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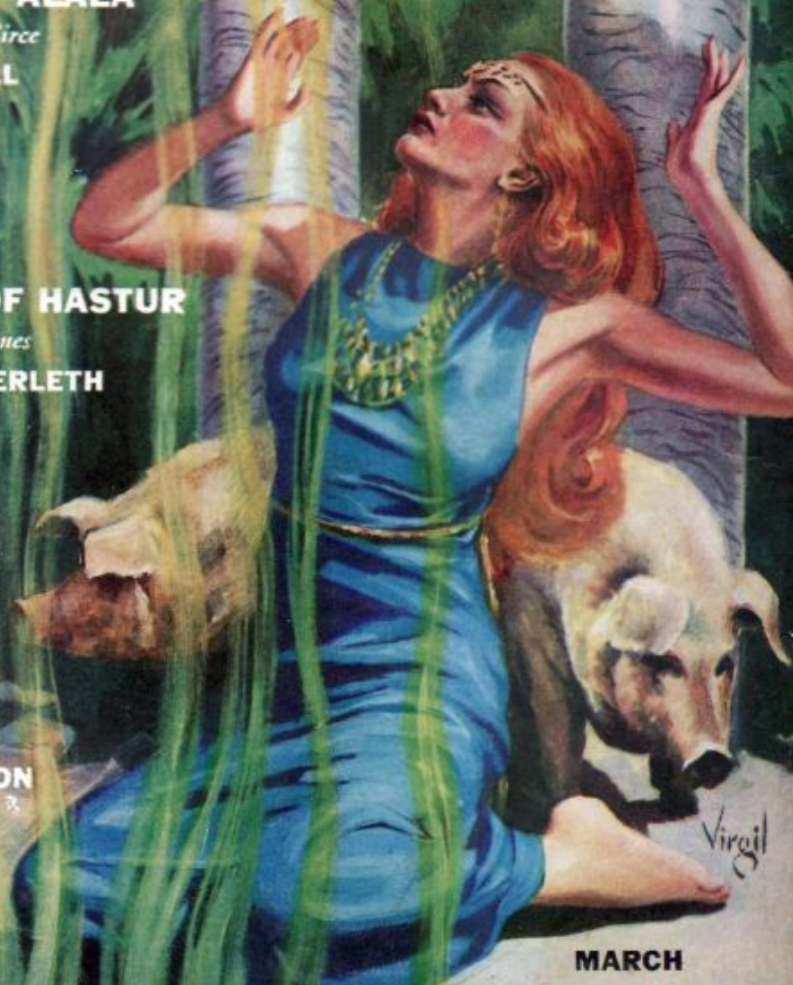
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“On the silver screen the skinny talon could be seen reaching for the handle of the leaf-switch.”

The Stratosphere Menace

By

RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Illustration by Harold DeLay.

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A brief scientific story of a terrible doom that threatened all mankind with destruction

Colonel Royce, the Commandant at Maxwell Field, sat in his office, and heaved a sigh of relief. Through the open window he could see the parade-ground and the shiny sphere of duralumin which was to carry Brigaud and his scientific instruments into the stratosphere. Above it the flabby gas-bag wobbled in the listless summer air. From the door of the sphere projected the rear end and legs of a soldier in well-bleached olive-drab cottons. Others in blue dungarees were tightening stays and testing the release-trips of the ballast-bags.

The electric fan on Colonel Royce's desk droned a monotonous seesaw tune. Royce stared with resentment at the television set which stood beside it. Soon the French scientist would be in the air—and *on* the air as well—and then the fan would have to be switched off, lest its static interfere with the broadcast.

Colonel Royce loosened his collar, and ran a handkerchief around inside the neckband of his olive-drab shirt, then looked across the sun-baked turf toward the stratosphere balloon. Brigaud's thin face, with its black pointed mustachios and goatee, was now peering out through the port-hole of the silver ball.

A heavy-set soldier in sergeant's stripes stood near the opening. Something white was handed out to him, the cover was carried up by two privates and battered on, and the attending soldiers began to loose the guy-ropes.

Colonel Royce swung away from the window in his swivel chair, and switched off the fan. Then he pushed one of the buttons on the corner of his desk. The door opened and the Adjutant entered, saluting stiffly.

