

FUTURE FICTION

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UNIVERSE IN DARKNESS

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NOVEMBER

FUTURE FICTION



PAUL

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THE ONSLAUGHT FROM BELOW

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym John Cotton.

First published *Future Fiction*, November 1940.

What mind could conceive these alien beings from the fires of earth's core who followed Alan Shay into a world inimical to them . . . to steal a six-inch figurine of a man?

Alan Shay halted the car in front of the Dexter's summer cabin, and breathed a sigh of relief at the memory of the winding Black Hills road. He got out, stretched, and placed a cigaret between his lips. There was time, though the sun was low in the west, for one relaxing smoke before unpacking his vacation equipment and taking possession of the borrowed cabin.

He thumbed the match head, then froze. He listened intently. He had heard a choking sob.

He heard the wracking sound again. Someone inside the cabin weeping, sobbing with harsh abandon. The match flame burned his fingers. Cursing softly, he dropped the bit of charred wood and started quietly toward the door.

A smashed padlock lay on the step, but the door was closed. His foot slipped and he stepped aside to regain his balance. He waited breathlessly. Had the weeper heard the slight sound?

Then he heard the hopeless crying again. He breathed easier and looked down to see what had come so near revealing his presence. An odd gully about four inches in depth and six in width extended from the step, across the drive, and disappeared in the shadows of the pines. Shay stared down at it, and felt a queer chill. It was smooth-sided—artificial. It looked like a trail of some strange beast.

He heard the mournful sound from the cabin again and went silently to the door. It gave easily, soundlessly. The room was in darkness, but he made out a huddled form in the middle of the room. Whoever it was must not have heard him for it neither ceased weeping, nor looked up. But remained motionless except for the wracking sobs, crouching miserably over something it held close.

Shay stepped noiselessly into the room, then to one side so that he wouldn't be outlined in the doorway. He waited without speaking. The skin of his neck chilled and felt as though it had crinkled into gooseflesh. Slowly his eyes became accustomed to the gloom and he saw that the mourner was a woman. A young woman, he thought, though the thick dark hair streaming in tumbled disarray effectually concealed her face.

There was a moment of doubt, then he stepped forward.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly.

The woman started violently and looked up, eyes distended with fear. Then, slowly, the fear left. Sorrow again twisted her youthful features and she caught and held her lower lip between her teeth as tears ran down her cheeks. But she said nothing.

"I'd like to help you," Shay said gently and waited for her to answer.

But she only stared at him and wept.

“Won’t you tell me what is wrong?”

“M-My f-father—” she choked, and could say no more.

He waited a moment for her to continue, then saw that she would not be able. Hunting accident, he thought. He looked at the object she was holding so tightly to her breast. It was small and black.

“What is that?” he asked with the notion of getting her to talk of something else.

“My-f-father—” she wept and lifted the object from her breast so he could see that it was a black figurine, a tiny statuette not more than six inches in height. It seemed to be a representation of a man, but it was so dark in the cabin that he could not tell for sure.

He stepped to the table, lighted the lantern, then turned to look again. He gasped, and stooped to peer closer. It was exquisitely done—a tiny black figure of a man. But the pose was indescribably horrible. It was fear! . . . greater fear than Shay had ever thought possible. The tiny figurine was that of a crouching man, turned half-away, with one arm raised to ward off some terror. The teeth were bared, eyes horribly distended, and face rigid with fear of some inescapable menace.

“God! Whose is it?” he whispered.

“M-My father—”

“Then your father is a great artist,” Shay said sincerely. “What is his name? That’s the best work I’ve ever seen. A person would swear that it was alive!”

A shrill chattering of mad, hysterical laughter escaped her lips; she was laughing uncontrollably while tears streamed from her eyes.

“*This is my father,*” she shrieked.

Shay straightened and stepped back. Mad, he thought. And he determined to take her to the nearest town where she could have medical care.

He sat down and talked to her, rambling quietly on any subject that came to mind. And at last he saw that she had quieted and was listening, though choking sobs still wracked her slender body. She hugged the figurine tight to her breast and looked at him as though she heard his voice but not the words.

Then he asked her to come to him, and she didn’t answer. He helped her rise to her feet. She would not release her hold on the figurine and he saw that when she walked she carried it as though it were much too heavy for her slender strength. She staggered, and leaned heavily on his arm. He was forced to brace himself against her weight. He looked at her with surprise.

