

FANTASTIC STORIES OF THE FUTURE

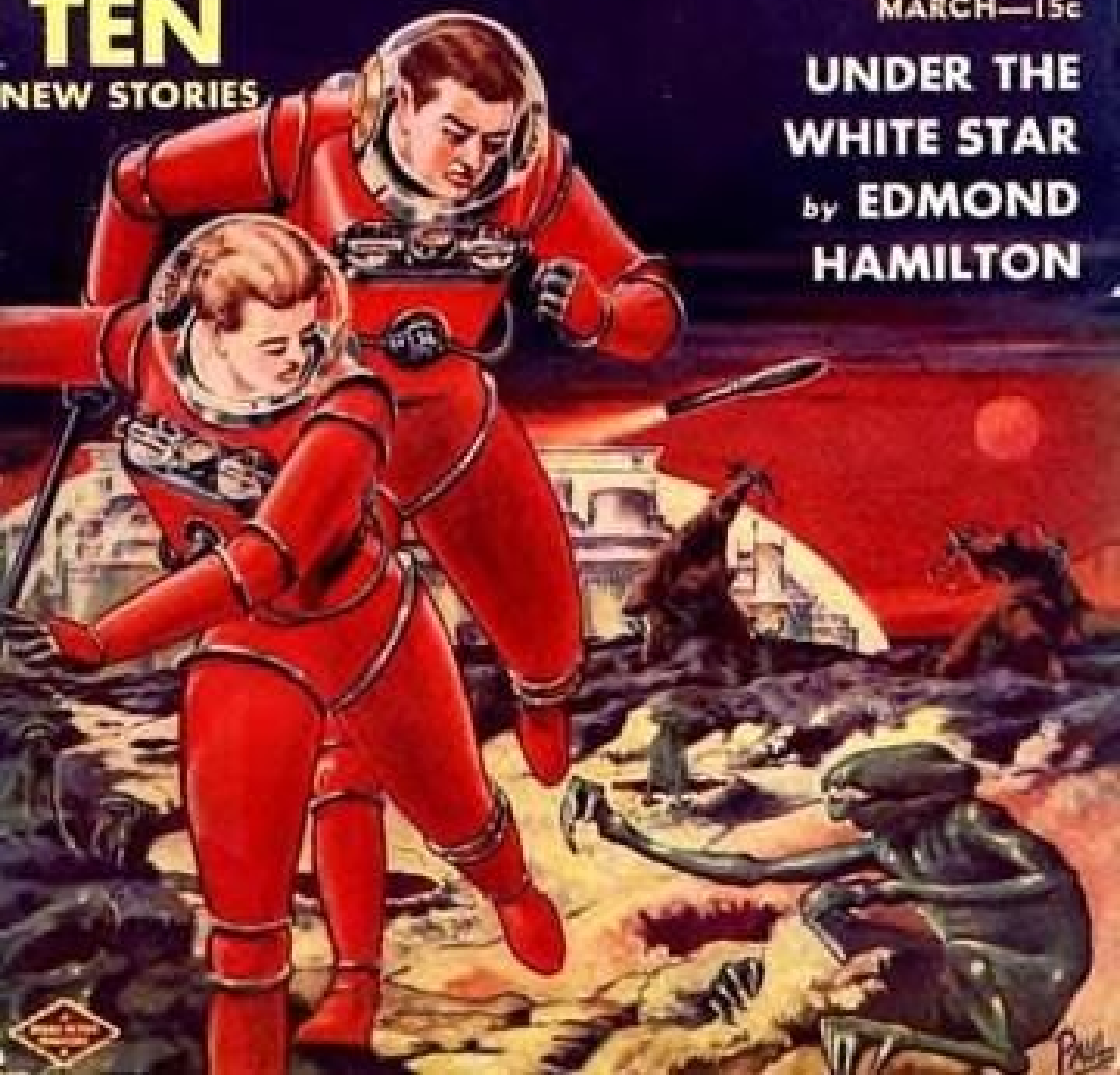
SCIENCE FICTION

TEN

NEW STORIES

MARCH—15c

UNDER THE
WHITE STAR
by EDMOND
HAMILTON



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Leeches from Space

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: John Russell Fearn (as Ephriam Winiki) (1908-1960)

Date first posted: Nov. 22, 2021

Date last updated: Nov. 22, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211141

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

LEECHES FROM SPACE

by

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Ephriam Winiki.

First published *Science Fiction*, March 1939.

The world scoffed at Mathison's wild theories—an approaching cosmic cloud did not frighten the peoples of Earth—until it started raining leeches!

