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HUGO GERNSBACK Editor



"EVOLUTION SATELLITE"

by J. Harvey Haggard

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INVISIBLE MONSTERS

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John Beynon Harris.

First published *Wonder Stories*, December 1933.

In the past, man has battled with monsters which he could never overcome. The law of self-preservation forced him to fight for his life, even though he knew it was useless. Consider for a moment the hopeless task it would be to combat an invisible creation.

You could not observe his methods of attack. You could only be his astonished prey.

In the present story, Mr. Harris presents an unusual angle of this theme. Here is a touch of horror mixed with the utter alien, good science, and an exciting narrative, realistically told.

Toby Horning was doing culinary things with a frying pan, a saucepan, and an open fire which flickered and sent up a shower of sparks in direct challenge to the laws of the district. David Fordyce sprawled comfortably, pipe in mouth, and watched him. Toby was vain about his cooking. When he camped, he liked to do the thing properly—none of the civilized oil-stove business for him. The third member of the party, Dirk Robbins, sat a little apart repairing a leak in an ancient kettle. David turned lazily and stared out towards the rolling country which lay beneath their hilltop camp. It was dim and a little misty, with only the stars and a dim crescent to light it. Here and there he could distinguish bright points of light many miles away. Some of them he knew for the lighted windows in farm-houses. Others, crawling like sluggish fireflies through the blue night, were the headlights of automobiles. From a point well beyond even his extended horizon, the shaft of an aerial beacon aspired heavenwards in a slim post of light. Away on the left, he became idly aware of a bright spot hitherto unnoticed. As he gazed, trying to place it in the familiar landscape, it seemed to grow in intensity.

“That bus must be moving some,” he said, removing his pipe and pointing with the stem.

Dirk looked up from his kettle and studied the growing spot of brilliance for a moment.

“Coming pretty near us from the looks of it. She must be big, too, to be carrying a light like that. Wonder what she’s doing around here? The main air line is miles to the south, beyond the beacon.”

Toby looked up, grunted, and returned to his cooking.

“Can’t get peace anywhere nowadays,” he growled. “The whole ruddy world is nothing but a hustling pandemonium. Where’s the sense in all this rushing about, I’d like to know?”

The others did not reply. They knew Toby’s pet grumbles of old. Instead, they watched the searchlight growing as it rushed towards them.

“Right off her course, and Lord, isn’t she travelling?” David repeated.

The nearing ship, seen from the front, appeared as a black circle silhouetted against a nebulous halo of her own exhaust gases. David grew a little alarmed with the sense that something was wrong on board. They could hear no sound of her rockets as yet, but it was obvious that she was travelling low, cutting the dense atmosphere at stratosphere speed; a

dangerous game to play, to say nothing of its illegality. Something very serious indeed must be amiss to let her captain take such a risk.

“Damn’ foolery,” muttered Toby. “She’s less than a thousand feet up—mind your ears.”

Still there was no sound, for she was travelling at a greater speed than her own noise. She hurtled on, passing a bare hundred yards to their right. The three crouching men with fingers tightly jammed in their ears, saw her lines of lighted portholes only as bright streaks. The plume from her rockets stretched out like the tail of a minor comet behind her. Only as she was almost level, did the thunder of her tubes strike them. First, great waves of sound buffeted them like physical blows which would have hurled them to the ground had they been standing. It was followed by a wind which scattered Toby’s fire, brought a groaning and crackling of branches from the trees close by, and strove to tear the clothes off their backs. Finally came the surges of hot, sulphurous fumes which caught their throats and set them coughing. Their heads turned to follow the modern dragon as she sped by. Toby’s lips were moving. His words were inaudible, but his expression told all that was necessary. A moment later, the rocket haze was dimmed by a mighty spurt of pure white flame. The sound came rolling back to the three watchers—a mighty detonation capping the roar of the rockets. Then silence—and darkness.

The men removed their hands from their ears and stared stupidly at one another.

“Lord,” said David, shouting above his own temporary deafness, “what a hell of a smash.”

“He was riding for it and he got it,” said Toby.

Dirk turned to gaze again in the direction of the final flash.

“Do you think we ought—?” he began.

David shook his head. “No good. We’d never find her in the dark, and not a man could have lived through that, anyway. We’d better wait until morning.”

Toby grunted, but said nothing. In an embittered manner, he began to collect materials for a fresh fire.

In spite of an early start, it was eight o’clock before they reached the wreck. Tracks were both scarce and faint, so that it was impossible to take the car nearer than a mile and a half from the scene. For the rest of the journey, it was necessary to march through the pine woods.

The ship had come to a final rest in a clearing. Behind her lay a furrow of shattered and scorched trees ploughed away by the onslaught. To all appearance, she had made an effort to clear the top of the hill and failed by two or three hundred feet. Her stern portion was tilted, so that the gaping rocket tubes pointed up to the skies. Her bows were an unrecognizable and tangled mass, while her middle was split into several sections. It was evident to David that, even in her crumpled condition, she was one of the biggest rocket ships he had ever seen. Looking at her with the memory of her speed fresh in his mind, he was surprised to find that she had retained even the semblance of her former shape. They stepped from the edge of the tree belt and crossed the open ground together. It was Dirk who asked the question which had begun to trouble them all.

“What is she? She’s obviously Earth built, not Martian, but she’s like nothing else I’ve ever seen.”

Too narrow in the beam for a liner, bearing none of the characteristics of a warship, she was nevertheless, far too large for a private craft and had shown a turn of speed which would be hopelessly uneconomic in a freighter. The nearer they drew, the more she puzzled them. David led the way to the bows; he was certain that he had seen a ship of these unusual proportions once before, but he could not recall the circumstances to mind. They stopped and

surveyed the wreckage. The massive plates of steelium were crumpled and crushed as though they had been paper. Jagged ends of twisted framework protruded here and there, gleaming like picked bones. The identification number on the bow was buried somewhere beneath the pile of interlocked rubbish. David was about to turn back to the stern when Toby gave an exclamation. At his feet lay a severed section of steelium, and faintly, the outlines of three letters could be traced upon it.

“K-A-N,” he read out. “What on earth does that mean?”

David frowned. He was trying to grasp something dimly remembered. It almost eluded him, then he had it with a rush.

“The *Hurakan*,” he cried. “I remember now. I saw a photograph of her before she sailed. This is she, all right.”

His two companions looked blank; the name conveyed nothing to them.

“What was she?” Toby asked at length.

“Explorer. She set off—must be seven years ago. Was to have been the first ship to leave the solar system.”

Dirk shook his head and professed to remember nothing of the affair.