He helped her to the car, saw that she was comfortably seated—and still she clung to the statuette. He went around the car and seated himself behind the wheel. With a faint smile he realized that he hadn’t yet had his smoke. He had lost the cigaret somewhere, too. He took another from the pack, and offered one to the girl. She didn’t seem to notice. He shrugged and returned the pack to his pocket.

He breathed the smoke deep, then turned on the ignition and stepped on the starter. The motor started instantly.

“What is your name?” he asked.

Before she could even show that she might have heard, there was a heavy-toned rumbling that seemed to come from far below the surface of the earth, and the car swayed violently.

“Earthquake!” he cried, then threw his arm around the girl to prevent her getting out of the car.

She was screaming. She had opened the door. And she fought to free herself from his arm. Alan Shay thought of the fear personified by the tiny figurine she still clutched to her breast.

The rumbling grew louder. It seemed to be coming closer. The springs of the car creaked with the jolting strain. The sound was like that of an approaching avalanche. The girl's fearful screaming was drowned by its thunder, though Shay knew that she still screamed.

Suddenly the great pines at the side of the clearing around the house swayed violently—twisted like tortured things; and toppled. And in their place was a blazing amber dome that bobbed up and down in the solid earth like an air-filled ball in water. And Shay suddenly felt sure that the dome was only the upper part of a great globe.

As it bobbed, the harsh rumbling waxed and waned. The strange amber-colored dome was hot. Even inside the car Shay could feel the heat irradiated. And Shay began to feel the freezing coldness of fear like that shown by the statuette. Wildly, he imagined that the globe was a malignant monster; that it was seeking them.

He feared that it would hear the girl's screaming. He clapped his hand over her mouth with brutal strength. The amber globe moved, parting the solid earth as a blunt prowed vessel might plow through water, or a free balloon part a visible air.

Shay reached frantically for the gear lever, stepped on the gas. The engine raced madly as the car skidded in low gear around the half-circle necessary to get on the drive leading to the public road. The automobile bounced over the trembling road, the door swinging wide.

He released the girl, pulled the door shut, and shifted gears rapidly. Then he sped recklessly over the rough drive. The girl cowered, hugging the tiny statuette. She was talking, mumbling to herself. And Shay heard. She was repeating a few words over and over:

“It's father they want! It's father they want!”

Only when they reached the public road did Shay glance back. The cabin was gone; in its place was a heap of shattered wreckage. And a trail of fallen pines led his eyes to where the globe moved majestically through the earth. As he looked, the amber globe passed into the side of the mountain and was gone from sight. But the ground still shook and the rumbling of the globe's movement was deafening.

Gradually the quaking of the earth became less, and the sound receded into a distant thunder. Shay halted the car. He looked back at the wrecked cabin, then at the girl. For a moment he thought. The globe had moved off in the same direction as the road led. They might meet it.

Then he shrugged and started the car moving. They couldn't stay here. They must go somewhere. And in the other direction the road dwindled into a mere fire-trail. They had to go on.

He drove in silence, muscles tense, eyes aching from the fixity of his stare. Wherever he looked he saw a phantom of that strange globe. It floated silently across the road, swept along ahead of them in an eery muteness that was more horrible than the grinding roar. He knew that it was only a wakeful-dream phantasy, but he could not dismiss it from his sight.

“Who are you?” asked the girl suddenly.

Shay jumped with surprise and the car veered. The tone was that of one awaking from a dream. He looked at her.

She still clung to the figurine, but her eyes were clear. And in them was the bright sparkle of intelligence.

“Alan Shay,” he replied. “And you?”

“Elsa Wallgense,” she said simply.

Shay laughed, a little discordantly. The sheer commonplaceness of their words made him drunk. It was like any ordinary pick-up.

“Don’t laugh like that,” she pleaded oddly.

Something about the intonation struck Shay as foreign. He glanced at her.

“American?” he asked.

She nodded. “Naturalized. We came from Europe a few years ago. Father teaches . . . taught at Chicago.”

Shay saw her hand tighten spasmodically on the figurine as she turned her head away. He felt a quick sympathy for her, but couldn’t find any words to express it. So, in an attempt to get her mind away from her own problems, he started to tell her of himself.

“I work for the Mountain Metals, Inc.,” he said. “I was on the end of the first day of my vacation. Caleb Dexter—he’s the chief of the research department and my boss—said I could use his cabin . . . the one we saw wrecked. Nice fellow, Dexter. They don’t come any better. He isn’t—” Shay glanced at the girl and saw that she was scarcely listening. “—at all what you’d expect one of the best scientists in the country to be. He’s quiet-speaking and never loses his temper. Harrumph!” He ceased speaking and settled down in his seat to devote his entire attention to driving.