"Send for the Signal Corps Officer," said Royce, returning the salute. "Then call all the staff in here to listen to Brigaud's broadcast."

The Adjutant saluted and departed. A moment later a Second Lieutenant with crossed-flag insignia came in, saluted absent-mindedly, and going directly to the television set began to adjust controls.

Presently the heavy-set stolid Sergeant who had been standing near the balloon, entered and announced with a snappy salute, "Sir, Sergeant O'Rourke has the Adjutant's permission to speak to the Commanding Officer."

He was breathing heavily, and the Colonel could see that beneath his soldierly precision O'Rourke was visibly agitated.

"Please, sir, Professor Brigaud gave me a note to the newscaster of the A. B. C. Network, sir. Told me not to deliver it until he was well up in the sky. But it all sounds fishy to me, sir, so I took the liberty of bringing it to the Commandant at once, sir."

He handed an envelope to the Colonel. The address, in precise French penmanship, read: "To the newscaster of the A. B. C. Network, Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama."

Obviously Colonel Royce had not been intended to see this letter. But something of Sergeant O'Rourke's breathless worry had infected the Colonel. He tore off one end of the envelope, and hastily pulled out the contents. It read:

Pig! You refused to broadcast my flight into the stratosphere because you say that the mere gathering of meteorological data is not news. Bah! Well, then, I shall give you some news.

I AM GOING TO DESTROY THE EARTH!

How do I do it? Very simple. Hydrogen replaces the nitrogen of the air at far heights. At 61.68 kilometers, the ratio is two of hydrogen to one of oxygen. A spark applied to a mixture in that proportion will explode the entire stratosphere and wreck the earth. I intend to apply a spark when I reach that high.

Is that news, Mr. Broadcaster?

So tune in, and let the peoples hear my laugh, and see me throw the switch which shall destroy the world.

PIERRE BRIGAUD, I. D.

The Colonel chewed his lip with a puzzled frown. Absurd! Preposterous! And yet——. He glanced up at Sergeant O'Rourke, and caught the worried look in the face of that perfect soldier.

"Here, Lieutenant," he shouted to the Signal Corps Officer, who was still fussing with the controls of the television set; "read this quickly, and tell me if it is possible."

The young officer ran his eye rapidly over its contents. His face blanched as he claimed, "My God, sir, it *is* possible!"

Colonel Royce stared at him for a moment. Then whirling, he vaulted out through the open window, and raced as fast as his old legs would carry his heavy body, toward the balloon.

"Stop! Stop! Hold that balloon! Wait!" he bellowed.

But just then the last rope came free. The silver ball quivered, began its slow and swaying ascent in the listless summer air. Colonel Royce came to a panting, chagrined halt, glaring up at the duralumin sphere and the gas-bag wobbling above it. O'Rourke joined him.

"Quick, Sergeant, your pistol!" Royce shouted.

O'Rourke flipped it out of its holster and handed it over, butt forward. Royce snatched it, rapidly discharging all seven shots at the balloon.

Like an echo in the distance, they heard the staccato bark of a three-inch anti-aircraft gun. Far aloft, two thousand feet or so, was an airplane towing a sleeve-target. Tiny puffs of white smoke appeared all about the target against the background of blue sky.

Colonel Royce's fleshy face was purple. Knotted veins stood out on his neck and great beads of sweat formed on his forehead. For a moment he stared at the rising balloon, then at the distant airplane and towed target.

"Quick!" he shouted. "My side-car!"

As if by magic, it came roaring up.

"Please, sir," Sergeant O'Rourke was saying, "I took the liberty of ordering the Colonel's car. I thought the Colonel might be needing it."

Royce was already clambering in. "Drive like the devil! To the anti-aircraft battalion!"

Down the concrete road sped the Colonel and his driver, then careened off sharply to the left onto a bumpy dirt road. The Colonel jounced up and down, steadying himself with his hands. The keen eyes in his apoplectic face followed the airplane, which by now had turned and was dragging its target across the artillery range.

The motorcycle skidded to a dusty stop fifty feet or so behind the four guns. The sound-ranger, with its four huge receiving trumpets, was being slowly turned by two soldiers with earphones on their heads. Other men were operating various aiming-machines which caused the four guns to follow automatically and exactly the flight of the target.