It was surprising how the relatively insignificant little column in the New York Daily Minute grew in meaning as the months slipped by. At first, an astronomical observation was relegated, as ever, to the least important section of the paper, preference being given over it to a society divorce. Nevertheless, those who were inclined to deeper thinking pondered the column not a little.

“Professor Mathison, the famous astronomer, has discovered that Earth is moving in her orbit into the midst of a peculiar cloud way out in space. He doesn't know what it implies, nor does anybody else, but it seems that Old Man Earth is due to go through the midst of it. Better get ready for the Day of Judgment, folks! And don't forget to pay up your tailor!”

Such was the bantering tone of the announcement. Scientists of America suffered exasperation in silence; Professor Mathison himself maintained a cold and dignified silence. And Old Man Earth just kept on steadily going through space.

That was in January, 1942. Half the world never even saw the announcement, and the other half forgot all about it—until the memorable day of June 11th in the same year that the liner Caribbean, bound from New York to Southampton, was suddenly pelted from a clear sky with something resembling massive congor-eels. That, at least, was the message that reached other ships by radio in the vicinity, until the Caribbean's radio mysteriously failed. The next discovery was of the liner floating in mid-ocean with a freight of paralyzed crew and passengers, which no power on Earth could bring back to life. They were neither dead nor alive—just frozen rigid, and yet their hearts still continued to beat softly. In this conditions they bafflingly remained.

Then suddenly the editor of the Daily Minute remembered the announcement of January and promptly got into touch with Mathison at his home near Pittsburgh. The Professor, rightly, was cold and reserved over the telephone.

“I could tell you quite easily what happened to the Caribbean Mr. Saunders,” came his voice, full of hurt pride. “But I can't forget the way you handled my January observations. We're on the very edge of that spatial cloud right now and sheer chance caused the first edges of it to descend on the ill-fated Caribbean, including a vast portion of the Atlantic as well. Congor-eels, the radio said. Well, that's about right, except that they were leeches, and not eels! Leeches from space!”

The editor bit his cigar impatiently. "Listen, Professor. I asked for some explanation, not a fairy story. I'm no scientist, but I do know that a collection of eels can't exist in the vacuum of space. It just can't be done!"

"Think not?" A sardonic chuckle came over the wire. "Well, since you admit you are no scientist, I realize you won't understand the fact that life can exist in multifarious forms, of which our own particular form of life is one of the most unstable and weak. I hope you find out more about the Caribbean!"

"But listen, Prof! It wasn't just the crew. The engines were stalled—all electrical equipment was completely out of order. Generators, armatures—the whole darned lot looked as though it had been sucked as dry as an orange on Coney Island."

"I knew that long ago," Mathison retorted, and abruptly shut off.

Editor Saunders glared at the phone malignantly, then slammed it back onto its rest. Hardly had he done so before the voice of the switchboard girl advised him that London was on the wire. Fiercely he yanked up another phone.

"Well?" he barked savagely, and immediately recognized the voice of Clements, his London correspondent. Clearly Clements's voice came over the three thousand odd miles of submarine cable.

"Listen, chief—something serious! Berlin, Copenhagen, Warsaw, and London are being deluged with incredible eel-like objects, identical with those of the Caribbean disaster! Business is paralyzed; all electrical machinery has come to a standstill; people are being reduced to a living-dead state. The sky is black with 'em, clear to the Arctic Circle. The world is getting covered by degrees. Now heading westwards towards the States, and—" Clements stopped.

"Heh! Clements!" Saunders bellowed. "Heh! Carry on!"

The line remained silent, unbelievably so, as though the wires had been cut or the power switched off. Somewhat dazedly, Saunders replaced the telephone and permitted a shiver to pass down his forged steel spine. There was something horribly malignant about the silence. In his mind's eye he began to picture a heaven black with eel-like shapes hurtling steadily and inevitably towards America. He bit his cigar through with the intensity of his reflection—then yelled for the copy boy.

"Stop the press!" he bawled huskily into the press-room phone. "Front page write-up. Hi—Snips! Get set for a new edition—a special. Space-eels! Play up the thrill angle—And you, boy! Find me McAvoy! Never mind, I'll find him myself. McAvoy! Where in hell is that guy?"

Fuming, he jumped to his feet and wrenched open the office door. At the same moment, McAvoy entered and surveyed his chief innocently.

"Want me, boss?"

"Of course I do—been yelling my head off. Now listen! There's a disaster of some sort overpowering Europe and England, and is now heading towards us. It's exactly identical with the Caribbean affair. Only one man knows all about it and that's Professor Mathison. You remember you wrote about him last January. He hangs out at Pittsburgh I believe."