“You wouldn’t. They did all they could to keep it quiet. There’d been such a lot of crashes about that time. I had it from a pal in the Rocket Service. He showed me the picture of her. A beautiful ship if ever there was one, and all the brains of the nation went into her building.”

Toby gazed at the shattered remnants. “All the brains of the nation,” he repeated, “and the lives of good men—all for this. What fools we are! Where did she go?”

“I don’t know anything beyond the fact that it was intended to take her out of the system. Perhaps she never accomplished it, but I fancy she did.”

“Why the odd name?” Dirk asked curiously.

“*Hurakan*? Oh, he was an old god who managed the thunder and the winds.”

“Well, she certainly thundered last night.”

As Dirk spoke, they came opposite a gaping crack in the hull. Toby paused, suggesting that it made a convenient entrance for exploration. The other two, after a momentary hesitation, agreed and followed him within. They found themselves in a well-built sleeping cabin which had been unoccupied at the time of the crash. David was thankful for that. He was not hankering for unpleasant sights. Toby strode across to the door in the opposite wall and tugged at the handle. As he expected, it was jammed and considerable leverage was necessary to free it. When at last, beneath their united efforts, it did give way, the three found themselves precipitated into a main corridor. Toby had had the forethought to come equipped with an electric torch. He drew it now and flashed the beam around. To the left, leading forward, a tangle of twisted metal choked the way, but to the right, the floor stretched away bare and empty, jerked from the straight, where the sections of the ship had strained apart. They had taken only a few steps, when a splintering crash somewhere towards the stern made them stop short. David jumped at its unexpectedness.

“What was that?” he asked uneasily.

“Cooling off, probably,” Dirk guessed. “She would be in a fine state of heat by the time she hit. Some bits of the wreckage must still be contracting.”

Nevertheless, there was a discouraging eeriness about these sounds aboard a dead ship, which none of them relished. Perhaps, David thought, they had been mistaken, and someone

had managed to survive the impact. He raised his voice in a hail. The echoes sped depressingly about the metal walls, but there was no reply.

Toby led on. Thirty feet along the corridor, a door to the left stood slightly ajar. They pushed it back and found themselves in a small living room. The furnishing was simple, consisting of a desk, a table, three or four chairs, and a bookshelf with bars to hold the books in place. But the discovery which most interested David, was that the walls were lined with charts. The constellations and groupings, he noted, were shown in black, but among them wandered a red line. His knowledge of three-dimensional navigation was crude school-room stuff, as was Dirk's, but the two of them became interested, and began to examine the red line which they took to indicate the voyage of the *Hurakan*. The diagrams held little interest for Toby, and with a word to the other two, he left them to continue his explorations.

The inference, which David drew at length, was that the *Hurakan* had been exploring the system about Procyon. The discovery found him the more puzzled. The ship had set off seven years before, but he remembered Procyon to be 3.2 parsecs distant. To get there and back would require almost twenty-one years travelling at the speed of light. He pointed out the discrepancy to Dirk. The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"I never understood why the speed of light was the theoretical limit. If these lines are right, it means that somehow or other, they passed that limit. Just look at the dates."

David bent closer to inspect the minute figures scratched alongside the track. They indicated a speed which made him gasp. He began to speak, but a sudden sound stopped him in mid-sentence. The same cracking, crushing noise which had startled them before, became audible again. This time it was far louder and seemed closer. Hard upon it came Toby's voice, calling them. They stared at each other. The cry was repeated with a note of alarm, and with one accord, they made for the door.

A few yards away, the ship's broken back had caused the floor to tilt upwards, and as they scrambled up the slippery metal, they called back encouragingly. The quality of the second cry was hard to associate with Toby. It gave a sense of rising panic. A rattle of pistol shots ahead spurred them on. What was there to fire at? David wondered. Perhaps others had found the wreck before they had.

"Where are you?" he called.

Toby's voice answered from the right, and simultaneously there came another wrenching creak of metal. David thrust back a door and the two of them stood gazing within. They faced a square storeroom. The walls were lined with deep shelves and rows of lockers, save for a space in the middle of the right-hand wall, where both shelves and the partition behind them had fallen away to reveal a dark aperture. The light from the two small portholes was uncertain, but it seemed to David that the edges of the dark gap bulged and bent even as he looked at them. Away in the left-hand corner crouched Toby, his eyes fastened on the dark hole.

"What—?" David began, stepping into the room.

"Stop!" Toby switched his gun on him. "Don't come a step nearer—there's something nasty loose about here."

The pair noticed that their arrival had taken the note of panic from his voice, but, for all that, his manner was tense.

"But—"

“For God’s sake, do what I tell you! Now stand back and hold that door open—and clear right out of the way. I’ve got to jump.”

David obeyed wonderingly. There seemed no sane reason why Toby should want to jump. Puzzled, he watched the other kick off his shoes and throw down his jacket. He tossed his pistol across and crouched tensely. Both of his friends knew him to be the possessor of no mean muscles, but the power of his standing jump amazed even them. Toby launched himself in a magnificent leap which would have done credit to an acrobat. It was superb; but it was not enough. In mid-air he was suddenly checked. The others gave an astonished cry. Toby had struck something—an invisible something which stood between them. For a second, he seemed to hang in the emptiness, scrambling madly with legs and arms, then he began to slip, first slowly, and then more rapidly, for all the world as if he slid down a curved surface to the floor. David and Dirk stared in stupefaction as the other struggled and fought with wildly thrashing limbs against something unseen. David broke the spell and took a step forward, but Toby noticed the move.

“No, no, go away,” he shouted. “I’m done, I—” His voice broke into a scream of agony and his body slumped inertly.

Half-way up one thigh a deep line appeared, then, as though severed by an ax, the leg came away with a jerk. But it did not fall: instead, it started to drift slowly across the room. With incredulous horror, they saw that the limb was unsupported. It travelled some nine inches above the ground, creeping with a steady, unswerving motion towards the break in the wall. Foot first, it edged inch by inch out of the room into the blackness beyond. David’s senses were reeling. He felt Dirk’s grip on his arm and tried to speak, but his mouth was queerly dry. He forced his eyes back to the fallen Toby, and caught a sudden breath. An arm, like the leg was being detached: the same sharp indentation, but still no visible agent. As the arm jerked free, he saw that the denuded shoulder was scored by deep grooves.

He sprang back, pulling Dirk with him. Both knew that Toby was far past all help, and in a wordless panic, they clattered and slid down the sloping corridor to seek safety in the open.

Invisible Monsters

CHAPTER II Official Investigation

A five-mile dash in the car brought them to the townlet of Clidoe. In the police station, they poured out a confused statement to a stolid and unsympathetic sergeant. There was reproving suspicion in the glance with which he favored them. An excited entrance coupled with rambling incoherence was, in his experience, frequently to be associated with excess of alcohol. Accordingly, he hid his likable, though not very brilliant self, behind a stern and chastening stare.