Vaulting out of his side-car, Colonel Royce roared, "Cease tracking!—Target, that balloon!"

The din of the bombardment instantly stopped, and the gun-crews turned as a man to face the newcomers.

Captain Melton, C. A. C., came running up. He saluted, flashed one glance at the rising balloon, then stared incredulously at his superior.

"But, sir," he began, "I am responsible for this battery, and——"

"And I'm in command of this post!" Royce cut in. "That crazy Frenchman is planning to explode the stratosphere—do you hear? He'll destroy the world. I *command* you! Open fire!"

The balloon, still slowly rising, was now drifting past in front of them.

"My God, man!" shrieked the Colonel. "Look at it! A perfect target!"

Falling back a pace, Captain Melton eyed his frantic superior through narrowed lids. He scowled, shook his head almost imperceptibly, and began, "Now, Colonel——"

But Royce interrupted him. "Melton, for—don't try to soothe me. There's no time to lose! Open fire!"

"Please, sir," Captain Melton replied belligerently, "I was taught at West Point that if commanded to do anything illegal, it is an officer's duty to disobey his superior."

Colonel Royce's heavy body sagged perceptibly. The color drained from his cheeks, then swept back again in a flood.

With a momentary burst of renewed vigor, he exclaimed, "You young whelp! I always said that that damned rule would make trouble some day! Listen, you idiot. I'll waste the necessary time to explain it to you. Professor Brigaud left a letter, which we intercepted. Get that? A letter! It stated that when he reaches the height where the ratio of hydrogen to oxygen is two to one, he intends to ignite the stratosphere, explode it, and destroy the world. *Now*, damn you, will you open fire?"

"Have you the letter?" Captain Melton pointedly inquired.

With growing chagrin, Colonel Royce rapidly felt of the pockets of his blouse, one by one. His jaw dropped. He stammered, "Why—er—no."

"Ah," said Captain Melton, meaningly.

Just then a second side-car roared up. Sergeant O'Rourke leaped out. He ran over, saluting. "Did the Colonel wish the letter? I took the liberty of bringing it, sir."

Snatching it from the Sergeant's hand, Royce handed it over to Captain Melton.

"Read it, quick!" he commanded. "The balloon is drifting out of range."

Melton read it. He scowled, read it again, and shook his head doubtfully.

"I'm sorry——"

"But I tell you," the Colonel implored, "the Signal Officer says that it's perfectly possible!"

"Where *is* the Signal Officer?" Melton asked pointedly.

“Please, sirs,” Sergeant O’Rourke cut in, “I took the liberty of sending for him. Here he is now.”

A third side-car drew up in a cloud of dust, and the Signal Officer dismounted.

“Thank God!” ejaculated Colonel Royce devoutly. “Evans, tell this young fool that the Brigaud letter is the truth.”

“It is. I swear it is,” the newcomer panted.

The expression on Captain Melton’s face was still incredulous. “Then why doesn’t lightning set off the stratosphere?”

“Lightning never gets as high as sixty-one kilometers. You see——”

“Or meteors?”

“The air is so thin at that height that meteors do not begin to glow until they drop lower.”

The Colonel’s face was purpling again. He swept one hand across in front of him, as though to brush the two other officers aside. “For heaven’s sake stop that childish chatter, and get going!”

Captain Melton galvanized with sudden resolution. Turning and running toward his battery, he shouted, “Target—that balloon! Commence firing!”

The men leaped to their stations. As fast as the loader could set the nose-fuses and slam the cartridges into the breeches of the four guns, shell after shell went screaming up into the blue. A few seconds later, white puffs of smoke began to form in a cluster to one side of the floating balloon.

Captain Melton, now calmly in full command of himself and his battery, observed through his binoculars.

“A technical hit, sir.” He removed his glass and smiled proudly at Royce.

The Colonel stared at the young Captain with shocked and incredulous surprise, then shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

“It’ll take more than a *technical* hit to bring Brigaud down,” he snorted disgustedly. “This isn’t target practise! Look here, Melton, that damned balloon is ’way above your bursts!”