"Three miles short of it at Kentonville—a small place with fields of daisies all around it," McAvoy responded.

"Never mind the daisies. Contact Mathison and get the truth out of him. He's still burned up over that article you wrote about him last January, so watch your step. But get some news! I'm relying on you."

“Oke!” McAvoy turned away. “It’s about seven hours’ trip to Kentonville; I’ll phone you the instant I get something.”

“Right. I’ll keep a wire open for you.”

Seated comfortably within the electric train—one of the new system of continental electric hookup completed in 1940, McAvoy pondered on what he had heard.

Upon every hand the main topic of conversation was the strange menace that seemed to have obliterated Europe. He listened, grim-faced, to the voice of the announcer as the radio was switched on. It was enough for him to know that the enigmatic eel-like objects were dangerously near the shores of America.

Practically three-quarters of the seven-hour journey he spent wandering pensively up and down the train corridor; then, as he realized that there was but thirty minutes to go, he returned to his seat to collect his bag. To his passing surprise, a fair-haired girl was seated in the opposite corner, listening with more than normal intentness to another hasty, almost desperate radio report of the approaching menace.

“Grim business, isn’t it?” he remarked casually to the girl, and she looked at him coolly.

“More grim than most people realize, I think,” she replied quietly—and at that he sat down. After all, there was still thirty minutes.

“They say a crazy old guy by the name of Professor Mathison knows all about this,” he commented. “He discovered this death cloud way back in January and I gave him a fool write-up. I could kick myself for it now, mainly because I think the old buzzard found something really interesting after all. Maybe you saw my column in the Daily Minute?”

“Yes, I saw it,” the girl assented coldly, and looked out of the window.

“Well, what did you think of it?”

“Frankly, I thought it was an insult to a very clever man.”

“Guess you’re right there. That’s why it makes it difficult for me. You give me an outsider’s opinion and it makes me see how plenty tough it’s going to be interviewing old man Mathison. These space-bugs are dangerous, it seems, and he’s the only guy who knows anything about it.”

The girl turned to look at him again. “You’re McAvoy, of course?”

“Of course. Besides—”

“I’m Claire Mathison,” the girl explained coolly, but her tone was clipped.

McAvoy started. “Claire Mathison! I—er—Well, what do you know about that? Glad to know you, Miss Mathison.”

“I’m afraid I can’t reciprocate that. . . . However, I am the old buzzard’s daughter in the flesh. Odd, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I dunno. I suppose scientists have daughters sometimes.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I mean our meeting like this. I’ve been to New York to hand over some secret papers of my father’s to a scientific convention there. I don’t even know what was in them. Believe me, there is a lot more in this eel business than anybody realizes. I’m going to tell you about it—not because I’ve any regard for you after that fool article of yours, but because I feel you’ll make amends by letting the truth get to the public. People must be warned. I was going to telephone in any case when I got back to Kentonville.”

“Why didn’t you call on the newspapers while in New York?”

“Because I wanted to try and get father’s permission first. If that failed, I’d do it on my own—and I chose the Minute for the dual reason that it has the biggest circulation and was the

one to decry my father last January.”

“I’m still sorry about that. But about these eels; what are they?”

“They’re creatures of space. They exist without air, are immune to heat and cold, and can exist equally well in atmosphere as without it, as is proved by their arrival on Earth. The world has run into a veritable cosmic cloud of them. In essence, they are electrical, and according to my father’s experiments, they absorb electricity to nourish themselves. Out in space they do it presumably by the constant absorption of solar radiations and cosmic rays. Here the effect is blanketed by the atmosphere, so they absorb whatever other electricity they can. That is in humans, machinery, live rails, and anything else. That is what stopped the engines of the Caribbean; that is why the passengers and crew were paralyzed. Every scrap of electrical energy was absorbed from them. By very slow degrees they may recover. . . . Leeches of space, Mr. McAvoy—leeches that suck electricity and not blood!”

The girl shuddered in spite of herself and gripped the handle of her travelling case more tightly. Then she looked up with a sudden start as a cloudy gloom began to fall on the compartment.

Puzzled she looked through the window. So did McAvoy, and they both caught their breaths in sheer astonishment. The air, the landscape, was suddenly black with hurtling objects. They thudded violently against the window or clung for a moment with black, nauseating sucker-caps, then were shaken off. Thicker and thicker, until the train began to noticeably slow down.

“By heaven, they’re here!” McAvoy panted. “They’re here!”