“Just who are you and what are you doing?” he demanded.

David gave their names and explained that they had been on a camping tour. The sergeant approached and scrutinized them more closely. They were excited, but he had to admit that they showed none of the signs of intoxication. Furthermore, the time was barely eleven o'clock.

“Well,” he said, returning to his desk and picking up a pen, “suppose you tell it to me all over again, but slowly this time.”

Evidently, the alcoholic theory was merely shelved, for his tone was not encouraging. David pulled himself together, and with occasional promptings from Dirk, recounted the affair in orderly detail. The sergeant listened throughout with an air of defensive reserve more than tinged with disbelief. At the end of the recital, he said:

“I’ve had a report that a ship went by at an excessive speed last night. What did you call her?”

“The *Hurakan*.” David spelt out the name. “You’ll find out about her if you ring up Interplanetary Explorations.”

The sergeant grunted. “Now just what was this—er—assailant like?”

“That’s just what I’ve been telling you. It wasn’t like anything. You couldn’t see it.”

“It was too dark in the ship?”

“No, I tell you, it was invisible.”

“Invisible, eh? And yet it killed a man?” His voice was a trifle weary. “What’s this you’re trying—a hoax?” he demanded with a sudden change of tone.

He watched them keenly while they both protested vehemently. He had no longer any doubt that the men had received a shock, but this yarn was pretty much like spook stuff . . . He pulled one ear reflectively and frowned. The matter would have to be cleared up.

“Rankin,” he called over to a constable, “you’ve heard these men’s story. Get along now and check up on it.”

“Yes, sir.” The constable saluted and turned to go.

“I’ll show you the way,” David suggested.

“No, can’t allow that,” the sergeant said firmly. There was something queer behind this. At any rate, one man was dead and he was taking no chances. “I’ll have to ask you to stay here until Constable Rankin makes his report.”

“But you don’t realize! This thing, whatever it is, is dangerous, damned dangerous. We could show—”

“No. If it’s serious, I’m going to hold you—if it’s a joke, you’re going to pay.”

The two gazed helplessly at each other, Dirk shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, all right.” David subsided on a hard bench and gazed moodily at a framed card of police regulations. “But don’t blame me for anything that may happen,” he added. “I’ve warned you.”

Constable Rankin strode unemotionally out of the station, and they heard him start up a motor cycle. The sergeant began to make laborious notes with a scratchy pen.

Three hours later, at almost two o’clock, the sergeant began to look worried. There had been ample time for a ten-mile ride and a cursory examination. He began to feel misgiving sharpening into definite apprehension. He plied the two men with a fresh batch of questions, and the answers did little to relieve his mind. Neither David nor Dirk had any doubt as to the reason for Constable Rankin’s prolonged absence, and they said as much. The thought of the man calmly walking to such a death stirred a queasiness in their stomachs.

“We’ll give him another half-hour. If he’s not back by then, we’ll go and have a look,” the sergeant said uneasily.

It was after three when they arrived, reinforced by two constables, at the spot where they must leave the car. David led the silent party through the trees. The two reserve policemen strode forward with puzzled stolidity, while the sergeant wore a look of worry which showed that his disbelief had weakened. As they came within sight of the fallen ship, he drew a whistling breath.

“Lord, what a ship—and what a crash!” he murmured. His attitude to the others underwent a subtle change as he asked: “Now, at which break did you enter?”

David pointed to the gap near the bows. “Through there,” he said, “and we began working back to the stern. The storeroom must have been about amidships.” He felt a little sick at his memory of that room. The sergeant nodded.

“You lead the way and show us exactly what happened,” he suggested.

David and Dirk both shook their heads emphatically.

“I’ll be damned if I do,” said the former. “I’ve told you how dangerous it is—and then you tell me to go ahead. That’s not good enough.”

The sergeant gave a contemptuous snort and motioned his men on. They were halfway across the clearing when there came the sound of splintering, yielding metal. The two friends looked at each other and hesitated.

“What’s that?” asked the sergeant sharply. “Somebody looting her, I’ll be bound. We’ll catch ’em in the act.”

A few yards from the break, he halted and began to give instructions in an undertone. After one sentence, he was interrupted by a further creaking and wrenching of metal plates. Then they all swung about and gazed sternward. Incredulously, they saw that the side of the ship was bulging. One of the plates of solid steelium was bending outward. Fascinated and speechless, they watched this toughest of metals bulge still farther. The sergeant gasped audibly, for he knew the well-nigh fabulous strength of the material. The rivet heads stripped off with a rattle like a monster machine gun in action, and the plate fell outside with a crash. The five men continued to stare nervously, but nothing emerged. Whatever had provided the

tremendous force behind the plate remained unseen. The sergeant pulled himself together with an effort.

“We’ll start there,” he said. “Keep close to the hull as we work up, and we’ll take them by surprise.”

David and Dirk hung back and did their best to dissuade him, but he was not to be turned off. His manner held a curtness which covered no little misgiving. The party edged along beneath the overhanging side of the ship. Eight feet from the recent hole, their fears were justified. The foremost policeman gave a sudden bellow and leaped back.

“What the—?” the sergeant began, but his words dried up and his eyes widened in astonishment. Pain was ousted momentarily by surprise even in the injured man. He stood with blood streaming from his severed wrist, gaping inanely at his lost hand as it floated slowly away in mid-air. David snatched a handkerchief from his pocket and sprang forward to make a tourniquet. The sergeant recovered rapidly from his first shock, hesitated and seemed about to advance.

“Don’t be a fool,” said Dirk, gripping his arm. “It’ll get you, too.”

The other retreated a pace, his eyes still fixed on the moving hand. Without audible comment, he watched it drift into the dark opening. As he turned to the others, his face was pale.

“I’ve got to apologize to you gentlemen. I didn’t realize what you’d seen. And to think I sent poor Rankin—” He broke off at the sound of creaking metal. The plates to either side of the original hole were bending and sagging ominously. The party beat a hasty retreat, carrying the injured man now in a dead faint. In silence, they watched the contiguous steelium being torn slowly and relentlessly from its rivets until there was a hole in the *Hurakan’s* side four times as large as before.

David, at a safe distance, circled around to catch a glimpse of the interior. He was looking, he knew, at approximately the spot where Toby had met his end, but the walls of the storeroom were now reduced to so much warped and mangled metal on the floor. Of the broad wooden shelves and lockers which had lined it, there was no sign. Vaguely, he wondered what had become of them; they ought to have been lying crushed with the metal. The sergeant came up to him with all dignity cast aside. It was evident that he now felt well out of his depth.

