. Every now and then a splashing flurry of white would spring from the hurtling, bouncing horde as the tough, yellow skin of one was ripped by some sharp spike or the corner of a roof. Then the great spores themselves were caught up by the wind and carried on faster as an advance guard of the yellow army.

The gale seemed to display a diabolical zest for this new game. It increased its force to drive the balls yet more furiously. Hedges, ditches and trees failed to check the headlong charge. Even rivers proved no obstacle; with the wind behind, the balls sailed across in their thousands, bobbing and jerking on the rough surface. They were thrust relentlessly down the narrow streets of the little towns, jostling and jamming against the corners of the buildings until the houses were hidden in a cloud of swirling spores and the surviving balls tore loose to follow bowling in the wake of their fellows.

This time, the wind did not desert them. Many lodged in sheltered hollows, but they served merely to fill them up and make a path over which the rest could travel. The wave of invaders climbed slopes and swept up and out on to the moor, a windswept bleakness where, unobstructed, they gathered speed to charge yet more swiftly upon the defenders.

There was a line of fire across the country. Ralph had soon learned the purpose of the broad trench. Filled now with blazing oil and wood, it formed a rampart of flame.

“Here they come,” cried the lookout, clinging to a swaying perch high above.

Soon all could see the few whirling balls which seemed to lead the way, and the turgid mass of yellow pressing close behind the outrunners.

They held their breaths.

The first ball hurled themselves to destruction upon a *cheval-de-frise*, a hedge of bristling spikes which slit and tore their skins and set free the spores to go scudding on into the flames. But they came too thick and fast. In many places they piled up solid against the sharp fence forming ramps for those behind to come racing over the top and fall among the meshes of barbed wire. Every now and then a ball seemed to leap as though it possessed a motive power within itself. Missing the wire, it would bowl across a no-man's land to a final explosion in the flaming ditch, its burning spores shooting aloft like the discharge of a monstrous firework.

"My God," muttered the man next to Ralph, "if this wind doesn't drop soon, we'll be done. Look at that."

"That" was one of several balls which, miraculously escaping all traps prepared for it, had leaped past them into the darkness behind.

"They'll catch it in the nets back there and burn it when the wind drops," Ralph replied with a confidence which he scarcely felt. "The thing that worries me is that the fires may die down—we can't get near to fuel them from the lee side here."

But, as luck had it, the fires outlasted the wind.

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"Men," began the officer in charge, the next morning, "it was a pretty near thing last night, and we have to thank Providence that we successfully withstood it. But we can't afford to waste time. We've got to get to work at once. There may be another wind any time, and that mass of stuff choking the spikes must be cleared before it comes. I want every man who has experience of flame-throwers to step forward."

Ralph, in company with many others, stepped out. He had no knowledge of flame-throwers, but it was the only way he could acquire an asbestos suit and get out into the danger area. For more than a week he had stifled his anxiety to know Dorothy's fate, and now he could bear it no longer.

As he struggled into the heavy covering which would not only insulate him from fire, but also withstand the deadly spores, he turned over his plan. Perhaps such a simple getaway was unworthy of the name of a plan. Roughly, it consisted in placing himself among the foremost of those who would be clearing the ground with their fire sprays, and working gradually ahead until the thickly scattered balls should give him concealment from the rest of the party. All he had to do then was to walk off to the west.

The only risk, once he was away, was that one of the food carrying planes might spot him. But the chance was remote, and it was unlikely that a lone straggler would be considered worthy of investigation.

The scheme worked as he had expected. No hue and cry was raised after him as he wormed away. In a very little while he stood alone at the threshold of the stricken district.

As far as he could see in three directions the land was dotted with the yellow balls, poised ominously where the wind had left them, and seeming to wait for the next gale to pick them up and send them swirling onward to more victims. Surrounded by the evilly glittering skins, he shuddered for a moment before his determination reasserted itself. He drew a deep breath through his mask, threw back his head and strode on—a lone, grey figure, the only moving object in a scene of desolation.

In the first village he found a motorcycle with its tank half full, and for six miles it shattered the silence of the moor as he drove it, zigzagging to avoid the growths which littered the road. Then came a sharp valley so choked with balls that he must leave the motorcycle, throw away the heavy flame-thrower, and climb across the balls themselves.