The girl’s face whitened, but she said nothing. Confusion settled on the compartment as the train came to a standstill. On the windows, the hideous objects, threshing mightily, gained a hold, thicker and thicker, blotting out the daylight. The electric lights came on momentarily, flickered, and expired.

“Quick!” McAvoy panted. “We’ve got to get out of this!”

“How?” Claire asked helplessly, all her purported dislike for McAvoy suddenly vanishing. She jerked her head towards the dimly visible doorway, jammed with panic-stricken passengers trying to escape.

“Only one way!” McAvoy answered crisply, and seizing his own heavy bag, and the girl’s, he threw them both at the window glass. Instantly it collapsed, leeches going with it.

“Through here!” He swept her up in his arms, clear of the jagged glass edges and dropped her to the track below. She tripped and fell sprawling on the sleepers, not two inches from the live rail. In an instant the leeches closed about her struggling form.

Without a second’s hesitation, McAvoy was after her, kicking and hammering the viscid monstrosities with all his power. They fell away somewhat under the fury of his attack, only to return.

Shivering with horror, too bewildered to know what to do, Claire lay on the track. McAvoy gasped sharply as he felt the terrific drainage on her strength whenever one of the leeches obtained a firm hold. He tore off his coat, thick with the things, and hurled it away. Then he swept the girl to her feet.

“This way!” he said breathlessly. “I’ve got a crazy idea, but it might work. We’re only a matter of six or seven miles from Kentonville. If we can get the train that far—”

He said no more. They had reached the massive electric engine, and, as he had expected, the cab was deserted. Driver and mate had fled for their lives.

As far as the two could see along the train, the terrible creatures were rigidly fixed, absorbing all the electrical energy they could find. The live rail in the center of the track was bristling with them. It looked for all the world like a vast banana stem. And still they came! A plague of locusts was forced on McAvoy's mind—blotting out the light. Shouts and screams came from the terror-stricken.

"Up!" McAvoy said suddenly, swinging around; clutching the girl beneath her armpits, he shot her up into the driving cabin. Immediately he was beside her.

"What now?" she asked in bewilderment.

"We're going through the brutes! Here—grab this bar and brain every leech you come across."

"Right!" Nauseated, she drove off the remaining creatures, picked up the bar, then began a flailing attack. The steel of the footplate began to become horribly slippery with greenish fluid.

For a moment, Mac studied the controls, kicked two dozen of the filthy things from the floor before him, then, satisfied that the engine was driven in the same manner as his own electric automobile, he flung over the switches. Immediately the train started forward, slowly and with difficulty, to the accompaniment of a dull crunching as the leeches were crushed on the rails.

His eyes became alarmed as he continued driving. There seemed no end to the things. They were everywhere—a solid, impenetrable fog. As fast as they were slain, others arrived, sucking perpetually at the live rail ahead, until at last, just as Mac had dreaded, the power failed.

"No use!" He tossed a glance at the momentary vision of moorland bordering the track, then jumped off the engine into the midst of the slithering filth. He caught the girl as she dropped beside him. "We made about two miles," he said briefly. "We'll have to walk the rest. Come on—up the bank."

"Our only chance is to keep moving," Claire said quickly. "Those on the liner were paralyzed finally because they couldn't escape. We can keep running or walking and shake the things off as we go."

So saying she arrived at the top of the bank, Mac by her side. They cast a glance back at the smothered train, dimly visible in the choked daylight, then began a stumbling run over uneven meadow land. The girl herself, familiar with the district, set a tremendous pace, heading towards a main road which she insisted could not be far ahead and which led directly into Kentonville, passing her father's isolated home on the way.

Then, as they advanced, the growling rumble of thunder smote their ears.

"More fun!" Mac panted, and slapped another collection of leeches from his hands and face. "Thunder to add to our joys."

They went on again; for another fifteen minutes, they waded through the midst of the horrors, and at the end of that time, the storm was upon them—nor was it any ordinary thunderstorm, but something awe-inspiring in its intensity. Mac reflected that he had never seen such blinding lightning or heard such appalling thunder. It veritably stung the ear-drums and made the ground shake. Lightning streaked with bewildering brilliance through the midst of the black, closely packed invaders overhead, then stabbed viciously to the rain-soaked ground.

"Looks like we're in the center of it!" Mac yelled, above the roar of thunder and drumming of rain.