“I’ll have to get help. Will you take a message for me to the police station? And there’s Dawkins, too,” he nodded towards the injured policeman. “He needs treatment as soon as he can get it. If you and your friend would take him in the car while we keep watch here—?”

David agreed. He waited while the sergeant scribbled a note, then he and Dirk, bearing the unconscious man between them, moved off towards the car.

At five o’clock, after they had dropped the unfortunate Dawkins at the hospital and had reinforced themselves with a good meal, they returned to find that the force of police at the *Hurakan* had been considerably augmented. The sergeant greeted them with undisguised gloom. He pointed out that the hole was much enlarged and that further plates had been wrenched off in other parts.

“Hanged if I know what to do,” he admitted. “The inspector ought to be along any time now, thank the Lord. Though I don’t know what he’ll be able to do about it either. Just look at this.”

He picked up a stout branch some three inches in section, and holding it extended before him, advanced cautiously towards the gaping hole. A six-inch length was cleft away with a

crunch. He retreated hurriedly and came back pointing to deep, gouged grooves in the wood.

“Teeth,” he said, “not a doubt.”

David nodded. It reminded him unpleasantly of Toby’s shoulder. He looked quickly back at the ship and remarked on the number of fresh breaches in her sides.

“And that’s not all.” The sergeant indicated a small bush which grew four or five yards away from the ship. “Watch that,” he said.

The bush was cracking and bending towards them beneath invisible pressure. It gave way as they looked and was crushed into a mass. Then it lifted slightly above the ground and began to drift in the wake of the piece of branch on a slow journey to the ship.

“It’s big and it’s advancing,” added the policeman. He picked up a stone and tossed it high into the air. Its curving flight towards the hull was uncannily interrupted. It hung for a moment before rolling a yard down and sideways. Then it rested, to all appearances unsupported and stationary save for a slight, pulsating rise and fall. All the watching men felt a touch of that trepidation which is bred by the incomprehensible.

A startling shriek from the other side of the ship stung them into action. They rounded the stern to collide with a group of men and women travelling at a surprising speed.

“What’s wrong here?” the sergeant demanded.

One of the men pointed behind him and shouted something unintelligible as he ran on.

“Damned sightseers,” puffed the sergeant. “Just as well they’re scared. Can’t they run, though?”

With a full view of the other side, they stopped. The reason for the runners’ panic became plain. One sightseer would pry no more. His body, in dismembered sections, was drifting towards the ship.

David looked at Dirk and then turned to the other. He was feeling sick with the sights of the day and suggested that they might be allowed to leave. The sergeant nodded.

“Yes. It wouldn’t do me much good to keep you here now, but I’d like you to be handy tomorrow—the inspector may want to have a word with you both.” He produced a large handkerchief and mopped his face. “That is,” he added, “if the inspector ever turns up.”

CHAPTER III

Plans to Destroy the Menace

•The two succeeded in finding a passable hotel in Clidoe, and returned the next morning to find that the inspector had at last arrived and taken command. Little had been possible during the night beyond the posting of guards to warn off the curious, but with daylight, a phase of activity had set in. A judicious tossing of stones had determined roughly the extent of the danger area, and it had become apparent that it now extended all about the ship in an approximate oval. The actual verge, however, was by no means regular, since here and there invisible extensions projected three or four feet in advance of the main substance. Rows of sticks planted at regular intervals had enabled the average speed of advance to be estimated at something over a yard an hour. The sergeant, again on the scene, greeted them and expressed his doubts of the value of this calculation.

“It may be,” he pointed out, “that this is not an advance at all, as they mean it, but merely the normal rate of growth.”

“God forbid,” said David fervently.

“What scientists have they got on the job?” asked Dirk.

“None. They reckoned they could tackle this thing all right without them—it’d mean extra expense to bring them along.”

Dirk grunted. “Probably save you expense in the end,” he grunted.

They looked out across the clearing. Save for the increased number of holes in her sides, the *Hurakan* looked just as they had first seen her the previous day. The sunlight bathed her, glittering in sparkling flashes from her polished plates. To all appearances, there was nothing amiss between her and them; nothing to stop one from walking right up to her and entering. Staring intently, one could fancy, perhaps, the slightest haze about her, something more tenuous than rising heat, but enough to make the edges not quite sharp. Nevertheless, David realized, that unwarned, he would have walked right into the invisible trap without a suspicion. With the handing of his duties to the inspector, the sergeant’s spirits had become more normal. The other had taken over without enthusiasm, and was now a troubled man. He nodded in a depressed way to David and Dirk as they were brought up and asked a few questions in a tone which showed that he expected little help from them. A few minutes later, a man in military uniform strolled across from the protecting cordon and introduced himself. He was, it seemed, a Captain Forbes and not displeased with the fact. He gazed across at the *Hurakan* in a bored style, and his manner was a blend of faint amusement and superiority. He spoke of his commander who had sent him, but had given no reason.

“Well, Inspector,” he said, “you’ve certainly managed to stir up our people—they’ve sent me along to reinforce you with a party of men and a machine gun. What’s it all about?”

The sergeant explained the situation again, and the inspector, though he had heard it before, listened to his subordinate with an expression of increasing anxiety. At the end of the report and David’s description of Toby’s end, he nodded slowly and gazed thoughtfully towards the ship.

“As we have no more evidence to go on, we must conclude that the crash killed all aboard and unfortunately set free some specimen they were bringing home with them. It’s the only

way to account for this thing. You concluded from the charts you saw that the ship had been outside the solar system.”

“They seemed to prove that it had been to the Procyon system. Besides, I happen to know that the ship was built with the intention of exploring free space,” David replied. The sergeant broke in:

“That’s right, sir. A message to that effect came through this morning.”

The inspector’s eyes narrowed. There were queer enough things within the solar system—heaven alone knew what monstrosities might exist beyond it. Captain Forbes, with a scepticism born of little imagination, broke in:

“But all this sounds absurd. What do you reckon the thing is?”

David disclaimed all pretense of knowledge, but suggested that it was some kind of animal—it might equally well be a plant, he admitted, but he thought not.

Captain Forbes smiled with a kindly tolerance, lit a cigarette, and began to saunter towards the ship. Dirk caught him by the arm.

“Don’t be a fool. I don’t blame you for not believing us, but take a look at this.”

He caught up the branch which the sergeant had dropped on the previous day, and exhibited the teeth marks. The captain examined them with close attention. He lost his ambition to advance at the moment. The inspector turned to David.

“You’ve thought of no way of tackling this thing?”

David shook his head. Dirk chimed in: “I’ve thought of one thing which may or may not be important.”