It was a long time later that the girl spoke.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I’ll take you to Newcastle where we can find a doctor, then I’m going back to Denver. I kind of want to tell Dexter what happened and see what he makes of it. Then, of course, it was his cabin.”

She said nothing, and Shay added no more. Neither spoke until they topped the last rise in the road and looked down on the small town. Elsa straightened.

“They’ve been here!”

Shay looked down into the inky blackness where the lights of the town should have been, and felt again a chill fear. But he pushed the girl back in her seat and growled:

“Don’t be a fool!”

But when they came to the outer fringe of the town the car headlights picked out and spotlighted a scene of utter desolation. Houses were tumbled masses of wreckage. The jagged planks and boards were mixed with loose earth and great slabs of concrete from the streets. It was as though a gigantic plow had passed through and through the city.

And most horrible was the absolute silence that lay over the dead city like a shroud. There was no moaning, no wailing of injured; there were no lights of rescue parties. Alan Shay got out and went to the nearest masses of wreckage and saw neither living people nor dead bodies. He returned to the car, sick at heart. He was afraid to think.

Elsa Wallgense lay back in the seat while he turned the car to shine the lights on the roadside. She was white and faint. The strength seemed to have drained from her body. Her nerveless fingers relaxed from around the black figurine for the first time, and it slipped to the floor.

It struck heavily. There was a dull snapping. Elsa stifled a cry of dismay and stooped to retrieve the object. Then she held it in the light of the dashboard.

“It’s broken!” she cried.

Shay glanced over and saw that the figure was indeed broken. The arm that had been held up to shield the tiny man from the unknown cause of fear was gone. It was broken off at the

shoulder.

Elsa lifted the figurine to the seat between them, then stooped to retrieve the arm. Her shoulder struck the gear lever, threw the car into gear. It leaped forward. Just in time, Shay stepped on the clutch and brake.

He reached down and seized her shoulder. He forced her to sit up.

“Now, you sit still, you little fool! Do you want to wreck us?” His voice was harsh with strain and she glanced at him, then sat still. Her only movement was to reach down cautiously and tug the one-armed figurine onto her lap. Then she was motionless while Shay drove across a shallow ditch, pushed down a wooden fence, and started over the fields to get around the town and back to passable roads.

With the wheels on smooth pavement again and the wrecked town behind, Shay pressed the accelerator close to the floor. They rocketed southward through the night toward Denver, and he said nothing more about leaving Elsa with a doctor. He was no longer sure that she needed one.

It was noon when they reached Denver and Shay sped straight to the research building of Metals, Inc.—where he knew he would find Dexter. The old man met him in the doorway and his jaw sagged with surprise.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “I thought you’d be up at the cabin by this time.” Then he saw Elsa in the car. A knowing look came to his eyes and he grinned. “What is it?” he chuckled. “A honeymoon?”

“No, Doc,” said Shay. “It’s—It’s something big! God only knows how big! Do you believe there is a hell?”

Dexter rubbed his gray-stubbed chin. “Wel-ll, I’ve always gone to church pretty regular,” he started, but Shay cut him short.

“No, I’m serious, Doc! I’ve seen a great amber glowing dome that I think was the top of a globe, and it moved through *solid earth* like a fish goes through water. That must mean that it lives underground, moves underground, and can come to the surface once in a while. You know, that land used to be sacred to the Indians; they thought gods lived there.”

Dexter looked at him sharply. Shay felt like blowing in the older man’s face to let him smell his breath, but instead he called Elsa, told her to help him explain.

“Father has always been interested in subterranean things,” she said. “And when he heard about the queer noises that used to be heard in the Black Hills, we went to investigate.”

“Wait a minute,” said Dexter. “You say your name is Wallgense—Is your father’s name *Otto Wallgense*?”

Elsa nodded and gripped the figurine tighter. Dexter was impressed. He nodded for her to continue.

“Father detected a queer rhythm deep underground,” Elsa went on, “and when some company prospectors were shooting for temblor maps for oil possibilities near the Hills, the rhythm changed. Father became very excited. He said the change was an exact repetition of the prospecting blasts—he said *they were answers*!

“I thought he was mad. But he contrived a signaling device by using very small blasts in an underground chamber. And his signals were answered!