On several occasions one burst beneath his weight and he dropped some feet in a flurry of spores which threatened to choke his breathing mask until he could wipe them away. Then, laboriously, he must pick himself up and struggle on while streams of sweat soaked his clothing beneath the clumsy suit. Once he almost turned back to pick up the flame-thrower with the idea of burning his way through the mass, but he remembered that its cylinder was already half discharged. Desperately he battled until at last his feet found the bracken and heather of the further hillside.

Afterwards, he could recall little of that journey. He became uncertain even of the number of days which passed as he tramped on and scrambled through one choked valley after another. Only odd incidents startled him now and then out of a stupid weariness: the little town on the moor where men and women lay dead in the streets while the fungus preyed on them, and the windows of the houses were full of yellow balls which mercifully hid the rooms—the voice of a madman chanting hymns in a barricaded hut; hymns which turned to cursing blasphemies as he heard Ralph's step outside—the things which had been men, and which he was forced to move when thirst tortured him to find a drink in a dead inn.

But somehow, with dulled senses, he strove on through the nightmare while with every mile he covered, the fear of what he might find at his goal, increased.

He felt that he was almost home when he crossed the river Tamar which separates Devon from Cornwall. The bridge was choked with the fungus. Upstream was wedged a solid mass of yellow, but, below it, the river raced, bearing an occasional, serenely floating ball which would later meet its fate before the fire boats in Plymouth Sound.

At last, St. Brian. The balls were fewer here. The wind had carried most of them away. His own home. Further on, Dorothy's home—blank, locked. Deserted . . . ? He broke a window to enter and wander about the empty rooms. No trace of fungus inside the house. No trace, either, of Dorothy. Perhaps she was upstairs. He was weak and hungry. Every step of the climb was an effort. At the door of her room he hesitated—would she be there?—the yellow balls growing from her, feeding upon her still body?

He opened the door; anything was better now than uncertainty. No one on the bed—no one in the room. He began to laugh hysterically. Dorothy had fooled the balls. They hadn't got her. She was alive, he was sure now—alive in spite of those damned balls. He fell on the bed, half-laughing, half-crying.

Suddenly he stopped. A sound outside. Voices? Painfully he crawled across to look out of the window. A group of people was coming up the road. People he knew. They were wearing ordinary clothes and among them was Dorothy—Dorothy. He tore off his mask and tried to shout to them. Funny, his voice wouldn't work, somehow. Never mind. Dorothy had fooled the yellow balls. That was damned funny. He was laughing again as he sank to the floor. . . .

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“Yes dear, I'm real,” said Dorothy, at the bedside.

“But—but how—?”

“When I got here I found that Daddy had gone. The only thing was for me to go, too. Several of us went down the river in a boat and rowed along nearly to Land's End. Right in

the toe of Cornwall we were beyond the balls, and to windward of them. Then, when it was safe—”

“Safe?”

“Yes, dear. It’s safe now. The balls are just like an ordinary fungus now—they don’t attack living things any more. Then we came home and found you here.”

“But—”

“Not now. You mustn’t talk any more dear. You’ve been very ill, you know.”

Ralph acquiesced. He went to sleep peacefully, her hand in his and a smile on his face.

## Envoi

The Prince Khordah of Ghangistan regarded the nephew of Haramin, bent low before him.

“Your plan has failed,” he said.

The nephew of Haramin nodded dumbly.

“But,” continued the Prince, “it has cost that accursed country more than did ever our wars—and we have lost nothing. Tell me, why did it fail?”

“Your Highness, the stock did not breed true. After two or so generations it was no longer a parasite, but had reverted to a common, saprophytic fungus.”

“Which, however, it will take them many years to suppress?”

“Many years,” the other repeated hopefully.

The Prince Khordah spent a few moments in contemplation.

“We are not displeased,” he said, at length. “Doubtless the first arrow did not kill a lion. There are other means, nephew of Haramin?”

The bent figure heaved a sigh of relief.

“There are other means,” he agreed.

THE END

[The end of *Spheres of Hell* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]