“And that is?”

“To prevent it from reaching the trees, if possible. You notice that it has consumed all the wood it has found. That may be merely a method of removing obstruction, but I doubt it: it didn’t deal with the metal that way. I shouldn’t be surprised to find that it feeds on wood.”

With his eye, the inspector measured the distance between the wreck and the trees—a quarter was already covered in the majority of places. Captain Forbes fidgeted impatiently.

“Look here, Inspector, I know this is your show, but what about letting me try my machine gun on the thing—that’ll tear it to bits.”

The other hesitated and then agreed. He had little faith in the power of a machine gun against the creature, but no harm seemed likely to result. As the captain strolled off, a thought struck him, and he scribbled a few words on a piece of paper which he handed to a near-by constable with instructions to hurry.

A puzzled-looking party of machine gunners arrived and was steered into position a few yards from the danger line. When it was explained that they were to set up their weapon at this spot, they appeared at first resentful and then amused. They planted the gun with the air of men who humored the half-witted.

“Bit o’ target practice—only there ain’t no target,” muttered one of them.

The gunner settled himself.

“What do we aim for, sir?”

“Just aim straight ahead.”

The man shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly and drummed a short burst. The crew gasped audibly. Each bullet had uncannily mushroomed out and now hung, a splotch of lead, in mid-air.

“Say, I don’t get this,” one of them muttered nervously. “What the hell is it, anyway?”

The gun choked out another rattling burst with identical results. David shot a sidelong glance at the captain; the expression of the latter was highly gratifying. The gunner turned an astonished face.

“Any more, sir?” he inquired.

“Look out,” shouted David. The blobs of lead had risen and surged forward. The gun crew, now thoroughly rattled, jumped back. One man tripped over the tripod and fell. There came a crunching sound followed by a cry of agony—the man’s boot, with his foot still inside, began to move slowly away. His companions turned and dragged him back.

Captain Forbes’s face turned a peculiar color as he stared foolishly at the severed boot. For the first time, it seemed to dawn on him that the affair was not a hoax, after all.

“Well, your machine gun hasn’t cut much ice,” commented the inspector unkindly. “When they bring the stuff I’ve sent for, we’ll try another trick.”

They were forced to wait for half an hour before a small party appeared carrying a bulky object which a closer view revealed to be a bale of cotton waste. Behind them followed two more men carrying gasoline cans.

“Soak the stuff,” directed the inspector as they lowered it. “Pour the lot over it—and get some long poles.”

The lighted bale flared furiously. Four men approached and began to lever it forward with the poles while the rest stood intently awaiting the outcome.

“If it’s a success, we’ll get some flame throwers,” the inspector was saying.

The bale came to an abrupt stop as it met the unseen barrier. It rested there, flaming smokily.

“Push again!”

The obstruction had withdrawn and the bale was able to advance a full turn before the next check. The sergeant showed what for him was unusual excitement.

“Bit hot for it,” he gloated. “We’ve got it moving now.”

But he was too optimistic. Just as the poles came forward for a further thrust, there came a thud which shook the ground. The flames were snuffed out and nothing but a charred smear remained of the flattened bale. The pole-holders speedily retreated.

“Damned if it hasn’t jumped on it,” snorted the sergeant indignantly.

The inspector pushed back his cap and scratched his head. His expression, as he gazed towards the *Hurakan*, was one of utter loss. Captain Forbes was no less taken aback, but after a few minutes’ thought, he broke into a smile. He stepped closer to the inspector and made a suggestion. The other looked doubtful.

“I’ll have to get permission,” he demurred. “After all, someone owns the ship.”

“They won’t mind when they understand the danger. Much better destroy the ship than let this thing grow.”

“How long will you take?”

Captain Forbes considered. “Till tomorrow morning.”

The inspector nodded. The plan seemed sound. Nevertheless, he glanced uneasily at the line of measuring sticks. The danger area would be close to the trees by the next morning. The captain saw his look, and interpreted it rightly.

“I know you’d like to tackle the thing now, but what can we do?”

Dirk, who had watched the last two attacks on the creature without comment, walked over to them. The inspector’s attempts to come to grips with the danger seemed to him childish and

highly unscientific. He was reminded of some boys he had once seen poking a sleepy lion with sticks—but there was a difference, for the boys had been able to rely upon the protection of the bars. Now Captain Forbes had succeeded in producing something which was probably another hair-brained scheme.

“Why not get some biologists on the job?” he suggested.

The captain did not receive the remark kindly. There was no reason that he could see why a terrestrial biologist should be an authority on a form of life imported from the Procyon system—if, indeed, it had come from there. Moreover, he pointed out that you did not call in a biologist when you wanted to destroy even an earthly wild animal. Dirk was curt.

“That’s just what you should do. After all, it was the biologists who destroyed the pests in Panama and similar unhealthy spots. For all you know, you may be fooling around right now with a barrel of high explosives. Just suppose the creature had been inflammable—as it might easily have been—you’d have started a fire which would have spread for miles.”

“You are not a biologist yourself?” asked the captain coldly.

“I am not.”

“Then I’ll thank you not to interfere. Further, I will remind you that you have no standing here.”

The inspector, less sure of himself, made to interrupt, but changed his mind. He did not feel a great deal of confidence in the captain, but he sympathized with his resentment. Dirk’s face went red with anger.

“While you’re playing around, this thing is growing. If it gets right out of hand, Lord knows what may happen—and the responsibility for it will be yours.”

“That being so, will you please refrain from further comment? Since you seem to have no constructive help to offer, I see no reason for you to remain here.”

Dirk checked the retort which occurred to him. He turned on his heel and strode angrily away into the trees.

“Damned meddler,” muttered the captain as he watched him go. Turning back to the inspector, he added: “If we are to be ready by tomorrow morning, I’ll need to get busy immediately.”

CHAPTER IV

Exploding the Invisible Monster

•Dirk did not return to the hotel, nor did he leave any message. David was scarcely surprised, for Dirk was not one of those to take rebuke easily—the less so when it was scarcely merited. In consequence, he made a solitary breakfast the next morning. There was no mention of the *Hurakan* affair in any of the newspapers. He had expected headlines in elephantine type, but repeated search failed to reveal even a paragraph on the subject. It was the more perplexing since the ship had now lain on the hillside three nights and two days. On his way to the scene, he stopped at the police station and picked up the sergeant.

“What’s happened to the journalists?” he asked as they started. “This ought to be a Godsend to them.”

“It was, but we shut down on them.”

“That’s a notable achievement—but why?”

“They were going to spread themselves over pages, and there’d have been day trips running by this time and—well, you remember that sensation seeker the other day. He got his, all right.” After a pause, he continued: “There are going to be some fireworks today and we want the place clear.”