“I wanted him to quit. I begged him to! But he wouldn’t and, knowing that I disapproved, he no longer confided in me. He worked alone. I don’t know what he said to them; or what

they said to him. But they came! They destroyed our home and tried to capture us.

“Father went—went mad I think. He said they were lying to him; that he would kill them all. But he never had the chance, because one of the creatures found us after we had broken into your cabin for shelter. I was looking for food. Father was alone.

“I came back to the edge of the clearing in time to see. The—the thing lay at the foot of the step. Father had made a queer instrument out of wires and a battery and he turned it on the thing. He hurt it somehow—I know, because it writhed with pain. But it pointed a rod at Father and a red beam came from it.”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Dexter again. “You saw this thing. . . . What did it look like?”

“L—like an ugly worm, only big and round; and it had lots of tiny legs, hundreds of them.” She halted, eyes bright and wide.

“Then the globe is a machine—a kind of a boat!” said Shay, suddenly realizing what had made that queer gully in the drive. “But how do they stand the pressure, or the lack of it?”

“It had something on its back that made it glow the same as the globe.” She halted again. It was as though she feared to go on. Her fingers were white with the strength of her grip on the figurine. She held it close as though it were very precious, with body arched back as though it were very heavy.

“Go on,” Dexter urged gently. “What happened?”

“Father got smaller and smaller under the red ray—smaller and smaller—smaller and smaller!” Her voice became thin and reedy and Shay moved to her side. It was as well, for she was near collapse. She struggled to hold the figurine up so they could see. “Smaller and smaller—smaller and smaller! The thing tried to get into the cabin after him, but it was hurt. Smaller and smaller! Until this was all that was left!”

The eyes of the men went to the figurine. Shay again chilled at the abysmal fear expressed so vividly; but Dexter stepped backward as though struck. His aged face paled until he was drawn and haggard.

“What’s wrong, Doc?” demanded Shay. “It’s only a little statue.”

Dexter smiled weakly, ran his fingers through his gray hair. “Yes, yes,” he said nervously. “It’s only a little statue. But it gave me an awful start. I’ve met Wallgense several times, and I never saw such an exact likeness.”

Shay stared, opened his mouth to say something, then leaped to catch Elsa as she crumpled. The figurine struck the floor heavily.

Shay lifted Elsa in his arms as Dexter stooped to pick up the figurine. Dexter’s fingers slipped and he regarded it with surprise. Then he grasped it again and lifted. He stood, holding it with both hands. His eyes met Shay’s.

“It weighs over a hundred pounds!”

Shay said nothing, but held Elsa closer. He saw that Dexter was going to speak again and, somehow, he feared the words that might come.

Dexter spoke hoarsely. “And Wallgense was a small man. He weighed about a hundred and twenty-five.”

Suddenly there was a sound like an explosion far underground. The earth trembled. Elsa moaned and raised one hand toward her face.

The trembling of the earth grew stronger. There was a heavy-voiced roaring as though the earth were being torn asunder.

“It has come here!” Shay shouted to Dexter. “It’s following us!”

Elsa moaned again. Her eyes opened. She seemed dazed. Then she heard the roaring. Her eyes brightened with fright. She struggled to escape Shay's arms, finally succeeded and tore the figurine from Dexter's hands. She started to run, wildly, unreasoningly.

Shay leaped after her, but she was speeded by fear. She ran to the street, started to the right, then turned with a scream and ran in the other direction. Shay glanced to the right and saw the amber dome moving down the street like a great plow. Fear lent speed to his feet, too, and he overtook Elsa.

He forced her to turn off the road, out of the path of the globe. He drew her into a garden and they crouched in the concealment of the shrubbery.

They watched the globe approach swiftly, destroying the street as it came. It came abreast of them, and they crouched lower. But it stopped, remained motionless, then a part of the top of the dome slid back and a pale amber beam darted out to touch Elsa. . . . Touch her and lift her into the air. A ray of ruby-red light came out to join the other and Elsa floated toward the opening in the dome.

Shay leaped forward. The heat from the sphere dried his skin. But strangely, it became no hotter when he leaped on the side of the dome and tried to climb to the opening. But it slid shut when Elsa was taken within. Then the dome started away and Shay was brushed off.

He sat stupidly in the ruined street, staring as the amber-colored dome dipped beneath the surface and was gone. Soon the earth quit shaking and there was no sound of the globe's passage. But still he sat motionlessly until a hand touched his shoulder. He looked up dazedly.