Captain Melton dropped his arms to his sides resignedly, and shook his head. “No use,” he moaned. “It’s out of range. I know when I’m licked, sir.”

“Well, *I* don’t,” snapped Royce. “I’ll send up a plane.”

He turned to Sergeant O’Rourke, lips parting to issue a command.

“Please, sir,” interjected the Sergeant, “I took the liberty of suggesting that they warm up a plane, sir. I thought the Colonel might be needing one.”

Clambering into the seat of his side-car, Royce shouted, “To the hangars!” And the cavalcade of three side-cars set out at breakneck speed back to the flying-field.

A small pursuit-plane waited, with its propeller already spinning and the pilot in his seat with machine-gun cradled. Major Phelps, in command of the flight squadron, required no persuading.

The chocks were pulled away, the motor speeded to a roar, and the plane took off. Slanting upward, it sped toward the gray bag rising in the distant sky.

As they watched it go, Colonel Royce mumbled aloud to himself, “Absurd as this seems, it is more serious than war; for, unless that machine-gunner succeeds in his mission, we shall all be dead in a few hours. Come on over to my office, and let’s tune in on Brigaud. My, but it’s a hot day!”

At Headquarters the Signal Officer stepped at once to the controls of the television set. Soon a pattern of concentric circles appeared on the silver screen, blended into one another, and became the grinning face of the little Frenchman, backed by the interior of the duralumin car of the stratosphere balloon.

“Well, *Messieurs*,” spoke the loud-speaker, “I see your plane approaching me. All in good time I shall dispose of it. Meanwhile, I should like to address the peoples of the world.”

“O’Rourke!” Sudden concern flooded the Commandant’s ample face. “Did you give that letter of Brigaud’s to the A. B. C. man?”

“No, sir. I took the liberty of not doing so. Here it is, sir.”

Sighing, Colonel Royce slumped back in his swivel-chair. “No need to alarm the world,” he muttered. “If they die, they die. Why frighten them?”

Meanwhile Brigaud, on silver screen and loud-speaker, was giving a long dissertation on the high degree of explosiveness of hydrogen and oxygen, when commingled in exactly the water-ratio of two to one.

“There is not a possibility for any life on earth to escape,” he was saying; “for when I ignite the oxy-hydro mixture at 61,680 meters, the detonation will completely encircle the world, stunning to death every living being. And if, by chance, a few individuals survive, the millions of tons of water formed aloft by the sudden combining of H₂O will fall in one mass like a cloud-burst, flattening everything under its impact, and then sweeping everything out to sea.”

“But we are forgetting our plane,” interrupted Major Evans hopefully. “It should be reaching Brigaud just about now. And then—pouf!”

“And if it doesn’t, then—pouf!” tensely remarked one of the others.

As if joining in the conversation, the voice of the French scientist came out of the loud-speaker, saying, “Your plane approaches. I shall focus my television transmitter on it.”

The silver screen blurred, then cleared to show the head-on picture of a distant plane. “And now observe, *Messieurs*.”

The listeners in the Commandant’s office gripped the arms of their chairs and leaned forward. They could faintly hear the drone of the plane, coming out of the loud-speaker. But abruptly this noise ceased, to be replaced by that most soul-chilling of all sounds, the whine of a falling aircraft whose motor has been cut off; and the plane dived down out of the picture. Everyone shuddered. The Air Corps Major passed his hand across his eyes.

With tight lips and set jaws, they listened as the voice from the loud-speaker explained, “It was very simple, *Messieurs*. Merely the ignition-stopping device of the French army, focussed on the plane. She sparks no more. The motor stops. *Comme ça!*” They could hear the snap of his fingers, which punctuated this remark.

“Damn it, men!” ejaculated Colonel Royce; “there must be *something* we can do! Lieutenant, are you sure that Brigaud’s theory is correct?”

“I wish to God I were not, sir. At 61,680 meters there is 14.36 percent of hydrogen, and 7.18 percent of oxygen. Exactly two to one, the most explosive mixture possible, all set to detonate and turn into tons of water, just as Brigaud has stated!”

“But that still leaves nearly 80 percent of nitrogen, doesn’t it?” Colonel Royce objected hopefully. “And nitrogen is non-inflammable and non-explosive.”