They approached the wreck to find that the danger area had shown greater increase than had been expected. Only a narrow margin of safety of a few yards’ breadth now lay between it and the trees. The inspector and Captain Forbes looked up to greet them and then returned to the study of an enlarged photograph. David gave an exclamation of surprise and the captain grinned.

“Good, isn’t it? Just been delivered.”

“But how on earth—?”

“Bit of brainy work up at the Flying Field. They sent a plane over yesterday and fired off a few feet of film—naturally, there wasn’t a sign of the thing when they developed. Then some bright lad had the idea of rigging up an intra-red camera and sent it over. Here’s the result.”

The print showed the site of the *Hurakan* and the immediate neighborhood. Of the ship herself, little but the upper surface was visible, the rest being submerged in a dark area which extended all about her. At the first glance, this shadow appeared to be a smooth oval, but a closer view revealed that the edge was serrated into a series of blunt projections. David found it disappointing and said so.

“Can’t tell much from that,” he murmured. “I mean, it still doesn’t show us whether we are dealing with a single creature or a mass of the brutes.”

“Anyway, I’m certain that it is animal and not vegetable,” rejoined the inspector. “—And that’s not really so strange when you come to think of it. After all, it’s not a very great step from the transparent living things we have on earth, to a creature of complete invisibility. Did you notice that everything that it has snapped up travelled right into the ship? I have an idea that we shall find it to be one individual with multiple throats and a central stomach somewhere in the *Hurakan*. In fact, Captain Forbes’ plan is really built upon that idea.”

“What is the plan?”

The inspector explained. It had been calculated that any object snatched by the invisible creature would require—at its present size—just over two minutes to travel into the ship. A

number of bombs had been constructed and equipped with timing devices to give a further half minute's grace. They had then been placed in wooden cases to make them palatable to the creature, and he had every hope that the simultaneous explosion of this indigestible meal would settle the matter. It entailed, of course, the annihilation of the ill-fated *Hurakan*, but she could now be of little value.

"Why not detonate the bombs by short waves and make certain that they coincide?" David asked.

The captain shook his head. "That was the first idea, but there's the masking effect of the metal hull to be considered and it's quite likely that the body of the creature may act in some degree as a shield. The timing method seems more certain."

David stood back and watched the preparations. Forty or fifty men had been assembled, and the captain was instructing them in their duties. The sergeant came to his side and chatted. He seemed to have no great faith in the plan, and concluded with the opinion that they had better look for cover if they did not wish to be blown to pieces themselves. David recalled seeing a disused hut which would be ideal for the purpose, since it stood back in the woods a hundred yards from the main clearing. He led the way around the narrow free space which still remained.

At a convenient spot, they paused to look at the deployment of the captain's troops. At regular intervals, all around the edge of the clearing, men were taking positions facing the ship. At a glance, it seemed impossible that there could be any danger lurking in that sunlit space—it still appeared that one might walk right up to the *Hurakan's* glittering sides and encounter no more obstacle than the empty air. Each of the encircling men held a pole in his right hand, on the end of which was mounted the wood-cased bomb. In his left hand was a string attached to the pin. One or two of them were noticeably nervous, and others seemed to regard the whole affair in the light of a joke. The majority waited phlegmatically for the signal.

At the sound of three sharp whistle blasts, each pole bearer snapped into sudden action. The weapons were tilted horizontally, the left hands tugging smartly at the strings, and the pins fell free. The cordon closed with levelled staves in the manner of old-time pikemen.

They took three paces, and then a sharp crackling ran around the line. The bulbous wooden heads were snapped away to begin their slow journey to the wreck. The men of the cordon sprinted for cover, dropping their shortened poles as they went. For a full half minute, David and the sergeant continued to watch the uncanny progress of the flock of destructive balls, slowly and silently converging. Then, they, too, thought of shelter and made for the hut.

The meagre light from two grimy windows enabled David to inspect the place. Such furnishings as had occupied it had long since been removed. Only a few sagging shelves were left; a broken ax-haft and remnants of other tools lay about with a few dribbled paint cans and other rubbish not worth the labor of removal. He sat himself down on a pile of leaves in one corner. The sergeant came and joined him. Their heads bent together over a large, business-like watch of the latter's.

"Still a minute to go."

As if in prompt contradiction, came a muffled double thud, quickly followed by a third. The sergeant shook a disapproving head. Bad workmanship—luckily it didn't matter a great deal in the present circumstances. Increasingly tense, they watched the second hand crawling

towards the main burst. It came fifteen seconds before it was due. First a crash, and then, right on top of it, a stunning roar as though the premature explosion of one bomb had fired the rest.

Instinctively, they clapped their hands over their ears while great waves of sound sent the windows tumbling into fragments. They were battered and swirled around as the aerial breakers surged over them. A patter of scattered debris rained overhead. A violent thud caused the entire structure to tremble. Dislodged dirt rattled down, and closely following it, came the slither of something falling from the sloping roof. It landed with a soggy thump outside the door.

CHAPTER V

“There Must Be Dozens—”

•David grinned. “I’ll bet that was a part of the brute,” he said with satisfaction. “If it gets over that little meal, it’ll—”

He stopped suddenly. Somewhere near at hand had risen a scream of fear; a scream mounting in agony till it stopped with a suggestive suddenness. The two looked at each other in consternation. That scream could only mean one thing—something had gone wrong and the danger was not past. The sergeant opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by another tearing scream, closer than the first. For some minutes after that, the air rang with anguished cries. David clapped his hands back over his ears to shut out the sounds of torment. He darted a glance at the sergeant, and could see that his face was pale and grimly strained; he was rising in the manner of one who feels that he should act, but does not know what course to take. He stepped towards the door, but David was swifter; he rushed past him and stood barring the way.

“No,” he cried. “Give me that stick first.”

Wonderingly, the other picked it up and handed it to him. David pulled the door an inch or two ajar and thrust the stick downward through the slit. There was a swift crunch and he withdrew it, appreciably shorter.

“You see?” He pointed to the unmistakable marks of teeth at the end.

The sergeant took it from him, and then he, too, thrust it at the crack—higher up than before. He struck smartly downwards. Two feet from the ground, it hit an obstruction and broke off short in his hand. He looked at David.

“We could easily jump over it,” he suggested.

“And land on another one, perhaps.” David shook his head and paused for a moment before adding: “Now we’re in a hell of a mess. That bomb idea was a complete flop—the danger’s been scattered all over the place.”

Another cry of pain came from the surrounding trees. A rattle of rapid fire began in the distance. A moment later a section of the door’s bottom edge snapped off and began to float away. Hastily, they slammed it shut and slid the bolt.