"You loved her, Alan?" asked Dr. Dexter in a low voice.

Shay nodded and didn't dare speak.

Dexter looked the way the globe had gone. "It's like that," he said as though to himself.

Shay hardly heard. He felt that a greater part of his life had died. And it was with a slow, shambling gait that he went with Dexter when the elderly doctor urged him back toward the research building. Finally he turned agonized eyes to meet Dexter's.

"You saw her—talked with her . . . It was real, wasn't it?"

Dexter nodded. "Yes, it was real." And he spoke as he would have spoken to a child.

But Shay hadn't the will to resent: he hardly noticed.

"But it's so impossible!" he burst out.

"What is?" inquired Dexter. "That's a dangerous word. I know Wallgense's theories. I thought them improbable; but I never called them impossible. All he said was that it was not necessarily three states to which matter was limited—gas, solid and liquid. He said there might be others . . . infra-solids and ultra-gases."

The words struck a spark in Shay's mind. He felt that he was coming to life again. A small thought was forming, snow-balling larger by the second as memories were added.

"You mean like neutronium?" he asked almost indifferently.

"No. That, hypothetically, is material—or let's say 'stripped atoms' . . . nuclei stripped of electrons and outer particles. Infra-solids, or ultra-gases, would be a normal state of matter, but unknown to us—just as air is unknown as a gas to a deep-sea fish."

Shay knew that Dexter would have gone on, but the thought that had fascinated him must be spoken.

"Why did it follow us?" he asked.

Dexter shrugged.

“Because it wanted either Otto Wallgense or Elsa. I think it was afraid of something. Elsa said her father had something that hurt the thing. It was afraid of him. It followed to get him back. But why? Because Otto Wallgense *isn't dead!*”

Dexter started to protest.

“He has to be alive!” Shay argued. “Maybe they were changing him to their ‘state of matter.’ Maybe he hurt the thing so that it couldn’t finish, and he is frozen in a sort of suspended animation.”

Shay was arguing to persuade himself, as much as to convince Dexter. Hope lent him some strength—filled a part of that aching void within him.

“And if Elsa’s father is alive, then so is Elsa.”

Dexter smiled grimly. “Well, I can’t say it’s impossible, after the lecture I just gave you, but—” he shrugged. “Even granting that it *is* so, what could we do? We don’t know them; we don’t know what energies they use; we can’t reach them; we can’t—”

Shay grabbed his arm and tugged him along at a faster pace. At the car he halted, opened the door and peered around the floor. At last he found what he wanted—the tiny arm that the figurine had held up to shield itself. Victoriously, he held it for Dexter to see.

“It’s the arm that broke off!”

“Off what? The figurine?”

Shay nodded crazily, and Dexter snatched the slender black thing away from him and peered at it.

“It’s a dirty trick on Wallgense,” he said, striding into the building, “But if we can find out how it differs from ordinary flesh, we may find a means to fight them.”

Shay followed him into the laboratory, watched the arm with sharp eyes when Dexter set it down. Dexter eyed him sharply, then turned to another man working a few feet away. He had a dazed look that made Dexter smile, and the smile grew broader at the way the fellow glanced unbelievably out the window, then shook his head.

Old Dexter laughed. “You weren’t seeing things, Chatterton. It really happened.” Then he went closer, spoke in a low voice so Shay couldn’t hear. Chatterton looked at Shay, greeted him with a smile that Shay found disturbing. Then Chatterton left.

Dexter went to Shay’s side. Shay had turned back to the tiny arm, was staring at it fascinatedly. Finally, he said hesitantly, “Doc, it’s growing.”

“You need sleep,” Dexter said unhesitatingly.

“No, it’s growing,” Shay insisted. “Mark and watch. You can’t see it grow; but it’s larger now than it was before.”

Dexter insisted that Shay sit down. He did so, but was careful to choose a place from which he could watch the arm.

Chatterton returned with a tray of food and set it in front of Shay. “Dig in,” he invited.

The aroma of toast and ham and eggs reminded Shay that he hadn’t eaten for twenty-four hours, and he needed no second invitation. He ate while Dexter and Chatterton worked.

Surfeited at last, he pushed the tray away with a sigh and started to get up. It was slow, hard work. He tried to walk to Dexter’s side, but was so dizzy that he was forced to hold to the table for support. Dexter turned and grinned.

Shay stared, stricken. “You . . . doped me,” he accused.