“Mac, I can’t go much further!” Claire gasped, limping. “I’m exhausted. And besides I think I’ve ricked my ankle or something. I—Oh!” She broke off and hid her face momentarily as a terrific streak of forked lightning cracked down not six inches away from her. The ground spewed blazing brilliance for a split second. Claire fell over with the shock, and Mac, slightly behind her, felt his entire body thrill violently as he received a percentage of it.

Forgetting all about the leeches, he lifted the girl up and found to his relief that she was unhurt—only frightened. Then gradually, as he endeavored to soothe her, his eyes took in something else. All about the area of the lightning flash, the leeches lay absolutely dead! For a moment he couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Look!” he almost whispered. “The lightning killed ’em! That means—”

“It means they must be composed of a like charge of the lightning,” Claire answered slowly. “Like repels like—neutralize and destroy each other. Mac, we’ve found a solution! We’ve got to get to father—”

“But your ankle!”

“Oh, I’ll manage. Come on!”

Again they set off, accompanied by the rattling, flashing din of the thunderstorm, but gradually it passed away. To their infinite amazement, as they progressed, they found that all the leeches were dead. They no longer fell through the air. The ground was thick with their loathsome bodies, but of life they had no sign.

Gaining the high road they came across car after car, deserted, practically buried under the leeches, but as before the things were quite dead.

Confidence began to return to the two. Half an hour later, they gained the Professor’s residence. Evidently he had been anxiously watching, for he came rushing out to meet them—a stern, grim-faced man whose general expression bore complete testimony to strength of character and considerable intelligence.

He fondled his daughter affectionately, gave her brandy very solicitously, and handed one less interestedly to McAvoy, then satisfied that the girl was practically normal again, he led the way into his massive laboratory.

“I have to thank you, sir, for bringing my daughter home,” he said grimly. “Even though I know from her that you are McAvoy, the man who tried to turn a serious warning into an idiotic burlesque. You reporters are all alike. However, we can waive that for the moment. My only thankfulness is that my dear girl—and you too, McAvoy, I suppose—were not killed in the storm.”

“Suppose, father, you tell us what it is all about?” Claire asked quietly. “We passed through the storm, yes, and hurried to tell you that lightning killed these leeches. It seems, though, that you know more about it than we do.”

Professor Mathison smiled ironically. “I ought to, considering that it was I who brought the storm into being! No, don’t interrupt me, Claire. . . . When I found that it was useless to make mankind take notice of my warnings, and knowing in advance from telescopic and spectroscopic analysis the nature of these terrible leeches—that they were creatures of space and composed almost entirely of positive electricity, it became obvious that the only way to destroy them would be to create a world-wide thunderstorm—or even several, if one was not sufficient—and so produce such a quantity of similar positive electricity that the invaders would be robbed of their own supply of energy by the infinitely greater power of the lightning.

“It was not difficult. I obtained the cooperation of scientists the world over, and we erected in different parts of the world, under my directions, electrical instruments which had the effect of slowing down the molecular activity of the upper air strata. I hardly need to tell you that the slowing down produced a corresponding coldness of atmosphere. We tested beforehand until we found the exact coldness necessary to strike a supreme balance in different countries between the heat of the Earth and the coldness above to produce the correct electrical tension necessary for a terrific thunderstorm. The results were, of course, better in the Tropics than in the Arctic, but the fact remains that, by having all our apparati working simultaneously, we produced a thunderstorm of world-wide intensity, through which you passed on your way here.

“You, Claire, took to New York the orders for the release of the instruments, but I fully expected you’d be back before I had to release my own. Other countries had been so overcome, I dared hesitate no longer—nor dared I go myself to New York, because my place was here by my radio instruments keeping in touch with my comrades elsewhere. I stayed—and when the leeches attacked America, I had to release the storm and trust to Providence that you would come safely through it—and you did. The leeches have gone—and will never return, because Earth has passed that foul cosmic spot and is free again. But had not all those storms been released—had not other scientists realized the urgency of things—there would not be a soul alive on this earth today! And you, young man, came very near to bringing that about.”

“I can only repeat that I’m sorry,” Mac replied quietly. “I was sent here to interview you, and I’ve managed it. Am I allowed to print all you’ve said?”

“Why not?” The Professor’s face relaxed into a smile. “You’re still young, McAvoy, and therefore there is still time to learn sense. I accept your apology. You vindicated yourself by saving my daughter. It is she who should say what is to be done about you.”

Claire Mathison said nothing then—but six months later she did say one word, and McAvoy, far from decrying the leeches from space, blessed them as the best thing that ever happened in his adventurous life. . . .

THE END

[The end of *Leeches from Space* by John Russell Fearn (as Ephriam Winiki)]