“We’ll have to get out of here pretty soon,” muttered the sergeant.

They gazed speculatively out of the shattered windows. The sunlight filtered down through branches to fall on ground which *looked* bare, but . . . David turned his attention to the cobwebby space overhead. Safety, for a while at least, seemed to lie up there. With the other’s help, he grasped a roof truss and swung himself up. The boarding proved to be in very bad condition, so that he was able, by standing on the beam, to kick a hole through the rotting roof. Shortly afterwards, the two men sat side by side on the coping, staring through the deserted wood. There was not a man in sight. Far away to the right they could still hear spasmodic shooting and an occasional cry. David gave a hail, but it brought no answer—there had been too many cries. The firing was slackening now, and he wondered whether the fact indicated escape or defeat.

“I guess we’ll have to stay here till somebody turns up,” he said at length.

The other did not answer; he was staring in fascination at a patch of open ground. Its whole surface appeared to be in motion. Drifting streams of sticks and chips of wood were

oozing to several centers. David looked about hastily, and observed the same seeping movement in a number of places.

“There must be dozens of them.”

The sergeant nodded. “And we’re in the middle,” he added. “It all comes of this galling about. I never did think much of it. Stick to your own planet, is what I say; it’s large enough. But will they? Not so you would notice it. They go flinging themselves about the sky, and then what happens?” He paused aggrievedly. “First they crash on the moon, and then when they improve their machines, they go falling into the sun. Nobody minded them doing that so much, ’cept that it was expensive. But they’re not content with that. No, they have to go and bring back that Venus weed that exuded bad gases, and no sooner have we stamped that out than we’ve got to face the blue plague from Mars—Lord knows how many millions went down with that—and now they go out of the system altogether and bring back this blasted thing from Procyon—wherever that it. Damn’ silly, ain’t it?”

In their present predicament, David felt inclined to overlook the wealth and amenities which had accrued from interplanetary commerce and agree with the sergeant.

“If we could only see the thing, we might be able to do something,” grumbled the latter.

An idea struck David, and he swung himself back through the hole in the roof. As he searched through the accumulated rubbish, he noticed that a quarter of the door had already gone. An exclamation of satisfaction told the sergeant that he had made a find.

“What is it?”

There was no answer for a while. Finally he said: “Can you see the door from there?”

The sergeant found that by craning over to the limit, this was just possible. David’s head and shoulders appeared through the empty window frame alongside the door. His hand held a battered can of red paint which he proceeded to pour out. Instead of leaching the ground, it threw the shape which lay there into visibility. It was a mere miniature, but, even so, it was a far more alarming object than the aerial photograph had suggested.

The main mass of the creature was hemispherical with the flat side resting on the ground. The domed top was bare and smooth to more than halfway down its side, but for the rest of the way it bristled with blunt projections. At the end of each of these was a wide mouth snapping continuously and full of sharp teeth. David concentrated on one of these “heads” and daubed it thoroughly; he noticed that, if necessary, the wide jaws were capable of opening far back like those of a serpent. It made him shudder to think of the size of the original invader of the *Hurakan*—even this little specimen was a long way from being harmless. He was able now to see the way in which the mouths wrenched lumps of wood from the door, bolting them whole in the same way that Toby’s leg had been bolted. Repulsive as the creature was, it became less perturbingly uncanny than had been the sight of the objects drifting down its unseen throat. David even felt slightly heartened—one could at least fight a visible enemy. He slopped his paint this way and that to detect the presence of any other. Only one was within his range, and the section which was revealed showed it to be even smaller than the first, but, despite its mere nine-inch diameter, the many mouths snapped no less ferociously. As he leaned yet farther out, a cascade of dirt rattled past his head.

“Hi,” called the sergeant’s voice in some agitation, “there’s one of the darned things up here.”

CHAPTER VI

Invisible No Longer

•David scrambled back to the roof, the paint can, which was his only weapon, still in his hand. The sergeant was staring and pointing towards a spot near the center of the coping. Already, the supports had been laid bare, and a piece of wood was rising into the air. His pot was almost empty, but he flung the last few drops at the place. They were enough to reveal two or three pairs of snapping jaws. The creature was not only on the roof with them, but it was gnawing away at the supports. He threw the useless can away and looked around.

Branches thrust themselves against the end wall of the hut. It would be a fair jump to the tree trunk. He looked at the other doubtfully. The policeman grinned as he saw that look.

“Used to do a bit of jumping in the old days, and I’m still good for that distance,” he said.

He led the way to the end, scrambling astride the gable. There was need of hurry, for the whole roof would collapse the moment the creature began seriously on the main tie-beam. He stood there poised on the extreme gable end, steadying himself with a hand on David’s shoulder. He launched with a powerful leap well into the branches.

“Good. Now climb up a bit and I’ll come over.”

He felt his right foot slip as he took off, and heard the sergeant’s startled cry. Desperately, he grappled at the branches, only to feel them snap beneath his weight. Something sluggishly yielding broke his fall. Like a flash he hurled himself to one side and rolled. Even as he went, he heard the tearing sound of fragments of his coat ripping away. The sergeant’s voice called after him hoarsely.

David sat up, and in that momentary rush of elation which follows a narrow escape, grinned up at him.

“I fell on one of ’em,” he announced. “What do you know about that?”

“Fell on it?”

“I did, and it’s a lucky thing for me that it hasn’t got teeth on top. It was right under the tree, and—”

He stopped suddenly as he noticed that the creature was eating into the tree trunk. It was not big, he judged, for the floating chunks of wood were no larger than lumps of sugar, nevertheless, the tree was slowly but surely being undercut.

The other had started to descend, but he called to him to stop. With a stick dropped by one of the retreating bombers, he thrashed furiously at the invisible feeder. There was no apparent effect; the wood chips continued to flow neither slower nor faster than before. David calmed himself. At the present rate it would be some time before the tree fell—that was, if the food did not cause the animal to grow. With a swift inspiration, he thrust a broken branch into the undercut so that it must be gnawed through before the trunk could be continued. Behind him, the roof of the hut collapsed with a startling crash.

“Not much too soon,” he muttered as he watched the rising cloud of dust.

“Look here,” objected the sergeant, “I can’t stay up here forever.”

“Why not? It’s the safest place.”

Another smashing thud caused him to jump around. Less than forty feet away, a tall tree had toppled and fallen. It became uncomfortably clear to both of them that this was not a safe

place after all. The sergeant's perch was overtopped by trees on all sides, many of them already showing deep cuts. Any one of them falling in his direction would certainly sweep him down. He began to descend hastily.

"Wait a minute. You can't come down the trunk."