Dexter nodded. “I knew you wouldn’t rest any other way; and you are too tired and jittery to be anything but a nuisance. Chatterton and I will get along all right, and I’ve called in Bailey and Wilson.”

Shay weaved on his feet. His senses whirled dizzily. He felt himself being lifted, then knew no more.

Alan Shay was brought back to consciousness by a thunderous roaring. He struggled to open his eyes and when he succeeded he found that he was lying on the cot in the corner of the laboratory. The cot was rocking. He heard the crash of something falling and turned.

His mind was still drugged, as was his body. He saw that the laboratory was shaking as though in a severe earthquake. Someone shouted:

“They’re coming!”

His mind cleared as though the words had been a tonic. He sat up quickly, then gripped the edge of the cot to keep from falling. Dizziness swept over him in sickening waves.

When he could see again, he saw four men standing in the room—Dexter, Chatterton, Wilson and Bailey. Chatterton leaped to a huge coil of wire mounted on a universal joint. He swung it around to face the direction from which the roaring was coming. Wilson and Bailey stood beside Dexter who reached up and slapped a large switch home. Shay staggered forward to join them.

He came close to falling. His legs felt like rubber, and only distantly related to the rest of his body. He grasped Dexter’s shoulder to stay on his feet. The old man jerked around.

“Hello, Alan,” he greeted. “Get back out of the way! You’re in no condition to help.”

“Whose fault is that?” Shay snarled.

Chatterton grinned at him from across the room and saluted mockingly. Shay thumbed his nose and turned back to Dexter.

“The globe?” asked Shay.

Dexter nodded. Shay waved toward Chatterton.

“Are you going to *fight*?”

“Going to try,” Dexter corrected. “Your noticing that the arm was becoming larger gave us a good lead. And the cells came alive just after it reached normal size. We had a hell of a time finding out why it was getting larger. They evidently increased the intra-atomic attraction—condensed the elements. We finally figured out that the arm must have been in the field of some magnet or wire while you drove down, and that the field started a slow readjustment to normal. We tried it out and the arm grew faster. So—here we are.”

Wilson interrupted bitterly. “And they’ve destroyed half the town while we held them out of here.”

“We’re letting them in, this time,” said Dexter, “and we’ll let them figure a way of getting out. If a field will keep them out; it ought to keep them in.”

Shay noted that the room was girdled with high-tension wires.

“And you think that they must use the same sort of a field to maintain their body pressures?” guessed Shay.

“Something of the sort,” shouted Dexter above the din, “or they’d burst apart like balloons.”

He opened the switch suddenly, and waited. Almost immediately the wall of the laboratory burst inward and collapsed atop the amber dome of the globe. Shay saw now why the cables had been strung near the ceiling. They draped downward, almost touching the top of the amber globe.

Dr. Dexter closed his switch at the same moment. There was a flaring gush of light from the globe and the strange hard metal of the dome blistered, expanded, and softened. And the

amber glow of the dome began to fade.

A round insect-like head appeared in the opening and stared at them with a pair of great compound eyes. Two antennae weaved questioningly as a huge pair of mandibles opened and closed.

Chatterton swung his weapon and the head disappeared into ballooning particles. There was a squashy explosion and they heard the remnants of the creature drop back inside the globe.

There was a short pause, then a dozen of the strange creatures scurried over the nearest edge of the opening and darted at the men. Chatterton swung his weapon as fast as he could and picked off a half dozen, but their many legs, moving with the wave-like motion of an ordinary millipede carried the rest to the men.

Shay saw defeat in front of them.

“Hold ’em, Doc!” he shouted. He leaped over one of the monsters and ran toward Chatterton’s coil.

Someone fired a pistol. Shay’s lips tightened. That was about as effective as a water pistol against an elephant.

Then he was standing at the giant coil, straddling Chatterton’s lifeless body. He swiveled the weapon around to sweep the laboratory. He was heedless of his fellows. This weapon would not harm them.

There was a quick series of popping explosions, and the laboratory became silent. He heard only the hoarse sound of his own breathing. Then came a shout from the globe. Shay wheeled, coil ready, and saw Elsa helping a shouting man down the side of the globe.

“Dexter! Caleb Dexter!” shouted the small man. “How did you get into this?”

Shay strode forward, and Elsa came to meet him. Somehow, she was in his arms, and he couldn’t remember exactly how she had got there. But he had no complaint. And neither did she.

[The end of *The Onslaught From Below* by John Russell Fearn (as John Cotton)]