Everyone turned strained eyes toward the two speakers. But the Signal Corps Lieutenant grimly shook his head.

"That makes no difference, sir. Merely dilutes the mixture."

"But the air is greatly rarefied at that height, isn't it?"

"Even that should make no difference, sir."

"Well, then, for heaven's sake, think of *something!*" the Colonel shouted.

Again the grim circle sat, immersed in thought. But no ideas came.

"Hello, everybody," came the cheerful taunting voice out of the loud-speaker. "I can well imagine that every radio-set on the American continent, and perhaps in Europe and Asia as well, is now tuned in on the A. B. C. Network, to watch and hear me destroy the world."

"We've fooled him there," Colonel Royce snarled. "It's all being wasted on just us!"

"Sixty kilometers," the face on the screen gleefully announced. "Man has never been that high into the stratosphere before, and man will never go that high again; for man will have ceased to exist. You see this leaf-switch? When I close this switch, a hot electric arc will form between two terminals on the outside of my globe, and will ignite the stratosphere. Pierre Brigaud is about to have his revenge."

Sergeant O'Rourke heaved a deep sigh. An inscrutable smile spread over his stolid Irish face.

"Sixty-one thousand," announced the loud-speaker. "Sixty-one thousand one hundred.—Two hundred.—Three hundred.—Four hundred.—Five hundred.—Six hundred.—Sixty one thousand, *six hundred*, and EIGHTY."

The voice of the crazy Frenchman rose to an eery shriek. On the silver screen his skinny talon could be seen reaching for the handle of the leaf-switch.

Colonel Royce set his jaw and braced himself. He glanced around the room. Everyone else was likewise braced. One Second Lieutenant had his fingers on his ears. Another young fellow had his head on his arms, sobbing.

Pierre Brigaud, on the television screen, seemed to take an eon to close the switch; but at last he thrust it shut with a vicious shove. His grinning face turned toward them, with a look of mad triumph in his eyes.

Nothing happened.

There was a tense silence. Brigaud's expression of triumph gradually changed to one of dismay.

"*Sacré nom de Dieu!*" came his voice, and it had a raucous falsetto break in it.

Brigaud's image on the silver screen wheeled and jammed the switch frantically in and out several times.

Still nothing happened.

When his face turned back once more toward his audience, the Frenchman was staring-eyed with fury, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a hideous snarl.

"Think not that you have escaped my wrath!" hissed the loud-speaker. "See, here is paper." He crumpled up a big ball of notepaper, and held it to view. "And here are matches." He exhibited them, too.

He struck a match and lit the ball of paper. Its flickering flames augmented the devilish appearance of his mustached and goateed thin countenance.

With the flaming ball of paper in one hand, he turned and groped for a lever. The port-hole swung outward.

The burst of an explosion showed on the silver screen. But from the loud-speaker there came, instead of a bang, merely a sickening squishy sound.

The scene on the television set cleared, but the screen was now covered with spots and blobs which nearly obscured the view. And between these spots, there could be made out the interior of Brigaud's sphere, likewise blotched and spotted, and a shapeless mass of flesh lying on the floor of the sphere.

The Signal Officer broke the awed silence. "Of c-course. Brigaud swelled up and burst with the sudden release of pressure when he opened the port. And the out-draft extinguished his torch!"

A sigh swept around the Colonel's office.

All the officers slumped back in their seats. They began to mop their foreheads and necks with sticky handkerchiefs.

"But what I don't see," mused Colonel Royce, his large face white with relief, "is why Brigaud's electric arc failed to work."

"May it please the Colonel, sir," Sergeant O'Rourke murmured in evident embarrassment, "when I checked over the Frog's wiring, sir, I found some wires which seemed unnecessary for any good purpose, sir. So I took the liberty of disconnecting them, sir."

An awed silence, as the assembled officers stared first at Sergeant O'Rourke, and then at the Commandant.

"Colonel Royce," blurted one of the young Lieutenants, beaming, "you're all right!"

Sergeant O'Rourke's blue Irish eyes filled with admiration for his superior. "May I congratulate the Colonel?" he asked diffidently.

Colonel Royce drew himself up proudly, as the officers crowded forward to shake his hand.

[The end of *The Stratosphere Menace* by Ralph Milne Farley]