Cautiously testing the way before him with his stick, David made for a spot beneath the lowest spreading bough. He thrust all around and ascertained that the ground was indeed as empty as it looked.

"All clear here, you can drop." The sergeant obediently landed beside him. "Now we've got to get clear of this place at once. The best way will be—Good God, what's that?"

There was no need to ask. A crackle of snapping sticks was followed by a swashy thud almost beside them. One of the creatures, caught in the higher branches, had succeeded in eating away its own supports.

They backed away in haste. The sergeant pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his damp brow.

"Like a doggone nightmare," he mumbled, looking nervously around and above. "That was a near thing. I don't get this at all. The inspector said there was only one of the brutes."

"Did he? Well, he was wrong. So was Captain Forbes. Dirk was the only one of us who had any sense—he cleared off. And that's just what we are going to do now, if we can."

They began a slow journey. Every foot of the ground had to be tested with sticks which they waved before them like the feelers of some giant insect. Frequently, they cast anxious glances upwards for fear of another falling creature, or of the trees themselves. An hour and a half of such progress found them more nervy and jumpy than ever. Each had discarded several sticks worn down by constant snapping, and so far, they had encountered no sign of any other survivors. The sergeant paused and wiped his forehead again.

"We must get clear of 'em soon," he said, without a great deal of conviction.

"I think there are less of them now," said David, "but they're bigger. They've been growing hard all the time we've been getting here. Come on."

Five minutes later there came a snap which removed a ten-inch length of David's stick. He recoiled. So large a bite proclaimed it as a monster which should be given a wide berth. They started beating around to one side without any success, and then tried the other. The way ahead proved to be completely blocked by a semi-circle of the snapping invisibles. The only thing left to do was to retrace their steps and detour around the spot. They turned back by common consent and began to trace the path with waving sticks. The sergeant was in the lead, and he knew that they had an almost straight track for some yards. He was the more surprised, therefore, when he encountered an obstacle straight ahead. He grunted and tried either side in vain. The two looked at each other. "We found a way in, so there must be a way out," David said desperately.

If there was, they both failed to find it. The circle about them seemed complete.

"Listen!" said the sergeant.

For half an hour they had been penned in the diminishing circle, and lusty hails from both had failed to produce any result. Save for the invisible monsters, they might have been alone in the world. Faintly, out of the silence came an unmistakable "Hullo?" Both replied with full lung power.

"Coming," the voice sang back. "Stay where you are."

Any other course being impossible, David replied with instructions to hurry. But it took another fifteen minutes before they saw the owner of the voice cautiously approaching.

He was a small young man with large glasses and he whistled cheerfully. One hand waved a long, metal rod before him; beneath the other arm he clutched a bundle of thin sticks, each tipped with a white knob.

“Hullo. What’s wrong with you two?” he asked.

“Surrounded,” answered David curtly. The casual air of the newcomer irritated him considerably.

“Uncomfortable,” commented the young man. “Never mind. We’ll soon have you out of that.”

He thrust with his rod until he encountered the snapping barrier. Snatching a stick from his bundle, he held out the knobbed end. Immediately it had been broken off, he held out other little sticks to left and right to suffer the same fate.

“Who are you?” he asked. The sergeant told him.

“They thought you were done for,” he said, pointing back over his shoulder. “Most of your lot were.”

Curiosity got the better of David’s disapproval of the nonchalant young man.

“What are you doing? Poisoning them?”

“No, we haven’t found a suitable poison for them yet. Watch.”

He pointed to the recently swallowed white knob and they saw that it had turned to a bright blue.

“Methylene blue wrapped in soluble paper,” he explained. “Away goes the paper and, presto, visibility. My boss, Cadnam, the biologist, had some hundreds of these pills made up. A man called Dirk Robbins came to him in a fearful state yesterday. Cadnam saw that we’d have to make the brute visible before anything else could be done.”

“Good old Dirk,” said David.

The other nodded. “He had a bit more sense than the rest of you,” he said ungracefully. “Unfortunately, by the time we got here, some fool had been playing Fourth of July inside the brute.”

The blue stain, growing less intense as it dissolved, rapidly spread throughout the creature. They could see now not only the domed outline which they had expected, but could look right into it as though it were a stained specimen on a slide. It became easy to trace the many throats to their common stomach and also to observe a kind of vascular system. At the root of each of the many “heads,” a kind of valve could be seen rhythmically contracting and expanding. The young man pointed to one of these organs and shook his head.

“That’s what caused most of the trouble,” he explained. Neither David nor the sergeant felt in the mood for a lecture. More than four feet of the creature blocked their way to freedom, and visibility had not interfered in the least with its appetite. They said as much.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said the young man cheerfully. He drew a rapier-like instrument from among his bundle of sticks and set himself to piercing the contractile organs with care and accuracy. As he worked, he continued to explain: “A very interesting arrangement, not unlike a heart—but the thing only needs one heart really, and it’s got scores. It’s a kind of composite animal, and when it was blown to bits, every part with a pulse like that became a separate individual. It quickly reformed and began to live on its own. When two of them press closely together, they merge again—I expect that that’s how you got surrounded. A very

primitive form, really. So far as we know at present, the only way of killing them seems to be to put every pulse out of action—as long as there's one left going, it can rebuild itself.”

When he had finished off all the heads he could reach from his side, he tossed the spike over to David. After a few minutes work, the erstwhile danger became no more than an inert lump of bluish jelly over which they could climb.

“Thank God for that,” said David as they reached the far side in safety. The sergeant grunted and mopped his brow again.

The young man led them back over the way he had come.

“What about the original creature? Was that entirely shattered?” David asked.

“Most of it was, but it's building up again. However, we'll be able to deal with it, now that we can see it. Even I felt it was a bit creepy, at first. Transparency is one thing—invisibility, quite another.”

They came at length to irregular rows of the creatures, already stained. They were still gnawing the trees, but seemed almost harmless when deprived of their armor of invisibility. In the distance was a group of men diligently disposing of the monsters with sharp probes. The young man bade them good-bye.

“Keep straight ahead,” he directed, “It's clear there. And it would please me if you would tell Captain Forbes what I think of him, when you see him.”

“He's safe?”

“Sure to be. That kind always comes out of it all right.”

He was correct. When they reached a group which seemed to be at the center of operations, the captain was amongst it. He seemed to be explaining that the failure of his attack was due to the premature explosion of two of the bombs. Dirk detached himself from the others and greeted them heartily.

“Let's clear out,” he said a few minutes later. “The gallant captain now has a theory that it would be quicker to gas the brutes. We'll be safer a few miles away.”

And so ended the menace of the Invisible Monsters.

THE END

[The end of *Invisible Monsters* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]